

TOWARDS AN ECOLOGICAL CIVILIZATION: A GRAMSCIAN STRATEGY FOR A NEW POLITICAL SUBJECT

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ABSTRACT: While much work has been done theorising the concept of an ecological civilization, the actual transition to an ecological civilization is another matter. One possible strategy for transforming our world from a death-rattle industrial civilization to a life affirming ecological civilization may be found in the later work of Antonio Gramsci. It is argued that as Gramsci became increasingly disillusioned with Soviet communism, he diagnosed its failure as due to the way opposition movements tend to mirror the ways of thinking, practices and organization of those they are opposing. To avoid this tendency, Gramsci called not for a 'counter-hegemony', but an alternative hegemony based on a different conception of the world. The notion of 'ecological civilization' could provide this, offering the foundation for the moral leadership required in a war of position to genuinely overcome and replace existing socio-economic forms.

KEYWORDS: Gramsci; Ecological Civilization; Hegemony; Conception of the World; War of Position.

The world today is mired, apparently inextricably, in two existential crises. These crises are interwoven and agonistic, which consequently seems to vitiate any possible resolution. The first crisis is a loss of autonomy, freedom and meaning brought about by the subjection of the human lifeworld to the domination of markets. This crisis is the product of 'the expansion of markets, and market values, into spheres of life where they don't belong' (Sandel, 2012: 7). The second seemingly irresolvable crisis is the imminent collapse of the global ecosystem, which threatens the very existence of life on earth. The scientific community is in almost unanimous agreement that human activity is responsible for dangerous, even life threatening, climate change (Cook,

2013; Creagh, 2012). In the face of these crises traditional liberal, democratic, parliamentary, politics is impotent. A depoliticized citizenry and a public sphere completely dominated by 'market ideology' (Birchfield, 1999) has allowed an unholy alliance of financial, business and political elites to hijack the institutions of liberal democracies for their own purposes (Fraser, 2013: 119; Perkins, 2004: xii-xiii). Therefore, it is not surprising to learn that, rather than address an ecological crisis that threatens our very existence, world leaders recently sat down to squabble over who had the right to exploit the resources that have become accessible due to climate change melting the Arctic polar ice cap (Krause-Jackson, 2013).

An alternative vision to the narcissistic and nihilistic consumer capitalist 'civilization' we are currently caught in calls for a transformation of our way of life from the neoliberal paradigm to an ecological civilization ([Zhang, Li & An 2011](#); [Magdoff, 2011](#); [Gare, 2010](#)). "[C]ivilizations", as Gare defends the concept, 'are characterized by deep assumptions about the nature of the world and the place of humanity within it, and thereby the ultimate ends worth striving for' (2010: 11). An ecological civilization will be defined by its consideration for all of nature, freedom from domination and exploitation, and will involve a radical transformation in ways of thinking, in ways of living and in the way societies are organised. In many respects it resembles the concept of *metahumanism* (Sanbonmatsu, 2004: 203-223). While the norms and the ethics of an ecological civilization can be theorised without too many problems the actual transition to an ecological civilization is another matter.

This paper will argue that the means to such a transformation are to be found in the work of Antonio Gramsci. It will discuss three of Gramsci's key concepts. Due to a lack of space this will necessarily be done with broad brush strokes. The aim, however, will be to demonstrate how Gramscian strategies might be deployed as a means to begin the necessary transformation from the present industrial civilization to an ecological civilization. The three concepts under consideration are 'hegemony', 'conception of the world' and 'war of position'. These three concepts need to be appreciated as processes that are interconnected and which, therefore, operate on each other.

First it will be argued that Gramsci, in elaborating his theory of hegemony deliberately eschewed the use of the term *counter-hegemony*. This has practical and strategic implications which will become apparent. It will be shown that a coherent concept of the world is crucial to any transformative project. Finally, it will be shown that a war of position has already been successfully fought, which transformed industrial civilisation from social democracy to neoliberalism, and therefore as a

proven strategy, when deployed in conjunction with the other two concepts, may prove irresistible.

THE NECESSITY OF CONSTRUCTING AN ALTERNATIVE HEGEMONY

The concept of hegemony is built around the attempt to theorise how a ruling class maintains its dominant position in society. Hegemony operates at several levels which Gramsci accounted for by distinguishing between the State and civil society as separate terrains. Through the State the dominance of the bourgeoisie is legitimated by legislation, and in public institutions such as the judiciary, the police and the military. Civil society reproduces bourgeois hegemony culturally, by presenting as 'natural' a conception of the world that endorses ruling class dominance (Gramsci, 1971: 245-276). However hegemony is much more than a single overarching ideology that simply reflects the interests of the dominant class, but rather, in bourgeois society, includes 'not only the competitive individualism diffused by liberalism, but also the social atomization and depoliticization produced by bureaucracy, the fatalism instilled by religion, the state worship fanned by nationalism, and the sexism that grows out of the family' (Boggs: 160).

It is the task of the proponents of ecological civilization (ecologists) to construct an alternative hegemony. They must, therefore, establish their moral and ethical leadership and present it as a distinct and new conception of the world. 'A social group can, and indeed must, already exercise "leadership" before winning government power (this indeed is one of the principal conditions for the winning of such power); it subsequently becomes dominant when it exercises power, but even if it holds it firmly in its grasp, it must continue to lead as well' (Gramsci, 1971: 57-58).

As a Marxist, and therefore a dialectician, Gramsci viewed history as a rational process that unfolds dialectically. The dialectical unfolding of history in its simplest description proceeds thus: 'the society that exists (society 1) calls up a negating image of the better alternative (society 2) and if the contradiction is sufficiently fundamental, there is the possibility of a synthesis (society 3), in which humankind advances one step further in a history that leads to the rational self-fulfilment of the species' (Pusey, 1987: 33). It is in this moment that the danger of mere opposition, of simplistic *counter-hegemony*, emerges.

In opposing hegemony directly, the oppositional force that adopts a strategy of *counter-hegemony* is shaped by the force it is opposing. In this way the 'conception of the world' of the hegemonic power becomes the vision being contested. Thus, in a war of manoeuvre, in simply opposing, an oppositional force has its vision (if one was prefigured) colonized by the image of the force it is opposing. Gramsci implicitly

eschews the notion of *counter-hegemony* when he argues that the protagonists in a war of manoeuvre must understand the ‘necessity for each member of a dialectical opposition to *seek to be itself totally* and throw into the struggle all the political and moral “resources” it possesses, since only in that way can it achieve a genuine dialectical “transcendence” of its opponent’ (1971:109, my italics). Furthermore, ‘in political struggles one should not ape the methods of the ruling classes, or one will fall into easy ambushes’ (1971: 232).

In the uneven struggle of a war of manoeuvre, the oppositional force does not merely display back to the hegemonic power an image of itself, rather it *reflects* that image, a distortion, a corruption of the actually existing conditions. This new corrupted image now replaces any prefigured vision and should the oppositional force prevail, it is doomed to realise its corrupted vision. If the negating image is merely a corrupted version of the society that exists (society 1), not a better alternative but a deformed copy (society 2), the contradictions can still force a synthesis (society 3), but one that leads to catastrophe; history is undone, the species does not flourish but is instead wounded.

It could well be argued that such a process took place in the case of the French Revolution wherein the revolutionary process, certainly inspired by its slogans but lacking a genuine vision, repeatedly reproduced the tyranny it opposed until Napoleon’s coup replaced the *ancien regime* with a bizarre copy of itself. Similarly, the Russian Revolution was deformed from the outset due to the predominant role of the peasantry, which compromised and militated against the Bolshevik vision of a ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’. Thus Lenin comes to be seen as a mirror image, a reversed distortion of the Tsar and the Bolsheviks as a deformed reflection of the Tsarist court, while Leninist ‘bureaucratic centralism’ assumed the steering role of authoritarian autocracy.

Gramsci recognised as much when he observed that ‘[w]hen the party is progressive it functions “democratically” (democratic centralism); when the party is regressive it functions “bureaucratically” (bureaucratic centralism). The party in this second case is a simple, unthinking executor. It is then technically a policing organism...’ (1971: 155). Although he was ostensibly condemning the bourgeois parties of Western Europe, he was well aware and highly critical of what he considered, in this very context, the ‘ruination of the Soviet Communist Party’ (Germino: 183-184) .

Gramsci understood the problem that mere oppositionism posed. This is why mention of *counter-hegemony* is nowhere to be found in his writing (Boggs, 1984: xi). His deep reflection on the concept of hegemony and his observations and experience of

hegemonic power in action gave him the insight, the ability to recognise the corrupting dynamic embedded in a *counter-hegemonic* struggle, a war of manoeuvre.

Thus is the case made for creating a collective political subject that can construct an *alternative* hegemony and in so doing prefigure an alternative society, in our case an ecological civilization. A number of thinkers have theorised various forms of universal social movement, or an ‘emerging multipolar global social movement’ (Amin, 2000: 12; see also Sanbonmatsu, 2004; Gill, 2008) and it is likely that just such a global subject will emerge as the crisis deepens. The question then arises as to how a successful alternative hegemony might then be formed.

In order to answer this it is necessary to consider Gramsci’s notion of ‘conceptions of the world’.

TOWARDS AN ECOLOGICAL CONCEPTION OF THE WORLD

‘The principal condition for overthrowing the hegemony of the politics of privilege and replacing it with the new politics of inclusiveness is the diffusion of a homogeneous mode of thinking from a homogeneous, or organic, center ... Those who spread the new conception of the world must understand the society in which they work in all its diversity and complexity...’ (Gramsci, cited in Germino: 249)¹.

A critical aspect of Gramsci’s thinking was always the centrality of a clear vision to the project of transforming society. As early as 1920 he was insisting that to be successful the working class and the communist party required a clear, unified vision of what they sought to achieve (Gramsci, 1977). We should not let the fact that Gramsci was committed to establishing communist hegemony distract us from recognising the value of his strategic vision which can be harnessed in the cause of an explicitly and profoundly democratic project such as the construction of an ecological civilization. If humanity is to successfully transform from an industrial to an ecological civilization then a unified ‘conception of the world’ is crucial.

The concept of conception of the world is far more complex than a simple worldview or imagined future. Gramsci argued that everyone has a conception of the world, which is not to say that it is a matter of personal taste. Rather it is imbedded in a language or even a dialect or it is conferred by social group membership or by culture. He pointed out, however, that a person’s conception of the world can be unconscious, passive and limited, or it can be a conscious and critical process of

¹ The final chapter of Germino’s book outlines the schema, the blueprint if you will, of the architecture of the new politics that he discerns in the *Notebooks*. It is his own translation and commentary on a selection from Antonio Gramsci, *Quaderni del carcere*, V. Gerratana, ed., 4 vols, Einaudi, Turin, 1975. The citation is drawn from notes 2267-2269.

becoming. A critically derived conception of the world produces ‘a coherent unity’. He insists on the historicity of a coherent conception of the world when he adds ‘[t]he starting point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is, and is “knowing thyself” as a product of the historical process to date which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory’ (1971: 323-324). Viewing the concept through a Heideggerian lens, Wainwright likens Gramsci’s critically arrived at ‘conception of the world’ to Heidegger’s ‘being-in-the-world’ (2010: 511). In this sense, a conception of the world is ontologically necessary.

It is not good enough, however, to simply have a multiplicity of conceptions of the world more or less regarded as valid to their holders. Each conception of the world can be judged on the basis of its immanent potential to represent and transform the world of the social milieu that generates and supports it (Gramsci, 1971:157). Conceptions of the world develop dialectically, negating and being negated. And, of course, not all conceptions of the world are equal; only one can be hegemonic at any given time. Gramsci’s objective was to establish Marxism as the pre-eminent conception of the world. The challenge for an emerging universal subject is to construct a conception of the world that can play a similar role.

It has been argued that ‘ecology is developing the forms of thinking required to rethink the relationship between humanity and nature and between individuals and their communities, the nature of culture and civilization, and thereby to transform the way people live and organise themselves’ (Gare: 13). This suggests that ecology is well placed to generate a coherent, critical conception of the world. The next step would be realising it, for, as Gramsci insisted, ‘[t]he formulation and propagation of the new conception of the world ... must not be done abstractly but concretely, on the basis of real and effective experience’ (Gramsci, cited in Germino: 249).

How this might be done requires a consideration of a third Gramscian concept, the war of position.

THE CASE FOR A WAR OF POSITION

To advance towards an ecological civilization would require acquiring state power and control of the economy. However, just as Gramsci recognised that armed insurrection, or a popular revolution, was an extremely unlikely prospect in Western Europe (Germino: 145) so too must it be recognised that revolutionary change in the 21st century surveillance state would be impossible, even if the supine, depoliticized public was somehow radically inspired and reanimated. And yet if humanity is to survive a way must be found.

Gramsci proposed a long-term strategy for overcoming hegemonic domination in the modern capitalist state. This strategy he called a war of position (1971: 238-239). It advocated the infiltration of the institutions of the state. Gramsci recognised that this was crucial to establishing hegemony with the astute observation that '[t]he State is the instrument for conforming civil society to the economic structure, but it is necessary for the State to "be willing" to do this; i.e. for the representatives of the change that has taken place in the economic structure to be in control of the State' (1971: 208).

We can see how successful a war of position can be just by reflecting on the rise of neoliberalism. Pusey (1991) details just such a process in which a particular ideological mindset successfully installed itself in the institutional structure of a modern state, i.e. Australia. A similar process took place across the developed, capitalist world after WWII. Gramsci had written '[t]he work of infusing society with the vision of a new politics will not be easy. Very rarely do changes in modes of thinking, in beliefs, in opinions come about rapidly through cultural explosions that affect the whole society at once. Patient, detailed work over a long period of time is needed to win the war of position in the West' (cited in Germino: 249-250).

Whether its members were familiar with Gramsci or not, the Mont Pelerin Society deployed the strategy of a war of position immediately after WWII and patiently waited for the right conditions to emerge. The economic crises brought about by 'stagflation' and the oil embargos of the mid-1970s provided the right conditions. From there the adherents of 'market ideology' were able to subvert the post-war settlement between capital and labour and replace the politico-ethical paradigm of social democracy with their own model (Harvey, 2005: 19-23).

It is inconceivable that capitalism will ever lead to an ecological civilization (Magdoff, 2011). Thus ecologists, the opponents of neoliberalism and globalisation, and other advocates for an ecological civilization must find another way. As can be seen with the rise of neoliberalism, a proven strategy can be found mapped out in Gramsci's elaboration of the war of position. As well as being a concrete strategy, a war of position must be incorporated conceptually into the new conception of the world.

As noted earlier, the formulation and propagation of the new conception of the world must be based on real and effective experience. With a war of position embedded in the emerging ecological conception of the world, the strategy would be transmitted and participants educated into the strategy as they absorb the philosophy. The new political subject is thus armed with its praxis. But from where will this political subject emerge?

Around the world new forms of social movement and political action are emerging. These movements are attempting to organize themselves outside of traditional forms of hierarchical and institutional power and apart from the state. Deploying a political strategy of *horizontalism* (Sitrin, 2006) first developed in the autonomous movements in Argentina and taken up by the Occupy movement, people are engaged in actively creating new communities and new and surprising ways of relating to each other and the world. Implicit in their politics is the desire to live in a substantially different society (Sitrin, 2012: 215).

Some commentators (Fraser, 2013; Sanbonmatsu, 2004) are pessimistic, even dismissive of the potential for radical change embedded in these movements. Fraser dismisses their potential to be agents of change, stating that ‘popular opposition fails to coalesce around a solidaristic alternative, despite intense but ephemeral outbursts, such as Occupy and the *indignados*, whose protests generally lack programmatic content’ (2013: 121). Sanbonmatsu, in an otherwise excellent study, misses the significance Gramsci’s notion of ‘conception of the world’ and is thus pessimistic about the possibilities for solidarity among social movements because they lack a coherent vision. He argues that ‘without a new theory of *totality*, and with it, a new *paradigm* of the whole, it is virtually useless to try to envision the basis of a new collective subject and its corresponding phenomenal form’ (2004: 192). However, armed with a coherent conception of an ecological civilization, which incorporates the principles of an ethical war of position, these movements are the best candidates for the project.

The principal aim of this paper has been to argue that the transformation of society is possible. The necessity for such a transformation is taken as a given. Three key concepts in the work of Antonio Gramsci, properly applied, could ground a strategy for that transformation. The challenge remains however to turn theory into practice. The principle task, I believe, lies in the process of critically constructing a coherent conception of an ecological civilization.

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