

CONSCIOUSNESS & CONSENT: GRAMSCI'S HISTORICAL MATERIALISM
AND ITS ONTOLOGICAL CONSEQUENCES.

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ABSTRACT

CONSCIOUSNESS AND CONSENT: GRAMSCI'S STATE THEORY AND ITS ONTOLOGICAL CONSEQUENCES

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This thesis investigated whether the elaboration of the role of ideas as a source of power in Gramsci's state theory to secure the historical bloc constitutes the basis of a paradigm shift from the main premises of historical materialism to a more deontological, contingent logic of politics and revolution. The author was motivated by the available literature on Gramsci which differs immensely on what he intended when he developed highly original concepts such as 'war of position', hegemony and intellectual leadership. This provides an opportunity for reconsideration for research. Thus, it is the author's desire to bring some further clarity to Gramsci's ontological and epistemological assumption. To that end, the thesis employed Kuhn's idea of 'paradigms' as a theoretical framework and Gadamer's 'fusion of horizons' as the historiological method to clearly understand the implications Gramsci's ideas. The contributions of Antonio Gramsci were re-traced from his somewhat

fragmented work, *The Prison Notebooks* and prison letters. This research shows that Gramsci attempted to update Marxism after the revolution had failed to spread in Western Europe, and in the process, he expanded the paradigmatic boundaries of historical materialism without breaking out altogether.

Keywords: Gramsci, Marxism, state (theory), ontology, ideology, hegemony, intellectuals.

ÖZ

**FARKINDALIK VE RIZA: GRAMSCI’NİN TARİHSEL
MATERYALİZM VE ONTOLOJİK SONUÇLARI**

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Bu tez çalışması tarihsel bloklaşmanın sürekliliğinin sağlanmasında Gramsci’nin devlet teorisinde fikirlerin bir güç kaynağı olarak detaylandırılmasının, analitik paradigmadaki tarihsel materyalizmin temel ilkelerinden sapmasına ve ilkelerin yerini deontolojik ve rastlantısal politika ve devrim algısına bırakmasına temel oluşturup oluşturmadığını inceler. Yazar, bu tez çalışmasında “mevzi savaşı”, hegemonya, entelektüel liderlik gibi son derece orijinal konseptleri yaratan Gramsci’nin niyetlendiği ile muazzam ölçüde farklılaşan mevcut literatürden motive olmuştur. Bu farklılaşma, mevcut literatürün yeniden gözden geçirilmesi için bir olanak sunar. Böylelikle, yazarın arzusu Gramsci’nin ontolojik ve epistemolojik

varsayımlarına açıklık kazandırmaktır. Tez çalışması, bu maksat ile, Gramsci'nin fikirlerindeki imaları etraflıca anlamak için Kuhn'un 'paradigma' ideasını ve Gadamer'in "ufukların kaynaşması"nı tarihsel metodunu kullanır. Antonio Gramsci'nin katkıları *Hapishane Defterleri ve hapishane mektupları* gibi kısmen dağılmış çalışmalarında yeniden incelendi. Bu araştırma Batı Avrupa'ya yayılmayı başaramayışından sonra Gramsci'nin Marksizmi güncellemeye giriştiğini ve bu süreçte tarihsel materyalizmin yaklaşımsal sınırlarını yine bu sınırları kırmadan genişlettiğini gösterir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Gramsci, Marksizm, devlet (teori), ontoloji, ideoloji, hegemonya, entelektüeller.

To my siblings: Priscilla, Netsai, Alfigio and Marlon

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

PSI	Italian Socialist Party
PCd'I	Italian Communist Party
PCI	Italian Communist Party
SPD	Social Democratic Party

Introduction

Antonio Gramsci (1891 – 1937) was a political activist and co-founder of the Communist Party of Italy (*Partito Comunista d'Italia* or PCd'I) in 1921. When Benito Mussolini came to power in Italy in 1922, he gradually rounded up and arrested opponents of the Fascist regime (Iodice, 2018). In 1926, the PCd'I was outlawed by the fascist regime and Gramsci was sentenced to twenty years in prison, despite his previous immunity as a member of parliament. It is in prison that Gramsci reflects and sets out his key theoretical innovations.

It was evident to Gramsci, following the failed uprising of the *Biennio Rosso* period (Two Red Years; 1919 – 20), that the Marxist 'orthodoxy' of the Second International (1889 – 1916), with its more deterministic-fatalistic approach to revolution, was deficient.¹ The Second International failed to mobilise the working masses against the capitalist dominated state in Italy, and indeed Germany and elsewhere following World War One. Thus, a new perspective on capitalist societies was needed to understand why the state was more robust and resistant to revolution than had been previously assumed. Gramsci had witnessed the failure of Bolshevism to take hold in Italy in contrast to Russia, where Lenin had succeeded in taking control of the Tsarist state in 1917. Therefore, Gramsci recognised the need to reappraise the entire basis of the revolution,

¹ *Biennio Rosso*: The economic crises after the First World War caused political instability and massive unemployment in Italy. This resulted in mass industrial uprisings by the working class from 1919 – 1920.

because force and industrial action alone had proved insufficient to topple the capitalist state in the West.

Whilst in prison, Gramsci began writing notes on a wide range of topics and these were smuggled out of prison by his friends. His fragmented notes were first published posthumously in the 1950s by Gramsci's friend, Palmiro Togliatti (1893 – 1964) (Jessop, 1985, p. 152), but they gained popularity in the English-speaking world after the release of the *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* in 1971 (Jubas, 2010, p. 237).

In the *Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci begins to question so-called 'orthodox' Marxism and reinvestigate some neglected themes, particularly within Marx's earlier writings – such as the *Thesis on Feuerbach* – and its injunction to not only understand the world but to recognise the importance of theory as a means to change it. This was intended to equip the communists with political possibilities that the more positivist interpretations of historical materialism had somewhat relegated as superfluous, voluntaristic or encrusted with Hegelian idealism.

Gramsci delved into the past as far back as Niccolo Machiavelli (1469 – 1527), Georg Wilhelm Hegel (1770 – 1831), and embraced Marxism's contemporary critics, such as the neo-Hegelian philosopher Benedetto Croce (1866 – 1952) to investigate what he called the "ethico-political" sphere (Gramsci, 1992, p. 167; p. 367). Gramsci uncovered the moral, cultural and ideological – in short, 'subjective' – elements that 'glue' human societies together through common understanding. Gramsci realised that ideas are as important as material conditions in determining historical outcomes. It is within this

‘discovery’ that Gramsci provided us with some highly original insights and concepts such as ‘war of position’, hegemony and intellectual leadership.

Key debates to emerge in recent times however give rise to a clear bone of contention: by pushing against the supposed limitations of historical materialism as he found it, did Gramsci inadvertently break out of the paradigm of historical materialism? Did his emphasis on the subjective aspects of revolution see him argue himself clear of historical materialism altogether? Or, is it the case that he merely exposed and expanded the hidden untapped possibilities previously lying dormant within Marxist theory?

The implications of Gramsci’s work thus raise fundamental philosophical questions. The aim of this thesis is, therefore, to gain a clearer understanding of his ontological and epistemological position. This can be pursued through his elaboration of a theory of the state since it brings into play his basic assumptions about power and the role of ideas in securing the state to a particular way of life. To this end, the thesis will tackle two research questions respectively: 1. what is Gramsci’s contribution to the historical materialistic conception of power and the state? ; 2. Is his contribution therefore suggestive of a paradigm shift towards what might be understood as a more de-ontological conception of the political?

De-ontological in this thesis means the scepticism originally introduced by Immanuel Kant (1724 – 1804), which questions the basis and indeed the possibility of objective knowledge against which human action may be judged. His ire was aimed at

philosophical consequentialism and for him the dangerous notion that moral effects are not necessarily given to be related to subjective intentions. But this opened a much wider critical panorama seized upon by postmodernists (Daly, 1999). Divorced irreconcilably from the objective “thing in itself”, Kant provides much of the philosophical authority for a shift in emphasis to the ‘knowing subject’, which is characteristic of postmodern distancing of the notion of the ‘real’ in its approach to ideology and identity construction, which is fundamental to political organisation. In other words, what we take to be a ‘truth’, upon which political action is based, is given over to subjective construction; that is, rather than objective determinants with which reality associated.

Following his shift in emphasis to the subjective aspects of political power, herein lies much of the epistemic and ontological debate surrounding Gramsci in recent times. Since the publication of Gramsci’s prison writings (1971), there are divergent views among scholars as to what he meant, and the overall trajectory of his approach. Some authors posit that Gramsci remained anchored to the fundamental tenets of historical materialism (i.e. Greaves, 2007, 2009, 2011; Harman, 2006; Thomas, 2009, 2015, etc.); others claim Gramsci as a precursor of postmodernism and its sub-variant post-Marxism (i.e. Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, 2001; Daly, 1999, etc.). The latter argue that Gramsci set ideology largely free from any external determination, opening it up to ‘logic of contingency’.

Kendie warns: “The eagerness to employ the precepts of [Gramsci’s] theory without awareness of its implications can only be dangerous” (Kendie, 2006, p. 101). Hence, it is the author's desire to attempt to clarify the contested area of Gramsci’s ontological and epistemological assumptions.

Gramsci himself exhorted his readers to constantly reflect on the meaning of an author’s work if he/she does not see it through to publication, pointing out Marx’s work as an example. This is clearly stated in one of Gramsci’s chapters entitled *Questions of Method*:

It is clear that the content of posthumous works has to be taken with great discretion and caution because it cannot be considered definitive but only as material still being elaborated and still provisional. One should not exclude the possibility that these works, particularly if they have been long in the making ... might have been deemed unsatisfactory in whole or in part by the author (Gramsci, 1999, p. 713 – 9).

Gramsci wrote on many topics, in over thirty fragmented notebooks, and he indeed died before the notes were published. This opens another window of opportunity to re-examine Gramsci’s work, just as he exhorted we readers to do.

Because Gramsci wrote his ideas in a different historical period from the present, the thesis demands certain hermeneutic sensitivity, such as that provided by Hans-Georg Gadamer in *Truth and Method* (1989; 2004). The role of the researcher is one of an intellectual historian. Gadamer’s hermeneutic method offers requisite qualities needed to study the ideas of Gramsci because it takes note of context, amongst other things. The historical text is open to interpretation in an era substantially different from the

original author. The objective is thus to try and identify Gramsci's meaning and implications. Gadamer's idea of the 'fusion of horizons' suggests that a historian is attempting to test whether the historical work has a trajectory that can be fused with current understandings. That is to say, can the logic of contingency that is indicative of postmodernism and/or post-Marxism thinking on the political be correlated with Gramsci's apparent understanding of his own ideas? Do such historically separable 'horizons' produce, at least certain elements of theoretical convergence?

The implication of the notion of fusion or non-fusion is predicated on the question of an alleged intellectual shift. This lends itself naturally in turn to Thomas Kuhn's (*The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 1996; 2012) concepts of 'paradigm' and 'paradigm shift'. In short, can Gramsci be justly considered an instigator of a "paradigm shift" towards a more post-modern account of power and the political? The underlying hermeneutic method and methodological frames of reference assumed will be discussed briefly, sufficient for our purposes in Chapter One.

In Chapter Two, the main focus will be on the understanding of the development of debates within historical materialism which prompted Gramsci's contribution. Further, in this Chapter, Gramsci's criticism of what he understood to be non-dialectical, positivistic and deterministic nature of historical materialism will be explored.

Chapter Three will go on to outline and analyse the concepts that Gramsci introduced in the *Prison Notebooks* such as hegemony, intellectual leadership, 'war of manoeuvre' and the 'war of position'. We seek here to discuss the originality of Gramsci's thought,

with particular reference to his emphasis on the subjective aspects of state power and the political.

Chapter Four investigated the epistemological and ontological position of Gramsci's ideas with reference to postmodernism and post-Marxist conceptions of power and the political. It shall be argued that Gramsci remained anchored in the main tenets of historical materialism, however, he expanded its boundaries with subjective elements.

To recap, the aim of writing this thesis is to investigate whether the elaboration of the role of ideas in Gramsci's state theory to secure the historical bloc constitutes the basis of a paradigm shift from the main premises of Marxism to a more deontological, contingent logic of politics and revolution. The justification provided for writing this thesis is based on the fact that the available literature on ideas and concepts written by Gramsci's contrasts immensely on what Gramsci meant by some of the aforementioned concepts which inevitably provides an opportunity for further research.

Chapter 1

Paradigms and Horizons: An examination of the method

This chapter will explain the rationale behind the use of the idea of ‘fusion of horizons’ from Hans-Georg Gadamer’s book *Truth and Method* (1989; 2004), and Thomas Kuhn’s concepts from *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1996), as the method and methodological frame of reference.

1.1 ‘Fusion of horizons’

The researcher will tackle the philosophical questions raised in Gramsci’s writings to determine his ontology and epistemology using philosophical research. “Philosophical research employs a much broader conception of a method than its Baconian definition as a technique that can be applied reliably irrespective of the talent of the researcher” (Ruitenbergh 2009, p. 316 cited in Leiviska 2016, p. 19).² Leiviska goes on to say that this “concept of the method refers to the various ways and modes in which philosophers think, read, write, speak and listen, make their work systematic, purposeful and responsive to past and present philosophical concerns...”. This broader concept of ‘method’ will be applied to this thesis. This chapter will explain succinctly, Gadamer and Kuhn’s method and concepts in order to illustrate my adopted historiological approach to the research problem.

² Baconian ‘method’: The phrase derived from an English, ex-politician and philosopher named Francis Bacon, who promoted experimental research instead of using rational speculation. He played a key role in the development of scientism.

To have an appreciation of Gramsci's meaning and implications from his contributions, one has to take into account the historical period in which he wrote his ideas. Gramsci wrote in the modern era and perceived himself as such. The modern era can be summarised as "the processes of individualization, secularization, industrialization, cultural differentiation, commodification, urbanization, bureaucratization, and rationalization" (Best and Kellner, 1999, p. 3). Of course, the underpinning intellectual shift was away from religion and towards science as the source of universal and objective knowledge.

This contrasts with postmodern assumptions today in which there is deep scepticism of universal and objective knowledge. A bone of contention is Gramsci's involvement in the postmodern shift. Is it possible to locate Gramsci this way?

Thus, it becomes crucially important to have some kind of hermeneutic basis for historical revision, such as that proposed by Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900 – 2002). Gadamer was a German philosopher who developed his distinct hermeneutic method from his predecessors such as Wilhelm Dilthey (1833 – 1911) and Martin Heidegger (1888 – 1976) (Crotty, 1999, p. 100 - 4). 'Historical consciousness' enables a reader to uncover the tension that may exist between a historical text and the present (Gadamer, 2004, p. 305); in this research, the tension that may exist between Gramsci's meaning and the implications of the *Prison Notebooks*, and the present understanding of postmodernism and its sub-variants, such as post-Marxism. For commentators of the latter persuasion, such as Laclau and Mouffe, there appears to be no tension involved.

Gramsci appears to be easily decontextualized from his own world and pressures rise to his ideas. The weakness here appears to be postmodern or post-Marxist lack of appreciation of hermeneutics in dealing with intellectual history.

Hermeneutics, broadly defined, “involves reappraisal and reinterpretation in relation to its cultural contexts” (McCaffrey, Raffin-Bouchal & Moules, 2012, p. 214). For Gadamer, hermeneutics is a historical understanding of the past (historical horizon) and the present (horizon of the present) (Crotty, 1999, p. 101 – 2). Gadamer was reacting against the notion that history can be understood or analysed as one single horizon: the “horizon is the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular stand-point” (Gadamer, 1989, p. 301). In order to have a better understanding, one has to attempt to ‘fuse’ the past and present horizons and observe if they have shared assumptions. Following that premise, an attempt will be made in this thesis to see if there are common intellectual patterns in Gramsci’s ideas that are ‘fusible’ with accounts of the political postmodern. Vessey’s analogy on the interpretation of Gadamer’s idea sums up the importance of fusing horizons;

We can recognize someone from the back of his or her head; were he or she to turn around to reveal that we were mistaken, this itself would be a sign that our perception of the back of the head included more than simply the back of a head. Otherwise, we wouldn’t have been surprised to find that he or she was someone we didn’t expect (Vessey, 2009, p. 533).

The analogy above reveals two ideas. The first idea evidently is that understanding a single ‘horizon’ only is insufficient to make a conclusion spanning a period of time.

Gadamer (1984) observes that “the present cannot be formed without the past. Past and present cannot exist without each other and ‘understanding is always the fusion of these horizons supposedly existing by themselves’” (p. 305). In other words, one’s understanding of the historical depends on a meeting of his or her understanding with that of a later time and vice versa. The second idea is that people tend to bring the prejudices of their present interpretation of the world to study a past event which may result in a distorted interpretation of the past (Gadamer, 2004, p. 304). To prevent this shortcoming, there should be a full examination of all elements in their context that determine a situation before a judgement is made.

In the case that there will be ‘non-fusion’ of Gramsci’s contributions and that of the postmodern conception of power and the political, it cannot be considered problematic because there is no foregone conclusion that is made. Vessey (2009) observes that if there is no fusion of horizons, the task is still a success because the objective is not always to seek agreement when applying Gadamer, but to test its possibility (p. 541). To put it differently, disproving the fusion of horizons is as important as proving that they can be fused. This, it is assumed, will naturally increase our understanding in itself of Gramsci’s political theory, that is, either he is or is not a forerunner of a more postmodern approach to the political.

As previously mentioned in the introduction, the implication of the notion of fusion or non-fusion is predicated on the question of an alleged intellectual shift. As a logical result, this merges with Thomas Kuhn’s concepts of ‘paradigm’ and ‘paradigm shift’.

Hence, Kuhn's concept of 'paradigm' shall be used to structure the terms of the argument.

1.2 'Paradigm shift'

Thomas Kuhn developed his concepts, he attempted to explain how positivist disciplines (natural sciences, such as physics and chemistry), which are 'rigid' in some cases are the most creative of novelty (Preston, 2008, p. 7). His discoveries led to a whole way of understanding the nature of knowledge acquisition. His influence went beyond natural sciences to social sciences, but it has created some 'controversies' as to whether his theories should apply to the latter (Percival, 1979). Percival notes that the 'controversies' emerge because there is a tendency to view natural sciences as superior to social sciences in terms of research 'thoroughness' or rigour in understanding or creating new knowledge.

In this thesis, the Kuhnian concepts shall be employed as theoretical metaphors to facilitate my understanding or investigatory framework. Therefore, there will not be any application of the concepts with the exact same purpose as in the natural sciences. In fact, it would contradict Gadamer who was against absolute knowledge. His hermeneutics arose in reaction to the positivist approach to history (Crotty, 1999, p.66 – 69; p. 100 – 5). Using Kuhnian terminology, Gramsci evidently did his "mop-up work" (Kuhn, 1996, p. 24) on the "anomalies" (p. 52) of Marxist orthodoxy. He saw himself located in the Marxist paradigm examining at that time unexplored possibilities, the basis of mopping up. Therefore, the thesis will trace the development

of Gramsci's ideas applying Kuhn's concepts such as 'pre-paradigm phase', 'crisis', 'anomaly' and 'paradigm'.

In summary, the method is both conceptual and historical. Kuhn assists us to understand, where it exists, a shift in the intellectual assumptions, what brings it about and the effect it has on subsequent enquiries in the field. Essentially, the problem posed by the thesis is to suggest the possibility of what Kuhn calls a 'paradigm shift' in which the boundaries of the scientific association becomes ruptured due to the incapability of the paradigm to incorporate the new discoveries. However, the historical dimension of the study recognises that the subject – Gramsci – occupied a separate time and space such that we might question whether Gramsci can be successfully located with an intellectual paradigm (postmodernism) that did not, in fact, exist when he made his argumentation of historical materialism. This, of course, invokes Gadamer's concerns about the fusibility of the work of different eras. Nevertheless, the attempt to fuse horizons does perhaps enable us to gauge the trajectory and implications of Gramsci's theorising for later times.

Chapter 2

Gramsci and the problems of historical materialism

2.1 The origins of historical materialism

Karl Marx (1818 – 1883) was born in Prussia (present-day Germany) and died in England where he lived in exile because of his radical ideas and previous activities in Prussia, Belgium, and France. Marx had been a student of philosophy, and he was part of a radical group called the Young Hegelians. From a young age (twenties) he criticised the miserable social conditions that were present during his day. These conditions were as a result of the sharp socio-economic inequalities created by the early stages of capitalist industrialisation and the political suppression of the working class. Marx wrote articles and publicly debated to promulgate his ideas on improving the conditions of the working class. As Gamble observes: “the foundations of Marxism in the nineteenth century lay in Marx’s critique [in collaboration with Fredrick Engels] of the political economy and political liberalism and the doctrines of class struggle and historical materialism which he developed out of it” (Gamble, 1999, p. 4).

How did Marx construct his critique of political economy and political liberalism? He developed his ideas as a radical departure from Hegelian idealism. Hegel believed that human history is progressing dialectically, until a time when society reaches a stage of unity with absolute *geist* (absolute spirit), which is loosely defined as the teleological peak or outcome of human history.

Young Hegelians started rejecting the idea of the ‘absolute’ mind but maintained that historical progress was nonetheless a result of humanity achieving self-understanding through a clash of ideas. Marx was still not convinced by the Young Hegelian arguments. He criticised them “for their [continued] devotion to obscure philosophy, pure thought and words without action” (Berlin, 1960, p. 106, cited in, Pampel, 1999, p. 14). Marx had observed the impotence of idealists to yield any substantial change that would wipe out the economic exploitation, political oppression and social degradation that the working class endured. He elaborates this argument in the *Theses on Feuerbach*: “Philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it” (Marx, 2000, p. 158). Also, Marx asserts that “Man must prove the truth — i.e. the reality and power, the “this-sidedness” of his thinking in practice” (Marx [1845], 1969, p. 13). These quotes show Marx’s desire to have a plan of action, not just an analysis of the world.

At this stage, Marx had abandoned traditional idealism. It becomes very evident in *The German Ideology* when he notes that: “phantoms formed in the human brain are also, necessarily, sublimates of their material life-process, which is empirically verifiable and bound to material premises” (Marx & Engels, [1846] 1974, p.47). This demonstrates the importance Marx gives to the material determination of ideas. Hence, Marx increasingly began to focus his attention on understanding material conditions in society, after he realised that ideas treated as abstractions could not affect the change he desired in improving the living conditions of the working class.

Marx looked into Ludwig Feuerbach's (1804 – 1872) ideas, from which he garnered the notion that material reality is vital in shaping social conditions. Marx realised ideas were merely secondary expressions of those material conditions. For example, Feuerbach saw religion as an impulse with material causation. The only shortcoming with Feuerbach's materialism was that it was 'static'. In other words, it was devoid of a theory of historical transition. Therefore, Feuerbach's materialism was an abstract concept simply because it did not show how change takes place. There was a need to supplement Feuerbach's materialism to avoid falling into metaphysical abstraction again, which necessitated the inversion of the Hegelian dialectical method.

By synthesising Hegelian dialectics and Feuerbach's materialism, Marx came up with a dialectical formula that laid down the foundation of his historical materialist thought.³ Hegel's philosophy had been turned 'upside down' to achieve a 'man standing on his feet'. Marx believed history would progress in contradictions, as Hegel postulated, but driven by material reality. Changes in the human production process put pressure for changes elsewhere – the social, political, cultural and ideological. Indeed, this notion is summed up by a metaphor in *The German Ideology* that: "in direct contrast to German philosophy which descends from heaven to earth, here we ascend from earth to heaven" (Marx and Engels, 1974, p. 47). The 'ascendance to heaven' occurs through distinct stages of history that Marx identified which are: primitive communism, slavery, feudalism, capitalism and eventually leading to communism.

³ For an alternative see Bertell Ollman's summary of Marx dialectical method: (Ollman, 2003, p. 12).

During his time in Paris (1843 – 45) and Brussels (1845 – 48), Marx also criticised “the inadequacy of the naïve and romantic ideas of French Socialists [such as Saint-Simon, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and Robert Owen]” (Pampel, 1999, p. 18). He agreed with the “utopian” Socialists that industrial capitalism was causing misery for the working class – the working class was treated as an appendage of machines and not as human beings. Nonetheless, Marx did not share the same solution to the problem. Therefore, “rather than vague and unrealistic images of a socialist future which people willingly cooperate with one another, he sought laws that eventually led to the downfall of capitalism” (Pampel, 1999, p. 18). In other words, Marx realised utopian socialists moral approach to the problem was ineffective because it had a deficient understanding of the process of change. The utopian socialists had to focus on *class* politics to overthrow capitalism. Engels later remarked that this was why he and Marx used to call themselves ‘communists’ so that they distinguish themselves from the ‘utopian’ ideas of French and British socialists (Carver, 2003, p. 13).

Thus, Marx persistently devoted himself to discovering material facts and processes with the productive sphere that would indicate meaningful changes in which the proletarian revolution is shown, as distinct from the moral approach of the utopians. By criticising the ‘utopian’ socialists, Marx develops ‘scientific socialism’. “Marx intended his understanding to be scientific in the sense of avoiding materialist and idealist abstractions” (Chilcote, 1994, p. 104). In other words, the working class had to have a clear understanding of revolution and to perceive themselves as fundamentally embedded in conditions that affected their era.

The phrase ‘scientific socialism’ calls into question whether Marx follows the exactitudes of positivist science – which was at the time popularised in France by Auguste Comte (1798 – 1857). Marx’s scientific approach was dissimilar to Comte’s positivism. Comtean positivism was based on the idea that social events can be explained and predicted using the methods of the natural sciences and with the same precision.

Comte's positivism celebrates industrial society in its early capitalist form as the end of history: humanity must accept its place within the natural order of things and adapt to the necessary equilibrium between parts and wholes (Swingewood, 1991, p. 50).

Comte treats human beings as passive and unconscious creatures, whereas, Marx proposed the view that human beings are different from animals such as ants, beavers and bees. According to Marx: “the practical creation of an objective world, the fashioning of inorganic nature, is proof that man is conscious” (Marx, 1975, p. 329). Thus, from Marx’s point of view, human beings possess a degree of consciousness to manipulate nature, unlike animals that react instinctually. Also, one does not need to look too far to see the visible difference between Comtean crude positivism and Marx’s scientific method by looking into the principle of value-neutrality in positivist science. The tenets of positivist science are based on the neutrality of the researcher, whereas Marx openly declared that he is *for* the oppressed class with no pretence for neutrality: i.e. Marx took sides in his approach which is antithetical to scientific positivism. Marx’s scientism is thus qualified in that he locates himself in the class struggle he identified as the ‘motor’ of history.

Marx utilises the authority of science to distinguish himself from Hegel. The point, of course, is that Marx sees his ‘science’ as dialectical – to be consciously inserted into a historical movement to effect change. This is because, at revolutionary moments, humans make conscious interventions into the historical process. The transcendence that Marx had made from Hegelianism to a more scientific approach was “historically necessary” (Greaves, 2009, p. 114). Indeed, Wood, (2016) corroborates by noting: “before Marx and Engels, history was seen by most people as a series of unconnected events or, to use a philosophical term, ‘accidents’” (p. 2). Thus, Marx’s new perspective was integral to the emancipation of the working class.

The 1847 – 8 failed revolutions in Europe also shaped the views of Marx’s scientific approach. Marx thought that the working class could take over in Europe because of the upheavals going on, but capitalism thrived. “Marx had come to the realisation [after 1848] that the communists have to wait for the right conditions” (Pampel, 1999, p. 31). To determine the ‘right conditions’ for the communists to attain their goal, Marx conducted more investigations on the dynamics of capitalism. In one of Marx’s most cited work with regards to historical materialism – which Marx considers as his “guiding thread” – in the Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Marx describes his analytical method to ascertain these conditions:

At a certain stage of development, the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production. . . From forms of development of the productive forces, these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an epoch of social revolution. The changes in the economic foundation lead sooner or later to the

transformation of the whole immense superstructure. In studying such transformations, it is always necessary to distinguish between the material transformation of the economic conditions of production, which can be determined with the precision of the natural science, and the legal, political, religious, artistic or philosophic – in short, ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out... No social order is ever destroyed before all productive forces for which it is sufficient to have been developed, and new superior relations of production never replace older ones before the material conditions for their existence have matured within the framework of the old society (Marx, 1977, pp. 389 – 90).

From the passage above, Marx claimed that there would come a time when the people will be conscious of their oppression, and they will fight against the capitalist state. The revolution(s) against capitalism will be inevitable especially in advanced capitalist societies where material conditions are more fully matured. The fact that Marx stated these conditions can be determined with the exactness or “precision of the natural sciences”, has led to different scholars claiming that Marx was pro-positivism. In fact, this became the basis of ‘orthodox’ Marxism even though Marx had stated there is a need to distinguish the material development from the ideological forms in which men become conscious. Commenting on the same passage, “Miller points out that neither Marx nor ‘most of his insightful followers’ understood historical materialism in this way” (Miller, 1984, p. 7; p. 271, cited in, Blackledge, 2018, p. 4). Marx’s perception of science was different from positivist science as previously argued. “Science was for Marx, historically dynamic, revolutionary force” (Carver, 2003, p. 51).

In fact, the scientific perspective in Marx “became less rigid during the period of the [First] International [1864 –1876]” (Pampel, 1999, p. 31).⁴ Marx did not abandon the general scientific approach. He had to confront a growing problem caused by the anarchists – one of the leading figures of which was Mikhail Bakunin (1814 – 1876) – who advocated for wanton violence and revolution without strategies grounded in historical and developmental facts. By steadfastly emphasising empirical realities, Marx was trying to prevent a retreat to the abstraction of the utopians.

For that reason, “Marx worked [until his death] progressively toward a comprehensive work grounded in accumulated insights of his previous writings and empirical investigations” (Chilcote, 1994, p. 78). He remained resolute in finding the best approach for the working class to defeat capitalism and this was about identifying the historical conditions in which the revolutionary moment arises. Hence, for the revolution to occur requires two antecedent conditions – ‘objective’ (development of material forces) and subjective (development of revolutionary consciousness).

Heywood (2017) attempted to summarise “the core of classical Marxism – the Marxism of Marx – [as] a philosophy of history that outlines why capitalism is doomed and why socialism is destined to replace it, based on supposedly scientific analysis” (p. 111). On the other hand, Gasper (2008) argues that “Marx’s theory of history is vital for understanding social change, but it doesn’t claim that socialism is inevitable”. Such

⁴ To give its correct title: International Working Men’s Association

disagreements are common in Marx's theory. They date back as far as the period of the Second International.

The dialectical subjective-objective foundation which Marx constructed, left a window of opportunity for a constant re-examination of ideas. Even though some of his predictions have not come true, "Marx's scientific approach had been useful in its time" (Greaves, 2009, p. 124). It had made the working class realise that history was on their side – Marxist determinism gave the working class courage and confidence that 'history' was on its side. Hence science had a positive political function as well as an analytical one.

The legacy that Marx left behind was one of a revolutionary working-class equipped with an understanding of itself and its role in history. The real question to emerge is: to what extent do revolutions have to be made consciously or do revolutions somehow make themselves?

2.2 The Second International's historical materialism – the descent into determinism

The death of Karl Marx marked the beginning of the 'turn' to a more fatalistic understanding or interpretation and the application of the 'materialist conception of history' which was to be criticised by Gramsci in the ensuing years. Some scholars posit Engels as the forerunner of a more positivistic version of Marxism (McLellan, 2007; Carver, 2003), while others claim Engels was not responsible for turning Marxism into positivistic science (Blackledge, 2018; Ollman, 2003). Nonetheless,

there is a consensus among scholars that the ideas of the theoreticians such as Eduard Bernstein (1850 – 1932), Karl Kautsky (1854 – 1938) and Nikolai Bukharin (1888 – 1938), promoted positivism in Marxism, which often resulted in a reformist attitude to politics. These Second International thinkers were mostly influenced by the contemporary theories of evolution and positivist disciplines like physics and chemistry.

After Marx's death, his followers were in need of someone to continue leadership. Naturally, Engels as a lifelong friend filled the void: "Engels was responsible for much of the elucidation and refinement of the Marxist theory" (Chilcote, 1994, p. 78). Even before Marx's untimely demise, Engels co-wrote some ideas that were developed in the 'materialist conception of history'. Marx was known to be an excellent thinker of many original concepts, but he had difficulties at times with summarising his ideas, and at times he was slowed down because of ill-health and the poverty he endured. Hence, Engels complimented Marx because he had excellent summarising skills (Carver, 2003, p. 36). Therefore, Engels inevitably played a huge role after the death of Marx in 1883.

Engels focused on making the materialist conception of history more systematic and condensed. For that reason, Carver (2003) declares that Engels was "the first Marxist" (p. 38). Heywood corroborates that "strictly speaking, 'Marxism' as a codified body of thought only came into existence after Marx's death in 1883" (p. 114). Marx died without leaving behind a well-structured 'paradigm' for the communists to use. Some

of his (Marx) writings were not even published when he was alive, and he wrote randomly at times with the hope of editing the manuscripts in the future. One example is the *Grundrisse* ([1857 – 8] 1941), which was published posthumously – Marx admitted that there was little coherent thread in *Grundrisse* because it was written in a ‘topsy-turvy’ manner (McLellan, 2000, p. 379). Marx sadly did not live long enough to give a well-polished argument.

So, why was it necessary to codify the materialist conception of history? Marx’s philosophical ideas were increasingly spreading across Europe, gaining popularity, and many Marxist influenced political parties were being formed. So, “the growing membership of Marxist parties [which] required a ‘philosophy’ in the sense of a coherent system of principles giving a total explanation of the universe” (McLellan, 2007, p. 4). It was from this attempt to codify Marxism for the working class that resulted in the making of a positivistic view of Marxism by different thinkers.

The seeds of a more positivistic interpretation of historical materialism were allegedly sown, by Fredrick Engels (1820 – 1895) who assumed the leadership role of the Communist League after Marx (McLellan, 2007, pp. 4 – 10, Carver, 2003, pp. 60 – 76). Some of the reasons that McLellan and Carver give to support that view include: the assumption that Engels was not well versed in German philosophy, as was Marx; and Engels had an inclination more for evolutionism and determinism than Marx. Those factors coupled to the fact that the cultural climate of the late nineteenth century [of the popularity of positivism and science], dictated the shape which the materialist

conception of history had to take (McLellan, p. 4). Positivism was dominant and popular especially in France, England and Germany, countries which were strongholds in terms of the socialist influence.

There is no doubt that the turn to a more fatalistic materialist conception of history, increased after Engels' death. The inheritors of the leadership of the Second International overtly incorporated scientism into Marxism. They "produced an evolutionary-determinist conception of history, governed by objective laws" (Merrington, 1968, p. 146). Some of the influence came from England, through a group known as the Fabian Society or Fabians. The Fabian Society believed that their socialism could be attained gradually through reforms and democratic processes since history was on its side. As a socialist party that belonged to a highly industrialised capitalist country, the Fabian approach to fighting the capitalist state seemed worthy to emulate.

The Fabian ideas became very influential in the German Social Democratic Party or *Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands* (SPD). The SPD was formed in 1875, and over the next three decades, it became the largest party in Europe as well as the largest party in the parliament of Germany. A jurist and socialist by the name Ferdinand Lassalle (1825–64) also influenced the likes of Bernstein. "Lassalle had argued that the extension of political democracy could enable the state to respond to working-class interests, and he envisaged socialism being established through a gradual process of

social reform, introduced by a benign state” (Heywood, 2017, p. 112). Bernstein seized the opportunity to develop those ideas for reformism.

Bernstein was one of the key contributors to the evolutionary revision of historical materialism. He produced a book entitled *Evolutionary Socialism*, first published in 1898, in which he attacked a lot of Marx’s work.

Bernstein consciously repudiate the dialectic as sheer pedantry; socialism was validated not by reference to historical necessity and the inevitable dialectical movements of conflict and change, but rather through an a priori ethical imperative derived from Kant which taught that in socialist society men would treat others not as means to ends but as ends in themselves (Swingewood, 1975, p. 15).

Bernstein’s reformism has Kantian overtones, but there remains a fatalistic inexorability about reformism – it suggests certain guarantees rendering active revolutionary work unnecessary.

Bernstein was influenced with ideas of evolution, his trajectory of proletariat emancipation was based on the idea of small, gradual changes. “Evolution is generally understood as a slow and gradual process without interruptions or violent upheavals. In [Marxist] politics, this kind of argument is frequently defined as reformism” (Wood, 2006, p. 2). The ideals of parliamentary democracy became more appealing to Bernstein because parliamentary democracy allowed a chance to increase gradually the influence of the working class. Bernstein saw this legal transition as a peaceful means to attain socialism. As Heywood observes: “[Bernstein thought] the working class could use the ballot box to introduce socialism, which would, therefore, develop as an

evolutionary outgrowth of capitalism” (Heywood, 2017, p. 111). Bernstein faced a lot of criticism on some of his philosophical ideas, especially from Karl Kautsky, a Marxist theorist.

Kautsky was so prominent that he was called the ‘Pope of Socialism’ (McLoughlin and Drake, 1976, p. 26). He founded the influential journal in 1883 called *Die Neue Zeit*, in Stuttgart and he was its as well editor until 1917. In the journal, Kautsky spread the ideas of the SPD to political parties belonging to the Second International. Kautsky worked hard to remove Bernstein from power through a battle of ideas. The evidence is found in Kautsky’s book entitled, *Anti-Bernstein* (Kronow, 2016, p. 35). Nonetheless, it seems like Kautsky’s ideas mirrored Bernstein’s evolutionary ideas and subsequent reformist tendencies. In other words, Kautsky and Bernstein were just two sides of the same reformist coin.

Because of his position as a leading Marxist theoretician, Kautsky became the most influential leader of Social Democracy and authority on Marxism until the Russian Revolution in 1917. Therefore, the SPD remained anchored in the evolutionary doctrine because of Kautsky’s positivist approach leading to reformism. Other, scholars have argued that Kautsky maintained theory and practice – i.e. Kautsky’s method was not positivistic but dialectical (Geary, 1987). However, Kautsky shows his ‘true colours’ when he argues against Rosa Luxembour’s (1871 – 1919) mass strike idea (Flakin, 2019, para 6). Luxembour wanted the working class to protest so that they can unite and start a revolution. However, Kautsky wanted to wait for the

elections. He insisted on the idea of “natural necessity” (Benewick & Green, 1998, p. 120; Kautsky, 1994, p. 62), which was based on the assumption that the working class will eventually detach themselves from the bourgeois class. Time proved Kautsky wrong, the SPD did not deliver what they promised when they were elected into the parliament because they were entangled between party politics and capitalist state interests.

Another influential thinker, mentioned previously, who promulgated a positivist historical materialism was Nikolai Bukharin. In his book, *Historical Materialism*, Bukharin gives importance to the application of sociology over the use or study of history. He was influenced by ideas of historical naturalism which privilege positivistic and mechanistic methods. What Bukharin failed to recognise is that he discarded essential subjective elements by using positivist sociology.⁵ Bukharin’s positivist sociology regards people as “unconscious actors” (Buttigieg, 1990, p. 71 - 74). If people are unconscious actors, it means no revolutionary action is possible. Ultimately, Bukharin’s method was like “jumping from the frying pan into the fire” (Haug, 2001, p. 72). The abstractions that Bukharin criticised in metaphysical idealism were also present in his metaphysical materialism. To put it differently, Bukharin’s attempt to critique idealism led him to form an abstract materialist theory that sees the working

⁵ According to Lenin (1922), “[Bukharin’s] theoretical views can be classified as fully Marxist only with great reserve, for there is something scholastic about him (he has never made a study of dialectics, and, I think, never fully appreciated it.”

class fulfilling a historical role that is unconscious and mostly passive – history itself is objectively moving towards socialism.

One of the leading thinkers, who saw the dangers of relegating the importance of revolutionary working-class consciousness under the positivistic approach, and reformist tactics during the Second International era was Vladimir Lenin (1870 – 1924). He criticised the path that the reformists had taken. He thought that without revolutionary strategies, socialist parties that followed reformist tendencies develop only “trade union consciousness” (Lenin, 1902, p. i). A revolution enables the working class to start again because it destroys all tenets of capitalism. On the other hand, reformism tends to minimise the rapacious socio-economic effects of full-fledged capitalism. It seems Lenin was suggesting that reformism had become a ‘bourgeois-*esque*’ philosophy.

Granted, Lenin astutely observed the inadequacies of positivism leading to reformism that had vulgarised Marxism into a bourgeois like philosophy. “It is [however] not true that the intellectuals of the Second International ignored the proletarian revolutionary problematic” (Greaves, 2009, p. 114). Indeed, the pro-positivist intellectuals always had the concern of the proletariat in the final analysis, even though their strategy was largely ineffective. However, much of the subtle dialectical qualities of historical materialism of Marx were overlooked during the period of the Second International. When World War One started, the positivist ideas of the Second International created

political passivity which saw Europe's socialist parties and working classes slide back to bourgeois nationalism.

2.3 Gramsci's critique of historical materialism

Antonio Gramsci was born in Ales, Sardinia in a family of seven children. Sardinia was a very backward place in Italy economically, socially and was not adequately integrated politically to other Italian territories.

In 1911, Gramsci entered the University of Turin, in Turin, after he won a scholarship for needy students. He loved reading. He majored in philology and linguistics, but he was very interested in politics too. Gramsci was introduced to the works of Benedetto Croce. Croce was an influential idealist philosopher in Italy, especially among young intellectuals. The direct influence of Croce on Gramsci came from journals written by Croce such as *La Critica*, *La Voce*, and *L'Unita* (Davidson 1977, p. 94). Croce had a significant influence on Gramsci later when it came to identifying the neglect of subjective elements in historical materialism. In the *Prison Notebooks*, Crocean references are constantly recurring. Gramsci retrieved insights on the importance of culture, politics, and religion from Croce's idealism in his theory of the 'sphere of complex superstructure'. Croce was one of the leading critics of positivism in Marxism.

While Gramsci was still in Turin, he had the opportunity to see the Italian Socialist Party's or *Partito Socialista Italiano* (PSI) activities for and with the working class first hand. Turin, nicknamed by Gramsci, "Italy's Petrograd", was highly industrialised and the number of the working class kept on increasing in that area during World War One.

[Thus], it was during his years at Turin University that Gramsci first came into serious contact with the intellectual world of his time. The deficiencies of liberal Italy had created a certain vogue for socialist ideas even in bourgeois circles, and many of the professors at the University had links with the socialist movement (Hoare and Smith, 1999, p. 27).

So, Gramsci joined the Italian Socialist Party (PSI) in 1912. He would also go on to drop his studies because of a lack of funds and physical ailments to devote himself fully to the party (Mayo, 2005, p. 10).

The PSI was affiliated with the Second International since 1892, thus it tended to adopt the fatalistic doctrine of the Second International. However, “the Bolshevik success in October 1917 decisively moved the magnetic field of Marxism from Germany to Russia. Lenin’s Marxism replaced Kautsky’s as the new orthodoxy” (Townshend, 1989, p. 659). Gramsci noted that if the ‘revolution’ could take over in a country that was backward like Russia, then it is possible for an advanced country like Italy. This is reflected in the popular article he wrote called “*The Revolution against Das Kapital*” (1917).

For Gramsci, the October Revolution had proved the determinism of the Second International’s thinkers like Kautsky to be wrong. Their determinism, supposedly influenced by Marx’s *Capital*, was “corrupted by the emptiness [or encrustations] of positivism and naturalism” (Gramsci, 1917). Gramsci was sceptical of the positivistic method. He had gained knowledge of idealism whilst in university as opposed to some who ritually followed scientism. Then again, Gramsci seems not to be for pure

idealism, or radical voluntarism, like the Bolsheviks. Gramsci was undoubtedly loyal to Bolsheviks but he criticised some political strategies that he did not think were effective (Femia, 1981, p. 4).

Gramsci sought to go beyond the over-reliance on positivism or scientism as the only sure way in Marxism enabling workers to understand their conditions better, leading them to socialism. Positivism or scientism was seen by Gramsci as abstract methods. He argues that:

Who is able to put himself in this kind of ‘standpoint of the cosmos in itself’ and what could such a standpoint mean? It can indeed be maintained that here we are dealing with a hangover of the concept of God, precisely in its mystic form of a conception of an unknown (Gramsci, 1971, p. 445)

Gramsci is pointing out a fallacy made when one looks into the claims to hold the truth made by positivists over religion and mysticism. Morera (2000) sums up the illogical claims: “the great thinkers of the Enlightenment were wrong in believing in the power of reason and managed only to further new myths in place of the old ones” (p. 16).⁶ Gramsci certainly became aware of the dangers of Marxism becoming a new religion.

Gramsci argued that the Italian Socialists, like some other Western socialist parties, were ‘misguided’ by vulgar Marxism or pseudo-scientific historical materialism called

⁶ At the risk of digressing: There is a good example of the continuation of how myths are perpetuated from religion to science that might add clarity to Gramsci’s observation. Smith (2001) observes that there is a relationship between *Atum*, Adam and atom. *Atum* was the Egyptian god for creation. From *Atum* came the idea of Adam, the first man & father of all human beings. From Adam came the term atom - particle that ‘makes up or create everything’.

“historical economism” created by Antonio Loria (1857 – 1943). Antonio Loria was an Italian economist who was notorious for plagiarising and embellishing the work of Marx’s work, *Capital* (Gramsci, 2011, p. 559). “Historical economism” was a one-sided cause and effect relationship between material conditions and the ideological superstructure. The intellectuals that promoted “Historical economism” were dubbed “Lorians” and their doctrine “Lorianism”, or *lorianismo* (Gramsci, 2003, p. 458). Thus Gramsci summarised Lorianism as “certain degenerate and bizarre aspects of the mentality of a group of Italian intellectuals and therefore of national culture” (Gramsci, 2003, p. 458).⁷ Gramsci saw the Lorians as a group that acted perhaps unwittingly against the interests of the working class.

The inspiration of the ‘Lorians’ came from the works of a French palaeontologist named Georges Cuvier (1769 – 1832) who studied bones of extinct animals. Gramsci was sceptical about using the same method in politics. He famously said, “from the little bone of a mouse sometimes a sea serpent was reconstructed” (Gramsci, 1992, p. 116). Gramsci was warning Marxists of the dangers of using and blindly following positivistic methods that are rigid and dogmatic, because their conclusions may be drawn out of erroneous data. Building from Gramsci’s analysis, Buttigieg argues that “Lorianism leads to conclusions as bizarre as those produced by misapplication of

⁷ Lorianism refers to “scientific methods of Lorians [that] resemble those of some misguided palaeontologist whose misuse of empirical evidence leads to erroneous, even bizarre conclusions” (Buttigieg, 1990, p. 62). “Lorianism is made to stand for a cluster of intellectuals from the social sciences whose crude positivism, opportunism, perverse thinking, and careless scholarship [is] stupendously exemplified in the work of the economics professor, Achille Loria” (Buttigieg, 1990, p. 61 – 2). See also Chapter Three.

scientific methods...a consequence of this kind of sociology is that it blocks the possibility of constructing an account of the history of repression” (p. 65). It so happened that in Italy, Gramsci argues that Fascism triumphed because the leftist sociologists that practised positivistic science failed to understand the historical circumstances because they did not have a theory of history in the first place, as we shall see in chapter three. Thus, when Giovanni Gentile (1875 – 1944) created a Fascist philosophy, Lorians could not develop a counter-movement that could fight it.

Merrington (1968), noted correctly that “Gramsci insisted on the impossibility of prediction which diverted attention from the possibilities of active political intervention”. Marxism could not and should not have been taken as an exact science because it blocked the revolutionary spirit and did not inspire action. The mechanistic or abstract materialism “posed a political–epistemological as well as a political-ethical obstacle to the unfolding of Marxist theory and practice” (Haug, 2001, p. 70). It meant the working class had to wait for the inevitability – i.e. the collapse of capitalism. A question arises: when will the working class know it is time for the revolution if their consciousness is determined purely by the economic base? It is difficult to distinguish the real and ‘organic’ moment from the passing and ephemeral. Gramsci sees the base–superstructure relationship as reciprocal and mutually interactive – i.e. dialectical.

Gramsci further advances his arguments against positivism by examining Engels’ works such as the *Anti-Dühring* (1878). Gramsci remarks:

Engels' formulation that, "the unity of the world consists in its materiality demonstrated by the long and laborious development of philosophy and natural science", contains the germ of the correct conception in that it has recourse to history and to man in order to demonstrate objective reality (Gramsci, 1971, p. 445).

Here we can note Gramsci pointing out the need to have an understanding of the ideological as an active attempt to articulate material reality, without which of course, the latter has no meaningful existence.

To go beyond the limitations of positivistic historical materialism, Gramsci ends up developing some concepts that were previously underemphasised or unknown within the theoretical framework. Moreover, Greaves (2009) posits that "Gramsci seeks not to destroy the main tenets of historical materialism but to humanise and re-invigorate them" (p.12). Just as we observed with the Second International, it was imperative to update Marxism so that it addresses the conditions of that historical period. This is probably why McLellan concludes that: "history of the development of Marx's thought could almost be written in terms of the rediscovery of aspects of Marx's ideas that had either been neglected or unknown – or at least as far as Western Marxism is concerned" (p. 1 – 2). The next chapter will illustrate how Gramsci reconstructed Marxism as he perceived its historical purpose at the time.

Chapter 3

Gramsci's concepts and innovations

3.1 A revolutionary Gramsci

In the previous chapter, the historical circumstances leading to Gramsci's criticism of the one-sided deterministic, non-dialectical Marxist 'orthodoxy' were established. First, it was shown that the foundation of historical materialism was laid down by Marx in collaboration with Engels. The latter made an effort to make Marxism more 'scientific', after the former's untimely demise. Second, prominent figures of the Second International such as Bernstein and Kautsky, reduced Marxism to an evolutionary doctrine guided by positivist science, to explain how socialist societies would emerge. These 'dogmatic prophets' of the Second International, derided the importance of consciousness in the working-class struggle for a revolution that could have led to socialism in Western Europe. When World War One broke out, positivistic Marxism resulted in political passiveness of some prominent socialist leaders and workers, which gave the bourgeoisie a nationalist leeway to maintain a grip on the capitalist state. World War One destroyed the Second International. Lastly, inspired by Machiavellian and Crocean ideas and later on, the October Revolution, Gramsci began to construct his criticism of "scientism" which had made Marxism for him deterministic, non-dialectical and fatalistic (Davidson, 1977).

Some of the first effects of the Russian Revolution in Europe were observed in Turin. From late 1918, working-class insurrections arose over the skyrocketing prices and

food shortages. Revolutionaries like Gramsci were eager to accomplish the same results as in Russia – the takeover of the State. This marked the beginning of a period called the *Biennio Rosso* (Red Years, 1919 – 1920). Gramsci and some of his friends, Palmiro Togliatti, Umberto Terracini and Angelo Tasca partook in the protests. They would also go on to form a newspaper called *L'Ordine Nuovo* (The New Order) to express the political events of the time. However, some party leaders of the Italian Socialist Party remained politically passive during this period.

It became more and more apparent to Gramsci that 'orthodox' Marxism had become a rigid, fatalistic evolutionary doctrine under the Second International leaders such as Bernstein and Kautsky and this infected the Italian Socialist Party. Its evolutionary doctrine laden with positivism succumbed to the resilience of capitalism. The evolutionary theory had created socialist parties that focused on reformism, abandoning the revolutionary spirit in Marxism which had proved successful in Russia. The Socialist Party in Italy ended up yielding power to the bourgeoisie in the parliament at the expense of the working class. Compounded by the problems of factionalism in Italian Socialist Party, capitalism thrived because factionalism between revolutionaries and reformists made the working class inactive after World War One. This paved the way for an opportunity to Marxist leaders like Gramsci to formulate a new way of destroying capitalism.

At the Livorno Congress of the PSI in 1921, Gramsci sided with the communist minority which advocated revolutionary political action. He would eventually leave the

PSI and co-found the PCd'I in 1921 because he preferred Lenin's active strategy as opposed to the politically passive doctrine of positivist sociology which dominated the PSI. Gramsci remained committed mostly to three of the six characteristics identified by Femia which are: commitment to class analysis (working class to be specific); commitment to the revolution; and the attainment of communism (Femia, 1993). As this chapter elaborates on Gramsci's innovations and concepts, it will also show how Gramsci adhered to these central tenets of Marxism, as mentioned above, but completely eschewed completely its scientism.

Gramsci continued to write for the *L'Ordine Nuovo* after 1921 because he saw the potential it had in amassing support for revolutionary action. Gramsci continued to criticise the PSI for being mere political bystanders when the conditions were otherwise seemingly favourable for a socialist revolution. For Gramsci, the inaction of the PSI was undesirable because it was opening up space within the working-class movement for the potential rise of Fascism. The true character of fascism was still largely unknown then, but Gramsci was right not to underestimate fascism as a potential counter-revolutionary force. Gramsci remarks;

It is bad tactics to put one's trust in the errors or one's enemies [Fascists] and to imagine one's enemies to be incapable and inept. Whoever has strength, uses it...The Communist Party has its line: to launch the slogan of insurrection and lead the people in arms to their freedom guaranteed by the workers' State. What is the slogan of the Socialist Party? How can the masses still trust this party, which confines its political activity to groaning, and purposes only to ensure that its deputies make "magnificent" speeches in Parliament? (Gramsci, 1978, p. 42).

Sadly, the Cassandra Curse befell Gramsci.⁸ The leadership of the socialist party kept paying mere lip service to revolutionary action in Italy. “In the aftermath, people looking back saw that the movement built around *L’Ordine Nuovo* had shown a way forward – one that, if generalised across all Italy, could have led to victory” (Harman, 2003, para 16). However, in October 1922, the die was cast; Fascists were able to seize power when they staged a ‘March on Rome’ and King Victor Emmanuel III handed political power over to Mussolini and the Fascists. The Fascists subsequently embarked on their journey to cement their domination of Italian politics.

In 1926, the Fascists launched attacks to eliminate their political opponents (Hoare and Sperber, 2015). They went on to consolidate their power by outlawing and threatening opposition parties. Gramsci was also arrested because he was a significant threat to Fascism, that Mussolini knew all too well (Hoare and Smith, 1999, p. 40). Mussolini ignored Gramsci’s parliamentary immunity. The prosecutor demanded Gramsci’s imprisonment, to “stop [his] brain working for twenty years!” (Hoare and Smith, 1999, p. 23). There was to be strict censorship of the letters that Gramsci would write in prison, and all this was intended to cut Gramsci off from being active in politics.

Gramsci’s imprisonment should not be trivialised. He knew his role in the struggle had to change, from being a “ploughman” to being the “manure” of history (Gramsci, 1971, p. xciii). Gramsci understood he could not be the forefront of the revolution as he would

⁸ Greek mythology: Cassandra told prophecies that came true, but no one believed her because of god Apollo curse.

have desired but would provide the necessary long term philosophical ideas while serving time in prison. He took the opportunity to reflect and write his long-term political strategies *for* the working class.

The *Prison Notebooks* were however written under stressful conditions and unsystematically. Gramsci's style of writing is elliptical (Forgacs, 1986); however, one can still interpret the crux of the matter. In the *Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci was trying to understand why the working class in the West had consented to the continuation of the capitalist state, and why it was not conscious of its oppression under capitalism. He was not just writing down his ideas for writing's sake without a target audience. Gramsci himself said in a letter to his sister-in-law, Tatiana Schutt: "I do not like throwing stones in the dark" (Gramsci, 1971, p. x). But his real concern was: what had gone wrong? Why had the revolution in Italy failed and the moment passed?

The answer to Gramsci's question lay in the inadequacy of the predominant 'instrumentalist' theory of the state in Marxism. Instrumentalism posits that the state is an agent for the bourgeois to maintain power. Marx and Engels observed, "the modern state is but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie" (Marx and Engels, 2010). Marx and Engels were challenging the liberal view of the state which sees the state as a neutral entity. They claimed that state neutrality was bourgeois myth designed to maintain class relations and when these disappear the state will "wither away".⁹

⁹ For more details, see Miliband (1969)

To critique the crude instrumentalist Marxist state theory, Gramsci developed absolute historicism in his *Prison Notebooks*. He believes history is important because it supplies the ‘moment’ of consciousness. The bulk of Gramsci’s substantive notes focused on the history of Italy’s national and social formations. Gramsci also employed what is called a ‘*maieutic*’ mentality – which means bringing “latent ideas into consciousness” (Morton, 2006, p. 50). Gramsci used this method before he was imprisoned and continued to do so in the *Prison Notebooks*. The reason for bringing latent ideas is that “history is a continual process of becoming and so it is essentially unforeseeable” (Gramsci, 1994, p. 111). The ‘bigger picture’ can only be seen after historical events pass. Thus, there is a need to develop history by picking up its ‘residues’ continually. It is from this background that Gramsci was able to expand the role of politics, previously underemphasised, in the Marxist tradition. He went on to establish new concepts or understanding of the Marxist paradigm such as ‘philosophy of praxis’, ‘intellectuals’, ‘hegemony’, the ‘war of position’.

One example of how Gramsci used latent ideas – ideas lying dormant – is his use of Marx’s *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852). Marx wrote this essay on politics but did not continue developing the ideas further in order to finish other projects. Marx wrote that Louis Bonaparte came to power championing the interests of the neglected French peasantry. However, this consolidated the French state at a moment of national crisis which enabled the further elaboration of the bourgeoisie, which gave up its direct grip of the state. In *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Marx discovered that the political conditions of France and the French state

did not correspond directly to the interests of the French bourgeoisie. Hence, Marx discovers an instance in which politics and state were irreducible to extant *material* conditions themselves. We can discern from Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* that he retrieves some insights against the vulgar base – structure, deterministic relationship that Marx discovers from *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (Gramsci, 1971, p. 211). This gave rise to the notion of the “relative autonomy” of the State from the economic base which would influence heavily Gramsci's later analysis of the state.¹⁰

3.2 Hegemony

The concept of hegemony is one of the most important contributions made by Gramsci to the Marxist paradigm. It appears throughout the *Prison Notebooks*. He started expanding it in his early years in prison as he was reflecting on the defeat of the working class.¹¹ The term hegemony can be traced back to Ancient Greek times – *hegemonia* which means to ‘lead’ or the ‘leader’. The term received a new twist in Marxism as it was used initially by the Russian revolutionaries such as Axelrod, Lenin and Plekhanov to mean the combined leadership of both the Russian proletariat and peasantry. Plekhanov was arguing that in a culturally backward country like Russia, there should be the hegemony of the proletariat over the peasants and the revolutionary party over the proletariat, to avoid degenerating into reformist tendencies (Bates, 1975, p. 352). Lenin (1902) also supported Plekhanov because he did not believe that workers could

¹⁰ See Jessop (2007)

¹¹ Gramsci begins using this term when he in his essay *Notes on the Southern Question* (1926)

become revolutionary socialists spontaneously. Lenin asserted the need to lead the proletariat and peasants in a revolution.

The term hegemony caught Gramsci's attention since it alleviated Marxism from the mechanistic and fatalistic interpretation of 'orthodox' Marxism because it recognised some crucial political and cultural factors. Gramsci took the term from the Russian revolutionaries, although he would later use it distinctively (Anderson, 1976, p. 15 – 21). Femia (1998) argues that Gramsci developed the concept hegemony from the writings of Machiavelli. Gramsci went further than Lenin, for whom it was a tactic, in combining moral and intellectual leadership to extend its use to achieve the consent of the mass to the state – Machiavelli's preoccupation in *The Prince*.

What were the circumstances that led to Gramsci's new meaning of the term hegemony? It all emanates from the differences that existed between the "East" (which means Russia) and the "West" (advanced European capitalist countries) and the subsequent failure to exploit the moment of crisis in Italy – the *Biennio Rosso*.

Gramsci's insight was unmatched in recognising the different political and cultural conditions between less developed countries and advanced capitalist countries. Vladimir Lenin and Leon Trotsky (1879 – 1940) were also concerned about the failure of the revolutions in the West, but they did not go as far as Gramsci did in elaborating the sophisticated nature of states in the West (Thomas, 2009). Gramsci notes that when the socialists in Italy attempted a revolution from 1919 to 1921, they failed because the state was only "an outer ditch, behind which there [stood] a powerful system of

fortresses and earthworks” (Gramsci, 1971, p. 207). This means the capitalist state had developed a defence mechanism that an instrumentalist conception of the state could not explain.

For Gramsci, the reason for capitalist resilience in Italy lay in the distinction in the superstructure between ‘political society’ and ‘civil society’. The presence of ‘civil society’ provided the bulwark of resistance to the socialist revolution in the West, as we shall see. Gramsci refers to the “civil society, as the ensemble of organisms commonly called private, and that of political society or the State” (Gramsci, 1971, p. 12). So, ‘civil society’ is a voluntary domain and includes churches, schools, and parties, where ideas are exchanged freely within. The ‘political society’, which is somewhat synonymous to the formal institutions of “state”, and it includes the army, the government, the police, in sum, public institutions that are involuntary or compulsory. The relationship of the civil society and the political society is complex. As Forgas states: “Although the two levels must be analytically distinguished from one another, they must also be seen as being intertwined in practice” (Forgacs, 2000, p. 224).¹² Gramsci states that, in Russia, the State was “primordial and gelatinous; [whereas] in the West, there was a proper relation between State and civil society” (Gramsci, 2007, p. 232). The civil society and political society in Russia were more or less one entity since there was little activity outside state control; thus it was conducive

¹² An example given by Gramsci (2000) is that “a state education system is at one level clearly part of political society, just as trade unions are when they take part in tripartite planning with employers and government. But this does not mean that everything which takes place in schools or trade unions is subservient to the state or reflects ruling-class interests” (p. 224).

to use force to take over the state in Russia. There was no consent basis for the state in Russia and thus no hegemonic component for state defence. It was this discovery that led to Gramsci's critical effort to restore the dialectical moments of 'force and consent' to the concept of state. Gramsci understood that something more than coercive force is involved in stabilising capitalist society in the West: Hegemony – the manufacturing of consent.

It is important to note that, Gramsci discovers that consent is always complimented with force. Hegemony does not always generate consent reliably in civil society, so force remains in reserve to make sure that 'civil society' complies with the dominant interests. He uses the Machiavellian phrase "Half-animal and half-human" (Gramsci, 1971, p. 170). The phrase is derived from a mythical creature called *Centaur* with the upper body of a human and the lower body and legs of a horse. The dominant groups should be aware that consent is not always enough; there it should have the option to use force (animal instincts) to maintain dominance. However, force needed no elaboration and it is consent which captures Gramsci's attention.

In the Hegelian tradition, Gramsci saw society as a divided unity defined now in Marxist terms by class. The would-be unity is effected by hegemony. Gramsci referred to hegemony as ideas which stabilise a dis-unified society. In other words, hegemony refers to the ideas that are so powerful that they create consensus among people with different political and social life experiences to accept the same cultural outlook in such a way that those people think they have concluded the nature of reality on their own.

Thus, the dominant class can secure consent through hegemony. Where is that consent secured? Consent is secured in civil society through the seemingly free exchange of ideas. Thus, the bourgeoisie utilises its hegemony in the civil society to generate consent for the capitalist system through schools, churches, and clubs as previously mentioned. As Gramsci notes:

The bourgeois class poses itself as an organism in continuous movement, capable of absorbing the entire society, assimilating it to its own cultural and economic level. The entire function of the State has been transformed; the State has become an “educator”, etc. (Gramsci, 1971, p. 260)

Hegemony thrives on using seemingly innocuous ideas, but at the same time, the ideas are powerful enough to compel a group to act according to the interests of another group. For example, hegemony capitalises on what Gramsci calls “common sense”. Common sense refers to “uncritical and largely unconscious way of perceiving and understanding the world that has become ‘common’ in any given epoch” (Gramsci, 1971, p. 322). To put it differently, common sense means people think in truisms without knowing precisely why capitalism is taken as normal, natural, etc.¹³ Thus, bourgeoisie hegemony weaves itself into common sense so that it constructs the bad experiences into something that can be venerated; for example, the booms and busts of

¹³ Appel (2014) provides a useful insight on using ideas without reflecting on their meaning and origin: “The most dangerous ideas are not those that challenge the status quo. The most dangerous ideas are those so embedded in the status quo, so wrapped in a cloud of inevitability, that we forget they are ideas at all.”

capitalism are taken as something normal. To maintain bourgeoisie hegemony, intellectuals are of crucial importance because their ideas have a role in generating and reinforcing common sense in ‘civil society’.

3.3 Intellectual leadership

Gramsci wrote extensively on the history of the formation of the intellectuals and their role in the State and revolution. He contested the view that intellectuals are an independent group in society. He contends that:

Every social group, coming into existence on the original terrain of an essential function in the world of economic production, creates together with itself, organically, one or more strata of intellectuals which give it homogeneity and an awareness of its own function not only in the economic but also in the social and political fields (Gramsci, 1971, p. 5).

This means intellectuals are harnessed to the class interests that created them. Gramsci believes they are part of the societal structure they live in and they have a massive impact on it; negative or positive for the working class.¹⁴ The Gramscian notion of an intellectual is not reduced to artists and scholars only, “but also functionaries who exercise ‘technical’ or ‘directive’ capacities in society” Ramos (1982). It includes everyone who is an “organiser of culture” (Gramsci, 1971). Gramsci also asserts that every person is an intellectual in one way or the other although “not everyone is an intellectual by social function” (Gramsci, 1971, p. 1). Not everyone performs the role of shaping the way which society thinks.

¹⁴ During Gramsci’s era, intellectuals had so much power. “The distrust of experts [intellectuals] and politicians is but a new phenomenon.” (see Sassoon, 2006)

Gramsci goes on to identify two groups of intellectuals which are “traditional intellectuals” and “organic intellectuals”. To understand how traditional intellectuals came about we will refer back to hegemony. Hegemony passes through three stages: the first stage, existing hegemony is blocked; the second stage, new class hegemony is adopted; and in the third stage, hegemony becomes ‘national-popular’ and cuts across the whole society. Traditional intellectuals are those who have previously reached stage three. They are organic intellectuals who manage to transcend their specific class function. These include diplomats, bureaucrats, religious figures and notaries. Gramsci (1971) calls ‘traditional intellectuals’ the “deputies” of the bourgeois class because they create the hegemony conditions conducive for its domination (p. 12).

An excellent example of a ‘traditional intellectual’ is Croce. He did not involve himself in the daily struggles of the people but wrote so many ideas from the position of “olympian serenity”. Gramsci condemned the inactiveness of ‘traditional intellectuals’ like Croce, and he calls it the “*Ponzio-pilatismo*” attitude; it is an attitude attributed to the Roman Pontius Pilate who washed his hands as a sign that he does not want to be involved in the judgement of Jesus Christ (Joll, 1977, p. 34). And yet he, like Croce, was an influential political figure.

Another example is Giovanni Gentile. He developed his Fascist ideas from his understanding of Marxism. He helped create a culture that lasted twenty-two years in Italy. The fascist ideas that Gentile formulated gave Italians a sense of national pride. Intellectuals provide ideas attuned to conditions that provide leadership.

‘Organic intellectuals’ articulate their class position, raise awareness of it, and its distinctiveness. Gramsci argues that ‘organic intellectuals’ are the most important for the development of working-class consciousness.¹⁵ ‘Traditional intellectuals’ can change sides but the movement must be led and directed by the working class ‘organic intellectuals’. Gramsci himself adopted the role of an ‘organic intellectual’ because he used his intellect to articulate the condition of the Italian working class from within, thus to provide leadership in the revolutionary struggle. One can also say historical figures such as Amilcar Cabral (1924 – 1973) and Ernesto Che Guevera (1928 – 1967) can qualify to be labelled ‘organic intellectuals’.

Despite his criticism of the Catholic Church, Gramsci saw the power of the Jesuits during the Counter-Reformation, as an example of how the organic intellectuals can be involved in the struggle. The Catholic Church was under threat from the Protestants, and the Jesuits became the defenders of their religion creating a “capillary culture” (*cultura capillare*) all over Europe. The critical element is that the Jesuits were from within the Church.

Gramsci encouraged the working class organic intellectuals to spread ideas that lead to socialist revolution with the same vigour as the Jesuits. Organic intellectuals are encouraged to be very active in the struggle. Gramsci suggests:

The mode of being of the new intellectual can no longer consist of eloquence, which is an exterior and momentary mover of feelings and passions, but in

¹⁵ For an alternative see Bodenheimer (1976, p. 26)

active participation in practical life, as a constructor, organiser, ‘permanent persuader’ and not just a simple orator (Gramsci, 1971, p. 10).

Gramsci’s encouragement to the intellectuals to be more active was a way for the working class to gain much-needed hegemony in the ‘war of position’.

3.4 The “war of position”

Marxist ‘orthodoxy’ as discussed previously saw the economy as determining ideology, and ideology, thus, has negative connotations, specifically, the distortion of power in the base is spontaneously transferred to the superstructure (Marx and Engels, 1974). Reality is perceived as a reflection of the distorted power of the economic base; ideology is thus passive and epiphenomenal. Gramsci argues that the subjective (political and cultural factors) can influence the “objective conditions” and vice versa (Gramsci, 1971, p. 407 – 9). So, ideology is dialectical because it operates in two directions. In other words, ideology can have a determining impact on the economic base also.

Ideology is, therefore, subject to class contestation. Just as an ideology can be contested, so also can hegemony. Hegemonic conditions are not permanent (Williams, 1977, p. 112). Hegemony needs to be revitalised every time to maintain consent in civil society. This on-going battle in the superstructure is called the ‘war of position’. By contrast, a direct military takeover or confrontation of the State is called the “war of manoeuvre”. One can note that Gramsci, maintains the correspondence of the political society and civil society with the “war of manoeuvre” and “war of position”.

Gramsci uses the military metaphors to warn the socialist leaders in the “West” that the battleground is not just at the base (or structure) level only because bourgeoisie hegemony has ‘reserves’ for survival in ‘civil society’ if the State is under direct physical attack. Instead, the battle should be fought in the superstructure to secure consent. When hegemonic domination is secured, it raises working-class consciousness and it binds them together with subordinate classes to stage a revolution. Raising consciousness through the ‘war of position’ is essential because it fights political indifference such as the one seen during the *Biennio Rosso* period. As Gramsci observes: “what comes to pass does so not so much because a few people want it to happen, as because the mass of citizens abdicate their responsibilities” (Gramsci, cited in, Salamini, 2014, p. 78). Gramsci was arguing that the working class did not fight in revolution against capitalism because they did not see the dynamics and resilience of capitalism to reproduce itself. Bertell Ollman shares the same sentiments with Gramsci that capitalism is a system that is not invisible but it is neither immediately apparent, thus, “any effort to explain how it works must be accompanied by an equally strenuous effort to display it, to simply show that it exists and what kind of entity it is” (Ollman, 2003, p. 3). The failure to awaken the workers’ consciousness can only result in the survival of capitalism because society will hold on to what it already believes and knows.

Also, the need to engage in the ‘war of position’ is because the dominant class does not just sit and watch when its interests are under threat. It can engage in a process called “passive revolution” or “revolution-restoration” (Gramsci, 1971, p. 59). Passive

revolution is a concept and a process that explains that reorganisation and expansion or consolidation of the capitalist mode of production. The process does not mean that it is always passive, like the rise of Fordism in America, but it can be violent like the consolidation of power by the Fascists in Italy.

3.5 The ‘philosophy of praxis’

The innovations and concepts that have been discussed are all components of the “philosophy of praxis” as understood by Gramsci. For one to understand the meaning and development of the term “philosophy of praxis” as Gramsci intended, it is imperative for one to appreciate the Italian intellectual climate and context of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century in which the term gained traction. The leading Italian Marxists from the early 1890s were ardent disciples of the eclectic positivist, evolutionary interpretations of Marxism, such as Achille Loria. However, by the 1890s, this version of Italian Marxism faced its first criticism in Italy from Antonio Labriola (1843 – 1904), an ex-professor of moral philosophy at University of Rome and ex-Hegelian (Jacobitti, 1975, p. 300).

Hence, Labriola became the first Italian Marxist to introduce the phrase “philosophy of praxis” into Italy before the outbreak of World War One. Philosophy of praxis “itself, is derived from those notes of Karl Marx, hidden during his lifetime even from his friend Friedrich Engels and now known as the *Theses on Feuerbach*” (Haug, 2001, p. 70).¹⁶ Nonetheless, Labriola “had come round to Marxism and participation in the

¹⁶ Some scholars contend that Friedrich Engels later read the *Theses of Feuerbach* and considers it as a powerful book (see Carver, 2003, p. 32)

socialist movement fairly late in life, [hence] bringing with him distinct traces of a Hegelian intellectual formation” (Hoare and Smith, 1999, pp. 27 – 8). His knowledge of Marxism was of the early Marx or young Marx. Thus, Labriola saw the essence of Marxism in the unique nexus it established between theoretical and practical activity and maintained the unity of philosophy and history. According to Labriola,

The ‘philosophy of praxis’ is the heart and soul of historical materialism. This philosophy is immanent to the things on which it philosophises. From life to thought, and not from thought to life; this is the realistic process. From labour, which is an operative knowledge, to knowledge as abstract theory [...]. Finally, historical materialism, or the philosophy of praxis, in as much as it invests all of historical and social man, just as it announces the end of all forms of idealism [...], is thus also the end of naturalistic materialism (Labriola, 1965, p. 216, cited in Thomas, 2009, p. 21)

From that passage, Labriola’s position on Marxism was clear. Marxism was neither idealism only nor materialism only, but a mutually reinforcing relationship of the two. However, Labriola’s students, Croce and Gentile deviated from this position and ended up creating idealist liberal and fascist ideologies respectively. Philosophy of praxis, as popularised by Croce and Gentile, was anti-materialistic, to put it differently’ it was pro-idealism of the liberal and Fascist kind. From the perspective of the Third International (1919 – 1943), that interpretation of the philosophy of praxis was ‘heretical’.¹⁷

¹⁷ Also known as the Comintern (Communist International): It advocated for the spread of communism across the whole world.

In the *Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci extensively uses the term “philosophy of praxis”, and it has made him vulnerable to attack as a heretic who broke away from Marxism. However, the meaning of “philosophy of praxis”, is distinctly two-fold, in the *Prison Notebooks*. In some passages, “philosophy of praxis” is a ‘cipher’ that refers to Marxism because Gramsci wanted to outwit the people tasked to censor what he wrote in prison. In other passages, “philosophy of praxis” is used to describe a philosophy to explain the world based on philosophy and history that shows a permanent dialectical connection between thought and action.¹⁸

Antonio Gramsci was introduced to Labriola’s Hegelianised “philosophy of praxis” in university. Gramsci seemed to have had a better understanding of Labriolian definition of the “philosophy of praxis” than Croce or Gentile. Also, Gramsci revisited and retrieved the concept of praxis from the *Theses on Feuerbach* which he utilised to defend historical materialism as a philosophy of praxis: i.e. the philosophy of theory and action, not one of one-sided determinism. The debates that were going on at the time that split “philosophy of praxis” did not convince Gramsci as the correct interpretation of Marxism.

¹⁸ See Thomas (2015): “According to this interpretation, the notion of a philosophy of praxis could be ‘deciphered,’ or perhaps even effectively ‘replaced,’ by the term ‘Marxism’; in its turn, ‘Marxism’ was assumed to be a more or less stable body of doctrine in accord with the main lines of the version of Marxist orthodoxy that emerged in the later years of the Third International. Gramsci’s proposal of a philosophy of praxis was thus argued to signal his fundamental allegiance, in however modulated a form, to the ‘actually existing’ Marxism that dominated the official communist parties throughout much of the twentieth-century” (p. 97).

To demonstrate his understanding of “philosophy of praxis”, Gramsci focused on two intellectuals who embodied the tendencies of orthodox historical materialism and Hegelian idealism; Bukharin and Croce. Gramsci’s Notebooks are full of criticism of the mechanistic form of materialism promulgated by Bukharin in his book *Theory of Historical Materialism: A Popular Manual of Marxist Sociology*. Also, Gramsci criticised Croce for taking idealism too far. Croce failed to see that ideas were attached to concrete social forces, and considered them as abstract from society (Gramsci, 2000, p. 194).

To disprove pure materialism, Gramsci (1971), revisits *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (p. 106; 138 -139; 336). He posits that positivism blocks consciousness the development which is needed by the subaltern for a revolution. Gramsci read the Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* in the “most anti-economistic way” (Gramsci, 2000, p. 190). The conclusion that Gramsci arrived at was that socio-economic changes do not necessarily result in political changes, but they set pre-conditions. Gramsci seems to have arrived at that conclusion based on his apparent understanding of the *Theses on Feuerbach*: “[in the] *Theses on Feuerbach*, one can foresee the struggle but not moments of the struggle” (Gramsci 2003 p. 438). The moments of the struggle can only be seen and acted on in the superstructure. This is why Gramsci promoted the need to have an effective political organisation to control the base.

On the other hand, Gramsci criticised Croce's idealism for not taking action but simply battling with ideas (Gramsci, 1971, p. 132). Gramsci compares Croce to the intellectuals of the Renaissance who did not take action. In order for ideas to work, Croce should be active like John Calvin of the Calvinist or Martin Luther of the Lutheran church. Idealism was making Croce distance himself from the national mass movements.

The 'solution' to materialism and idealism was the dialectical relationship between thought and action. To put it differently, there should be an interplay of the objective and subjective conditions in our understanding of the moment. Gramsci uses a simple but powerful example of using cardinal points to explain the dialectical relationship. Gramsci notes geographical terms East and West are arbitrary directions (objective), but they have cultural interpretations too (Gramsci, 1971, p. 447). For example, East is East depending on where one stands, but, it also has a cultural meaning in some context to refer to a people or group. For example, Italians refer to Moroccan as Easterners because Moroccans are Arabs not because they are to the East on the cardinal map. If one understands this relationship, one understands the basics of "philosophy of praxis". One would need to demonstrate the objective truth of the east or west by going there. If Morocco is not discovered by going east of Italy, the theory of east and west is amended.

Gramsci was an active communist revolutionary. His imprisonment had a profound effect on what he wrote and how he wrote for the emancipation of the working class.

There is no doubt he made some innovations to our understanding of the state and revolution in Marxism. Gramsci took 'obscure' concepts such as 'civil society', 'hegemony' and intellectuals gave them a new meaning that opened up possibilities for revolutionary action previously unseen. Gramsci addressed most of the problems in the superstructure where he felt Marxism lacked. He did not leave the analysis of the base, however, as we can see from some the earlier works of Marx he revisited such as *Capital* and *A Contribution to the Political Economy*. Nonetheless, after Gramsci's death, debates have started to emerge as to whether he remained anchored in historical materialism or if he broke out altogether. At bottom, Gramsci's opposition to determinism and his recognition of the contingency of the war of position has given rise to a seemingly more voluntaristic notion of the political, as we shall now see.

Chapter 4

Gramsci's (de-)ontology

4.1 Demarcating the boundaries of the postmodernism 'paradigm'

Gramsci's emphasis on subjective elements has led some scholars (typically Laclau and Mouffe, 1984) to conclude that Gramsci's philosophical or intellectual arc spiralled out of the paradigmatic boundaries of historical materialism into what has become contemporary postmodernism and or/ post-Marxism. To this end, this chapter will begin with a detailed analysis of what constitutes the postmodern and/ or post-Marxist paradigm.

A review of related literature on postmodernism shows that there are as many conceptual 'definitions' of postmodernism and its sub-variants as there are scholars that define it. Stuart Sim acknowledges this conceptual problem of defining contemporary postmodernism. However, he argues that it is possible to find a common thread that can give us a conventional understanding which is an abandonment of a correspondence theory of reality (Sim, 2001, p. 4). To put it differently, one can have an operational definition by synthesising the common tenets or ideas that run through different accounts on postmodernism. To demarcate the boundaries of what constitutes postmodernism for this research, we will trace the roots of postmodernism itself and some of its key figures.

To begin with, the roots of contemporary postmodernism, as previously mentioned in the introductory chapter, can be traced from Immanuel Kant's philosophy. Kant was

the most influential thinker to challenge the ideas of the Enlightenment - the Enlightenment period ushered in the modern era in which scientism dominated our explanation of the world. Scientism dominated because in the modern era, “the central status of reason as objective and competent – in contrast to faith [and] mysticism” became fashionable (Hicks, 2004, p. 6). However, Kant questioned the Enlightenment principle of objectivity. He notes that we cannot fully understand the object or events external to ourselves, which he called the “noumenon” (things as they really are), with our senses. Instead, the object is experienced phenomenologically, which means it depends on how the human subject perceives it. Hence, Kant’s shift to the deontological position because there was no ‘reality’ that was ultimately apprehendable to which human thought and action apply. Kant knew this opened up an opportunity for fragmentation of objectivity, resulting in a society in which ‘people may do as they wish’. So, Kant proposed a universal moral precept or categorical imperative.¹⁹ “[Kant’s] dictates of the categorical imperative are premised on a notion of moral community which aims to overcome just such fragmentation” (Wolkler, 2000, p xiii). In the end, his scepticism of objectivity was not as ‘radical’ as would be with the philosophers that came after him because it ultimately remained in line with the principle of universalism, but what is important is the scepticism he introduces into the possibility of objective knowledge.

¹⁹ Kant insisted that there must be consistency in morality hence the categorical imperative. One example of Kant’s categorical imperative is: “Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never merely as a means to an end, but always at the same time as an end” (Kant, 1996, p. 429).

In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, Fredrick Nietzsche (1844 – 1900), an iconoclastic German philosopher, who became one of the prominent sceptics of the Enlightenment, continued the tradition of emphasising the importance of the subjective. “Nietzsche seized the grammatical core of the Kantian subject” (Grant, 2001, p. 32). He wrote extensively on the difficulties of determining the definition of truth. The famous Nietzschean line “‘God is dead’, [signalled] that truth, morality and knowledge itself were illusions” (Grant, 2001, p. 29). It also represents Nietzsche’s disdain for the power of universal ideas and absolute truths.

Nietzsche continued to be influential after his death: “Debates erupted concerning whether the tradition of modern philosophy had ended and many began celebrating a new postmodern philosophy associated with Nietzsche” (Best and Kellner, 1991, p. 1). Indeed, Sim (2001) concurs that some contemporary postmodernists looked up to Nietzsche for their theoretical development (p. 3). One good example of a postmodern thinker that inherited the Nietzsche’s epistemology is Michel Foucault (1926 – 84) (Miller, 1999). Foucault was influenced by much of Nietzsche’s work such as *Untimely Meditations*, *Human, All too Human* and *Beyond Good and Evil*. Both thinkers shared a radical critique of the concept of truth which bears more relation to power than ‘objective fact’.

It is, however, difficult to determine the exact moment when contemporary postmodernism emerged in humanities and social sciences. Scholars generally consider the period 1950’s and 1960’s as the beginning of the postmodern era. This period is

regarded as the “fundamental rupture in history and inauguration of a new era” (Best and Kellner, 1991, p. 17). There were new socio-political trends that were emerging, which raised doubts on the promise of the Enlightenment age and modernity. Modernity “[became] criticised for its search for a foundation of knowledge, for its universalising and totalising claims, for its hubris to supply apodictic truth, and for its allegedly fallacious rationalism” (Best and Kellner, p. 4). Emphasis on the role of the individual and cultural relativism became very important. One leitmotif to emerge is thus renewed scepticism, in fact, a claim to the impossibility of the modern project such that truth becomes radically relative.

There are so many thinkers who were instrumental in shaping postmodernism such as Michel Foucault, François Lyotard, Jacques Derrida, Fredric Jameson, Jean Baudrillard, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. However, while their approaches to postmodernism are different, the common thread is, they believe;

“[the] rejection of many, if not most, of the cultural certainties which life in the West has been structured... [for example] the economies must continue to grow, the quality of life to keep improving indefinitely, etc.” (Sim, 2001, p. viii).

The repudiation of ‘certainties’ or structural references detaches socio-economic and political analysis from a priori ‘pre-given’ to the ‘discursive’ and the contingences of the political, cultural, historical and intellectual context. ‘Reality’ does not correspond to external references. It becomes de-ontological in the sense, as Kant grasped it, that our thoughts and actions do not conform to pre-given consequences because of the impossibility of apprehending an objective reality and knowledge of “things in

themselves”. Hence, we do not merely ‘receive’ the truth, but project it. Sims posits that the above statement can be used as a definition of postmodernism and the theories such as poststructuralism, post-Marxism, post-truth can be subsumed under the broad term postmodernism, as will be assumed here.

Mostly the philosophers from France were crucial in this development of postmodernism after the Second World War (Grant, 2001, p. 28). In France, it was dubbed poststructuralism. To use Chaffee and Lemert’s (2009) words, poststructuralism is against the belief in “prior existence of order in [any] field under investigation” (p. 124). As one of the influential French postmodern thinker of the time, Derrida noted, “there are only contexts without any absolute centre of anchorage” (Derrida, 1988, p. 62). This was a clear endorsement for an epistemological and ontological position in which the political and/ or power thrives on the terrain of inter-subjectivity.

While some authors refer to Lyotard and Baudrillard generically as postmodernists, Stuart Sim asserts that they can be placed specifically under the sub-variant *post-Marxism* (Sim, 2000, p. 1). The emphasis is on ‘post’ because they were initially Marxists but they repudiated their Marxist past. Those who reformulated Marxism, like Laclau and Mouffe, to accommodate the rise of new ‘non-economic’ social movements fall under *post-Marxism* (Sim, p. 1). The emphasis is on ‘Marxism’ because they accept conflict and the concept of economic repression, but reformulated Marxism to accommodate new social groups. However, Laclau and Mouffe claim that their position

is both *post-Marxist* and *post-Marxist* (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001, p. 4). Not only did they reformulate Marxism, but they also broke out of it altogether (Geras, 1987).

Laclau and Mouffe's *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* has thrown into question Gramsci's ontological assumptions and epistemological approach. Laclau and Mouffe accept the general postmodern tenet and have given up on a correspondence theory of truth. They even admit that "the transition from Marxism to post-Marxism, is not only ontic but also ontological" (Laclau and Mouffe p. x). Intellectually and philosophically, however, Laclau and Mouffe moved to a de-ontological position. Daly (1999) also observes the shift in the ontological position and posits that: "it is only by moving to a postmodern position that it becomes possible [for Laclau and Mouffe] to reactivate the emancipatory potential of Marxism beyond the epistemic constraints of its totalising tendencies" (p. 63). In other words, he is arguing that it became possible to analyse the social formation and ways to create a coalition of oppressed groups, or so the argument goes.

Most importantly for this research is the fact that Laclau and Mouffe see Gramsci as a pivotal figure in the development of their post-Marxist political theory. In their own words:

Only the isolated example of Gramsci, writing from the Mussolinian jails, can be quoted as a new departure producing a new arsenal of concepts - war of position, historical bloc, collective will, hegemony, intellectual and moral leadership - which are the starting point of our reflections in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001, p. ix).

Hence, we need to examine more closely their claims on Gramsci.

4.2 The background of Gramsci's 'pushing' out of the paradigm

After the Second World War, the nature of capitalism and socio-economic conditions in Western Europe transformed. There was “an increasing diversification of particularistic identities and political demands constituted around new sites of antagonism: gender, sexual, environmental, ethnic, cultural and so on” (Daly, 1999, p. 61). Laclau and Mouffe observe the spread of welfare state idea by Keynes as a factor that caused the proliferation of different political actors and the loss of distinction of the working class (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001, p. 73 – 5). Compounded by the spread of neo-liberalism under the Western leaders such as Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan in the early 1980s, Marxism seemingly went into retreat. Marxism became “a discredited system of thought, carrying with it a burden of authoritarianism and totalitarianism at odds with the current commitment (theoretical as well as political) to cultural pluralism and libertarianism” (Sim, 2000, p. 1). It was viewed narrowly as a theory that was failing to uphold the new diverse political groups democratically. As a result, some academicians called for a new way of addressing the rise of a plurality of political actors who demanded equality and freedom. It is from this background that Laclau and Mouffe wrote their book *Hegemony and Social Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (1985; 2001).

Post-Marxists believed that the Marxist theory had become *passé* in the 1970s (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001, p. viii). For them, the promises and predictions that Marxism had made did not come true and were not likely ever to come true. Laclau and Mouffe analyse the failure of German socialist leaders, especially Kautsky, to recognise the subjective with his arguments for economic determinism (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001, pp. 14 – 5). As a result, they were motivated to reformulate Marxism to regenerate its theoretical power for the Left to develop an alternative strategy to address the needs of the plural actors that emerged to emancipation. They argue that:

[t]he surpassing of a great intellectual tradition never takes place in the sudden form of a collapse, but in the way that river waters, having originated at a common source, spread in various directions and mingle with currently flowing down from other sources. This is how the discourses that constituted the field of classical Marxism may help to form the thinking of a new left: by bequeathing some of their concepts, transforming or abandoning others, and diluting themselves in that infinite intertextuality of emancipatory discourses in which the plurality of the social takes shape (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001, pp. 4 – 5)

Laclau and Mouffe see Marxism as a perspective fraught with foundational flaws leading it to the ‘crisis’ it faced. To address the ‘crisis’, they abandoned the determinants of Marxism and looked into the ideas of theoreticians from the Frankfurt School, but most importantly from Antonio Gramsci. They claim that Kautsky and even Bernstein failed to surpass limitations of economism but Gramsci broke free, and in the process expanded the autonomy of the political from the base (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001, pp. 30 – 1). Gramsci’s alleged “rupture with economism” (Laclau and Mouffe, p. 30), suited Laclau and Mouffe’s agenda of an indeterminate philosophy that

is capable of explaining postmodern conditions and social changes. Nonetheless, they did not, however, accept Gramsci's ideas and concepts wholly and uncritically. They criticise Gramsci for being somewhat essentialist (Laclau and Mouffe, 1987, pp. 68 – 9). They point out that Gramsci had crafted the key ideas and vocabulary to navigate political subjectivity but he still had a bias towards the role of class. So, to put it metaphorically, for Laclau and Mouffe Gramsci can be likened to Christopher Columbus who discovered America but did not know at the time he was there.

In their quest to find a solution to the crisis faced by Marxism, Laclau and Mouffe analyse the ideas of Rosa Luxemburg from her analysis of the *Mass Strike*. They conclude that crucial moment in Luxemburg's idea is the recognition of "subject position" (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001, p. 11). Here, Laclau and Mouffe seem to suggest that class is not a product of economic reality but a symbolic unit.

Laclau and Mouffe did not stop there, they continue their analysis by tracing the genealogy of hegemony. They conclude that hegemony is a concept that "alludes to a kind of contingent intervention required by the crisis or collapse of what would have been a 'normal' historical development" (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001, p. 1). They are arguing that hegemony became the solution to explain the failure of economic 'stagism' because of its "logic of contingency". They also argue that after the Bolshevik Revolution, the Russian leaders were the first to use the concept. However, they criticise them, especially Lenin's use of hegemony, because it had elements of

authoritarianism of the leaders over the led; proletariat and peasants (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001, p. 55).

Laclau and Mouffe, thus, saw Gramsci's understanding of hegemony as more enlightening because, Gramsci stressed the significance of the working class building alliances with other groups, constituting a wider spectrum of interests. In addition, they also observe Gramsci going beyond Lenin's proposal of hegemony as merely political because Gramsci included cultural and moral characteristics (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001, p. 67). By this, it appears as though Laclau and Mouffe mean that Lenin's hegemony is just interest-based alliance between Russia's tiny proletariat and the peasantry, whereas, Gramsci constructed actual linkages between groups, generating ideology, creating an organic, historical bloc based on collective will for the entire national community.

In the end, Laclau and Mouffe concluded that there can be no hegemony without articulation (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001, p. 50) – articulation which they define as “any practice establishing a relation of elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice” (p. 105).²⁰ They give the impression that the interests of social groups are first made (through ‘symbolic’ interaction and discourse) and then represented, and they are not pre-determined by ‘objective conditions’ of an economic nature or anything else. This for Laclau and Mouffe allow hegemony to include a

²⁰ Laclau and Mouffe were criticised by Clark (2004, p. 28) for using obscure, ‘awkward’ or ‘empty’ definitions such as articulation. It is not an unprecedented criticism because Geras (1987) has criticised Laclau and Mouffe for “obscurantism” (p. 47 – 9).

“plurality of political spaces” and thus incorporates ‘extra-economic’ actors in their political project – race or gender.

4.3 Reclaiming Gramsci’s historical materialism

The insertion of Gramsci into post-Marxism by Laclau and Mouffe has caused huge debate. Some scholars have come out to ‘redeem’ Gramsci’s ideas back into the historical materialist paradigm (Thomas, 2009, 2015; Greaves, 2009, 2011; Morton, 2006), i.e. they claim that Gramsci remained anchored to the basic tenets of historical materialism. For example, Greaves (2007) argues that “Gramsci’s...vital contribution to historical materialism is in danger of being ‘cherry-picked’, abstracted and employed by postmodern definitions other than his own” (p. 69). He argues that Gramscian concepts are selectively used risking misappropriation. However, Laclau and Mouffe have gained traction in academia. Their de-ontological appropriation of Gramsci has received its fair share of defenders such as Daly (1999) and Smith (1998), and it has spread into various disciplines such as international relations, sociology, political theory and anthropology. (Thomas, 2009, p. 11). Thus, the “debates surrounding [Gramsci’s] political and intellectual legacy still abound and show no signs of abating” (Bieler and Morton, 2006, p. xv).

There is nothing wrong in having different interpretations of Gramsci’s text. In fact, it is a virtue to have different criticisms and interpretations. Firstly, ideas are not trans-historical, therefore, they require constant re-evaluation. Secondly, different interpretations and criticisms can be a “creative force from which new ideas and new meanings are articulated” (Prestipino, 2000, cited in, Medda, 2010, para 1). For

example, Marx formulated his ideas by critiquing Hegel's dialectics. Even Gramsci himself critiqued other people's ideas to formulate his original concepts. However, Germain and Kelly (1998) give a sound warning that "we must question whether the use made of Gramsci does not stretch a conceptual apparatus beyond the point at which its explanatory power can be maintained" (pp. 4 – 5). In other words, the appropriation of Gramscian ideas should still have relevance vis-à-vis the aim(s) of the original author. As Edward Said, argues each text has a 'worldliness' which means it is written under certain socio-political conditions for a particular group and with an agenda (Said, cited in, Morton, 1998). That quality should always be retained when interpreting a text.

4.3.1 Historical context & interpretation

To have a more enlightening interpretation of Gramsci that retains his historical materialism, Thomas (2015) observes that Gramsci's text should be treated as a "message in a bottle" drifting against its own currents (p. 95). Thomas' argument is that Gramsci is obviously not our contemporary so we should read his message as if it were left for 'us' to read in the present day. Bellamy (1992) is of the same opinion that Gramsci's historical context should be taken into consideration. However, Morton (1999) criticises Bellamy for focusing on the history of Italy only to understand Gramsci's epistemology and ontology (p. 2). Morton asserts that Bellamy's focus on Italian history only is "*austere historicism*" – meaning it restricts our understanding of Gramsci's ideas because he was, in fact, more than a mere national thinker (pp. 2 – 3).

Gramsci, it is argued, also took into consideration the historical developments in other parts of the world vis-à-vis events in Italy.

In what context did Gramsci write his *Prison Notebooks*? Gramsci saw himself as a ‘Leninist’ but not in the strictest sense of the term. Gramsci shared the passion of revolutionary tactics like Lenin and remained active during the imperialist era, like Lenin (Jessop, p. 142). When the revolution failed to take hold in the West, Gramsci had the same political concerns as Lenin on the way forward for advanced capitalist countries to have a revolution. As a leader of the PCd’I, Gramsci knew he had to reformulate the theory of revolution to go beyond a mere confrontation or mere assault of the state apparatus into a complex process that involved preparing the masses ‘psychologically’ to gain their consent and take over a state. The PCd’I had to engage in a “war of position” so as to win the active consent of the civil society. This was not a *retreat* into reformism. Consent of the civil society was needed so that the revolutionary conditions will be conducive for a “war of manoeuvre”. Also, Gramsci broke away from the PSI to form a genuinely revolutionary party, PCd’I (Harman, [1977] 2006). The PCd’I was a “party of praxis” because it continued to spread socialist ideas and push for a revolution through the dialectical interaction of theory and practice.

When Gramsci was sentenced to prison, his active role in the revolution was curtailed. As a determined leader, he decided to write down revolutionary tactics that would outlive him - *für ewig*, he called them (Hoare and Nowell-Smith, 1971, p. xcii). As

Thomas (2009) observes Gramsci wanted to find some ideas that would be used to continue the revolutionary struggle (pp. 110 – 2).

The reformist perception that subsequently led to the de-ontological appropriation of Gramsci was started by a fellow Communist Party member Palmiro Togliatti. From 1931 onwards, Togliatti started pursuing his political goals which were to rebrand the PCd'I as a reformist party (Harman, 2006) and Gramsci was made the patron saint thereof (Bobbio, 1976, pp. 55 – 6, cited in, Finocchiaro, 1984, p. 145). Togliatti did not publish Gramsci's work until ten years after Gramsci's death and Togliatti heavily redacted the prison notebooks and prison letters (Harman, 2006), to promote a strategy known as Eurocommunism (Bellamy, 1992, p. 5; Hoare and Sperber, 2015, p. 212), and so the 'creativity' with Gramsci began.

It seems Laclau and Mouffe who wrote in the context of Eurocommunism unconsciously 'inherited' perceptions propounded by the PCI of a reformist Gramsci.²¹ We can see Laclau and Mouffe diverge from Gramsci's ideas on revolution because they argue that a working-class revolution is an illusion that is unattainable (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001, p. 2). They propose that the New Left should deepen the liberal radical democracy principles so that they accommodate different groups seeking emancipation instead of working-class revolution. This strategy adopted by Laclau and Mouffe seems antithetical to Gramsci's stance as Boggs notes: "each of the currents in Gramsci's Marxism took shape precisely in opposition to the timid social-democratic politics

²¹ Laclau and Mouffe (2001, p vii)

which in the Italy of Gramsci's time most appropriated what Eurocommunism later came to represent" (Boggs, 2002, p. 63).

4.3.2 The nature of 'Marxism' and 'capitalism'

Another point of comparison for Gramsci's ontology and epistemology with post-Marxism is related to the understanding of the dynamics of capitalism in Marxism. Instead of confronting capitalism spreading during the neoliberal era, post-Marxists (i.e. Laclau and Mouffe) dilute the working class and its interests replacing them with identities based on race, sex and religion (Wood, 2016). Wood goes on to argue that, in so doing "post-Marxists surrender to capitalism and ideological mystifications" (Wood, 2016). It becomes harder to fight capitalism without the working class because interests become fragmented. So, capitalists seize the opportunity to 'divide and rule' the masses based on dispersed identities. For example, white working-class members are made to turn against some non-white immigrant workers for 'stealing their jobs', rather than encouraging workers to recognise they are in the structural position.

Thus, Laclau and Mouffe's ambiguous relationship with capitalism poses problems. The inclusion of identity group politics seems to dilute the critique of capitalism by suggesting many sources of oppression are 'extra-economic'. This seems a step too far for Gramsci who remained fiercely anti-capitalist. "Gramsci's concept of civil society was unambiguously intended as a weapon against capitalism, not an accommodation with it...civil society is now in danger of becoming an alibi of capitalism" (Wood, 2016, para 3 – 4). Wood is right to be worried because Laclau and Mouffe do not seem to suggest a strong alternative to destroy capitalism rather than pursuing the goal of

deepening democracy. Gramsci regenerated historical materialism with the non-economic elements with the goal of attaining socialism. Gramsci did not believe in a rigidly caricatured Marxism like that assumed by Laclau and Mouffe. Laclau and Mouffe based Marxism on Kautskian interpretation which reduced Marxism to an inflexible doctrine based on scientism. Gramsci re-invigorated Marxism, whereas Laclau and Mouffe abandoned Marxism, as in Gramsci's analogy like a beaver that tears off its testicles to survive the chase by its hunters.²² In the process, Laclau and Mouffe broke out of the paradigmatic boundaries of historical materialism but they were never successful in taking Gramsci with them because Gramsci remained "deterministic in the last instance" to capitalism. Laclau and Mouffe seem to ignore the possibility that Marxism could be expanded without breaking through the paradigm as though it were subject to a single definition. As Gamble asserts:

One of the strengths of Marxism was that it was instinctively interdisciplinary and sought the most comprehensive and universal explanations. It had no patience with artificial discipline boundaries or with an investigation of trivial and marginal questions. It always wanted the big picture (Gamble, 1999, p. 6)

Gramsci never ceased to find ways to defeat capitalism, which is why he devoted himself to expanding the subjective political elements that would revive an already moribund 'orthodox' Marxism that Gramsci always took to be the mistaken interpretation of Marx in any case.

²² The fable of the beaver: "The beaver, pursued by trappers who want his testicles from which medicinal drugs can be extracted, to save his life tears off his own testicles" Gramsci (1971, p. 223)

4.3.3 The ‘demons’ of Croce in postmodernism and post-Marxism

Finally, another point of discussion on Gramsci’s ontology vis-à-vis post-Marxism is his relationship with Benedetto Croce’s ideas. Gramsci’s Marxism can be located in Croce’s apparent misreading of history – ideas do not transcend history but are embedded in the struggles of real social actors, for Gramsci classes.

Croce detached the superstructure from the base setting it free from all forms of determinism. As a result, some scholars see Croce as the first post-Marxist *avant la lettre* (Thomas, 2006; Morton, 2006) who was a neo-Hegelian idealist, fiercely anti-positivistic (Greaves, 2007). There are so many references to Croce throughout the *Prison Notebooks*. They do not mean that Gramsci followed Croce’s speculative philosophy. However, Gramsci admits that in his younger days he was ‘tendentially Crocean’.

The reason Gramsci continued citing Croce extensively in his notebooks was based on the fact that he had to retrieve a lot of quotes of Marx and Engels either from memory or from Croce’s writings (Hoare and Sperber, 2015, p. 21). Also, “the Crocean language was merely a convenient device to explore some deep issues with epistemology” (Morera, 2000, p. 18). Croce was one of the few thinkers who saw the limitations of applying the positivist method or scientism making his insights into the subjective elements very important for Gramsci’s analysis. However, Gramsci incessantly distanced himself from Croce’s neo-Hegelianism by giving importance to material conditions. This marks a huge difference between Croce’s philosophy and

Gramsci. Also, “The dialectical view of history developed by Gramsci was explicitly cast as a direct criticism of the speculative and idealist philosophy of Croce” (Morton, 2006, p. 45). To think of Gramsci as a Crocean is certainly a mistaken perspective.

The contemporary de-ontological perspective is however similar in some respects to Croceanism. The post-Marxists Laclau and Mouffe relate to Croce’s speculative philosophy with their logic of contingency. For instance, Laclau and Mouffe diminished hegemony to articulation and set it free from any determinants, whereas, Gramsci states that “hegemony is ethico-political, it must also be economic, must necessarily be based on the decisive function exercised by the leading group in the decisive nucleus of economic activity (Gramsci, 1971, p. 161). Hegemony can be used by any dominant group that not only has control of the economy but the institutions that generate consent.

4.4 Paradigm shift and fusion of horizons?

Let us finally revisit the essential question posed throughout – as to whether Gramsci caused a paradigm shift. There were no Marxists and historical materialism before Marx and Engels. Marx in collaboration Engels started from a “pre-paradigm” to paradigm stage of historical materialism by synthesising different theories. A pre-paradigm is when there is “an identifiable subject matter, but few empirical propositions, and little agreement either about the shape of reality or about an agenda of priorities for future work” (Polsby, 1998, p. 202). So many ‘theorists’ will be fighting to establish a functioning paradigm. The subject matter and future agenda of historical materialism included a commitment to the emancipation of the working class

and the attainment of socialism. However, Marx never got to write the book, with the method to attain socialism, so he left readers without a clear grasp of what it entailed, forcing them to re-examine what he meant (Ollman, 2003), but this process for Gramsci is revealed in praxis.

Marx died without leaving behind a well-structured ‘paradigm’ for the communists to use. It is not unusual for the founders of a paradigm to die before it becomes fully developed. Kuhn (1996) observes that a paradigm is at the time of its appearance is “very limited in both scope and precision” (p. 23). Engels was the first to start the “mop-up work” as a life-long friend and co-writer of historical materialism. After, Engels’ death, historical materialism descended into one-sided, non-dialectical and deterministic paradigm through the influence of Karl Kautsky in particular who raged against the voluntarism of Lenin’s Bolshevism.

After the First World War, it was evident that Marxism was in a “crisis” in the Kuhnian sense – the paradigm begins to lose its power to solve or explain the agenda in research (Kuhn 1996 p. 84). During the “crisis”, a paradigm partially resembles the pre-paradigm situation and researchers come in to address the “anomalies” (Kuhn, p. 52, p. 84). When a “crisis” is resolved, it ends up with three outcomes; researchers return to the paradigm, or they suspend the paradigm for the future practitioners to solve or there is a “paradigm shift”. The latter results in the adoption of a new paradigm. A number of Marxists took to task to solve the “anomalies” and arguably the most original of them was Gramsci.

Gramsci was working on the “anomalies” that existed within the historical materialism so that it would be more active in solving the problems Italian communists faced in liberating the working class. Unlike Engels, Gramsci did more than ‘mopping up’ the paradigm, he expanded historical materialism to accommodate subjective elements previously neglected or overlooked. He did not, it would seem, break out of the paradigm. Laclau and Mouffe’s position on Gramsci’s Marxism thus is exaggerated at least to some extent.

The anchoring of Gramsci into historical materialism naturally suggests that there is non-fusion of the historical horizon and present horizon in postmodern form. Gramsci’s ideas do not have a shared understanding of the tenets of postmodernism and post-Marxism. It is highly probable that the publication of the *Prison Notebooks* to the English speaking world in the 1970s affected how Gramsci was received. Gramsci was inserted into de-ontological debates that were gaining impetus at the same time as he was beginning to make inroads in English-speaking academia. He wrote extensively and grappled with similar problems in postmodernism and post-Marxism such as culture, politics, religion, subjectivity, truth, language and history, thus, he gave refreshing analysis to problems faced by Marxists in the neo-liberal era. The over-emphasis on the subjective by Laclau and Mouffe is in its way as one-side dialectically as the vulgar economism Gramsci was against.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

This thesis sets out to investigate Antonio Gramsci's apparent understanding of and contributions to historical materialism. A central theme was to ascertain whether or not Gramsci's contributions to historical materialism made him a precursor of postmodernism and post-Marxism. Different scholars mentioned previously in the introduction and Chapter Four oppose each other when it comes to Gramsci's ontological and epistemological assumptions. This prompted this researcher to reassess Gramsci's ideas to determine their implications and to attempt to add clarity.

The method and methodological frame of reference used to navigate through the thesis was Hans-Georg Gadamer's method of 'fusion of horizon' and Thomas Kuhn's 'paradigm' and 'paradigm shift' respectively. Gadamer's method enabled the researcher to distinguish between the past and the present i.e. Gramsci's historical context and contemporary accounts of postmodernism and post-Marxism and ask whether some correlation is possible. This enabled the researcher to be historically conscious of the prejudices that come from reading a historical text from the standpoint of a later time. The ultimate aim was to test whether or not Gramsci's ideas fuse philosophically and intellectually with postmodernism. This research concluded that there is a very limited possibility of fusion of Gramsci's ideas and postmodernism, specifically post-Marxism. The non-fusion of Gramsci's ideas and contemporary postmodernism indicates moreover that there was no 'paradigm shift'. As such

Gramsci remained anchored to the historical materialist paradigm but considerably expands the meaning of the term.

To show how Gramsci remained anchored in historical materialism, Chapter Two focused on the origins of historical materialism and the subsequently heated disagreements that emerged, inducing Gramsci's critique. The origins of historical materialism were traced from Karl Marx's dissatisfaction with the Young Hegelians over the role of ideas, as well as Feuerbach's ideas on materiality. Marx synthesised the two ideas to create the foundation of historical materialism – material conception of history. Together with Fredrick Engels, Marx continuously revised the concept of historical materialism by critiquing and reformulating theories from French socialism and British Economics. The cause was to enhance the explanatory power and therein to liberate the working class from the rapacious effects of capitalism. Marx died without leaving a complete manual with the formula and precisely defined concepts that the working class would need. It posed so many challenges to the heirs of Marxism who had to codify it for the growing membership of Marxist inspired political parties. "Marx's words are like bats. One can see in them both birds and mice" (Pareto, 1902, as cited in, Ollman, 2003, p. 4).

Engels tried to accomplish the enormous task of 'codifying' Marxism but he did not see it through. The successors of Engels, especially Karl Kautsky reduced Marxism to economic determinism in their attempt to make Marxism more 'scientific', commensurate with positivistic methods in natural sciences that were dominant at the

time in Europe. This led to false conclusions, most notably that capitalism will die a 'natural death' as countries increasingly industrialised. After World War One, Marxism faced a crisis because of the fatalistic, non-dialectical version of historical materialism. One of the active revolutionaries and scholars of Marxism, Gramsci devoted his time to challenge the economic deterministic version of historical materialism which he saw as politically passive. He saw that ideology and culture are also powerful formative forces of history other than the economy in determining the political state as the regulating mechanism of the social economy.

Gramsci went on to expand the space and role occupied by cultural, political, social factors in Marxism by drawing from the ideas of, amongst other people, Italian philosophers Machiavelli and Benedetto Croce and retrieving the dormant ideas in Marx's writings such as the *Theses on Feuerbach*. Chapter Three focused on the highly innovative concepts Gramsci introduced into the Marxist vocabulary such as hegemony, intellectual leadership and the 'war of position'. These were intended to awaken the working class, which had under poor leadership, let the moment for a revolution pass, enabling capitalism to thrive in the 'West'. Most importantly, the concepts also were intended to be applied ultimately positively to win the revolution by creating a counter-hegemonic challenge to capitalist domination. Gramsci consistently showed how these subjective elements could also operate objectively in impacting on the economy. That is to say, base and superstructure are given to reciprocate dialectically with inter-changing subject-object. But there remained for Gramsci a dialectical relationship – he eschewed all 'this-sidedness', either economism

or ideologism. However, this did not stop some scholars (i.e. Laclau and Mouffe) from claiming that Gramsci's ideas are de-ontological – that is to say, he was instrumental in launching a determinant-free conception of ideology and the political.

Chapter Four explained the debates surrounding Gramsci's ontological position and epistemological assumptions. There is no doubt Gramsci, “grappled with same questions of cultural politics, language and meaning, science and objectivity, power and truth, the critique of the Enlightenment, social diversity, and so forth” that dominate postmodernism (Morera, 2000, p. 16). However, Gramsci constantly referred to the economy ‘in the last instance’. For example, when he critiqued *A Preface to the Critique of the Political Economy*, he acknowledges the role of the economy on setting the pre-conditions but he felt Marx had not elaborated on the ‘moment of crisis’ where “men become conscious to fight” to fight capitalism. For example, one would need to only ask, in his ‘war of position’ who precisely is doing the fighting? It is predominantly a struggle between opposed intellectuals who are embodiments of the class positions.

All of that seemed to be downplayed by Laclau and Mouffe who saw an opportunity to not only reformulate historical materialism but break out of it altogether using Gramsci's ideas as a precursor to postmodernism. Albeit addressing to neo-Gramscians in *International Relations*, Saurin (2008) is right to posit that Gramsci gave erstwhile Marxists hope when they were losing ground due to the crisis of Marxism in last quarter of the twentieth century but his concepts have been purged in the process (p. 24 – 6).

Laclau and Mouffe use Gramsci, in the same way, to address the crisis in Marxism but they strip him away from his historical context and his apparent understanding of Marxism.

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