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GRAMSCI: ON THE PARTY

Alastair Davidson, lecturer in European Politics at Monash, continues his series on the Italian marxist, Antonio Gramsci.

GRAMSCI'S VIEW of the role of the socialist party in preparing for the revolution was quite novel. This was to be expected given his novel view of marxism and of the tasks of socialists in advanced capitalist countries. This point has had to be made at the outset because other writers from both the communist party and outside have maintained that Gramsci, on party questions, was in the Leninist tradition.[1] They have had both ideological and scholarly reasons for asserting this. The P.C.I. has still, to the best of my knowledge, not given up democratic centralism, although factional activity is quite open to its ranks, and therefore has emphasised the continuity in Gramsci's writings between the *Ordine Nuovo* period and the *Prison Notebooks* period. The second period has been seen in the light of the former. Thus it is maintained that what Gramsci wrote while in prison constituted only a revision of earlier ideas which were strongly democratic centralist and inspired by Leninism.[2] The same interpretation has been made for scholarly reasons by non-communist writers who view Gramsci's theories on the party in 1919-20 and 1927-37 together and extract a synthesis.[3] Presumably, though this is not stated by the writers, they are not prepared to risk assertions that this or that part of Gramsci constitutes the essence of his work. In refusing to do so they are avoiding a cardinal point of Gramscian methodology which was brought out in the third article in this series; always to seek for the essence of the writings of a man and to disregard obiter dicta and writings not really the product of his own thought but borrowed from somewhere else. Since Gramsci himself emphasised the need to do this they are being unjust to him by ignoring his own directions on how to interpret philosophy.

This article assumes that there is a major disjunction between the thought on the party which he held before he went to jail and that which he evolved while in prison which corresponds with the disjunction between his understanding of marxism before he went to prison and after. Essentially what Gramsci had said in

his prison treatment of marxism was that in advanced capitalist systems with a long tradition of bourgeois rule, control of the proletariat and its allies did not rest on the naked repressive force of the state and there was little class consciousness. Rather it rested on the bourgeois hegemony of political consciousness, that is, on the fact that in hundreds of different ways it had secured the adoption of its own world view by the whole populace. This had not been obtained without concessions by the bourgeoisie and rested to some extent on the absence of causes for resentment among the populace. In other words, in contradistinction to the Leninist proposition advanced in *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism,* that capitalism in advanced capitalist countries could "bribe" (a term of opprobrium meaning convert) the top level of the local proletariat, Gramsci maintained that capitalists could do so for nearly the whole populace. The conversion rested not so much on conceding economic conditions of a high level but rather on the incapacity of the mass to formulate an alternative world view for themselves. They were, after all, faced with an absence of intellectuals of their own and a sophisticated set of values offered to them by the bourgeoisie. Not that this was a conscious activity on the part of the bourgeoisie on all occasions. Rather it was the inevitable result of the nature of society. In sum, in capitalist societies with long established cultural and political structures, the bourgeoisie had maintained a monopoly of moral values and in the last analysis socialism is concerned with inculcating new moral values (i.e., the creation of a new man).

Hence flowed Gramsci's view of the task of a socialist party in such an environment. He drew an analogy with Machiavellian theory, understanding that in his *Prince,* Machiavelli "intended to educate politically 'those who don't know', an education which is not negative, to hate tyrants . . . but positive, to recognise certain determined means, even tyrannical, because you want certain ends".[4] Gramsci did not accept the view that what Machiavelli was preaching was some sort of political amorality, but rather addressing an exhortation to the man who must educate the whole people to the need for a new society. What was needed politically in the era of capitalism of an advanced sort was a "modern prince". But the "modern prince" could not be a concrete individual it had to be an organism . . . the political party. This was so because of the complexity of modern society. Great king philosophers were no longer possible. However, the party had a role essentially the same as that of Machiavelli's educator prince. He wrote:

"The process of formation of a determined collective will, for a determined political end, is conducted not through pedantic elaboration and classification of principles and criteria for a method of action, but as a quality, characteristic

traits, duties, the necessity for a concrete person, what makes the artistic fantasy of he who you wish to convince work, and gives a more concrete form to the political passions."[5]

While there are apparent similarities to the role of the revolutionary party as described in Lenin's *What Is To Be Done?,* centreing on the primary role of the party as an elite educator of those "who do not know", it is the dissimilarities which must be noted. Apart from the period and depth of education, which will be discussed later, the important distinction lies in the greater emphasis in Gramsci on the role of the party as a moral force. It, unlike the Leninist party, concentrates not on what to do and how to do it but what ought to be done; not on imparting theory and tactical directions through its newspapers but on imparting moral and ethical values. The possibility of success of Gramsci's suggestions and emphasis is borne out much more by contemporary knowledge of political science than Lenin's, which assumed the possibility of transmitting complicated theory (albeit diluted) to the masses and having them make use of it effectively. Apart from the fact that men cannot be reached through ideas alone, the history of the Russian revolution showed that the theory had to be watered down to virtual meaninglessness (by Stalin) and eventually contributed to the substitution of a religion of the Leader rather than a religion of the doctrine. We know that men are attracted by the religion of marxism rather than the rationality, that they follow opinion leaders rather than choose more plausible ideas when presented with advice between two arguments. Thus Gramsci in choosing to make the party the church of the new religion[6] was actually being much more realistic and historically oriented than those marxists who either believed in the appeals of rational argument or believed in the ability of the proletariat to learn marxism and conduct its own revolution. This did not mean that marxism would not eventually be lifted above the level of a religion but in the first stages the task of the party was to establish itself by whatever means, elitist or otherwise, as a moral leader.

The second distinction between Gramsci's party and Lenin's was that the educatory role of Gramsci's party was expected to last a much longer time than that of Lenin. This was so precisely because (1) Lenin needed only to teach the Russian worker how to conduct a revolution which they already wanted, whereas Gramsci had to convince them that they needed a revolution, and (2) Lenin envisaged the making of the new man after the revolution and for Gramsci it was essentially a case of making him before the revolution. This flowed naturally from the insistence on building up a counterhegemony of socialist ideas within the capitalist framework.

Of course the distinction between "those who know" and "those who don't know" sounds rather platonic and is elitist, with intellectuals as the elite, as we shall see in the last article in this series. It is not likely to appeal to the populist dominated members of the Australian labour movement both because of the implied hierarchy of value and because of the damaging egalitarianism (levelling down; disrespect for achievement of any sort)[7] present in the whole of Australian society. It is going to be difficult for the worker who believes or has had it dinned into his head that he is as good as everybody else and that the labour movement is *his* movement, to swallow views which so depreciate him and his potential for leadership. Only in the countries where the prevailing notion is not merely that there is a division of social functions but also a hierarchy of social functions, like Italy, is such a notion not outrageous to democratic sentiment.

Another distinction between Lenin's party and that of Gramsci concerned size, organisation and discipline as distinct from purpose. While recognising the changing qualities of the bolshevik party from that proposed in 1902 to that at present in existence in the USSR, the fact remains that this party was tightly organised and disciplined and composed of a small section of the population. Gramsci had a quite different view of the party. The party he talked about was the "organic" party, understanding party more in 18th century sense as a grouping of those with similar interests and a similar world view.

"One can observe that in the modern world, in many countries, the organic and fundamental parties, for the necessity of struggle or for other reasons have broken in fractions, each of which assumes the name of "party" and even of independent party. Often for that reason, the intellectual headquarters of the organic party belongs to no fraction and operates as if it were a directive force of its own, above the parties and sometimes even believed to be some by the public. One can study this function with greater precision if one starts from the view that a paper (or a group of papers) a journal (or group of journals) are also "parties" or "fractions of a party" or "functions as a determined party". Think of the function of *The Times* in England. . . .[8]

Quite clearly this party would not function as a monolith and would not be subject to tight discipline (there are some moves to create something like it being conducted by Amendola in Italy today). Such a party would have three levels of organisation. (1) A diffuse element of "average" men whose participation is through discipline and loyalty and not through creative and organising functions; (2) A principal cohesive group, "the captains",

who are most important since they can form an army whereas an army cannot run without them; (3) A "middle element that articulates the first element with the second, putting them not only into physical but moral and intellectual contact." While this appears a variation of the leaders, cadres, rank and file system of bolshevik parties, it has significant differences. First, there is no pseudo-democratic assertion that it is the first group which is most important. The captains are the most important for "without them any discussion is empty". It is not really clear to me what role the communist party proper would play in it. It appears that any sectarianism would be abhorred and that it would be expected to work with other members of a splintered labour movement (the organic party?). Which fraction would play the leading role would depend where the leading theorists were. In the case of Italy, Gramsci clearly believed that the PCI would provide the leadership, something even more logical today than when he was writing.

Another major distinction was that Gramsci's party would consider national interests of primary importance in motivating its activity. He wrote, "Certainly the development is towards internationalism but the point of beginning is "national" and it is from the point of beginning that one must start".[9] This was so because hegemony expressed itself nationally (in specific national forms) and because national proletariats thought within national frameworks. Internationalism of the Comintern's sort was evidently wrong.[10] It had led to passivism and then to "napoleonism". World revolution was a variety of mechanistic marxism for which Gramsci had no time.

The party had to make a detailed investigation of the national character of the people it was dealing with in order to discover how to reach them.[11] This did not mean that the party should become populist in its orientation. On the other hand Gramsci denied that the theory of the party could ever be in contradiction with the desires of the populace, at least at a level which was qualitative. Australians faced with the fact that the Australian worker is the worst enemy of socialism, in many if not most cases, may find this a trifle optimistic. But it must be remembered that Gramsci regarded all that existed as rational, that is, having or having had its purpose and this included the scintilla of "common sense" which could be developed on. It was merely a matter of working slowly on little things and not looking to the finishing post with the blindness of the man who does not see the hurdles.

To conclude, Gramsci's party had the following task: to propagate and popularise a new world view. But, the populace

"change concepts with great difficulty, and never by accepting concepts in their "pure" form, so to speak, but always in some eclectic combination. Rationality, logical coherence, completeness of argumentation, all these are important but far from decisive in dealing with people. Of course, it can be decisive at a secondary level, if the person involved is already in a state of intellectual crisis, has lost faith in the old, and is wavering between the old and the new" [this would not be so in advanced capitalism].

So philosophy can only be lived as a faith by the masses. "The important element is without doubt irrational, faith". The change to a new world view can only come for social and political reasons [not economic]. Hence certain tasks can be deduced (1) never to tire in repeating your own arguments (varying the literal form); repetition is the pedagogic method most appropriate for acting on the minds of the populace; (2) To work incessantly to raise the intellectual level of ever greater strata of the population. This entails developing groups of intellectuals of a new type, who rise directly from the people and yet remain in contact with them forming as it were, the ribs crossing the mass. This second necessity, if fulfilled, is what really modifies the "ideological panorama" of an epoch. Nor, furthermore can these elites be constituted without a hierarchicization of authority and intellectual competence taking place in their midst, which may culminate in a great individual philosopher, if this person is capable of living in a concrete way the demands of the massive ideological community, of understanding that it cannot have the narrowness of a movement of his own individual mind and who thus succeeds in elaborating the formal collective doctrine in the way which is closest and most appropriate to the modes of thought of a collective thinker [the party].[11]

1 G. Ferrata, Preface in *2000 Pagine di Gramsci, I,* (Saggiatore, Milan, 1964); N. McInnes, "Antonio Gramsci", *Survey,* No. 53, October 1964; S. Tarrow, *Peasant Communism in Southern Italy,* (Yale UP, London, 1967), ch.5; *Mach.,* p.76 for review of democratic centralism.

2 *Ordine Nuovo,* p.228 ff, 353 ff. See also the first two articles in this series. *ALR,* Feb.-March, April-May 1968.

3 See for example Tarrow, *op.cit.*

4 *Mach.,* p.100.

5 Ibid., p.3.

6 *Materialismo storico,* pp.15-16.

7 See e.g. V. I. Lenin, *"What Is to be Done",* (F. L. P. H. Moscow), p.204.

8 *Mach.,* p.21.

9 *Mach.,* p.114.

10 Ibid., p.115.

11 *Passato e Presente,* p.56.

12 *Materialismo storico,* p.17.