

**Gramsci, Hegemony and the (Transnational) Historical Bloc.
Theoretical contributions to the 21st Century International Relations***
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The Gramscian thinking has been increasingly used in the fields of Political Science and International Relations, however, prioritizing its concept of hegemony. In this article, it is proposed both, a more accurate elucidation and a possible transposition of the concept of the historical bloc to the international scenario, having as the main question the following study inquiry: can we transpose the concept of the historical bloc developed by Gramsci for International Relations of the 21st century, taking into account its transnational nature? Methodologically, a deductive, qualitative approach is used, with a literature review based on data collection from secondary sources. It is understood that the notion of the historical bloc coined by Gramsci, followed by the assumptions of critical theorists, helps us to understand the difficulties of the current international relations. The versatility of this concept allows us to endorse a macro view of the many facets of International Relations, whether they are linked to the political, economic, social, and even ideological spheres.

Gramsci; Transnational Historical Bloc; International Relations; Hegemony; Critical Theory.

1. Introduction

Antonio Gramsci's ideas influenced not only his generation, but also a subsequent generation of researchers and academics seeking a critical perspective on social sciences, politics, and, more recently, International Relations¹. Thus, this article discusses the main postulates of Gramscian's thought, essentially those of hegemony and the historical bloc, until their possible applicability in the scope of the current International Relations, essentially concerning the transposition of the latter to a more comprehensive perspective developed by Neo-Gramscian authors², which aim to

* International Relations with capital letters refer to the theoretical currents of this field, while international relations with lowercase letters alludes to the relationships between the actors in the international system.

¹ GRAMSCI 1971; 2001; 2011a.

² COX 1983; GILL 1993; SASSOON 2000.

make it operational at the international level. On the basis of these conjectures, we intend to examine the following research question: can we apply Gramsci's concept of the historical bloc to twenty-first-century international relations, while recognising its transnational nature? The current configuration of the international system, it is argued, has resulted in permanent corollaries for International Relations, and the concept of a historical bloc, coined by Gramsci and developed, albeit to a lesser extent³, by Neo-Gramscians, attests to the conceptualization's transnational nature. However, the primary distinction between the neo-gramscians' conceptualizations and the argument presented in this article is based on the Transnational Historical Bloc's role and contributions to IR theory, rather than on concepts such as hegemony, social and political classes, or power production.

This research employs a qualitative method of analysis⁴, as well as a deductive approach⁵, because it begins with a general understanding of Gramsci's conceptualization of the historical bloc and its corollaries for its instrumentalization in twenty-first-century International Relations, as effected by the Neo-Gramscian authors. Additionally, this approach enables us to comprehend how to establish a causal link between the concept of transnational historical bloc and the nature of the international realm (as it presents nowadays). Additionally, a literature review was conducted using secondary sources, as both Gramsci's writings and those of his contemporaries are analysed, providing us with a better understanding of the concept of historical bloc on the original, as defined by Gramsci, and that of the neogramscians.

To achieve these objectives, this article is divided into four subsections. First, an introduction to the thought on hegemony based in Gramsci, essentially for the understanding of the historical bloc; secondly, the concept of the historical bloc and its conceptual characteristics; thirdly, the role of the Critical Theory and the neo-Gramscian assumptions regarding the national/international transposition; fourthly, the notion of a

³ Mostly, they worked on the concept of hegemony, classes, power, society (political and civil), see, for exemple, COX 1981, 1983; ARRIGHI 1993; GILL 1993; GILL AND LAW 1989; SASSOON 2000; BUDD 2013.

⁴ LAMONT 2015; BOX-STEFFENSMEIER, BRADY AND COLLIER 2008.

⁵ DE VAUS 2001, pp. 5-8.

transnational historical bloc and how it influences the international scene, taking into account the consolidation of the transnational capitalist class; and, finally, some final considerations on the importance of Gramscian's thinking for the current International Relations.

2. The concept of hegemony

One of the most applied and most used concepts of Gramscian's thought in contemporary international relations and politics is that of hegemony. However, this perspective is imbued with a complex formulation that involves different levels of analysis of the society, the State, and, by extension, International Relations. To organize the Gramscian's thought of hegemony and its corollaries in the philosophy and practice of the State, it must be considered that the 'Prison Notebooks' is the result of a collection of criticisms under the most varied themes⁶. His intention, although considered by Gramsci as a project to last 'forever' and interrupted by his illness and precipitous death, on April 27, 1937⁷, was precisely to reflect on the most varied themes inherent to the social and political construction of his time. Consequently, it has become an extremely important text for academia in general. That said, it is for this reason that we can find his concepts combined and analyzed by other authors such as Luciano Gruppi⁸, Huges Portelli⁹ e Norberto Bobbio¹⁰, for example, on the question of hegemony, historical bloc, and society civil law, respectively.

Starting from an analogy to the work previously done by Marx¹¹, Gramsci verifies that the question of hegemony is essentially based on the class struggle carried out at the level of the superstructure. This division, carried out by Marx, between (infrastructure) and superstructure argues that the first refers to the economic forces of a given social reality and,

⁶ GRAMSCI 2011a; 2011c; 2011b.

⁷ GRAMSCI 2011a.

⁸ GRUPPI 1978.

⁹ PORTELLI 1977.

¹⁰ BOBBIO 1982.

¹¹ MARX 1909a;1909b; 1909c.

consequently, the second is formed by ideological and political values, essentially within the scope of civil and political society. As he is a neo-Marxist author, Gramsci's analysis necessarily involves reinterpreting the functions and attributions of the structure and superstructure. The relations between spheres of the State form the complex relationship between different groups of the economic, political, and civil society. This notion becomes crucial to understand the concept of a Gramscian historical bloc. So, by structure, we understand the private sphere, that is, the economic forces that prevail within the state structure, as we can verify,

«[...] The structure is defined, in a very classic way, as the set of social forces and the world of production: Based on the degree of development of the material forces of production, social groups are made, each representing a function and keeping a certain position in the production itself» (PORTELLI, 1977: 45).

In contrast, the superstructure is formed by the relationship between civil society and political society (State). For Gramsci, it is precisely in this sphere that the hegemonic struggle takes place, that is, between social forces and government forces. In this sense, the structure has a deterministic function concerning the state economic reality in the sense of being based on the formation of the means of production and its interactivity with social life.

As it is a delicate sphere, Gramsci argues that, methodologically, it is not possible to identify a structure through a snapshot of social reality, but rather is necessary to resort to the role of history to understand the characteristics inherent to this social sphere, so the past becomes a fundamental analytical part since the present can only be better understood through a scrutiny of the past, that is, an analysis that takes into account the role of history. In this sense, the importance and necessity of the historical function concerning the understanding of social and economic relations become more and more evident to the detriment of the adoption of a certain period of time for such analysis¹².

However, his interpretation of the historical bloc argues that a scholium of the organic relationship between the two spheres of the superstructure, that is, civil society and political society, necessarily gives us a

¹² PORTELLI 1977, p. 46.

view, by analogy, of the structural reality of a given State, thus passing on, to place a greater emphasis on superstructural relations than necessarily structural ones¹³.

Thus, civil society represents socio-political forces that interact with governmental and social institutions to form their own political identity; this is manifested by private institutions such as religion, schools, associations and political parties¹⁴. One of the points that, at the same time, approaches and differentiates Gramscian theory from the Marxist concept of civil society is precisely in the placement, or better, in the situation where it becomes the object of analysis. For Gramsci, civil society is based on the superstructure, while for Marx, on the structure. This differentiation in the way of interpreting concepts allows us to assess the role of civil society as a historical-social factor. Thus, civil society for Gramsci is the true centre of history, as well as being located, in opposition to the Marxist conception of civil society, in the superstructure¹⁵.

Intrinsically linked to the concept of civil society is the concept of political society, or the State, which is also an integral part of the superstructure. However, this relationship is not static, but organic, taking into account the concept of a historical bloc. By definition, the State holds the legitimate use of force (military and police), as well as bureaucracy (legal system, education, public services, etc.). In this sense, there is a clear distinction about the role of political society concerning civil society.

Still, the concept of hegemony allowed Gramsci to broaden the traditional concept of State, where «[the] State is normally defined as a collectivity that is composed of a territory and a population, submitted to an organized political power» and «is characterized by sovereignty»¹⁶, leading to a more complete and complex conceptualization, which includes in its formulation the support of the political structures of civil and political society¹⁷, thus assuming a more comprehensive aspect¹⁸. We can, under this aegis, point out that the extension of the concept of State

¹³ PORTELLI 1977, p. 47.

¹⁴ GRAMSCI 1971, p. 12.

¹⁵ BOBBIO 1982.

¹⁶ DINH *et al.* 1999, p. 374.

¹⁷ COX 1983, p. 51.

¹⁸ BOBBIO 1982, p. 23.

in Gramsci allows us to advocate its transnational function since its performance is certainly not restricted to its borders (most evident aspect in a globalized world, characteristic of the international relations of the 21st century).

Regarding the relationship between civil society, we can also say that there is no organized separation between them, both are closely related. Although methodologically they are analyzed separately, we have to keep in mind an organic relationship, that is, living between the different levels of the society in question. The example of the formation of public opinion is given to us to express the formation of consensus.

For Gramsci, as well as for the Neo-Gramscians¹⁹, the concept of hegemony involves an inherent complexity of relationships that explain the domination of one group over another. There are at least three important concepts to be advanced here: civil society, the State, and the historical bloc. Robert Bocoock²⁰, for example, suggests a different dismemberment²¹ in Gramsci's proposal, that is, his interpretation of power relations, which separates three interdependent areas: the economic, civil society and the State.

The central point of hegemony in Gramsci is the attempt to match philosophy and practice within political life, assuming this practice as coercion due to the formation of consensus²². The basis of this political practice is based on the interaction between structure and superstructure, defined by Karl Marx, where the first is related to the means of production²³ and the second, includes civil and political societies. While Marx prioritizes economic relations, Gramsci, in turn, advocates that values and ideologies are more important in the process of hegemonic formation. It is worth mentioning that this interpretation removes the primacy of historical materialism from its exclusive formation in the structure, and transposes it to the existing relationships in the superstructure.

Having established the necessary theoretical context for understanding Gramsci's theory about the Italian reality of his time, it remains for

¹⁹ BOBBIO 1979; COX 1983; FEMIA 1981; GILL 1993; GRUPPI 1978.

²⁰ BOCOOCK 1986.

²¹ This division is only methodological.

²² ARRIGHI 1993; COX 1983.

²³ FORGACS 2000.

us to evaluate how the concept of hegemony is defined. Thus, the term hegemony is frequently associated with a realistic conception²⁴, in which one group, state, or group of states achieves military and economic dominance over another. This view of reality is predicated on the fundamental and fundamental concept of power, in which economic and military forces predominate.

Thus, the aggregate of all levels of society – political, social, and economic – constitutes what Gramsci dubbed the historical bloc (*blocco storico*). After that, we will see how the relationship between these spheres of society and hegemony can be tangential to the article's central concept, namely the historical bloc.

3. *The concept of « Historical Bloc »*

Concomitantly with Gramsci's conceptualization of hegemony, the formation and/or construction of the historical bloc becomes essential to the presented argument. Therefore, and using the language prevalent in Gramsci, the historical bloc is defined as the organic interaction between the structure and the superstructure, «Structures and superstructures form an «historical bloc». That is to say the complex, contradictory and discordant ensemble of the superstructures, is the refecction of the ensemble of the social relations of production»²⁵.

Thus, this concept is inextricably linked to this philosopher's concept of hegemony, which encompasses all social levels simultaneously²⁶. We must bear in mind that the concrete role of the historical bloc concept follows a more emancipatory aspect of world-conception, in the face of historical, political, and social challenges, as the same states,

«In what sense can one identify politics with history, and hence all of life with politics? How then could the whole system of superstructures be understood as distinctions within politics, and the introduction of the concept of distinction into a philosophy of praxis hence be justified? But can one really speak of a dialectic of distincts, and how is the concept of a circle joining the levels of the

²⁴ JOSEPH 2002.

²⁵ GRAMSCI 1971, p. 366.

²⁶ GRUPPI 1978.

superstructure to be understood? Concept of «historical bloc», i.e. unity between nature and spirit (structure and superstructure), unity of opposites and of distinct» (GRAMSCI, 1971: 137).

Given the present configuration and definition, it is imperative to emphasize that its characterization is inherently linked to the concept of hegemony and, at the same time, to the development of history itself. Starting from this principle of correlation between the superstructure and structure within the State, it is affirmed that the State here as being a regulatory and representative entity of civil society, that is, the regulatory, ethical and, simultaneously, representative apparatus of civil society, as we can see,

«Every State is ethical in as much as one of its most important functions is to raise the great mass of the population to a particular cultural and moral level, a level (or type) which corresponds to the needs of the productive forces for development, and hence to the interests of the ruling classes» (Gramsci, 1971: 258).

At this point, political society, defined as the regulatory, ethical, and representative function of a particular class, moves beyond the domestic context and into the transnational/international realms. Thus, we can verify that, from this vantage point, the international projection of Gramscian thought occurs as a result of a perception of an enlarged State, and concurrently as a result of the configuration of the twenty-first-century international system, that is, of the interests represented by the relationship between civil society and political society (e.g., the historical bloc).

In this regard, Cospito ²⁷ reaffirms the Historical Bloc's continued importance throughout Gramsci's work, confirming Canfora's ²⁸ argument that the term has two effective readings namely:

«Di «blocco storico» Gramsci da due formulazioni, che corrispondono a due concetti diversi: a) «blocco storico concreto», ovvero «blocco storico economico-politico», espressioni che non sembrano poter indicare altro che, per l'appunto, un blocco di forze sociali; b) «concetto di blocco storico resupposto dal Sorel? », e ancora: «il concetto del valore concreto (storico) delle superstrutture

²⁷ COSPITO 2016.

²⁸ CANFORA 1987.

nella filosofia della prassi deve essere approfondito accostandolo al soreliano concetto di blocco storico» (CANFORA 1987: 585).

Due to divergent interpretations of the same concept, and despite Cospito's assertion that «c'è una connessione necessaria e vitale tra struttura e sovrastrutture, così come c'è tra la pelle e lo scheletro nel corpo umano»²⁹, his work suggests that historical blocks should be viewed as significant but not necessary. The statement emphasizes in particular that, despite certain critics' reservations about Gramsci's concept of historical bloc, neo-Gramscian embraces the term and enhances our understanding of the international arena.

However, when we consider the historical bloc to be the product of a combination of local and global events, it is assumed, on the one hand, a social structure that is defined by its dependence on the productive forces and, on the other hand, an ideological superstructure (that is, the formation and construction of culture) and politics; it must emancipate from static devices and, thus, come to be understood in an organic (that is, alive) and dynamic way, as stated by Pizzorno,

«On pense maintenant en général que la notion de bloc historique constitue l'un des éléments les plus importants de la pensée de Gramsci. Mais on a tendance à y voir davantage l'idée du lien, de l'interaction entre structure et superstructure donc une façon d'écarter de difficiles analyses des racines structurelles d'une situation politique que le point de départ d'une analyse: l'analyse de la façon dont un système de valeurs culturelles (ce que Gramsci appelle idéologie) imprègne, se répand, socialise et intègre un système social. On peut observer une correspondance quase parfaite entre les descriptions généralisées, implicites dans la notion de bloc historique, d'hégémonie, de direction politique, d'idéologie, de la fonction des intellectuels, et certaines descriptions généralisées de la sociologie et de la science politique d'aujourd'hui» (Pizzorno, 1968: 166).

In this regard, it should also be taken into account that it is through the analysis of the historical bloc that Gramsci verifies and studies the disintegration of the hegemonic system of the ruling classes and, concomitantly, how the formation of new historical blocs takes place³⁰.

²⁹ COSPITO 2016, p. 162.

³⁰ PORTELLI 1977; COX 1981

Gramsci ascribes a unique role to intellectuals as «employees of the superstructure» that is, those who maintain and build ideologies within the historical bloc, he argues that this link between intellectuals and members of civil society is established through organic cohesion, as exemplified by him,

«If the relationship between intellectuals and people-nation, between the leaders and the led, the rulers and the ruled, is provided by an organic cohesion in which feeling-passion becomes understanding and thence knowledge (not mechanically but in a way that is alive), then and only then is the relationship one of representation. Only then can there take place an exchange of individual elements between the rulers and ruled, leaders [*dirigenti*] and led, and can the shared life be realised which alone is a social force with the creation of the «historical bloc»?» (GRAMSCI 1971: 418).

Primarily, note that there is a fundamental distinction between philosophy, folklore, and common sense when it comes to the formation of ideology, understood here as a world perspective of the ruling class. In this sense, philosophy is understood here as the highest level of ideology, that is, for the intellectuals of the ruling class, who hold the hegemony; on the other hand, folklore is considered to be the lowest level, intended for the subordinate and auxiliary classes; and, finally, common sense is found between these two conceptions³¹. Given the importance of ideology in the support of civil society.

Gramsci argues that this worldview must be communicated to the auxiliary and subordinate classes in order for them to impose their associated values. Thus, among the mechanisms that this author classifies as mechanisms for forming consensus are the media, the Catholic Church, the school (elementary and secondary education), militarism, and political parties. By way of illustration, regionalisms can be viewed as a mechanism for achieving regional/international consensus. Thus, Gramsci connects these three critical institutions within the ideological structure, «everything that influences or has the potential to influence public opinion directly or indirectly» and emphasizes the role and function of

³¹ GRAMSCI 2011a, p. 173.

libraries, circles, and clubs, among others, as mechanisms of ideological diffusion³².

Still, hegemony is considered the ideal moment for the ruling classes, and its materialization occurs through the monopoly of ideology, that is, of intellectuals. In this way, the maintenance of hegemony is dominated by the control and diffusion of the dominant philosophy, thus causing a direct reaction in the formation and domination of the historical bloc.

One last aspect of the formation and maintenance of the historical bloc in Gramsci is related to the conception of the organic crisis and its corollaries, e.g., the reorganization of the historical bloc itself through a new hegemonic system. Thus, by definition, the organic crisis is characterized by the rupture between the structure and the superstructure, that is, by the incapacity of the ruling hegemonic class to exercise its hegemony in other sectors of civil society, as stated by Gramsci,

«And the content is the crisis of the ruling class's hegemony, which occurs either because the ruling class has failed in some major political undertaking for which it has requested, or forcibly extracted, the consent of the broad masses (war, for example) , or because huge masses (especially of peasants and petit-bourgeois intellectuals) have passed suddenly from a state of political passivity to a certain activity, and put forward demands which taken together, albeit not organically formulated, add up to a revolution. A «crisis of authority» is spoken of: this is precisely the crisis of hegemony, or general crisis of the State» (GRAMSCI 1971: 210-211).

These precepts referring to the crisis of authority vis-à-vis civil society result, necessarily, in the rupture of the current system (which can also be understood as an international system). Thus creating the possibility of structural reorganization in terms of State actors and programs, as he continues to advocate,

«The crisis creates situations which are dangerous in the short run, since the various strata of the population are not all capable of orienting themselves equally swiftly, or of reorganizing with the same rhythm. The traditional ruling class, which has numerous trained cadres, changes men and programmes and, with greater speed than is achieved by the subordinate classes, reabsorbs the

³² PORTELLI 1977, p. 28.

control that was slipping from its grasp. Perhaps it may make sacrifices, and expose itself to an uncertain future by demagogic promises; but it retains power, reinforces it for the time being, and uses it to crush its adversary and disperse his leading cadres, who cannot be very numerous or highly trained» (*ibidem*).

The immediate consequences of this representativeness crisis are unavoidably the formation of a new hegemonic system, with the so-called subaltern classes assuming responsibility for political and civil society restructuring. Concerning the strategy pursued by the new historical bloc, it is directly and indirectly related to its capacity to break with the preceding ideology, implying a significant restructuring of the intellectuals of this new leading group's capacity to promote its ideology in front of the rest of society.

4. The Critical Theory: Neo-Gramscians and the national/international transposition

One of the factors related to this conceptualization is precisely the discussion regarding the transposition of the Gramscian's construction of a historical bloc, which influences national boundaries, to the regional/international sphere in analogy to Robert Cox's³³ understanding in what touches on the relevance of international organizations as instruments of consensus building which, in this case, added to the concept of hegemony (considered here interdependent), are important tools for understanding the formation of power through the transnational historical bloc operating in the scenario. Thus, in terms of conceptual construction, we intend to reread Neogramscian's through the lens of the transnational historical bloc, focusing on the impact on contemporary International Relations.

This attempt to apply Gramscian's ideas and concepts to the contemporary world is predicated on Critical Theory, which, in collaboration with the Frankfurt School and its adherents, incorporated Gramsci's perspectives into its formulation³⁴. However, before turning to these

³³ COX 1983.

³⁴ FRIEDMAN 1981; GEUSS 1981; WIGGERSHAUS 1995, 2002.

authors' interpretations, particularly Robert Cox's, it is important to keep in mind that Gramsci himself argues for the importance of placing the international context in context in order to better understand the national structure, as he points out,

«Every relationship of «hegemony» is necessarily an educational relationship and occurs not only within a nation, between the various forces of which the nation is composed, but in the international and world-wide field, between complexes of national and continental civilizations» (Gramsci, 1971: 350).

Thus, despite various allusions to the manner in which this historical and international transposition occurs³⁵, the Gramscian formulation itself emphasizes the importance of understanding the historical context in light of the international.

However, Cox establishes a kinesia between this international/national relationship, beginning by casting doubt on the concept of hegemony's application in the context of international relations, citing Gramsci as an example,

«Do international relations precede or follow (logically) fundamental social relations? There can be no doubt that they follow. Any organic innovation in the social structure, through its technical military expressions, modifies organically absolute and relative relations in the international field too. Even the geographical position of a national State does not precede but follows (logically) structural changes, although it also reacts back upon them to a certain extent (to the extent precisely to which superstructures react upon the structure, politics on economics, etc.). However, inter national relations react both passively and actively on political relations (of hegemony among the parties)» (GRAMSCI 1971: 176).

Thus, it is stated that there is an organic relationship between national and international, where there is a reflection of domestic policies under interstate relations. This understanding involves analyzing some factors that integrate the issue of hegemony. The first of them has to do with the temporal question, that is when a hegemonic power in history begins and ends.

³⁵ DAY 2005; LEYSENS 2008.

Cox³⁶ examines the influence capacity of the predominantly British world and its hegemonic period between 1845 and 1875; second, he examines the period 1875-1945, during which this supremacy is challenged; third, he examines the post-1945 world (1945–65), which saw the emergence of a new world order led by the United States; and finally, between the 1960s and 1970s, North American hegemony opened up three possibilities.

Thus, in order to better situate the current international hierarchical order, Cox argues that hegemony at the international level is not limited to a list of states determined by their economic capacity, but is also an ideological order, an international social and political interrelation that penetrates and transposes its way of production into other international spheres, as advocated,

«World hegemony is describable as a social structure, an economic structure, and a political structure; and it cannot be simply one of these things but must be all three. World hegemony, furthermore, is expressed in universal norms, institutions and mechanisms which lay down general rules of behaviour for states and for those forces of civil society that across national boundaries – rules which support the dominant mode of production» (COX 1983: 171-172).

Following this line of reasoning presented by Cox, he still develops the question of the function of International Organizations, where he explains that they are formed to harmonize one or more global ideologies, as he affirms,

«One mechanism through which the universal norms of a world hegemony are expressed is the international organization. Indeed, international organization 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) they 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 and (5) they absorb counter-hegemonic ideas» (COX 1983: 172).

³⁶ COX 1983, pp. 170-171.

Finally, it remains for us to analyze how Robert Cox, and his neo-Gramscian understanding of the structuring of the international order, presents the question of the historical bloc and its interpretation with the concept of hegemony in the current world. One of the main corollaries of his interpretation of the concept of the historical bloc presented by Gramsci, as we saw in the lines above, and followed by Robert Cox in his formulation, is related to an inherently more complete and, above all, more real perspective concerning political, social and economic relations of international relations, as he points out,

«The juxtaposition and reciprocal relationships of the political, ethical and ideological spheres of activity with economics sphere avoids reductionism. It avoids reducing everything either to economics (economism) or to ideas (idealism). [...] Superstructures of ideology and political organization shape the development of both aspects of production and are shaped by them» (COX 1983: 167-168).

That way,

«The movement towards hegemony, Gramsci says, is a «passage from the structure the sphere of the complex superstructures», by which he means passing from the specific interests of a group or class to the building of institutions and elaboration of ideologies. If they reflect a hegemony, these institutions and ideologies will be universal in form, *i.e.*, they will not appear as those of a particular class, and will give some satisfaction to the subordinate groups while not undermining the leadership or vital interests of the hegemonic class» (COX 1983: 168-169).

Although this formulation, as elaborated by Adam David Morton³⁷, Adrian Budd³⁸ and Richard Day³⁹, is not without criticism. Given the centrality of history, that is, the pre-existing timeline in Gramscian's analysis, criticisms of its application to the international scene focus primarily on the construction of its analysis during the formation of the Italian State in the 1920s and 1930s, adding to the fact that it was written in prison.

³⁷ MORTON 2006.

³⁸ BUDD 2013.

³⁹ DAY 2005.

However, a chain of analysts known as neo-Gramscians operationalized these principles for this goal, taking them beyond Gramsci's historical period and applying them to the contemporary world situation. We shall see in the next part how the Neo-Gramscians use this leap to facilitate the development of a Transnational Historic Bloc.

5. *The Transnational Historical Bloc (THB)*

According to the ideas presented by Robert Cox ⁴⁰, international organizations serve as mechanisms for consensus-building between states and, thus, the creation of regional or global hegemony (Cox 1983). Here, one of the aspects that transpose Gramsci's thought into the realm of International Relations can be verified. On the one hand, this view that the formation of a hegemonic group is preceded by the formation of a historical bloc, which Cox argues is possible at the international level, allows us to verify the formation of a historical bloc at the regional/international level. In other words, it transcends state boundaries, and is conceptualized in this vein as a transnational historical bloc. On the other hand, Leysens criticizes this «controversial leap» from Gramscian's national concept to the international historical bloc, arguing that,

«[...] the world order is, therefore, made up out of and can be described in terms of social forces, as well as in terms of the interactions between states. The latter are at the interface (in a permeablesense) between transnational and domestic compositions of social forces in a specific country» (LEYSENS 2008: 53).

Although Carnevali ⁴¹ highlights the fact that the Gramscian's concept of the historical bloc in the international arena is inapplicable, essentially due to its connection and proximity to social classes, it is crucial to mention the increasingly eminent importance of the emergence of a transnational capitalist class (TCC) ⁴². Under this aegis, part of this «transnationalization» of historical blocs will follow the same path as the

⁴⁰ COX 1981.

⁴¹ CARNEVALI 2005, p. 45.

⁴² CARROLL 2010.

currently called «transnational capitalist class»⁴³. At this point, while THB turns to a superstructural issue, more directed to cultural, ideological issues, on the other hand, TCC is focused on structure, that is, closer to Marx's historical materialism.

For example, a transnational capitalist class embraces a neoliberal conception, which becomes the pivot of its premises, thus resulting in a hegemonic project led by capitalist groups, whose intent can be found in the current international system. Following this line of thought Carroll (2010) advocates a narrowing between economic and cultural policies, postulating and affirming a neo-Gramscian conception, as we can see in the passage below,

«[...] a transnational capitalist class do *not* depend exclusively on the structure of elites networks» [...]«As Gramsci understood, class formation involves both structure and culture, and although network analysis gives some purchase on the former we have done no more than telegraph some of the discursive elements of neoliberal globalization as a hegemonic project» (CARROLL 2010: 55).

One of the fundamental aspects of such an approach is related to the analysis of the transnational historical bloc and, consequently, to its associated complementary transnational class. However, usually among academics, one seeks to focus on the capitalist class (or, as mentioned above, the transnational capitalist class) or the economic class across borders⁴⁴. Thus, to overcome this limitation, that is, to restrict itself to the economic/capitalist level, the notion of a transnational historical bloc is used, which includes not only the economic level in its formulation but also its organic relationship with other spheres (civil society and politics for example), as well as presenting analysis at both local/domestic and regional/international levels. This conception justifies the use of the concept of a transnational historical bloc to understand the vicissitudes of the international reality of the 21st century.

The current configuration of the world, particularly the formation and construction of transnational blocs, is increasingly being studied in

⁴³ ROBINSON AND HARRIS 2000; SKLAIR 2001, 2002.

⁴⁴ ARRIGHI 1993; PIJL 1998; ROBINSON 2005, 2006; ROBINSON AND HARRIS 2000.

academies. Regardless of the approach, whether top-down or bottom-up, there is a reconstruction of our understanding of international relations through the ruling class's visibility in relation to its global sphere of influence. As such, it seeks to comprehend the Neo-Gramscian concept of a transnational historical bloc by incorporating the concept of a transnational capitalist class into its formulation. It should be noted that this article is not attempting to undermine a research model that takes the economic sphere as its central premise, but rather to inquire about its emancipation and even to appropriate these fundamentals in the context of understanding the transnational historical bloc.

Thus, following the line of thought of William K. Carroll, the formation of the transnational capitalist class meets the construction of the transnational historical bloc, in the neo-Gramscian sense of the term, as stated «In this way, Gramsci's (1977) formula for ruling-class hegemony – that concessions granted in organizing consent must not touch the essential nucleus of economic relations – is satisfied»⁴⁵. The globalization of capital also means the globalization of its mode of production, a process in which the capitalist classes were always active, but not necessarily as a unified, transnational capitalist class.

The definition of a global class based on the construction and maintenance of capital is explored as being a fundamental aspect, making it important to highlight the fact that the same concept is based on the understanding of premises that, although they are explored and analyzed from a Gramscian perspective, they explore how the structure, that is, capital is capable of transcending national borders. As we can verify,

«In the conduct of a global war of position, the dominant class and its allies have several obvious advantages, which translate themselves into effective and distinct forms of organization. Neoliberal civil-society groups are resource rich and they form on the sturdy basis provided by a transnational corporate elite – an organized minority that is already ideologically cohesive, politically active and extensively networked. Business activists are well positioned to influence policy and culture, via established political and mass communication channel. Their action repertoire – a combination of producing and disseminating knowledge via elite channels and corporate media, lobbying key institutions such as the UN

⁴⁵ CARROLL 2010, P. 216.

and facilitation consensus formation among global and national elites – reflects this advantage location» (CARROLL 2010: 221).

In this way, the concept of a transnational historical bloc enables us to comprehend its relationship to the formation and performance of the world's hegemonic elites, including their interests, whether in directing and deepening the regionalisms of the 1990s (Mercosur, European Union, ASEAN, for example), or in the current resurgence of global conservatism and unilateralism (BREXIT, Paris agreements, protectionism, among others). These implications are primarily discernible through shared interests and the global predominance of its direct (political and economic) and indirect (ideological) powers. Worth (2015), as he points out, also advocates a similar position in this regard,

«Even when looking at historical transformation through a highly state-centric lens, Gramsci's concept of *blocco storico* becomes useful, because within each bloc or era there exists a unique set of popular beliefs and assumptions. The withering away of one bloc and the formation of another happens over time as ideas, material circumstances and overriding hegemonic forces challenge the prevailing order and replace it with another. This transformation might occur through conflict and war, or through confrontation, but the resulting material conditions brought about by that conflict remain central to such a change» (WORTH 2015, 20).

Considering the historical bloc as the organic relationship between structure and superstructure, the transnational historical bloc follows the same logic. Where, on the one hand, the structure in the scope of international relations passes through the understanding of the transnational capitalist class and, on the other hand, within the international superstructure, the global civil society is identified and, finally, as a political society responsible for the regulation of peace in an international level, the United Nations.

Similarly to the construction and/or formulation of a transnational capitalist class, the historical bloc concept must be understood as a structure that, while also based on capital, emphasizes ideological influence, that is, the ability to construct a worldview and thus achieve some degree of consensus within the international system. This view of the

construction of ideas and values, and thus their propagation within the international system, accords with the presented argument.

The international system is constituted by diverse actors, values, norms, and ideas that were formed and, consequently, consolidated throughout its history. A view based on the organic relationship between structure and superstructure helps us to understand the main factors of the international arena, taking into account the role of history, from those in the American and French revolutions (late 18th century) to the Bolshevik revolution (1917), World Wars of the beginning of the XX, Cold War⁴⁶ and, finally, the turbulent beginning of the XXI.

However, if we look beyond the security and historical spheres of international relations, we can argue that the formation and deepening of regionalism resulted from the formation of consensus among actors who, while addressing economic concerns, also addressed identity, social issues, political and ideological concerns. Alternatively, they shifted their focus directly to the superstructural sphere. Finally, we can assert that the very existence and growth of regionalism demonstrate the existence of a historical bloc that transcends international borders. Numerous regional blocs exhibit this dynamic: the European Union, the Southern Common Market (Mercosur), and the Union of South American Nations (Unasur).

Similarly, the concepts of democracy, the free market, and the rule of law adhere to a dominant logic on the international stage, manifesting itself most vividly in United Nations peacekeeping missions. These concepts are irreducibly implemented, expressing a consensus between a superstructural (ideal) and a structural (economic) variable, such as democracy and the free market, respectively.

In short, the concept of a transnational historical bloc provides us with a theoretical-conceptual framework that can be applied to a variety of aspects of the international scenario, thus distancing itself from mainstream views of International Relations and adopting a critical view toward them.

6. *Final Considerations*

⁴⁶ PELLISTRANDI 2002; MILZA 2002a, 2002b; VAISSE 1995.

Throughout history, there has been an increasing interest in understanding how the ruling class is formed outside of national borders, that is, in a globalised world. Thus, the present article began by presenting the essential information about Antonio Gramsci's perspectives, from his interpretation and re-reading of the Marxist current to the concept of a historical bloc, arguing that it can be used to comprehend both the internal and, later, the international dimensions of these dynamics.

One of the implications of this interpretation is the international operationalization of the concept of a historical bloc. Thus, it was demonstrated that the author considered the epistemological leap of Gramscian's thought to the international stage in his work, though it was not without criticism and opposition from his contemporaries. Based on this premise, Robert Cox develops and explores this transposition of the concept of hegemony from the national to the international level in order to contextualise it in the contemporary world, for example, by examining the role of multilateral international organisations as consensus-forming mechanisms, while omitting Gramscian's concept of the historical bloc.

Finally, it was demonstrated that the concept of a transnational historical bloc is more comprehensive in understanding the current international system because it encompasses ideological, cultural, and economic issues. It incorporates an emancipatory position regarding the predominance of concepts and values inherent in international relations into its conception. On the international arena, there is a well-known presence of certain ideologies that are commonly rooted in the conduct of its members' external policies, such as the Rule of Law, Market Economics, Democratic State, and Human Rights, that is, values and ideas that have evolved over time to become fundamental to the current configuration of the international system. In a nutshell, this is the central feature of the Neo-Gramscian approach to legitimising the transnational historical bloc.

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