Gramsci's Prison Notebooks: Towards a 'War of Position'

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Section IV of **Towards the War of Position: Gramsci in Continuity and Rupture with Marxism-Leninism (http://wp.me/pqCiM-Fm)**

by Amil K.

The main concern of the prison notebooks is the development of "the philosophy of praxis"[1] with the aim of rejuvenating communist strategy in light of the failures and setbacks in Gramsci's period. However fragmentary the passages of the notebooks are, they compose a totalizing system of thought in which a major focal point is the question of strategy. While there is so much more to the prison notebooks in terms of Gramsci's intellectual contributions than questions of class war and strategy – hence, the Gramsci being a treasure trove for liberal academics – many of the notes point back to what Gramsci calls the *war of position*. But this concept can only be appreciated by unpacking some of the conceptual apparatus built up around it throughout the prison notebooks, which includes concepts such as the *historical bloc*; the 'analysis of situations'; *hegemony;* Gramsci's concept of philosophy and the *organic intellectual;* his distinct notion of the Party;and finally, his explanation of civil society.

Understanding the Historical Bloc

One of the core concepts of Gramsci's prison notebooks is the '*historical bloc*'. While the term is only scarcely mentioned in the prison notebooks, given the concept's role in framing much of Gramsci's conceptual apparatus it can be argued that Gramsci's prison notebooks are a long-running elaboration of the concept. There is no section dedicated to the *historical bloc*, only a couple short passages:

> Concept of 'historical bloc', i.e. unity between nature and spirit (structure and superstructure) unity of opposites and of distincts (137).
>
> Structures and superstructures form an 'historical bloc'. That is to say the complex, contradictory and discordant *ensemble* of the superstructures is the reflection of the *ensemble* of the social relations of production (366).

If I may take the liberty to flesh this out somewhat, in light of my reading of the prison notebooks, the *historical bloc* is the organic but contradictory unity between the dominant and subaltern social groups in a given historical period, the relations of which are historically emergent and need to be understood as such in order to understand the nature of the relations among these social groups in the present. Whereas 'nature' here is considered relatively fixed and generally changes only over much longer periods, the 'Spirit' is the contradictory unity between structural and super-structural elements in a bloc of time. On the one hand, the concept of the historical bloc is a rather orthodox reformulation of Marx's historical materialism, a principle thesis of which Gramsci paraphrases at certain points throughout the prison notebooks: "1. That no social formation disappears as long as the productive forces which have developed within it still find room for further forward movement; that a society does not set itself tasks for whose solution the necessary conditions have not already been incubated" (106).

On the other hand, Gramsci's elaboration of the architecture of the historic bloc (without actually referencing the term) throughout the prison notebooks reveals an awareness of the incredibly *dynamic* and *ever-shifting* character of the relationships among the "discordant… ensemble of the social relations of production" (366). The acute awareness of the *dynamism* at play amongst various levels of relations of force is a feature of Gramsci's thinking that makes his analyses of history so penetrating and his overall method of historical and political analysis such a force of rejuvenation for "the philosophy of praxis" and the communist movement. Of particular importance for Gramsci, and for any communist movement, is a comprehensive study of the oppressed and exploited classes within their own historical bloc.

In his note "History of the Subaltern Classes: Methodological Criteria", Gramsci provides a schema for what such a historical reconnaissance actually consists of when it comes to the "subaltern classes." Whereas the historical unity of the ruling classes is realized in the State (and therefore its historical development can be traced through the development of the State as well),

> The subaltern classes, by definition, are not unified and cannot unite until they are able to become a "State": their history, therefore, is intertwined with that of civil society, and thereby with the history of States and groups of States. Hence it is necessary to study: 1. The objective formation of subaltern social groups, by developments and transformations occurring in the sphere of economic production; their quantitative diffusion and their origins in pre-existing social groups, whose mentality, ideology, and aims they conserve for a time; 2. their active or passive affiliation to the dominant social formation, their attempts to influence the programmes of these formations in order to press claims of their own… 3. the birth of new parties of the dominant groups, intended to conserve the assent of the subaltern groups and to maintain control over them; 4. the formations which the subaltern groups themselves produce, in order to press claims of a limited and partial character; 5. those new formations which assert the autonomy of the subaltern groups, but within the old framework; 6. those formations which assert the integral autonomy (52).

This schematic outline for studying the subaltern is a major component for understanding the historical bloc. This method of historical analysis is the means by which a communist formation ultimately determines whether or not a favourable situation exists for the subaltern social groups to accumulate revolutionary forces and whether the situation is favourable to them becoming the ruling class at a given conjuncture of history; in other words, the essence of this historiographical method reduces to the question of whether the situation is favourable for revolution in the present historical bloc.

The factor driving the dynamism within Gramsci's historical schema ultimately reduces into a question of the development of the mode of production. As Gramsci reiterates in his outlining of the concept of the *passive revolution*,

> No formation disappears as long as the productive forces which have developed within it still find room for further forward movement; 2. that a society does not set itself tasks for whose solution the necessary conditions have not already been incubated, etc. It goes without saying that these principles must first be developed critically in all their implications, and purged of every residue of mechanism and fatalism. They must therefore be referred back to the description of the three fundamental moments into which a 'situation' or an equilibrium of forces can be distinguished, with the greatest possible stress on the second moment (equilibrium of political forces), and especially on the third moment (politico-military equilibrium) (106-7).

Here, Gramsci directly links his method of historical analysis to an elaboration of the philosophy of praxis that he provides in his note "Analysis of situations." The implicit statement here is that the object of the study of history and an account of the historical bloc is to grasp ***the situation***, and the various levels of force that make up a given situation.

Grasping 'the situation' and Relations of Force at Three Levels

In his explication of the notion of 'a situation' the contours of a theory of revolution begin to emerge which distinguishes Gramsci from communist strategies overly focused upon what he calls the rapid ***war of siege/war of maneuver***. Gramsci directly critiques Trotsky's concept of '*permanent revolution'*, Luxemburg's advocacy of the mass strike, and syndicalism's methods in general for each for overestimating the capacity of the *war of maneuver* (238) to overwhelm bourgeois power and all of them being laden with notions of spontaneity because – as we shall see in further elucidations of Gramsci' notions on state and civil society below – they misidentify the locus of power of the bourgeoisie, at least in the case of the more advanced capitalist countries where civil society is more advanced. A proper analysis of a situation is a precondition for revealing the objective conditions for or against the revolution.

"The study of how 'situations' should be analyzed," Gramsci tells us, is to "establish the various levels of the relations of forces," and this, ultimately, is what constitutes the "elementary exposition of the science and art of politics" (175). Such an analysis of the situation, Gramsci tells us, is the basis for formulation of the strategic plan with a strategy and tactics, for propaganda and agitation, for developing the command structure, organization of the armed forces, and resolving other questions pertaining to organizational structure (175).

Once one has resolved "the problem of the relations between structure and superstructure" – in other words, the nature of the contradictions in the structure of society and the trajectory of their development – one can proceed to correctly analyze the role of the forces that are active in the history of a particular period. However, one must also be able to distinguish between the *organic* (or structural) and the *conjunctural* crises, which differ from one another by virtue of being long-term crises consisting of basic contradiction in the structure of society versus the conjunctural phenomenon arising from "occasional, immediate, and almost accidental" movements in the superstructure (177). "A common error in historico-political analysis consists in an inability to find the correct relation between what is organic and what is conjunctural," and Gramsci warns that such lines of research are "most serious in the art of politics, when it is not reconstructing past history but the construction of present and future history which is at stake" (178-9). What this reconstruction consists of is a determination of the immediate relations of force that define the situation.

Gramsci defines **three levels of relations of force**, beginning from the most structural and proceeding into the superstructural. The first is the ***relation of social forces***, which is

> closely linked to the structure, objective, independent of human will and which can be measured with the systems of the exact or physical sciences… By studying these fundamental data it is possible to discover whether in a particular society there exist the necessary and sufficient conditions for its transformation (181).

The development of any clash of political or military forces will originate from contradictions at this level.

The subsequent moment is the ***relation of political forces***, "in other words, an evaluation of the degree of homogeneity, self-awareness, and organisation attained by the various social classes" (181). By way of example pulled from elsewhere in the prison notebooks, Gramsci's methodological criteria for conducting historical research into the subaltern classes – points four through to six, which deal with the political formations created by the subaltern classes, ranging from those limited to pressing their claims in a limited manner and in dependence upon the bourgeoisie all the way up to an integral and revolutionary way – are methods by which one can determine the level of political forces of the subaltern classes (52).



(https://revintcan.files.wordpress.com/2013/09/1323.jpg)

Despite the overthrow of immensely popular liberation theology priest Jean-Bertrand Aristide twice in a decade by U.S.-led imperialism, and in spite of the collective punishment meted out to the Haitian people for electing a left-leaning and mildly anti-imperialist President, for years after the 2004 occupation the Haitian masses remained militant and mobilized. But Aristide never supported arming the people during his term, nor after he was overthrown. Neither was his political party, Lavalas, willing to build an armed struggle after the 2004 occupation, despite armed resistance from the urban masses in Haiti's largest slums, such as Cité de Soleil.

The struggle of the Haitian people for the last two decades has been a case of having the relation of social forces on their side, and having political forces strong enough to outmaneuver the tiny pro-imperialist elite in any liberal electoral contest, but tragically not

having the arms to defend their interests and, in the spirit of Dessalines and L'Ouverture, carry forward the 1804 Haitian revolution.

The third moment is the ***relation of military forces***, which Gramsci breaks down further into *military forces* and *politico-military forces*, which become decisive for the subordinate social classes if and only when all three levels of relations of forces exist in the favour of the subaltern social classes and are seized upon by the social, political, and military actors they have constituted. Of course, oppressed people can take armed action without the social and political relations of forces being favourable. But these are always defeated and are easily dismissed as acts of terrorism (no matter the actual content of the armed act) if the political forces are not sufficiently capable of defending the armed actions. But if the social, political, and military relations of force are indeed favourable and sufficiently mature, then what it means for a situation to be seized upon is as follows:

> The decisive element in every situation is the permanently organised and long-prepared force which can be put into the field when it is judged that a situation is favourable (and it can be favourable only in so far as such a force exists, and is full of fighting spirit). Therefore the essential task is that of systematically and patiently ensuring that this force is formed, developed, and rendered ever more homogeneous, compact, and self-aware (185).



(https://revintcan.files.wordpress.com/2013/09/2342.jpg)

We support the people armed… but armed by who? At their own initiative and with their

own resources, or backed and armed by the imperialists? U.S.-led imperialism has been trying to tip the military balance of power in Syria for two years in favour of the Free Syrian Army, over which it has worked to exercise greater and greater influence, especially through regional allies. But winning in a military balance of power is not a revolution. As Gramsci's explanation of relations of forces clarifies, a revolution is made when the subaltern classes have the social, political, and military relations of force in their favour, and seize upon them. What social classes and which political forces are animating the civil war from within Syria? Is this Syria's revolutionary situation? Or is the temporary military balance of power being propped up by imperialism?

What we have here, in an abstract and simple outline, is an historical-materialist analysis of how to determine if and how to make a revolution and under what conditions can the conscious intervention of the vanguard forces of the historically progressive classes be successful in providing leadership to a revolution. Revolution does not consist of the momentary numerical superiority of the masses in a mass strike or an insurrection – that is, momentarily favourable military relations of force – but relations of force that correspond to every level of relations of force. And for the political relations of force to be in the favour of the proletariat and its allies in countries under circumstances where bourgeois power extends beyond the formal institutions of government and State, its leading forces must do more than muster an army for a pitched battle and a day's victory.

This formulation is a sharp critique of the way insurrection came to be conceived within the Communist International, the worst expression of which was Trotsky's 'permanent revolution'.[2] But it is also a much sharper formulation of how to perform a general analysis of a situation than that offered by Lenin. Lenin defined a revolutionary situation as one in which the ruling class could no longer go on ruling the same way, when the suffering of the masses had reached an intolerable level, and when, consequently, the masses burst into political activity (Lenin 1915). But this definition neither differentiates between structural or conjunctural crises, nor does it offer precision in the analysis of relations of forces that Gramsci's philosophy of praxis revealed to be necessary.

To fully appreciate how Gramsci's theory of revolution goes beyond Lenin's foundational but historically- and contextually-limited articulation, one must further understand Gramsci's theory of the state and civil society. For the historically progressive forces to actually prevail in an objectively favourable situation, the question of leadership must be correctly posed and correctly answered; which brings us to Gramsci's concepts of hegemony, the role of intellectuals, and his conceptualization of the Party. With these concepts at hand, we can gain a fuller appreciation of Gramsci's idea of revolutionary strategy – the *war of position.*

Hegemony: Coercion & Consent

Beginning first with the question of *hegemony:* Dominant social groups maintain their power in two distinct ways: through **domination / coercion**, and through **intellectual-moral leadership / consent**. Dominant social groups dominate the classes with which they have an

antagonistic relationship by liquidating or subjugating them through armed force (57); but they lead "kindred and allied groups" by providing moral and intellectual direction. So long as the productive forces still have room for greater development under a given mode of production, the dominant social groups can maintain their hegemony by making leadership primary and domination secondary. But an organic crisis – which consists of the shifting of the social composition of society, the classes and the relations among them – will engender crises in leadership as the dominant social groups rely more heavily upon coercion to subdue their antagonists and even formerly allied classes.

What is Philosophy and who is the 'Organic Intellectual'

The place of intellectuals in ruling class hegemony is through diffusion of its moral and intellectual culture. Gramsci understands that there is not a direct correspondence between the ruling social groups and its intellectual functionaries, but that the latter are dependent on the former for their existence and serve them accordingly: "The intellectuals are the dominant group's 'deputies' exercising the subaltern functions of social hegemony and political government," for which they are compensated. Gramsci includes the work of such intellectuals within the overall operation and power of the ruling class, not outside of it.

It should be said at this point that Gramsci sees each and every person as a philosopher, albeit whose capacity to think independently relates to the dynamics of the overall situation, the most important question of which is: Has a given class produced the political forces to think and act independently, and to what extent are these forces developed?

Gramsci sees each human being as a philosopher, since every person has a conception of the world. For Gramsci, there is no pure philosophy, but "various philosophies or conceptions of the world exist" (326). As for those philosophies that are disconnected from the people, elite intellectual cultures of and in support of the dominant social classes, Gramsci asks:

> Is a philosophical movement properly so called when it is devoted to creating a specialised culture among restricted intellectual groups, or rather when, and only when, in the process of elaborating a form of thought superior to 'common sense' and coherent on a scientific plane, it never forgets to remain in contact with the 'simple' and indeed finds in this contact the source of the problems it sets out to study and to resolve? Only by this contact does a philosophy become 'historical', purify itself of intellectualistic elements of an individual character and become 'life' (330).

In contrast to these philosophies, "the philosophy of praxis does not tend to leave the 'simple' in their primitive philosophy of common sense, but rather to lead them to a higher conception of life… to construct an intellectual-moral bloc which can make politically possible the intellectual progress of the mass and not only of small intellectual groups" (333). Gramsci is clear in his position that for the communist movement such an intellectual élite – while its effect must be diffuse and hegemonic – is not an unorganized and undisciplined current. Rather it is the Party that is the "elaborator of new integral and totalitarian [i.e. unified and all-absorbing] intelligentsias and the crucibles where the

unification of theory and practice, understood as a real historical process, takes place" (335). The need for such a unified if dynamic intellectual current leads Gramsci to clear reject parties on the "pattern of the British Labour Party" in favour of the Leninist/Bolshevik vanguard model. However, as we should see further below, the deeply democratic and pedagogical tasks of the communist party should not be overlooked in Gramsci's thinking.

The intellectual work of such an intellectual-moral bloc includes: (1) the repetition of its basic arguments; and (2) to raise the intellectual level of the masses and to raise new intellectuals directly out of the masses. These intellectuals raised from the ranks of the exploited and oppressed masses are what Gramsci called *organic intellectuals*, and small, 'independent' intellectual currents cannot take up the task of seriously cultivating this sort of leadership. This can only be taken up by the Party, or a Party of sorts.

The Party: the consciousness of a class

At this point it is worthwhile to briefly consider what exactly is a Party. Generally, the word Party invokes the idea of an electoral formation, united by a program sufficient to unite its functionaries, candidates, elected members, rank-and-file membership and sufficiently united to present itself to a wider electorate. But this is only a very specific form of a Party – the electoral Party – and not the general sort that Gramsci brings our attention to.

Gramsci's *Modern Prince* offers a general historical theorization of parties in order to better situate the particular tasks of the party of the proletariat. The history of the political party is not the history of electoralism or the party construed in such narrow terms, but rather the history of the social classes themselves. With politics theorized at a superstructural level as being a reflection of contradictions in the fundamental structure of society, parties appear all throughout history where we find basic class contradictions in the structure of society. The history of political parties is not the history of its founders or leading intellectual thinkers, but rather the intricate network of relations with which the party is attached to and organizes its social class.

Gramsci argues that all parties have (1) a mass element "whose participation takes the form of discipline and loyalty, rather than any creative spirit or organizational ability (2) a cadre element, "the principal cohesive element," without which the former would "scatter into an impotent diaspora and vanish into nothing"; and (3) "an intermediate element, which articulates the first element with the second and maintains contact between them (152-3). This schematic outline of the Party form is offered as a matter of objective historical fact, one that the communist party must observe if it is to succeed in its task. The distinction with the Communist Party is that it represents a class whose historical mission is to abolish class distinctions altogether.

That Gramsci had a distinctly Leninist view on the party, but a Leninist view nonetheless, is evident from this hierarchical structuring of the Party and the tasks that it must be prepared to confront. Of particular interest to Gramsci concerning the various strata of the party is how these strata must be organized to guard against destruction. Gramsci argues that firstly,



(https://revintcan.files.wordpress.com/2013/09/2346.jpeg)

The Black Panther Party succeeded like no other revolutionary organization in its era – arguably in the whole of the twentieth century America – in the recruitment of this "mass element." However, the breakneck speed of the organization's growth overwhelmed its capacity to preserve the unity of its cadre – that "principle cohesive element" – when faced with repression and counter-intelligence.

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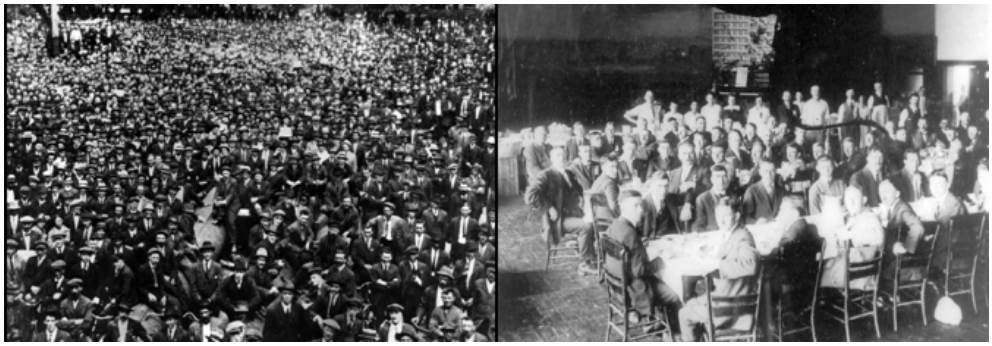
an iron conviction must prevail amongst the various strata that a solution has been found to the historical problems faced by its class. Gramsci's views on philosophy clarify that such an iron conviction is not based on dogma, but on the development of a philosophy of praxis that actually addresses the problems of the masses and adequately reflects the contours of the historical bloc. Without this 'iron discipline,' the intermediate strata cannot be formed. But this philosophy of praxis, as we have seen in the foregoing analysis on philosophy, is not a simplified Marxism. Gramsci was a harsh critic of crude materialism and economism, and understood the dangers of such an articulation of Marxism included losing its connection with a top layer of intellectuals that it needed to bring under its hegemony (164).

Gramsci uses the metaphor of the "modern prince," building on Machiavelli's concept of the Prince, to stand in for the role required of the communist party to develop a national-popular will, not a will developed around an individual, but a collective will of the popular masses: "The protagonist of the new Prince could not in the modern epoch be an individual hero, but only the political party" (147).

The State and Civil Society

Returning to the question of the state and civil society, Gramsci's definition of the State is not limited to "formal political society," which includes the official organs of the State, but instead "the State is the entire complex of practical and theoretical activities with which the

ruling class not only justifies and maintains its dominance, but manages to win the active consent of those over whom it rules" (244). In other words, a theorization of the State must include those organs of bourgeois power that are outside official bourgeois-democratic state organs – the mere "outer ditch" of bourgeois power – to include the exercise of bourgeois domination of civil society, where bourgeois power is constituted "in a powerful system of fortresses and earthworks" (238).



(https://revintcan.files.wordpress.com/2013/09/2834.jpg)

During the Winnipeg General Strike in the summer of 1919, workers inspired by the Russian revolution completely took control of the city (image to left). While the local ruling elites and the Canadian government completely lost political power for a span of weeks within the city, the Citizens' Committee of One Thousand (image to right) – a secretive organization of Winnipeg's bourgeoisie created – was created to maintain the unity of its class and counter the revolutionary advances, and finally, facilitate the Canadian state's quasi-military repression of the strike in late June 1919.

Therefore, based on the foregoing explication of Gramsci's conceptualizations of the historical bloc, relations of force and the analysis of situations, philosophy, the organic intellectual, the Party, and the State and civil society, we can develop a fuller appreciation of Gramsci's understanding of revolutionary strategy.

War of Position vs. War of Maneuver

Gramsci warned that "in political struggle one should not ape the methods of the ruling class, or one will fall into easy ambushes" (232). Reflecting on the postwar situation in Italy, Gramsci warns in the prison notebooks of trying to counter the illegal private armed organizations of the ruling classes with similar commando-like tactics:

> It is stupid to believe that when one is confronted by illegal private action one can counterpose to it another similar action – in other words, combat commando tactics by means of commando tactics… The class factor leads to a fundamental difference: a class which has to work fixed hours every day cannot have permanent and specialised assault organizations – as can a class which has ample financial resources and all of whose members are not tied down by fixed work (232).[3]

Gramsci also dismisses the rapid *war of movement / war of manoeuvre* as a strategy for the proletariat by focusing on Luxemburg's conceptualization of the mass strike, wherein

> the immediate economic element (crises, etc.) is seen as the field artillery which in war opens a breach in the enemy's defenses – a breach sufficient for one's own troops to rush in and obtain a definitive (strategic) victory… This view was a form of iron economic determinism, with the aggravating factor that it was conceived of as operating with lightning speed in time and space. It was thus out and out historical mysticism (233).



(https://revintcan.files.wordpress.com/2013/09/jammas-hussain20130707014046253.jpg)

The Muslim Brotherhood: Political Islam may not be a friend of the revolutionary communist movement, but the Muslim Brotherhood's power in Egypt today reflects decades and decades of construction of a counter-power in ideological, social, political, and potentially military terms.

For the modern proletariat, however, it is the war of position that is the strategy for proletarian revolution – a protracted revolutionary strategy (more on the parallels with Mao's protracted people's war in Part II of this paper). With the failed attempts at proletarian revolutions in the early 1920s weighing heavily upon Gramsci's conscience, he recognized that "in the case of the most advanced States, where 'civil society' has become a very complex structure and one which is resistant to the catastrophic 'incursions' of the immediate economic element (crises, depressions, etc.)" then the proletarian revolution must focus its strategy on carving out power within "the superstructures of civil society" which are "like the trench-systems of modern warfare" (235). In light of the ICM's failures, Gramsci had the hindsight to recognize and boldness to state "a crisis cannot give the attacking forces the ability to organize with lightning speed in time and in space; still less can it endow them with fighting spirit" (235). This is an argument *against* spontaneity. It sometimes seems like "a fierce artillery attack seemed to have destroyed the enemy's entire defensive system, whereas in fact it had only destroyed the outer perimeter… The same happens in politics, during great economic crises" (235). Therefore, Gramsci warns, those elements of bourgeois civil society that constituted strong defensive ramparts must be closely studied. Gramsci's entire conception of philosophy and the role of the party is arguably worked out in relation to the ideological and cultural defensive ramparts of the bourgeoisie that must be ruptured.

Gramsci's sees the Russian revolution to have corresponded to a *war of maneuver* – a successful one at that. But he is concerned that to the extent that "1917 has been studied – [it has been only] from superficial and banal viewpoints" (235). Gramsci accuses Trotsky's formulation of the *permanent revolution* as constituting a "reflection of the theory of the *war of maneuver*" (236), which Gramsci views in hindsight as having been inappropriate for the postwar situation. Whereas Trotsky upheld the universality of the "frontal attack in a period in which it only produced defeats," Gramsci views the postwar situation as having been one wherein the shift to the war of position was necessary, a strategic shift which Lenin

understood: “Illich understood that a change was necessary from the war of manoeuvre applied victoriously in the East in 1917, to a war of position which was the only form possible in the West” (237).



(https://revintcan.files.wordpress.com/2013/09/8754.jpg)

Even though only some of these men have formal political power, all of them exercise the power of their class (in their own distinct ways) beyond the instruments of the State. From top-left, running clockwise: Clinton kickin’ it with some celebrity golfers; Ayatollah Ali Khamenei leading Eid al-Fitr prayers in Tehran; some exuberant priests; and the founders of Kony 2012 posing with the imperialist-backed so-called Sudan People’s Liberation Army. Seriously, WTF!? What North American could pose with a grenade-launcher with a real people’s army, and not find herself/himself convicted with a life’s worth of terrorism charges? But bourgeois white dudes can pose with reactionary paramilitary forces on any given weekend. Not only will these parasites go away after the revolution, much of their base of power will survive it and will have yet to be destroyed.

Therefore, the *war of position*, undertaken and led by a proletarian revolutionary vanguard Party on the basis of the criteria outlined above, is the only strategic approach Gramsci viewed as feasible for revolution in the imperialist countries of his day. The task of future communist parties would have to be to identify the openings and necessary points of intervention within ‘civil society’ wherein the communist party could make its interventions and entrench itself for the long battle for ‘terrain’ within the matrices of bourgeois society. This isn’t an argument for operating exclusively or even mainly within the hegemony of bourgeois society, such as through its institutions; but rather to rupture those institutions by building up a dual power of the popular classes.

In the face of the failures of European communist parties in the early 1920s, Gramsci recognized that a more formidable proletarian counter-hegemony was required in advance of an insurrectionary moment, and that only these advanced preparations could consolidate the dictatorship of the proletariat post-revolution. Posed as such, revolutionary strategy can be understood as a continuous process of accumulating revolutionary forces that is punctuated with the rupture of revolution, or revolutions. In other words, a protracted *war of position* would have to precede the *rapid war of maneuver*. In revolutionary communist

theory today, I believe that this conception bears some similarity with the *protracted peoples war* strategies of the Revolutionary Communist Party of Canada – though much remains unclear to me about their strategic formulation – and especially that of the new Communist Party of Italy (nPCI). For the nPCI in particular, insurrection is conceptualized as necessary but only as a momentary tactical maneuver within a wider protracted popular war. Without intending to split hairs in the ICM today, we should seriously consider whether Gramsci's *war of position* is a more clear and correct articulation of what our tasks are in the imperialist countries today. Gramsci's strategic framework was specifically developed with the hegemony of the imperialist bourgeoisies in mind, and the term *war of position* has the added benefit of clearing up confusions and strawman arguments that are easy to make about the idea of PPW in an imperialist country. However, the working out of these ideas – Gramsci in comparison to Mao Tse-Tung's thought in particular and the modern conceptions of PPW in general – is the main object of Part II of this essay.

Concluding Thoughts: Is Gramsci a launching point for reconceptualizing communist strategy today?

The *war of position* is never actually applied to the context of Italy, or anywhere else in the imperialist countries, for that matter. Although, the PCI develops a substantial armed apparatus in the early 1940s before the fall of Mussolini, it is disarmed, and under American occupation and in the postwar period, the PCI played a leading role in Europe in blazing a trail of parliamentarism and reformism that comes to be known as 'Eurocommunism'. With the center of gravity of the international communist movement (ICM) having completed its shift to the third world by the end of world war two, the parties of the ICM in the imperialist countries never seriously take up Gramsci's ideas. Mao Tse-Tung is (rightfully) looked to as the leading strategic thinker in the International Communist Movement after 1960, this at a time when the name of Gramsci remained obscure for most communists.

In Part II of this essay, I will explore what I believe to be the striking similarities between Gramsci's reconceptualizing communist strategy and that of Mao and the Chinese revolution. The answers that each gives to the question of Marxism-Leninism's limitations in the 1920s are strikingly similar, however different and particularized to their very different contexts.

To reiterate, Gramsci's prison notebooks constitute a major rejuvenation of revolutionary Marxism, or the 'philosophy of praxis'. While upholding many of the applicable and valid elements of Marxism-Leninism, Gramsci substantially revises and breaks with elements of orthodoxy that proved disastrous and tragic in their application within the Comintern. Gramsci's theoretical contributions range from questions of historical materialism, the party form, state and civil society, philosophy, and revolutionary strategy, albeit in a fragmentary unity. Although Gramsci's prison sentence would claim his health and ultimately his life, it's doubtful that this level of theoretical development would have been possible without an extended period of solitude that he faced. All the other communist leaders of Gramsci's caliber would generally have been killed or too pre-occupied with the day-to-day tasks of developing the communist party to embark upon the huge and necessary intellectual project

that Gramsci commenced. We owe it to the communist movement, to ourselves, and to the liberation of all oppressed and exploited peoples to return to Gramsci, and take what we must from his contributions. But first, let us consider Gramsci alongside Mao…

We had hoped for Part II of this long-running exploration of Gramsci and Mao to be ready sometime in 2014. Alas, other theoretical work was required of us, and this project had to be indefinitely put on hold. The working title I had intended for that piece was "Protracted People's War and the War of Position: Parallel Ruptures of Mao and Gramsci with Leninism?" -Amil K.



(https://revintcan.files.wordpress.com/2013/09/0976.jpg)

Gramsci went from being in the whirlwind of leading a rapidly expanding revolutionary Party to the solitary experience of incarceration, having virtually unlimited time and undivided attention to reflect on and write on first-hand experiences. As tragic as his imprisonment – and a decade later, his death – were, most revolutionary leaders in Gramsci's position would have never had that opportunity to comprehensively assess their first-hand experiences. They would have been too busy organizing, or they would have been dead. This is the source of value in Gramsci's prison notebooks. Let's make use of them.

1Gramsci referred to Marxism as the philosophy of praxis, perhaps to evade the prison censors, but just as likely because he understood the philosophy itself was more than and beyond Marx the individual.

2 Trotsky's theory of *permanent revolution* quite simply advocates for the revolution to continue on the offensive indefinitely until world revolution has been achieved, which was the stand-point of Trotsky at the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. The historical necessity to consolidate socialist society to ensure the salvation of a revolution has always been considered the 'Stalinist' deviation of 'socialism in one country,' painting all revolutions with a single brush and failing to differentiate between countries that have actually abandoned communist internationalism and those undergoing a stage of socialist consolidation.

3This is an important observation for the industrial proletariat in the imperialist countries, and clearly not one formulated for, say, conditions of a society of a largely rural peasant population, wherein Mao would develop the idea of *protracted people's war.*

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