

The Neo-Gramscians in the Study of International Relations: An Appraisal¹

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In this article I provide an appraisal of the neo-Gramscian approach to the study of international relations by focusing on three of its major exponents: Robert Cox, Stephen Gill and Adam Morton. I argue that neo-Gramscians have yet to adequately address some important challenges and criticisms of their method around its overly “top-down” mode of analysis, its neglect of forms of resistance and its excessively global and cosmopolitan account of neoliberal hegemony and especially resistance. I maintain that a return to the letter of Gramsci’s writings on hegemony and its national-popular and democratic character would not only allow neo-Gramscians to address more effectively these weaknesses, but also strengthen their approach and align it more effectively with trends in contemporary politics.

Keywords: Gramsci; International Relations; Hegemony; National-Popular.

1. Introduction

Since Robert Cox’s seminal interventions in the 1980s², Antonio Gramsci has become a familiar presence in the study of international relations (IR) and international political economy (IPE)³. In fact, a whole “school” of study in IR developed on the back of Cox’s ground-breaking work throughout the 1990s and into the new millennium where neo-Gramscians remain today an important alternative to more mainstream and traditional approaches in this field – principally (neo) realism and liberal internationalism.

In this article, I provide an appraisal of neo-Gramscian scholarship in the study of IR by focusing on the work of three of its leading proponents: Robert Cox, Stephen Gill and Adam Morton. The first section explores the unique nature of this neo-Gramscian intervention

¹ This article is the product of a paper delivered at the “Egemonia dopo Gramsci” Conference in September 2016 at the University of Pavia. I am grateful to the organizers of the conference for their support and to its contributors for comments on an earlier draft.

² COX 1981, 1983, 1987.

³ International political economy is treated in this article as a sub-field of international relations.

in IR with reference mainly to Cox and to a lesser extent Gill and Morton. I focus in particular on the principal Gramscian concept of hegemony, demonstrating how it provided these scholars with the conceptual apparatus to make a welcome and important contribution to the field of IR that had become entrenched in an uncritical “problem-solving” positivist mode of enquiry. This provides the context for the appraisal which follows where I give a more personal evaluation of the approach, raising three key criticisms or challenges for neo-Gramscian IR specialists which, it seems to me at least, they have so far failed to address adequately. I conclude by arguing that a retrieval of the «national-popular» character of Gramsci’s hegemony would allow neo-Gramscians to address these shortcomings and strengthen and develop their framework of analysis so it is more aligned with the contemporary world.

2. The Impact of the Concept of Hegemony in International Relations

There is little doubt that the introduction of the Gramscian concept of hegemony in the study of IR has made a welcome transformative contribution to scholarship in this area. Its innovation lies in the fact that its authors seek to develop in IR studies a critical theory tradition, whose origins can be traced to Marxist Historical Materialism and the Frankfurt School⁴. They therefore refuse to take for granted or to *naturalize* power relations and the states that direct and anchor them. Indeed, neo-Gramscians reject the positivist, “problem-solving” approaches of conventional IR – particularly of a (neo-)realist variety – since the latter are embedded in an epistemology that provides little more than explanation. The goal of neo-Gramscians, by contrast, is *not* to explain the current world order but to *transform* it by calling into question how state power and global orders come into existence historically, and how they might be subject to challenge by emerging social and political forces of opposition⁵.

⁴ For the relationship of Gramsci’s thought to the wider critical theory tradition see, HOLUB 1992.

⁵ COX 1981, pp. 128-29; GILL 2012.

The critical leverage is achieved primarily by drawing on the class and ideological analysis at the core of Gramsci's account of hegemony. For, unlike in the work of their realist or liberal internationalist predecessors, as Morton puts it, «class struggle is ...faced rather than effaced in this historical materialist conceptualization of critical theory» and accordingly, their work takes the form of «an enquiry into distinct capitalist relations corresponding to forms of property ownership, state power, and *un*freedom»⁶. The neo-Gramscian project is primarily orientated, however, around a reliance on Gramsci's account of hegemony.

Firstly, they effectively employ the Gramscian notion that dominant social forces achieve hegemony by a combination of force *and consent*⁷ to reject conventional usage of the term in IR that privileges a limited conception of the state and its monopoly of coercion. Here it is important to note, however, that the domination achieved through military and economic power is not simply rejected for the moment of consent, but rather wedded to it in a manner that recognizes that force or domination is an integral component of any hegemonic order⁸. As Cox puts it, dominance is «a necessary but not a sufficient condition of hegemony»⁹, and force is in fact employed resourcefully since «Hegemony is enough to ensure conformity of behaviour in most people most of the time»¹⁰.

This shift in focus away from the concerns of traditional IR by drawing on the idea at the core of Gramsci's concept of hegemony that power is also exercised by *relations of conformity and consent*, opened up the study of international relations to a broader and richer framework of analysis. In fact, it redirected attention to the ways in which states, state formations and world orders are sustained through ideological struggle. The manufacturing of consent at the global level

⁶ MORTON 2007, p. 118. See too MORTON 2006.

⁷ GRAMSCI 1975, Q1, §48, pp. 58-9; GRAMSCI 1992, pp. 155-56. All references to the Prison Notebooks are to the Gerratana critical edition (1975) followed by the relevant English language translation.

⁸ GRAMSCI 1975, Q1, §44, pp. 40-2; GRAMSCI 1992, pp. 136-38. See too, THOMAS 2009, pp. 162-65.

⁹ COX 1981, p. 139.

¹⁰ COX 1983, p. 164.

was a particularly important advance. World hegemony, according to Cox, is established through global institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank (WB), the World Trade Organization (WTO), the European Union (EU) and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). International organization on this scale:

«functions as the process through which the institutions of hegemony and its ideology are developed. Among the features of international organization which express its hegemonic role are the following: (1) the institutions embody the rules which facilitate the expansion of hegemonic world orders; (2) they are themselves the product of the hegemonic world order; (3) they ideologically legitimate the norms of the world order; (4) they co-opt the elites from peripheral countries; (5) they absorb counterhegemonic ideas»¹¹.

The manufacture of ideology that reproduces and normalizes class-based conceptions of the world links the neo-Gramscians not only to Gramsci, but wider constructivist tendencies in critical and cultural theory including the Frankfurt School and currents of critical poststructuralism¹². A certain tension exists though within the various strands of neo-Gramscianism, between those who are prepared to push this latter route to the point at which it threatens the foundationalism of the neo-Gramscian approach in a Historical Materialist analysis of the socio-economic and political order.

Neo-Gramscians also draw innovatively on the «relations of forces» element of Gramsci's account of hegemony in a manner that moves beyond Gramsci, while nonetheless capturing the central Gramscian principle at its heart that power should not be analyzed as some unified, homogenous top-down phenomenon, as is typical in some realist approaches to IR. Accordingly, the state and the world order are not conceived by neo-Gramscians as the expression of one social class, but rather complex and sometimes contradictory power configurations of class and ideological alliances that span the economic, political and cultural spheres. They in fact follow Gramsci in assuming that hegemonic forces can and do «lead» in hegemonic orders, but it is

¹¹ COX 1983, p. 172.

¹² GILL 2012, p. 507.

always in the context of a dynamic set of «relations of forces». This means that leading groups must continually consolidate and forge new relations of hegemony with subordinate or subaltern forces in a process that aims at «not only a unison of economic and political aims, but also intellectual and moral unity»¹³.

Crucially, what the «relations of forces» element does for the neo-Gramscians, is that it allows them to fully exploit the vital *strategic* dimension of hegemony in Gramsci that eschews simplistic class sectarian and «economic-corporate» accounts of capitalist power or resistance¹⁴. This captures effectively the way in which social forces that arise from particular modes of production build alliances with other social forces at the state and international level by making concessions and compromises. Hegemony thus presents itself as a «universal» programme in the interests of *all* sections of society, or indeed, the global community¹⁵.

In fact, Cox, in a move that resonates with a famous passage in the *Prison Notebooks* on the relations of forces in the structure and superstructure¹⁶, sets out three mutually conditioning «spheres of activity» that must be addressed in the analysis of any historical structure:

social forces – the social groups that are engendered through particular ways of organizing production;

forms of state – understood in the Gramscian sense as «state/society complexes» or «historical blocs»;

world order – a historically contingent configuration of forces at the global level that can be characterized by stability or conflict.

He then identifies three further mutually conditioning realms of the relations of forces within each of these spheres of activity:

ideas – widely shared «intersubjective meanings» on the nature of social relations as well as conflicting «collective images of social order

¹³ GRAMSCI 1975, Q13, §17, p. 1584; GRAMSCI 1971, p. 181.

¹⁴ SASSOON 1987, pp. 116-19.

¹⁵ COX 1996, p. 99.

¹⁶ GRAMSCI 1975, Q13, §17, pp. 1583-86; GRAMSCI 1971, pp. 180-85.

held by different groups of people» that incorporate «differing views as to both the nature and the legitimacy of prevailing power relations»;

material capabilities – technological and organizational capabilities and stocks of accumulated industrial and military resources and the wealth that can command them;

institutions – «particular amalgams of ideas and material power which in turn influence the development of ideas and material capabilities»¹⁷.

On one level, it is arguable that there seems to be a kind of linear determinism and economism at work here. This is particularly evident in Morton's statement that Cox's framework «focuses on how power in *social relations of production* may give rise to certain *social forces*, how these social forces may become the basis of power in *forms of state* and how this might shape *world order*»¹⁸. However, neo-Gramscians are at pains to point out the reciprocal and dialectical relationship between various levels of the social and global orders (national, regional and international). They thus reject charges of abstract determinism emphasizing the historically specific and partially open-ended constitution of structures and social forces that leaves space for human agency and diversity of experience¹⁹. While tensions remain between the deterministic and dialectical/historicist character of the framework, the outcome is arguably a sophisticated relational account of hegemony that once again captures the essence of Gramsci's concept.

Neo-Gramscians also follow Gramsci in recognizing that no hegemonic order is unassailable. They thus incorporate into the «relations of forces» the historically unique forms of national and international resistance engendered from within. It is here where the potential for change and transformation is often located. Morton, for example, explores how the uneven development of global capitalism affects its periphery where attempts at hegemony often take the form of «passive revolution». In effect, passive revolutions are elite and state-led social upheavals that produce a «restoration» of the current order in a new arrangement of social forces. They can take the form of externally

¹⁷ COX 1981, pp. 135-38.

¹⁸ MORTON 2007, p. 117.

¹⁹ COX 1981, pp. 134-35; GILL 1993, pp. 26-7; MORTON 2013, p. 143.

motivated and assisted ruptures with little popular involvement in which elites employ the state apparatus to intervene economically to institute a radical «catch up» strategy with the capitalist core. Alternatively, they can also present as relatively far-reaching social transformations that are engendered by deep popular unrest in which elites successfully use state intervention to head-off serious revolutionary resistance and change by co-optation and compromise. Crucially, both aim to extend or restore capitalist relations of production, but achieve only a «minimal form of hegemony» due to the lack of genuine popular involvement. Popular resistance can thus either grow and triumph in the longer term or – as has traditionally been the case – be absorbed and tamed in the passive revolutionary dialectic of «revolution and restoration»²⁰. Morton, for example, explores in great detail the Zapatista (EZLN) resistance in Mexico²¹, demonstrating the potential of this neo-Gramscian approach to explore resistance within the ambit of national and global hegemonic politics.

The final step in the neo-Gramscian acquisition and reconfiguration of Gramsci's hegemony in IR involves the translation of its theoretical framework and particularly its novel concept of «world order» to the actual historical development of states and global inter-state relations. According to Cox and others, there have in fact been two major «world order» in the post-Second World War period. The first is usually defined as a US-led hegemonic world order or *Pax Americana* that lasted until the 1970s. The *social forces* it engendered developed out of a Fordist accumulation model with high levels of production and consumption and a mixed economy. Stability and relative industrial peace were secured by tri-partite agreements involving government, business and labour unions. Its corresponding *form of state* was the Keynesian Welfare State with its developed welfare system and its moderate interventionism that aimed at high levels of employment. This world order was promoted ideologically by the principles of «embedded liberalism» which defended the free market and free trade on the Bretton Woods model of fixed exchange rates, but recognized

²⁰ MORTON 2007, pp. 63-73; MORTON 2013, pp. 18-40. For more recent discussions of the concept of «passive revolution» in Gramsci that broadens our understanding of this key category see ANTONINI 2016; MODONESI 2016.

²¹ MORTON 2013, pp. 199-236.

that domestic stability required state intervention and some redistribution of wealth. States – and especially the United States – were its key institutional anchoring points in the global order and they enjoyed considerable autonomy. Other emerging international institutions – the IMF and WB – promoted and protected its mode of production, ideas and form of state globally²².

The second world order was initially described by Cox and others as the era of «globalization», though it is defined in more recent neo-Gramscian work as a world order characterized by a virulent form of globalized and increasingly authoritarian «neoliberalism»²³. It emerged from the economic crisis and breakdown of the post-War consensus in the 1970s when the *Pax Americana* was deeply destabilized by the internationalization of production and the state²⁴. This global restructuring of production, characterized by the spread of transnational corporations (TNCs) and the territorial dispersion of single productive processes across states, threw up new *social forces*. Both Capital and Labour tended to divide between those elements whose interests lay in sustaining and protecting domestic industries and others who acquired new wealth and advantages in this more open global market economy. The major change here was the increasing dominance of Finance Capital and the emergence of a «transnational managerial class» who drove the process of economic globalization from beyond the reach of the state²⁵. The *form of state* that sustains this world order, according to Cox, is a «hyperliberal form of state»²⁶ that becomes in effect a «transmission belt» for neoliberalization «from the global to the national economy»²⁷. Morton, however, is somewhat less convinced of the extent of this globalization and weakening of the nation-state²⁸. Gill, by contrast, describes this world order in Foucauldian terms as a «global panopticon» that institutes a «new

²² COX 1987, pp. 211-67; MORTON 2007, p. 123; GILL AND LAW 1988, pp. 79-80.

²³ BIELER, BRUFF AND MORTON 2015; BRUFF 2014.

²⁴ COX 1987, pp. 273-85.

²⁵ COX 1987, p. 271; MORTON 2007, p. 124.

²⁶ COX 1987, pp. 286-88.

²⁷ COX 1996, p. 302.

²⁸ MORTON 2007, p. 125.

constitutionalism» in which the rules and prescriptions of neoliberalism are meticulously surveyed and regulated across states where deviance is disciplined and punished. Indeed, power is employed efficiently as states and other institutions self-regulate, developing increasingly exploitative and efficiency-driven practices of heightened observation and control over citizens and workers, attuned to survival in the wider neoliberal world order. From this perspective, transnational political and economic institutions such as the IMF, G7, WB, WTO and the European Union (EU) and its European Central Bank (ECB) become increasingly more fundamental to the maintenance of this new neoliberal world order. They disseminate, normalize and regulate an ideology of uncompromising neoliberalism committed to market fundamentalism and a «rolling back» of state intervention in the economy for *dirigiste* or welfare purposes. The imposition of the conditions of neoliberal world order on nation-states thus challenges democratic governance in more fundamental ways and in turn gives birth to new forms of national and global resistance²⁹.

3. Three Challenges for Neo-Gramscians in IR Studies Today

Having sketched out a brief account of the approach of neo-Gramscians, I want to turn now to consider three important criticisms or challenges that it seems to me they have so far failed to address adequately in their analysis of IR. The criticism raised here should not, however, be conflated with some familiar critiques raised in an earlier period. For while it clearly owes something to them, I am also skeptical of many of the arguments raised in these earlier critiques. They in fact tended to focus on three key issues: the neo-Gramscians' apparent lack of Marxist materialism³⁰; their adherence to a *passé* mode of Marxist analysis that provides an excessively reductionist – class and economic – account of international relations³¹; and finally, their supposed decontextualization and misreading of Gramsci's thought that illicitly

²⁹ GILL 1995.

³⁰ BURNHAM 1991 and 1994.

³¹ ASHLEY 1989; HOBSON 1998; SPEGELE 1997. For similar criticism from within a broadly Historical Materialist approach see too WORTH 2011.

converts him into a theorist of the international when his analysis was firmly orientated towards the nation-state³², and the Italian nation-state in particular³³. It seems to me at least, that while the latter two criticisms of these three have some justification, they are on the whole grossly overstated. In what follows I therefore sail a course between these early critiques and neo-Gramscian responses to them to highlight what I regard as three important shortcomings of neo-Gramscian analysis that appear particularly pertinent today.

The first of these concerns the tendency of neo-Gramscians to theorize the spread of the neoliberal world order in terms of an all-powerful «transnational managerial class» imposing neoliberal globalization on nation-states from above. This criticism was first raised by Leo Panitch who contested in particular the unrealistic «top-down» nature of the analysis typified in Cox's depiction of modern states as «transmission belts» for the implementation of neoliberal policies devised in transnational institutions³⁴. The problem with this approach is that it not only undervalues the continuing importance of nation-states as loci of considerable power in the modern world, but also, fails to adequately appreciate the impact of class struggle and conflict within them that can cut across and thwart global class alliances.

This critique is not new and neo-Gramscians have gone some considerable way to address it. For example, Cox's reformulation of world order as a decentered impersonal «*nébuleuse*» dominated by finance capitalism in a form of «governance without government»³⁵ is unquestionably less hierarchical than in his earlier work. Morton's empirical work, moreover, has a decidedly more state-centric approach and he is himself critical of neo-Gramscians who give too much weight to transnational elites in a top-down orientation that fails to appreciate how local interests build alliances to initiate and drive forward capitalist accumulation and neoliberalization at the periphery³⁶. It is arguable, however, that Morton's reliance on a Trotsky-inspired focus on «uneven and combined development» of capitalist economics means

³² FEMIA 2005 and 2009; GERMAIN AND KENNY 1998; SAURIN 2009.

³³ BELLAMY 1990; BELLAMY AND SCHECHTER 1993.

³⁴ PANITCH 1994; see too, BAKER 1999; WORTH 2009.

³⁵ COX 1996, pp. 298-99, 301.

³⁶ MORTON 2013.

the *primary* determinant for passive revolutions or «minimal forms of hegemony» at the periphery is the external capitalist *international core* and in that sense his approach remains – structurally at least – overly top-down in its mode of analysis³⁷.

Moreover, this top-down critique seems particularly relevant today in a world in which nation-states are reasserting their capacity to strategically limit the processes of globalization in response to popular demands and the survival of cross-class alliances at the national level. The capacity to resist is for sure uneven, but is typified by the 2016 decision by public referendum of the United Kingdom to leave the EU (and its free market of goods, labour and services), and indeed, the protectionist and anti-immigration politics that are on the rise all over the world. The latter have of course found new expression in the United States with Donald Trump's commitment to build a «beautiful border wall». What these contemporary political developments illustrate is, that assumptions among neo-Gramscians that nation-states are merely «transmission belts» for neoliberal globalization imposed by transnational classes seem more than ever in need of serious revision.

A second major challenge to neo-Gramscian IR concerns its continuing failure to move beyond a mode of critical political economy aimed at neoliberal globalization to consider seriously forms of resistance. As early observers also pointed out, there is in fact a propensity to concentrate on and present the formation and structures of neoliberal hegemony in such an all-powerful light that little space is left to theorize and investigate convincingly how resistance is – and might be – formed to oppose it³⁸. It is certainly true that neo-Gramscians have gone some way to addressing this weakness by extending the focus on forms of resistance³⁹, but overall the field remains predominantly preoccupied with exploring the mechanisms of neoliberal hegemony internationally. Thus, one is bound to remain sceptical about the capacity of this theoretical model to make good on

³⁷ Of the three neo-Gramscians I consider Morton's theoretical proximity to Gramsci and his consequent rich and detailed analysis of state, class and spatial relations within the nation-state (mainly Mexico), make him less susceptible to the criticisms I am raising here.

³⁸ CAMMACK 1999; DRAINVILLE 1994, 1995; STRANGE 2002.

³⁹ See, for example, GILL 2000, 2012; MORTON 2013; BIELER 2011.

its claims to move beyond the explanation of its predecessors into the realm of *critical praxis*.

This, in fact, leads me to the final and most important challenge I wish to raise here which relates to the excessively globalized and cosmopolitan manner in which neo-Gramscians theorize neoliberal hegemony and especially resistance to it. Among the three authors focused on here, there is little doubt that it is Gill in particular who has provided the most influential account of potential resistance in his Gramsci-inspired conception of the «postmodern Prince». Written in the direct aftermath of the Battle of Seattle (1999), Gill's initial account of the postmodern Prince identified it with an alternative «politics of globalization» and «global democratic collective action» led principally by transnational protest movements like the Alternative Globalization Movement (AGM) and the World Social Forum (WSF)⁴⁰. In 2012 he returned to the idea of the postmodern Prince incorporating now the emerging movements of the Arab Spring and the then expanding Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (ALBA)⁴¹. In the early years of the millennium Gill's optimism that these movements might eventually mature into «something akin to a postmodern transnational political party»⁴² was perhaps understandable, but from the contemporary perspective this attempt to theorize and investigate a credible resistance within primarily transnational movements appears signally unconvincing. For today we can see that the projected potential of these movements like the AGM, the WSF, the Arab Spring and ALBA have not only failed to materialize, but are everywhere in retreat and are in effect being outflanked by a wave of populist movements that are deeply embedded in national contexts.

In these circumstances, neo-Gramscian attempts to theorize resistance and neoliberalism in excessively globalized terms is in serious need of revision. Indeed, its future development requires in my view a return to the letter of Gramsci's writings and particularly his emphatically *bottom-up* account of hegemony under the category of the «national-popular». However, it is not the intention here to re-rehearse the arguments advanced by Germain and Kenny and Femia noted

⁴⁰ GILL 2000, p. 140.

⁴¹ GILL 2012.

⁴² GILL 2000, p. 138.

above that Gramsci was essentially a theorist of the nation-state whose ideas have no serious bearing on international politics. In fact, as I have maintained elsewhere against this critique, Gramsci is at once a theorist of the national and international (*internationalism*) and his concept of hegemony and especially the «national-popular» are inscribed with an essential international perspective⁴³. Thus, while the *Prison Notebooks* and hegemony are open to a range of contested interpretations⁴⁴, what seems relatively clear is that throughout their pages Gramsci *continued* to treat capitalism (and the working class) as he had done in 1919 as «a world historical phenomenon»⁴⁵. He *continued* to regard both as developing an increasingly international character, and despite his rejection of the Stalinist Comintern, he *continued* to believe in the necessity for forces of resistance embedded in national contexts to build an international movement of coordination and support⁴⁶. In fact, Gramsci convincingly argues in the *Quaderni* that there are no nationally specific forms of economics, politics or culture in absolute terms, since «international relations intertwine with ...internal relations of nation-states,' though in this process they do create at the level of the nation-state 'new unique and historically concrete combinations»⁴⁷.

Neo-Gramscian IR scholars have rightly emphasized these aspects of Gramsci's thought, but they have also overplayed the international dimension of Gramsci's hegemony in my view, undervaluing – in theory and application – its «national-popular» character. Here, it is particularly important to grasp the *strategic* coordinates of Gramsci's account of hegemony as a political and ideological struggle to build a series of «national-popular» relations that articulates classes to local historically grounded mass ideologies and identities. In effect, Gramsci inflects his internationalism to give *strategic primacy to the national struggle* while continuing to maintain the necessity for integrated coordination and support at the international level. This is important since it is a move that links his thought to democracy; democracy, that is, understood not in any abstract sense as a set of principles and

⁴³ McNALLY 2009.

⁴⁴ LIGUORI 2015, pp. 176-91.

⁴⁵ GRAMSCI 1977, p. 69.

⁴⁶ McNALLY 2009: pp. 64-5; see too, IVES AND SHORT 2013.

⁴⁷ GRAMSCI 1975, Q13, §17, p. 1585; GRAMSCI 1971, p. 182.

institutions, but in its radical historical concrete sense as *democratic praxis*, or the awakening and effective mobilization of the popular masses without which no subversion of elite-dominated societies can take place⁴⁸.

The «national-popular» is thus a critical concept in Gramsci that guides the working class movement and its various intellectual strata to undergo an ideological transformation without which hegemony over the working masses cannot be achieved. This required above all the rejection of an internationalism characterised by abstract «cosmopolitanism» and the application of a universalized conceptual armoury that had little more than «“geographical” seats» in each nation⁴⁹. In fact, in what is perhaps one of the most important passages in the *Notebooks* he makes clear how he conceives hegemony as both international and national-popular in character praising the Bolsheviks – not for abandoning internationalism – but «purging internationalism of every vague and purely ideological (in a pejorative sense) element, to give it a realistic political content». He then provides a vital insight into how he conceives of hegemony in relation to the international and national strategies.

«It is in the concept of hegemony that those exigencies which are national in character are knotted together... A class that is international in character has – in as much as it guides social strata which are narrowly national (intellectuals), and indeed frequently even less than national: particularistic and municipalistic (the peasants) – to “nationalise” itself in a certain sense»⁵⁰.

The leading group’s ideology, according to Gramsci then, should also be «nationalised» since «non-national concepts (i.e. ones that cannot be referred to each individual country) are erroneous» and «have led to passivity and inertia...»⁵¹.

⁴⁸ LACLAU 2005.

⁴⁹ GRAMSCI 1975, Q10, §61, p. 1361; GRAMSCI 1971, p. 117. For an analysis of Gramsci’s critique of abstract cosmopolitanism in the Quaderni in favour of a «cosmopolitismo di tipo nuovo», see, IZZO 2016.

⁵⁰ GRAMSCI 1975, Q14, §68, pp. 1729-30; GRAMSCI 1971, pp. 240-1.

⁵¹ *Ibidem*.

However, for a hegemonic group to nationalise its intellectual and conceptual armoury was not enough for Gramsci. For he makes clear that hegemony also requires *emotional* understanding and expression of the demands of the populous among the leading group's intellectuals. In other words, a hegemonic class should have organic intellectuals embedded in the culture of the masses who «know and sense their needs, aspirations and feelings' so that they actually «feel tied to them» and their movement becomes in effect «an articulation with organic functions of the people themselves»⁵². In fact, Gramsci sums up the «entire work» of the Modern Prince (i.e. the Party) as «intellectual and moral reform» aimed at «the formation of a *national-popular collective will* [my italics], of which the modern Prince is at one and the same time the organiser and the active operative expression...»⁵³. Significantly, his model here was not only the Bolsheviks, but also, the radical bourgeoisie in the French Revolution (i.e. the Jacobins). Their slogans «stirred up» the «great popular masses» with the aim of placing themselves «at the head of all the national forces... identifying the interests and the requirements common to all the national forces, in order to set these forces in motion and lead them into the struggle»⁵⁴.

Finally, in Gramsci's conception of the national-popular there is an emphatically realist strategic account of democracy that he acquired from his United Front experience and that taught him that hegemony is a battle for the masses in which every advance of one's own mass forces is a weakening of the opposition⁵⁵. A successful «national-popular» struggle for hegemony must therefore be attuned to the dynamics of mass politics in the national and regional context and the necessity to deprive the opposition «of every zone of passivity in which it would be possible to enrol Vendee-type armies»⁵⁶. This above all would require emerging forces of resistance to fully appreciate for strategic purposes

⁵² GRAMSCI 1975, Q21, §5, p. 2117; GRAMSCI 1985, p. 209.

⁵³ GRAMSCI 1975, Q13, §1, pp. 1560-61; GRAMSCI 1971, pp. 132-33.

⁵⁴ GRAMSCI 1975, Q19, §24, pp. 2028-29; GRAMSCI 1971, p. 78. For a further discussion of the affective relationship between democracy and hegemony in the *Quaderni* that captures the elements of mass praxis and the emotive mobilizing quality of Machiavellian myth, see, FROSINI 2016.

⁵⁵ MCNALLY 2015; PAGGI 1984.

⁵⁶ GRAMSCI 1975, Q19, §24, p. 2029; GRAMSCI 1971, p. 79.

that while «the line of development is towards internationalism... the point of departure is “national” – and it is from this point of departure that one must begin»⁵⁷. Neo-Gramscians are fond of quoting this passage from Gramsci to emphasize his internationalist credentials, it seems to me however that they have not fully appreciated the primary force of its intentions. This was not in fact a declaration of internationalism *per se*, but of a particular kind of internationalism inscribed with a national-popular strategy – as outlined above – which would allow the emerging working class resistance to mount a credible strategic challenge for hegemony. To deprive hegemony of this national-popular mass democratic character as neo-Gramscians do is therefore to depart from Gramsci in a manner that adds no value to their mode of analysis. On the contrary, it undermines their capacity to account for the enduring quality of forms of capitalism (including its virulent neoliberal variety today), and more importantly, it negates hegemony’s critical and radical potential as a guide to understanding the potential for mass democratic resistance.

4. *Conclusion: Retrieving the National-Popular*

Indeed, I would argue that a retrieval of the «national-popular» character of Gramsci’s account of hegemony in neo-Gramscian scholarship would allow them to meet all three challenges outlined above. For the «national-popular» in Gramsci indicated a rejection of excessively top-down accounts of capitalism, it foregrounded resistance, and above all it indicated how *effective* resistance must eschew abstract cosmopolitan internationalism and adopt an internationalism that fully appreciates how capitalism has embedded itself in local and national contexts. Accordingly, it required the forces of resistance to develop a more profound and strategically advanced national-popular strategy that is capable of superseding capitalist hegemony.

This appraisal and its emphasis on the national-popular will no doubt appear to some all too pessimistic, or perhaps another attempt to criticize from some mythical vantage position of insight into the one

⁵⁷ GRAMSCI 1975, Q14, §68, p. 1729; GRAMSCI 1971, p. 240.

true meaning of the *Prison Notebooks*. It is well therefore to restate the arguments raised at the beginning of this article and to reconnect with them here in concluding.

I have argued that neo-Gramscian scholarship has already made a transformational and progressive contribution to the study of IR in providing a framework of analysis informed by Gramsci's hegemony that is uniquely critical and sensitive to the ways in which power is exercised in international politics through a combination of (inter-)state and economic coercion and ideological forms of national and global consent-building. It has also developed its accounts of resistance in response to earlier criticism and shows signs of a greater determination to make good on its critical potential in this area. Insofar as its proponents depart from Gramsci, I am broadly sympathetic with such moves as long as they are acknowledged and can be justified in terms of sharpening and updating its conceptual tools in light of the change of context from the world in which Gramsci developed hegemony to our own.

However, the failure to assimilate fully the national-popular character of Gramsci's hegemony and his complementary conception of internationalism as *nodal* – to use a term coined from Morton⁵⁸ – is manifestly not of this order. For despite globalization, the masses remain today embedded in national and local political cultures and look primarily to the institutions at this level – national, regional and local governments – to address their demands as they did in Gramsci's own time. It is indeed a mistake to underestimate how neoliberalism is interwoven into the fabric of mass national-popular cultures and institutions at this level, and to underestimate their continuing power and resilience. Nor should we imagine its decapitation by some assault on a fictitious centre. I have argued above that Gramsci's account of the national-popular teaches us to eschew such illusions for a strategy of hegemony that aims to dismantle it at its dispersed foundations. The invocation here to retrieve the national-popular coordinates of

⁵⁸ MORTON 2007, p. 122. Morton maintains that «it is within this nodal “national” context that hegemony is initially constructed, prior to outward expansion on a world scale» (p. 123). I would argue rather that in Gramsci this is a structural characteristic of global hegemony – political, economic and cultural – that should not be confined to explaining its initial stages.

Gramsci's hegemony are, moreover, by no means an attempt to dismiss neo-Gramscian scholarship. On the contrary, it is rather an effort to contribute to an ongoing discussion which will hopefully lead to the further development and enriching of its method.

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