Marxisms in the 21st Century

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Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937), one of the most original Marxist thinkers of the twentieth century, was imprisoned by Benito Mussolini’s regime in 1926 for his radical ideas and his leadership of the Italian Communist Party. He began writing his highly influential *Prison Notebooks* in 1929, the year the New York Stock Exchange crashed and capitalism entered the ‘Great Depression’. A central aspect of the problematic informing the *Prison Notebooks* is the ability of capitalism to reproduce itself through ruling-class strategies. At the same time, Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks* pondered how to elaborate a politics capable of transforming capitalism without degenerating into revolutionary voluntarism on the one hand, and economic determinism on the other. Today the world is living through the ‘Great Depression’ of the twenty-first century. In this context, drawing on Gramsci’s theoretical corpus critically is extremely important to provide insight into the nature of the hegemonic crisis of capital; how ruling classes are responding to this crisis and how struggles for alternatives can be waged.

I begin this chapter by clarifying which Gramscian Marxism has to be transnationalised. This is important, given that Gramsci’s own Marxism has been overlaid and in some senses obscured by varied interpretations, readings and sometimes abuses. Within twentieth-century Marxism, Gramsci has been
reduced to a Western Marxist, an Italian Marxist–Leninist and even a Euro-communist social democrat. First, I reconnect with the universal and critical core of Gramsci’s own historical materialism. It is this historical materialism that is central to the project of transnationalising Gramscian Marxism in the twenty-first century. Second, I locate and trace how Gramsci’s historical materialism has been brought into international relations and the global political economy. For the greater part of the twentieth century, Gramsci’s Marxism has been considered irrelevant to understanding the expansionary tendencies and dynamics of capitalism. However, this has changed as the twentieth-century journey of Gramsci’s Marxism inspired the emergence of a neo-Gramscian outgrowth. This transnationalising current of Gramsci’s Marxism has challenged the mainstream orthodoxies of twentieth-century Marxism in terms of understanding the international dimension of capitalism.

To a large extent the rise of neo-Gramscian perspectives has engendered a crucial development ensuring Gramsci’s Marxism a place in critical analyses of global capitalism and contributing to transformative politics. While this is both a novel and a creative theoretical outpouring, the neo-Gramscian moment is far from complete in terms of transnationalising Gramscian Marxism. This project has come into its own only over the past two decades and mainly in the global North. Although important ground has been covered within a neo-Gramscian framework, there are various unexplored and inadequately developed themes which limit the extent to which Gramscian Marxism is transnationalised in the twenty-first century. In this chapter I specify such themes as a means of deepening the efforts to transnationalise Gramscian Marxism through a South-to-North axis and through a broader research agenda.

RETURNING TO GRAMSCI’S HISTORICAL MATERIALISM

Marxism and its ideological framing is itself a battleground. Engagements with Gramsci’s thought have also not escaped this experience. The reception of Gramsci’s theoretical framework, mainly his *Prison Notebooks*, has produced important interpretations, elaborations and appropriations throughout the twentieth century. In some ways the fragmentary and unfinished nature of the *Notebooks* lent themselves to various readings. Many of these readings have produced intersubjective understandings of how to understand and ‘apply Gramsci’, giving us certain dominant modes of approaching Gramsci’s
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Moreover, these understandings have diffused as common sense in the social sciences, in political movements and amongst activists. In this regard, most of Gramscian-inspired theorising from the twentieth century represents Gramsci’s Marxism as Western Marxism or a contribution to Italian political thought, particularly Italian Marxism.

The concept of Western Marxism appears in Perry Anderson’s (1976) work, mainly to refer to both a generational and geographic shift in Marxist theoretical work. His perspective on the historical development of Western Marxism suggests that it is both generationally distinct from the classical Marxism of the nineteenth century, and was geographically based outside of the Soviet Union after World War I, especially in the West. Besides this formal setting of Western Marxism he goes on to argue that its defining feature, particularly after World War II, was the break between theory and a mass-based class practice. This shift represented a defeated Marxism, but Anderson recognises that this shift was not a spontaneous or teleological inevitability. Interestingly, Anderson highlights that the only exception within the Western Marxist tradition was Gramsci who, shaped by his experience of organising and theorising the Turin factory council movement (1919–1920) and leading the Italian Communist Party (1924–1926), maintained an organic link between theory and practice but also grappled with central questions of historical materialism as it related to socialist advance (Anderson 1976: 45).

The elaboration of Gramsci’s place in Western Marxism does not end with Anderson. In other characterisations of Western Marxism, Gramsci’s Marxism is reduced to a philosophical tradition, with Georg Lukács’s emphasis on a Hegelianised Marxism and its emphasis on ‘totality’ defining the tradition. Gramsci is placed within this Western philosophical tradition in a rather superficial way. While Gramsci shared with Lukács and Karl Korsch a critique of determinism in sovietised Marxism, and a concern for the need to create a role for collective social agency in history and the importance of superstructures, this did not mean that Gramsci was preoccupied with giving his Marxism a Hegelian philosophic cast (Merquior 1986: 97). On the contrary, one of Gramsci’s main preoccupations in the Prison Notebooks is a critique of Italy’s foremost neo-Hegelian philosopher, Benedetto Croce, that focuses on the liberal infusions of his thought and its hold over Italian society. This does not mean that Gramsci dismissed philosophy, however. Central in his approach to Marxism as a ‘philosophy of praxis’, is placing the unity of theory and practice onto another terrain. Gramsci’s intention was not to substitute politics
for philosophy, but rather, to recognise that Marxism, with its intellectual resources, could constitute a new civilisation. This opens up an original and new track for philosophy which finds its expression through being grounded in struggle. In short, and for Fabio Frosini (2009: 678), the Prison Notebooks is not a book on philosophy and neither should it be read as such, but it does challenge us to think in a new way about philosophy and to think of philosophy as a ‘philosophy-politics’.

In addition to placing Gramsci within Western Marxism, there have also been attempts to place him within an Italian tradition. To be sure, Gramsci’s Marxism has a distinct Italian flavour about it, given that it grows out of an Italian context. For example, its Italianness is expressed through Gramsci’s attempts to build on the work of Antonio Labriola (one of Italy’s foremost Marxist thinkers), his engagements with other influential Italian thinkers (for example Niccolò Machiavelli and Croce) and the Italian historical examples he works with (the Risorgimento or North–South question). The Italian Communist Party (PCI) reinforced this in two ways. First, it constructed an iconic place for Gramsci both amongst the Italian left and in Italian society. He was haloed and treated as a patron saint of an Italianised Marxism–Leninism. For Palmiro Togliatti, the leader of the PCI after World War II, any attempts to view Gramsci as an original thinker were dismissed (Femia 1981: 10–11). Togliatti’s publication of the Prison Notebooks as six thematic volumes, between 1948 and 1951, also presented Gramsci’s thought as finished and systematic. For Frosini (2009: 671–672) this meant the Prison Notebooks could not be read diachronically as a provisional work that was in progress, open-ended and inviting further research. Essentially, Gramsci was preserved and portrayed as an unreconstructed Marxist–Leninist who was merely translating the Leninist model into Italian circumstances. Many interpretations of Gramsci emanating from the PCI maintained this line even after Togliatti’s passing. Moreover, for the PCI, Gramsci was hailed as the theorist of ‘revolution in the West’ from the 1960s onwards, which laid the basis for appropriating Gramsci as the ideologue of Eurocommunism. Gramsci was evoked to legitimate this ideological current and reduced to being the theorist of class compromise and a social democratic project (Simon 2007: 90).

Readings of Gramsci as theorist of a defeated Western Marxism, a Western philosophical Marxism, a staunch Italian Marxist–Leninist or a reformist social democrat lock us into particular understandings of Gramsci. These instrumentalised understandings came to the fore post-Gramsci. While there may
be merits to each of these approaches, they have also become orthodoxies and have circumscribed Gramsci in a manner that takes us away from appreciating the universality and critical edge of his historical materialism. In the twenty-first century our task is to reclaim and return to the universal core in Gramsci’s historical materialism. This has to be done in two steps. First, by reading Gramsci through Gramsci. This method of approaching Gramsci’s thought has its most sophisticated expression in the work of Adam Morton (2007). For Morton, such an approach to Gramsci’s thought is a crucial corrective to the ‘austere historicism’ which reduces Gramsci to an Italian thinker (or for that matter a Western Marxist). While Gramsci used historical examples, mainly Italian, to illustrate the meanings of his concepts, this does not mean that Gramsci was seized with an Italian problematic. Morton overcomes this demand to place Gramsci narrowly in an Italian context (or a Western context) and instead keeps his historical materialism open to generate new meanings in the present by understanding Gramsci through Gramsci.

To summarise Morton’s (2007: 15–36) conception of understanding Gramsci through Gramsci, he gleans from Gramsci’s pre-prison and prison writings the following guidelines about appreciating the relevance of historical thought in the present. First, it is important to ‘search for the leitmotiv, the rhythm of thought, more important than single, isolated quotations’ of a thinker (20). The methodological procedure provided by Gramsci in this regard is a detailed biography of the thinker and an exposition in chronological order of all the works of such a thinker. Second, Gramsci, in his readings of Georges Sorel and Dante, refused to argue that the interpretation of a text was limitless, ‘that any reading is valid as any other’. On the contrary Gramsci’s methodological advice is to return to the text to establish what was the ‘real meat’. Third, the history of ideas has to be understood in terms of the connection between past and present. For Gramsci the past was always part of the present. While ideas are the product of social relations, this does not mean that ideas cannot outlive a historical context. Fourth, according to Gramsci’s ‘philosophy of praxis’, the criteria for the relevance of ideas in the present relate to how an idea assists with clarifying an existing, practical, political problem and the extent to which these ideas become part of mass consciousness. In short, Morton shows that it is possible, through Gramsci’s own guidelines, to approach ideas through an absolute historicism which places Gramsci’s ideas ‘in context but also beyond’. This does not mean that Gramsci’s ideas and theoretical concepts are trans-historical but rather, that thinking with Gramsci in new circumstances entails
further research and a recognition of his limitations. In others words, reading and understanding Gramsci’s concepts through his own absolute historicism also entails going beyond Gramsci.

A further crucial move to take us back to the core of Gramsci’s thought is to think in a Gramscian way about historical materialism and social reality. While Gramsci accepted Karl Marx’s critique of capitalism and his dialectical understanding of historical change, Gramsci also emphasised the need for historical materialism to be unencumbered by dogmatic, voluntarist and mechanical understandings of history. In this regard, other dimensions of Gramsci’s historicism are crucial. First, such a historicism rejects economism, that is, an understanding that history is made only by the ‘economic last instance’ or fluxes in economic structures. This understanding liberates Marx’s ‘base-superstructure’ metaphor from a deterministic straightjacket and brings to the fore a role for politics, culture and ideology in shaping history.1 Second, and as corollary to the previous point, Gramsci rejected the positivist and law-like approach to understanding capitalism. This has been explicated with reference to Gramsci’s critique of Nikolai Bhukarin’s attempt to reduce historical materialism to a structurally determined schema which negates a role for consciousness and social agency.2

At the same time, Gramsci’s historicism in his Prison Notebooks affirmed three important aspects: (i) transience; (ii) historical necessity; and (iii) a dialectical variant of philosophical realism.3 First, transience refers to the social construction of society and its ever-changing character. Nothing is natural or eternal and there is a ‘historicity’ about all social phenomena: from states, to class structures, to philosophy, even to capitalism itself. Such a historicised understanding assists in understanding what is old and what is new. Second, historical necessity refers to collective agency as happening ‘within the limits of the possible’. These limits (for example, ideas, consciousness, institutions, power relations) are ‘not fixed or immutable’ but exist within social structures that are subject to the dialectic of historical change: contradiction. Ultimately while social action is shaped and conditioned by social structures, these structures are also transformed by such action. The third element of ‘philosophical realism’ in Gramsci’s historicism refers to how ideas are implicated in and dialectically part of the historical process. This refers to a process of knowledge production which is also open-ended and continuous but integral to the historical process. Philosophy in this context emerges from class struggle and is part of a transformative understanding of social change.

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In *Capital* Marx expressed his belief that the self-expanding value of capital meant that it would extend beyond national spaces to secure profits. This insight about capitalist accumulation is developed into theories of imperialism by second-generation Marxists such as Karl Kautsky, Rudolf Hilferding, Bukharin, Rosa Luxemburg and Vladimir Lenin. Amongst these Marxist conceptions of imperialism, three contentious issues come to the fore. First, whether the expansion of capitalism was driven by underconsumption or overproduction or both. Second, whether monopoly capitalism was the root cause of inter-imperialist rivalry or rather the end of such rivalry amongst the advanced capitalist countries. Third, whether monopoly capitalism meant inter-capitalist war and revolution or rather, domination of poor countries.

In the twentieth century Lenin’s understanding of imperialism and neo-Marxist world-systems theory came to dominate understandings of how the expansionary tendencies of capitalism needed to be understood. For Lenin (1977) imperialism was neither fleeting nor was it a policy that could be changed; rather, it was an expression of an inevitable consequence of monopoly capitalism. With monopoly capitalism, inter-capitalist rivalry ensued and ultimately inter-capitalist war. This understanding of inter-imperialist rivalry and war amongst capitalist countries provided the basis for a political conclusion to overthrow the capitalist system through revolution. It is this understanding of revolution that guided Lenin and his Bolshevik party in 1917 Russia while World War I was being fought. As a result, Lenin’s conception of imperialism has been instrumentalised and reified as the basis of revolutionary Marxism. It has become an orthodoxy but as a lens through which to understand contemporary capitalism and its dynamics, it is extremely inadequate. With his emphasis on monopoly capitalism being the ‘highest stage of development’, Lenin’s conception of imperialism is a teleological reading of capitalist development in that it fails to appreciate the dynamics of transnational class formation, the emergence of global capitalist rule through transnational historical bloc formation and new mechanisms of imperial control and discipline.

From another theoretical tradition within Marxism, world-systems theory expressed the fundamental contradiction of contemporary capitalism as being between the rich North and the poor South (also known as centres and peripheries). This world system has its origins within mercantile capitalism, *circa* the sixteenth century, which evolved different regimes of labour control and a
hierarchy of states corresponding to these regimes of labour control (Wallerstein 1974). The core, semi-peripheries and peripheries engender states that enable global accumulation and unequal exchange. Through unequal exchange a polarising logic dominates centre–periphery relations, which explains underdevelopment. Hegemonic states with material capacities (political, military and economic) dominate such a world system. Today world-systems theory is at the cutting edge of debates about the decline of the US hegemon and the rise of China. However, while world-systems theory has a lot to offer in terms of contemporary analysis of global capitalism, it is also plagued by its own limitations. Beyond its fixation with hegemonic cycles and a ‘neo-Smithian definition of capitalism’ grounded in a world market, it is not able to appreciate the role of struggles and class conflicts as the basis for social change.

For the greater part of the twentieth century classic theories of imperialism (such as Lenin’s) and world-systems theory provided common-sense understandings of the international relations of global capitalism, both in the academy and beyond. However, with the reception of Gramsci’s work in the English-speaking West in the early 1970s and the evoking of transnational relations to explain how US capitalism has penetrated and dominated post-war western European capitalism, the ground was set for bringing Gramsci’s Marxism into international relations (Overbeek 2000). This has given rise to a neo-Gramscian transnational historical materialism, which draws on Gramsci’s conceptual framework but attempts to understand the dynamics and structures of global, rather than simply national capitalism. This is a new development in terms of transnationalising Gramsci’s Marxism. At the same time, such an approach is further characterised by its openness and willingness to go beyond Gramsci’s thought in trying to understand contemporary global capitalism. In many ways, this non-dogmatic approach draws on other critical readings of Gramsci and critical theoretical approaches to explain global capitalism (discussed in the next section in this chapter).

THE RISE OF NEO-GRAMSCIAN TRANSNATIONAL HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

While neo-Gramscians have been designated as belonging to a school of thought by some, this is not the self-understanding that prevails amongst these scholars. Neo-Gramscian scholars draw on Gramsci’s Marxism in different ways. They
either draw on Gramsci selectively or as part of elaborating a new framework to understand the global political economy of contemporary capitalism. One of the most influential neo-Gramscians, Robert Cox, falls into the latter camp. He has laid the foundations for a neo-Gramscian transnational historical materialism that applies Gramsci to the international while going beyond Gramsci and drawing on other critical theoretical sources. Cox’s work is a crucial bridge between the ‘nationally bounded’ Gramsci and a transnationalised Gramsci. Cox opens the way to bring Gramsci into international relations and global political economy by first challenging mainstream international relations theory as being problem-solving theory rather than critical theory. According to Cox (1995) neo-Gramscian theory is critical theory, which attempts to understand the origins of historical structures and highlights the potential for structural change. It attempts to understand the intersubjective meanings and institutions that have emerged from collective human experience as a response to particular realities. Hence political economy, in his view, is a version of critical theory that contrasts with problem-solving theory, which focuses on ‘order’ and ‘management’ within existing structures; the latter takes the status quo for granted. In short, Cox argues that theory is for someone and for some purpose. Moreover, harnessing Cox’s method of historicism calls into question the taken-for-granted aspects of neo-realist international relations: the state as the primary actor of international relations and the aggregation of a ‘national interest’ through the state. Through a Coxian approach the state is understood as the outward expression of a historically constituted bloc of forces and is contested by domestic and external social forces. Cox (1994) even suggests that the state is a ‘transmission belt’ for a policy consensus of transnational hegemonic social forces and institutions.

A second crucial step by Cox has been to systematise and elaborate a framework to take Gramsci into international relations. In this regard he draws on and goes beyond Gramsci’s historical materialism, mapping a more complex frame to understand power dynamics in relation to hegemony and world order, social relations of force and a historical understanding of structure-agency dynamics within global uneven development. Cox’s ontology of the international dimension of capitalism begins with distinguishing modes of social relations of production and the kinds of social forces engendered by such patterns plus state forms (state-society complexes) and world order. These three bases of historical structure have a reciprocal interaction. The configuration of forces shaping such structures are constituted by capabilities (various material resources such as technology and military capabilities), ideational structures
(collective images and intersubjective understandings of the world) and institutions (state and non-state, made up of capabilities and ideas). To Cox this ensemble of historical structures and forces is the basis for understanding hegemony and its transformation in the world order.

Cox’s work has been critiqued as either a kind of ‘Weberian pluralism’ or on the basis that his understanding of the state in the neoliberal world order underestimates the state’s role in shaping this order (Dufour 2009: 460). Despite these critiques, Cox’s foundational work has been built on and taken further by other neo-Gramscians,7 which has provided a diversity of perspectives and different emphases that bring out the link between transnational historical materialism and the struggle for hegemony within the world order. In this elaboration, the critiques of Cox have also been addressed.

KEY THEMES OF NEO-GRAMSCIAN PERSPECTIVES

There are three critical organising themes in neo-Gramscian theorising: global restructuring of capitalism, transnational class forces and transnational neoliberalism and its fit with the rule of transnational capital. I will address each theme below.

Global restructuring of capitalism

For neo-Gramscians the expansionary tendencies of capitalism are not governed by theological-like laws. Instead, these tendencies have to be explained. Rather than accepting the globalisation narrative and its economic determinism there has been a rigorous attempt to understand change within global capitalism and world order. This has entailed understanding historical change in terms of the event, the conjuncture and the longue durée (Gill 2003: 41–44). Change has been understood at different levels and through how it has impacted on historical structures. According to Stephen Gill (1994b: 170) this is a process shaped by a dialectic of disintegration/reintegration in what he describes as ‘patterned disorder’. This means social, economic and political structures of the world order are being transformed or are breaking down but the new structures are only beginning to become identifiable.

Moreover, instead of embracing globalisation discourse, neo-Gramscians have historicised and placed it in the context of the accumulation crisis of the 1970s. Globalisation in this context has been understood as a response to this
crisis. It is about restructuring capitalism through a new hegemonic ‘concept of control’ (Overbeek 1993). Such a concept of control has provided an ideational convergence that has led to globalising post-Fordist relations of production, financial markets and liberalised trade. In this global process of restructuring capitalist historical blocs, state forms, state–civil society relations and international relations have been remade. In other words, a conjunctural project has emerged which expresses a class strategy to facilitate the rule of capital and discipline labour. This capitalist strategy has ensured that the interests of the dominant class fraction become the general interests at a societal level; it has propagated an ideological outlook through intersubjective understandings and world-order institutions.

For Gill (2003: 116–138), beyond a new class consensus for a hegemonic project shaping the restructuring of global capitalism over the past three decades, there has also been a deeper historical shift taking place. This shift goes to the systemic level, or the longue durée, in that capitalism has been remaking itself in civilisational terms. Essentially, the global restructuring of capitalism has led to the emergence of a ‘global market civilisation’ which is premised on possessive individualism and competition. In other words, the world view of transnational capital has articulated with and become part of the common sense of everyday life such that commodification of social relations, the socialisation of private risk and the ‘civilising role of financial markets’ have become naturalised.

Transnational class forces

The centrality of class analysis within social science has generally been contested by postmodernism’s search for non-universalising categories and new subject identities as the basis of understanding social change. This has coincided with and feeds into the neoliberal ideological onslaught which is best expressed in Margaret Thatcher’s well-known declaration in the 1980s that ‘society is dead’; the subject of neoliberal society is merely the greedy and possessive individual with a fetish for commodities. However, for neo-Gramscian perspectives the global restructuring of capitalism cannot be understood without the centrality of class analysis, particularly transnational class analysis. According to Bastiaan van Apeldoorn (2002: 21–22) late twentieth-century Marxist class analysis tended to polarise between two extremes. At the one extreme, stood a Poulantzian-inspired structural approach to class in which class was not prior to structure but was merely an expression of structure. Put differently, there was a structural over-determinism that accounted for class agency; class agency was ‘mechanically
determined’ by structure. At the other extreme, E.P. Thompson rejected structure and focused on class as a historically constituted category. It was necessary to historicise class formation in order to appreciate the social agency of class.

Drawing on Gramsci, neo-Gramscian theorists have brought to the fore a structure-agency understanding of transnational class analysis. Such a position appreciates the structural location of transnational capital within globalised production, financial and trade structures. However, this in itself does not constitute a transnational capitalist class; ultimately, such a class has to be constituted politically and ideologically. For Gramsci, capitalist class forces are incomplete in their formation unless they transcend corporate and sectoral consciousness and ultimately achieve a political consciousness about how their interests articulate with the overall direction of society. Such an approach recognises the limits of class location as not necessarily translating into class position. An understanding of the structural and agential nature of a transnational capitalist class has engendered three crucial dimensions to neo-Gramscian transnational class analysis.

The first dimension relates to appreciating the fractionation of the transnational capitalist class. Due to competition, capital is not necessarily disposed to find common perspectives.

However, to understand the agency of transnational capital in this context, neo-Gramscian perspectives engage fractionation of capital, at an abstract and at a concrete level. For Henk Overbeek (2000) and Kees van der Pijl (1984 and 1998), transnational class formation has to be located within Marx’s scheme in which the functional forms of capital are determined within the overall reproductive circuit of capital. Moving from the abstract forms of money capital and productive capital to more concrete forms such as merchant houses, financial firms and industry, this approach emphasises how capital fractions exist at an abstract level and how these fractions constitute transnational capital more concretely; the shift from the abstract to the concrete does not mean class formation is automatic. Instead, the constitution of capital fractions at a concrete level also brings in a role for historicising class formation as it relates to politics and ideology. Van der Pijl (1984) demonstrates this empirically in his study on the formation of an Atlantic ruling class, demonstrating how capital fractions formed and linked in particular circuits of accumulation. At the same time, these fractions constitute and contest the direction of historical blocs as part of the making of an Atlantic ruling class. In this sense, hegemonic concepts of control are negotiated, bargained and articulated under the leadership of a particular class fraction. The outcome determines the direction of the historical
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bloc in terms of accumulation models, state forms, state–civil society relations and international relations.

A second dimension regarding transnational class analysis is the nature of transnational class power. For Gill and David Law (1988: 84–95) a transnational capitalist class and its managerial cadre emerges through the restructuring of global capitalism. As production relations transnationalise, the structural and direct power of capital is reconstituted. Structural power refers to the mobility of capital, for example, and how this constrains the nation state. Footloose and mobile capital is able to play off states, push regulatory standards downwards and ensure the risk to capital prevails even over democratic imperatives. The latter expresses itself through ‘international and domestic business climates’ which are a mechanism to articulate limits and functions for states. Direct power refers to networks of influence and lobbying to advance the interests of transnational capital.

A third dimension of transnational class analysis refers to the national versus transnational level and the ideological disposition of transnationalising capitalist classes. Van Apeldoorn (2002: 29–30) highlights how productive fractions of capital, while generally oriented to national protection, tend to transcend this in the concrete process of being transnationalised. Increasingly the degree and depth of the transnationalisation of an economy shifts the outlook of productive capital towards economic liberalism. This increasing disembeddedness and ideological shift prompts a national oriented productive/industrial capital to embrace policies that challenge national protection.

Transnational neoliberalism and the rule of transnational capital

For neo-Gramscians global restructuring of capitalism led by transnational capital has been linked to neoliberalism and how transnational capital rules the current world order. This prompts an attempt to understand how historical blocs are constituted in national spaces and how this links to other state–civil society complexes to reproduce a form of class rule. Following Gramsci, hegemony is understood as a form of class rule in which leadership is based on consent rather than naked coercion. For neo-Gramscians hegemony has to be rooted in a national context as the basis for projecting it outward into the realm of international relations. Mark Rupert (1995) in his study of US hegemony shows how it has its roots in relations of production, state–society complexes and in ideational structures. In the context of the Pax Americana after World War II, a national hegemony grounded in Fordist relations of production, a
welfarist state and ‘embedded liberalism’ provided the basis for projecting US hegemony externally. In other words, national hegemony became the necessary condition for projecting a US global hegemony.

However, with the global restructuring of capitalism over the past three decades a new concept of control has come to the fore: transnational neoliberalism. Such a concept of control is the world view of transnational capital, and is founded on a ‘market civilisation’ – a market-based accumulation model – and it determines new requirements for the functions of state power. This concept of control has provided the basis for a new class consensus and transnational capitalist class project in which the transnational fraction of finance capital has prevailed. This has provided a new basis for renewing US hegemony, grounded in production relations, state forms and a new balance between coercion and consent. Besides explaining neoliberalism as part of reproducing global hegemony, neo-Gramscian perspectives have traced the origins of transnational neoliberalism and how it works.

In the context of the heartlands of capitalism and particularly European monetary integration, neoliberalism has been characterised as a new disciplinary constitutionalism. For Gill (2001) this is about insulating parts of the state from mass scrutiny and democratic accountability. It is about hollowing out democracy, while at the same time, ensuring state functions are changed to meet the requirements of transnational capital. In the peripheries of capitalism and given uneven development, neoliberalism has been embedded in a manner that reproduces the rule of transnational capital through ‘passive revolutions’ (Morton 2007). Such forms of non-hegemonic rule from above have also demonstrated how the internalising of neoliberalism in specific contexts takes on a national character and articulation. In other words, neo-Gramscian perspectives have gone beyond generic or abstract understandings of neoliberalisation and have attempted to analyse concrete ways in which transnational class rule is reproduced through neoliberalisation. This is developed further below.

UNDERSTANDING POST-APARTHEID SOUTH AFRICA AS A ‘PASSIVE REVOLUTION’

For Gramsci, in the Prison Notebooks, the concept of passive revolution refers to a form of politics in which there is a ‘revolution without revolution’; it is a non-hegemonic form of bourgeois class rule. There are three crucial dimensions
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defining the politics of passive revolution. First, it is primarily a politics of social change led from above with a conscious effort to limit mass initiative and subaltern hegemony. Passive revolution exists in a context in which there is a stalemate in the relations of force; a thorough social revolution has not occurred in which bourgeois hegemony can be established and economic structures developed on these lines. The form and role of the state constituted in this process is determining in this regard. For Gramsci (1998: 246–274), the form and roles of the state are not just determined by internal forces but also by international influences. Ultimately the state form and the social relations that constitute it advance a restoration of power relations determined by dominant class and social forces; power relations are not reconstituted substantively but rather, dominant power relations are reproduced. Second, passive revolution is about gradual or ‘molecular transformation’ which does not seek to transform the social order. Various ideological concepts of control are articulated to suggest that a universal project of social transformation is underway, involving a broad base of class interests, but yet the content of reforms merely meets the needs and requirements of dominant class and social forces; some concessions are made to the subaltern. Third, through passive revolution the modification of economic structures engenders capitalist social relations that produce either a ‘bastardised capitalism’ (marriage of pre-capitalist and capitalist structures) or variants of state capitalism. These historical choices, which are malformed copies of capitalist development but reflecting advances of capitalist modernity, eclipse more radical possibilities for social transformation and are underpinned by more degenerate authoritarian political forms like ‘Caesarism’ (rule by a strong political personality or even a corrupt parliament) and trasformismo. Trasformismo refers to the co-option of leaders and elements of subordinate groups in order to pacify, neutralise and tame such forces. It is about ensuring that a working-class-based opposition does not emerge. In these senses, passive revolution is a form of politics that exists between consent and coercion; it is ‘corruption-fraud’; it is a politics aimed at containing the working class and subaltern social forces. It is not a politics for the working class.

Gramsci’s concept of ‘passive revolution’ derives from two important principles (1998: 106–107):

1. That no social formation disappears as long as the productive forces which have developed within it still find room for further forward movement.
2. That a society does not set itself tasks for whose solution the necessary conditions have not already been incubated.
As a ‘criteria of interpretation’ (or analytical concept), passive revolution is a complex concept which should not be understood fatalistically or teleologically, but rather, should find its meaning in historical contexts of class and social struggle. In the Prison Notebooks, Gramsci utilises various historical analogies to explicate the concept and develop a theory of passive revolution in which state formation, advances of capitalist modernity in the context of uneven capitalist development and international forces are linked. There are three crucial historical analogies utilised. First, for Gramsci the 1789 moment of the French Revolution expressed the narrow and self-interested set of demands of the bourgeoisie. Hence, the Jacobins (1792–1794) represented the apogee of the bourgeois revolution in France. Their revolutionary dictatorship succeeded in achieving a ‘national popular’ character through developing an alliance in which the bourgeoisie had to make sacrifices, landed estates had to be broken up so that land could be given to the peasantry and a bourgeois state had to be constituted as an expression of the French nation. While for Gramsci the Jacobins represented the most radical expression of bourgeois hegemony, this was a limited class hegemony that remained on ‘bourgeois ground’. This was expressed through crackdowns on workers’ rights of assembly and limits on workers’ wages in order to control inflation. The importance of Jacobin hegemony is used by Gramsci to highlight the limits of the broader historical pattern of bourgeois rule that unfolded in Europe up to 1870. In terms of ‘temperament’ and ‘content’ all subsequent forms of bourgeois rule were ‘passive revolutions’, but they did not achieve the radical social transformation of Jacobin bourgeois hegemony and were moments of reform-based ‘restoration-revolution’; aristocratic and feudal elites continued to thrive as Western societies transitioned to capitalism.

Second, and as a corollary to the previous point, in the nineteenth century the emergence of the unified Italian state under the leadership of the bourgeoisie did not go as far as the French Revolution (despite feeling the threat of its long historical march since 1789 and the defeat of the working class in 1848). The Risorgimento, as it was called, led to a form of state in which an alliance of the industrial bourgeoisie in the north and the landlords in the south prevailed. While there were some benefits provided to the petite bourgeoisie in the state bureaucracy and a centralised government established with limited suffrage, the lack of widespread popular participation defined the ‘passive’ character of this ‘passive revolution’.

Third, with the emergence of fascism in Europe, Italy did not escape its influence. Gramsci characterised fascism as a ‘passive revolution’. Fascism in
Italy attempted to introduce the advanced industrial practices of American capitalism through corporatist arrangements, underpinned by a broad alliance of industrial capitalists, workers and with a primary role for the petite bourgeoisie. This class alliance co-opted and neutralised the working class through ‘corporativism’ which gave it a ‘passive’ character. Its ‘revolution’ character derived from two dimensions: the shattering of a weak liberal order and its transformation of the economic structure, through moderate steps, from a competitive economy to a semi-planned economy.

For neo-Gramscians it is crucial to go beyond the literal historical analogies used by Gramsci to explicate his concept of passive revolution so as to grasp the rhythm of his thought and historical method (discussed above). With this in hand, the concept of passive revolution can be deployed in contemporary historical contexts to understand the global restructuring of capitalism, neoliberalisation and state formation. This is about locating passive revolution in the context of transnational relations and uneven capitalist development. It is about understanding how neoliberal globalisation, as a form of transnational class rule, prevails over national states, state–civil society complexes and accumulation models. In the following section I utilise a neo-Gramscian approach to initiate another way of thinking about post-apartheid South Africa’s embrace of global neoliberal restructuring. I suggest that this is about reproducing a form of transnational capitalist class rule at the expense of advancing a working-class-led popular democratic and hegemonic transformation project. I argue that neoliberal post-apartheid South Africa engendered a passive revolution, a form of non-hegemonic transnational capitalist class rule.

This is not a fully fledged analysis, but rather a thought experiment of how a neo-Gramscian approach can be utilised to understand and contest existing explanations of South Africa’s much-vaunted transition to democracy and global capitalism. The starting point for this exercise is an engagement with a rival interpretation of post-apartheid South Africa which ostensibly explains contemporary South Africa as an expression of hegemonic politics. Thereafter there is an attempt to identify the key aspects characterising South Africa’s embrace of global capitalist restructuring as the making of a ‘passive revolution’.

Rival interpretations of post-apartheid South Africa’s transition
Hein Marais’s *South Africa Pushed to the Limit – The Political Economy of Change* (2011) provides an analysis of South Africa’s transition from above. It
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is a rigorous take on historical shifts, policy agendas and strategic choices that have come to the fore to define post-apartheid development. Thus it provides a comprehensive overview of the macro political-economy picture and a useful policy scan of crucial challenges for and limits of the African National Congress (ANC) rule. However, a key claim and assertion of this book is that post-apartheid South Africa’s political economy is explained as the ANC’s ‘hegemonic work in progress’. This intervention in the debate about post-apartheid South Africa, while wanting to come across as a sophisticated reading in its rich historicised and empirical descriptions, tends to be a rather muddled and confused explication of post-apartheid South Africa.

Marais’s assertion and use of ‘ANC’s hegemonic work in progress’ evokes a crucial Gramscian analytical category but in ways that do not work. It reads as a desperate attempt to fit reality into theory. There are three serious limitations to Marais’s theoretical characterisation of post-apartheid South Africa’s transition as the ‘ANC’s hegemonic work in progress’. First, this formulation suggests, despite Marais’s historicising of South Africa’s embrace of neoliberalism, that the ANC’s rather contingent and tenuous hegemony is about advancing a neoliberal post-apartheid South Africa; the ANC and all South Africans must embrace the realities of a capital-led process of neoliberal economic transformation, he argues, with a few ideological embellishments thrown in to provide ideological tension (Marais 2011: 395). Moreover, it is claimed the working class has gained and still can gain from this project. He seems to suggest that consent for the neoliberalisation of South Africa, with a national liberation gloss, is what the ANC has secured in civil and political society. Second, for Marais (390) hegemonic consent is really about clinching and winning the balance of forces in South African society and this is what the ANC has achieved, but for a few setbacks and weaknesses (such as mass unemployment and deepening inequality). For Marais the prospects of renewal and fixing the ANC’s unravelling hegemony come to the fore at the ANC’s national conference in Polokwane, which saw the rise of Jacob Zuma. This simply means the ANC must get on with addressing some of its weaknesses and recommit to marshalling ‘broad based consent’ (394). Such an understanding of hegemonic consent, which gives a determining role to the balance of forces, seems to imbue the ANC with the ability to switch hegemony on and off like a light switch. However, by itself the balance of forces is not a sufficient condition to ensure a hegemonic politics. In fact, such a conception of hegemony could be more about a degenerate dominance than a class-based intellectual
Transnationalising Gramscian Marxism and moral authority to lead society. Furthermore, hegemony is never fixed and has to be constantly worked for on the terrain of civil and political society, to provide moral and intellectual solutions, to find the right balance between the dialectic of consent and coercion once being organised within the state, to constitute a national popular imagination around a progressive South African nation-state, to maintain the ideological cohesion of a leading historical bloc of forces and to be organised through democratic political instruments. These are necessary conditions for hegemony to come into being and persist, but are non-existent vis-à-vis the ANC’s vaunted ‘hegemonic work in progress’.

Finally, in relation to the conceptual thrust of ‘hegemony’, Marais does not explicitly ground this concept in a class-based analysis and understanding of South African society. Instead he inserts the centrality of capital in different parts of his analysis, highlighting that some of its fractions have been the main winners of South Africa’s transition (Marais 2011: 390). Yet, at the same time, hegemony is explicitly presented as a declassed category beyond the overdeterminations of the class struggle (391–392). Hegemony is reduced to the hegemony of a political party: the ANC. Reducing hegemony to a political party lends itself to substitutionism, vanguardism and authoritarianism. Gramsci’s major contribution to Marxist theory, through the Prison Notebooks and in particular his concept of hegemony, ‘is a moment of rupture with the conceptuality of the bourgeois epoch analysed in the Prison Notebooks’ (Thomas 2009: 134). In other words, hegemony has to have a class character and it would seem Marais uses the formulation of ‘ANC hegemonic work in progress’ as a proxy for capitalist hegemony rather than working-class hegemony; Gramsci would have analysed such a power configuration but would not have advocated it for the subaltern and society.

Moreover, there are three coherent, but not entirely compelling arguments made by Marais (2011: 397–401) against a characterisation of post-apartheid South Africa as the making of a ‘passive revolution’. First, he argues against a passive revolution analysis by imputing a normative basis to the argument. Thus he suggests that the alternative to a globalised and capitalist post-apartheid South Africa was a socialist South Africa almost akin to a sovietised ‘socialism in one country’. This counterfactual argument is disingenuous and a misleading caricature. To utilise a passive revolution analysis does not mechanically suggest all-out revolution as the alternative, but it does point to more radical and transformative possibilities than what has been realised in South Africa, within the limits of the conjuncturally determined balance of
forces and necessary conditions to develop a rival class hegemony in South Africa. Such transformative possibilities are profoundly about democratic Left alternatives including, but not limited to, food sovereignty, climate jobs, a solidarity economy, de-growth, a socially owned renewable energy sector, a basic income grant, participatory budgeting, integrated mass public transport, decent housing and public health care and ultimately, more democracy not less. In short, the use of a passive revolution analysis allows us to disentangle progressive transformation in the interests of the majority from bourgeois transformation in the interests of an elite, which is necessary for advancing twenty-first-century Left alternatives, including a reimagined democratic eco-socialist South Africa as the basis of a working-class-led politics.

Second, Marais suggests that the ideological disciplining of the working class is what hegemony is all about. Hence a passive revolution analysis that suggests the linchpin concept of national liberation ideology, namely the ‘National Democratic Revolution’, is a ‘disciplinary abstraction’ bereft of a grounding in the contemporary political economy of South Africa, is misplaced. Put differently, Marais argues that it is in the interests of the working class in South Africa to be misled, duped and enticed by the ANC’s ‘hegemonic work in progress’. There are two fundamental problems with Marais’s understanding. First, as pointed out above, it lacks a class analysis, and is about control in the interests of the elite rather than the working-class hegemony. Second, his understanding of ANC capitalist hegemony is about assimilating, disciplining and limiting the opposition capacities of the working class, which then means he is actually talking about a passive revolution. This, of course, is notwithstanding the ANC’s historical commitment to ‘working-class leadership of the National Democratic Revolution’.9

Finally, Marais reveals a selective and superficial reading of Gramsci on the passive revolution. He suggests the passive revolution merely manifests in the context of failed hegemonic politics. He goes on to argue that the premise for a passive revolution did not exist in South Africa because apartheid was not about hegemony, in particular a politics of universal consent, and therefore a passive revolution analysis is irrelevant in the post-apartheid context. Gramsci utilised various historical analogies to explicate his concept of passive revolution, which highlight two important issues. First, passive revolution refers to various historical moments including transitions from feudalism to capitalism (like the Risorgimento in Italy), liberal advance (through crisis and defeat of working-class forces in the nineteenth century, such as in 1848 and 1871) and
the emergence of fascism after a great upheaval, namely World War I. These moments should not be read mechanically to verify (or reject) the application of a passive revolution theoretical analysis in the present, as Marais does. Instead, if the concept of passive revolution is to help us understand our contemporary times, it needs to find its own meaning and relevance in different historical contexts, whether preceded by hegemony or not; it is not a frozen analytical concept tied into a rigid historical sequence. Second, the passive revolution is about the inability of the bourgeoisie to be a progressive force in history and to lead social transformation. Gramsci thus points to the limits of capitalist modernity with the use of the concept of passive revolution. This, of course, is too ghastly and challenging for Marais to contemplate.

Approaching post-apartheid South Africa as a passive revolution
The theory of passive revolution, when applied to South Africa, has to speak to South Africa’s transition to democracy and deep integration into global capitalism as part of highlighting the limits to capitalist-class rule. It shows how the formation of the post-apartheid state gave rise to the dominance of transnational capitalist-class rule and the deepening of apartheid patterns of political economy (the passive side of the couplet) and how it ended formal, political apartheid (the revolution side of the couplet). Such an analysis teases out the specific and concrete dimensions of this form of class politics. What follows is an attempt to propose key dimensions of such an analysis to be developed; this is not a fully fledged analysis of South Africa’s passive revolution but a proposed approach to such an analysis.10

The first crucial element is historicising and periodising South Africa’s transition. This task is necessary to highlight the origins and line of development of the passive revolution. There is a need to bring out the historical contingencies, the twists and turns, and the complexities as part of this narrative. In this regard, there are two overlapping historical conjunctures which are crucial. A conjuncture, which can last decades, refers to a political project or its counter of class strategies that attempt to determine the form and role of the state. South Africa’s transition can be historicised and delineated into two overlapping conjunctures. The first is the conjuncture of the democratic corporatist state (1990–1996) and the second is the conjuncture of constituting the African neoliberal state (1996 to the present). The former conjuncture can be delineated into two phases: (i) the phase of negotiations (1990–1993) and (ii) the phase of democratic advance (1994–1996). The conjuncture of constituting the
Afro-neoliberal state is delineated by a long phase of low-intensity co-option, division and defeat of the working class (1996 to the present). Each of these conjunctures and phases can be unpacked with regard to historical evidence demonstrating the strategic class and state practices that come to the fore.

For the sake of illustration, our starting point has to be a recognition that resistance to the apartheid state did not produce an outright victory for either the contending class or the popular forces. Neither did the phase of negotiations (1990–1993) yield such an outcome. At the same time, a working-class-led alternative project was not automatically co-opted or defeated. Rather the defeat of a working-class alternative project has been politically constituted through neutralising a working-class-led hegemonic project and through the making of an Afro-neoliberal state. The conjuncture of constituting a democratic corporatist state highlights the way in which the hegemonic working-class-led project was neutralised (and defeated) by cementing working-class commitment to ANC-led state rule.

By 1994 the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu), the most organised section of South Africa’s working class, had put in place the following strategic elements to define a hegemonic working-class-led, post-apartheid project: (i) to form an alliance with the ANC and the South African Communist Party (SACP), rather than Cosatu forming a workers’ party to contest elections; (ii) a crucial commitment from South Africa’s emergent democratic state and transnationalising monopoly capital to engage in a democratic corporatist framework to determine macro-economic policy; (iii) the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) as a basis for electoral support for the ANC. The RDP was meant to provide a basis for redistribution, the realisation of basic needs, domestic-centred and externally oriented industrial development and deepening democratisation. Workers in Cosatu mobilised in their communities and workplaces for the ANC’s electoral victory in 1994, believing that the RDP would determine the content of state policy. All three elements in Cosatu’s strategic initiative provided for the making of a democratic corporatist state. To cement this in place the ANC brought on to its electoral list several leading trade unionists in Cosatu, including key leaders of Cosatu such as Jay Naidoo (he was appointed RDP minister) and Alec Erwin (who eventually became minister of trade and industry) who were given places in Nelson Mandela’s cabinet. By 1995 Cosatu’s commitment to institutionalised and democratic corporatist bargaining was crystallised into the National Economic Development and Labour Council (Nedlac). Despite Cosatu’s political commitment to the ANC
state and seeming assertion of a hegemonic strategic initiative, it was ultimately neutralised and then defeated in the conjuncture of the Afro-neoliberal state. However, the phase of democratic advance ensured that working-class self-organisation, initiative and commitment to an ANC-led democratic corporatist state yielded a fleeting moment of ANC hegemony and held out the potential for the ANC to embody a working-class-led hegemonic project.

By 1996 Cosatu was on its way to being effectively defeated and losing the strategic initiative to transnationalising capital. This focuses us on the second element in our analysis regarding the making of post-apartheid South Africa as a passive revolution. How did South Africa’s neoliberal shift come about? The emergence of an indigenised neoliberal accumulation model and state form is crucial, as it gave African characteristics to neoliberalism. The historicising of South Africa’s Afro-neoliberal shift is located in the context of the conjuncture of constituting an Afro-neoliberal state and the eclipsing of a democratic corporatist state form. Such a shift relates to the following:

- The contestation of the petit bourgeois leadership of the ANC by monopoly capital. This begins in the 1980s with various dialogues between the ANC and white monopoly business and the undertakings given by the ANC to secure the interests of capital. Moreover, post-1990 witnessed various initiatives by capital to contest the perspectives of the ANC through scenario planning exercises. Ultimately a deal is struck between the dominant faction of the ANC, which embraces the deracialisation of monopoly capital through Black Economic Empowerment (BEE), and transnationalising white monopoly capital wanting to globalise through neoliberal reforms.

- After being elected, the ANC’s economic policy choices were neoliberal policies, starting with South Africa’s first democracy budget in 1994 which echoes key strictures of International Monetary Fund (IMF) neoliberal thought, the liberalisation of trade and exchange controls and the adoption of a neoliberal macro-economic policy: the infamous 1996 Growth, Employment and Redistribution (Gear) macro framework, which is followed in 2006 by micro-economic policies to reduce costs to business, referred to as Accelerated Shared Growth Initiative for South Africa. All of these policy choices created the conditions to globalise South Africa from within and externally, while at the same time, remaking the state. In this regard, the role of the minister of finance, Trevor Manuel, and his department, are crucial as a state within the state.
There was an emphasis on transnational class formation through domestic restructuring and the constitution of a historical bloc of forces committed to a globalised South Africa. Three structural determinants of transnational class formation are crucial: first, the role of neoliberal reforms in externalising South Africa’s import-substitution industrialisation model; second, the movement of monopoly capital into Africa and beyond; and third, the attraction and inflows of foreign direct investment. All of this expressed itself through the existence of transnational capital and various social forces (sections of the media, economists working for capital, state managers, parastatals, a dominant faction in the ANC, transnational corporations and international forces such as the World Bank, the IMF, the World Trade Organisation and the World Economic Forum) championing deep globalisation of the South African economy, through a non-hegemonic historical bloc.

Finally, understanding post-apartheid South Africa as the making of a passive revolution requires us to bring into view ANC state–civil society relations in the conjuncture of the Afro-neoliberal state. Cosatu’s political defeat regarding a democratic corporatist state was further reinforced with the structural squeeze on the working class once neoliberalisation kicked in. Retrenchments, rising costs of living and high unemployment all serve to undermine the structural and direct power of labour. In this context the ANC (also working through the state) effectively won over key leadership strata of Cosatu to business unionism, careerist paths in ANC politics and BEE deals. Moreover, state practices around BEE mired the state in corruption and patronage relations. Finally, ANC state–civil society relations evolved from the demobilisation, to the instrumentalisation, then to the bureaucratisation and finally to the outright criminalisation of civil society. The most telling in this regard is the recent violent attacks by the ANC state against the Marikana mineworkers. The state’s response ranged from a police massacre of 34 workers, to collective purpose murder charges being laid against the mineworkers, to a police and military crackdown on the community. This tragedy ended with a death toll of 46 (44 workers and 2 police officers), all because mineworkers wanted to challenge apartheid working conditions – working conditions the ANC state has refused to challenge as it manages a globalised economy.

In short, post-apartheid South Africa can be explained as a passive revolution in which the rule of transnational capital eclipsed a working-class-led
hegemonic project for a democratic corporatist state. Since 1996, with the onset of self-induced neoliberalisation, the ANC state has been remade to manage a globalised accumulation model, mitigating risk to capital, facilitating transnational class formation and limiting the realisation of democratic citizenship rights for workers and South Africans in general. Essentially civil society has been ensnared in the politics of ‘corruption-fraud’ and increasingly state-orchestrated violence. This is an unviable project and is most certainly not about hegemony, a politics in which the general interests of society is expressed through the particular interests of a class or dominant fraction.

**NEW THEMES FOR A TRANSNATIONALISING NEO-GRAMSCIAN MARXISM**

Neo-Gramscian Marxism (transnational historical materialism) has successfully transnationalised Gramsci’s Marxism beyond a ‘nationally bounded’ Marxism and beyond our received understandings of Gramsci’s thought from the twentieth century. It has done this both in academic spaces (particularly with regard to international relations and the global political economy) but also within transnational activist currents. However, it is an unfinished project. This is so because of its own open-endedness but also because of the ever-changing vicissitudes of global capitalism. As a result we need to identify new themes and research agendas to continue the transnationalising of Gramsci’s Marxism as part of neo-Gramscian transnational historical materialism. In this regard there are three crucial research themes that need to be developed.

First, the current crisis of global capitalism, since 2007, has brought to the fore various ‘organic’ crisis tendencies that register and impact on both the systemic and the conjunctural level. This has also disrupted the hegemony of a US-led historical bloc of forces. This prompts us to research and grapple with the following questions: How have relations of production been transformed in the context of the global capitalist crisis? How is the US state–society complex dealing with the crisis of hegemony? How are state–society complexes adjusting in the heartlands and peripheries of capitalism? What is happening to existing historical blocs? What are the new concepts of control coming to the fore from various transnational class and social forces to ‘solve’ the global capitalist crisis? What are the limits of these new class strategies? Has neoliberal hegemony ended in the world order? Is this a crisis of neoliberalism or a crisis in
neoliberalism? Is this the end or the beginning of the end of neoliberalism? Is the world order in transition to global passive revolution or to global supremacy? In short, there is a need for a systemic and conjunctural understanding of the current global capitalist crisis from a neo-Gramscian perspective.

A second crucial theme that needs to be developed to enhance the transnationalising of Gramsci’s Marxism is the ecological dimension of Gramsci’s thought. In this regard, new readings and interpretations are required of Gramsci’s Marxism, both to identify how Gramsci grappled with nature within his historical materialism and to begin a conscious ‘greening’ of Gramscian categories that will make sense of the ecological crisis of global capitalism. This needs to be related to the greening of neo-Gramscian thought as a whole. In other words, the ecological limits of Coxian-inspired neo-Gramscian theory have to be revisited. The relationship between power, production and ecology must be rethought. This provides another crucial research plank for transnationalising neo-Gramscian Marxism.

Finally, while a transnationalising neo-Gramscian research agenda has and will continue to provide politically committed analysis of the capitalist world order, which has important implications for strengthening anti-capitalist politics, this has to be taken further. In other words, a more explicit research and theoretical commitment has to come to the fore in order to support how alternatives to contemporary anti-capitalist politics are articulated. More work has to be done on understanding ideologies of anti-capitalist movements, the alternatives being articulated, how these relate to transforming historical blocs both nationally and beyond, the nature of the power being expressed by such anti-capitalist forces in state–society complexes, new forms of counter-hegemonic practice and new ways of contesting common-sense understandings of the world.

CONCLUSION

Transnationalising Gramscian Marxism in the twenty-first century entails disrupting existing orthodoxies about Gramsci’s Marxism by retrieving its core. This entails reading Gramsci through Gramsci and thinking in a Gramscian way about historical materialism and social reality. This is not about finding a true Gramsci or a Gramsci with all the answers. Instead it is about thinking with Gramsci, as expressed through his own work, while also going beyond
Gramsci. At the same time, transnationalising Gramsci’s Marxism has meant taking Gramsci beyond the national scale of politics and into international relations by applying Gramsci’s concept of hegemony to world order and global political economy.

Neo-Gramscian approaches and elaborations of Gramsci’s Marxism are a crucial bridge. Neo-Gramscian analysis has historicised the social structures of global capitalism, including globalisation, has elaborated a transnational class theoretical approach to global capitalism and has explained how transnational capitalist rule works in the context of neoliberalisation. This is an unfinished transnational historical materialism. In the twenty-first century a neo-Gramscian transnational historical materialism has to be taken further with a historicised analysis of the crisis of capitalism, the greening of Gramsci’s Marxism and with a new appreciation for anti-capitalist struggles. Such an elaboration is happening through a South–North diffusion of ideas, grounded in an appreciation that all history according to Gramsci is ‘world history’.

NOTES
1 See Gramsci’s (1988: 189–221) notes on hegemony, relations of force and historical blocs which provides a non-reductionist understanding of ideology.
3 Gill (2003: 17–20) elaborates on these three elements and suggests these elements form a crucial basis for neo-Gramscian perspectives. In Gramsci’s (1998: 321–418) notebooks these themes are brought out in his notes on the study of philosophy, namely, ‘Some preliminary points of reference and problems of philosophy and history’. For his discussion about the problems of Marxism, see his notes ‘Some problems in the study of the philosophy of praxis and critical notes on an attempt at popular sociology’.
4 World-systems theory is part of an ongoing research agenda within which there are different emphases and perspectives. For example, Giovanni Arrighi, Immanuel Wallerstein and Samir Amin have had divergent views on various aspects and dynamics within the world system.
5 Leysens (2008) provides an important interpretation of Cox’s thought. He highlights the various influences on Cox’s historical dialectical approach which include Gramsci, Giambattista Vico, Marx, Braudel and Collingwood, amongst others.
7 Amongst others, see Gill (1994a).
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9 All the ANC strategy and tactics documents have evoked the primacy of the working class as the leading social force for change in South Africa.

REFERENCES


