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## Gramsci, Class and Post-Marxism

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# Gramsci, Class and Post-Marxism

M. Donaldson

## **Abstract**

Often Gramsci is presented in the social sciences, particularly by post-Marxists, as a precursor of and justification for abandoning the concept of class. This is incorrect. This article outlines Gramsci's ideas of class, class composition, formation and alliance which Gramsci based on a detailed, accurate reconnaissance of the Italy of his time.

## GRAMSCI, CLASS AND POST-MARXISM

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While Gramsci was without doubt a revolutionary Marxist at least since 1920 and at the time of his imprisonment at the end of 1926, Ernesto Laclau and others have claimed that because of fascism's victory, Gramsci fundamentally rethought his ideas in writing the *Prison Notebooks* (Poynting, 1995: 181). Laclau and other post-Marxists almost exclusively rely on the *Notebooks* for their understanding of Gramsci even though most of the concepts central to the *Notebooks* are in his pre-prison writings (Bellamy, 1994: x). Germino and Fennema (1998: 183) can find "no justification for the all too common practice of largely ignoring the pre-prison notebooks". The prison writings have an "organic continuity with the political universe within which Gramsci had operated prior to his arrest" (Hoare and Nowell Smith, 1971/1999, SPN: 91), and Alastair Davidson (1977: 162, 246) is certain that Gramsci himself "makes clear that his overall view had not changed since 1916, except in details" and that "on the eve of his imprisonment Gramsci maintained much the same view of Marxism as he always had". There had, he added, "certainly been no stupendous rupture in Gramsci's intellectual development since 1919–20". In Derek Boothman's (2005: 4; 1995/1999 FSPN: 36–37) view, too, there is "nothing in the *Notebooks* to indicate that he changed his opinion on these pre-prison stances [on religion], the last of which was written just six months before his arrest". And according to Germino and Fennema (1998: 192), "It is clear from the Vienna letters that Gramsci had already worked out in 1924 what in his *Prison Notebooks* he was to call his theory of hegemony and the conquest of civil society through the 'war of position'".

The strict limit imposed by the prison authorities on the number of books, including notebooks, that Gramsci could have in his cell at one time, meant that his considerations on a particular subject were often written in whatever notebook was to hand (Boothman, 1995/1999 FSPN: 30, 31). The post-Marxists, Stuart Hall (1991/1999a: 8) in particular, found that this "fragmentary nature of his writings was

a positive advantage”. Problems (or advantages) posed by this “scattering” of work were compounded by the fact that Gramsci was anxious to avoid the attention of the prison censor who would effectively terminate his work. Thus Gramsci refers to the Communist Party as the “Modern Prince”, “modern Jacobins”, “the elite”, and to its press as “a group which wants to spread an integral conception of the world”, a “unitary cultural organism” and a “homogeneous cultural centre”. Historical materialism usually appears as “mat. stor.”, Marxist economics as “critical economy”. He wrote Marx as “M.” or C. M. (Carlo Marx) and Marx and Engels as the “founders of the philosophy of praxis” (Boothman, 1995/1999, FSPN: 23; Hoare and Nowell Smith, 1971/1999, SPN: 16, 313, 314; Forgacs and Nowell Smith, 1985/1999, SCW: 647–648).

Not surprisingly, this had led to some misapprehensions. Boothman (1995/1999, FSPN: 25; 2006: 1) has noted the misunderstanding that by “historical bloc” Gramsci meant a bloc of social alliances, and that “hegemony” is “often employed in senses that are often considered Gramscian but not always consonant with him”. The same is true of class, but even more so, in the sense that some claim that in the *Notebooks*, Gramsci had ignored or superseded class altogether. After his transfer to the prison clinic in 1933, Gramsci began to recopy, reorder and rework his notebooks, removing any of the remaining dangerous words like class. Classes became “social groups” and class struggle, “the struggle of groups” (Boothman, 1995/1999 FSPN: 28; Hoare and Nowell Smith, 1971/1999, SPN: 16, 817 fn. 100).

There is, notes Davidson (1977: 243) “naturally a dialectical relation between how [Gramsci] felt and what he wrote”. Certainly, Gramsci’s experience of class was diverse and direct, and its hidden and not so hidden injuries were profound and personal. The relationship between autobiography and sociological analysis for him was “intimate and complex” (Hoare and Nowell Smith, 1971/1999, SPN: 163–164). The petty bourgeoisie, the peasantry and the proletariat were not distant and abstract categories. His grandfather was a colonel in the *Carabinieri*. His father, Francesco, was a registrar, disgraced and imprisoned. His father’s dishonour forced his mother Giuseppina, the daughter of a local inspector of tax, out of the petty bourgeoisie and

into the impoverished working class. She had to sell the family assets, to take in a boarder and to work at home as a seamstress. She became deeply religious. As a boy, Gramsci shared the social values and morality of the peasantry among whom he grew up and at whose hands he suffered dreadfully. As Bellamy (1994 : xi) notes, he “appreciated at first hand the narrow-mindedness that sometimes characterizes folk cultures”. He engaged in full-time wage labour as boy to support his family at the expense of his schooling and his health. As a young man, he obtained socialist literature from his militant brother Gennaro, a white-collar worker employed as a cashier in an ice factory, and he learned about Marxist theory from his teachers at the University of Turin where he studied on a scholarship for poor Sardinians. Coming face-to-face with and living among the militant workers of Turin, changed his life forever but did not erase his past, the effects of which were imprinted on his body (Davidson, 1977: 13–14, 15–16, 26, 27, 39, 42; Hoare and Nowell Smith 1971/1999, SPN: 24, 25, 27; Hoare 1977/1999, SPW 1910–1920: 13).

### **Gramsci and the Post-Marxists**

Benedetto Croce, who declared Marxism to be dead in Italy after he had left it in 1900, was described by Eric Hobsbawm (1987: 286) as “the first post-Marxist” (Hoare and Nowell Smith 1971/1999, SPN: 29). One hundred years later, post-Marxism had established itself theoretically, more recently drawing heavily upon post-modernism (Simm, 2000: 1, 3). Ironically, given Gramsci’s careful critique of Croce in his tenth *Prison Notebook*, many of those who currently espouse post-Marxism think themselves indebted to Gramsci’s work, particularly to his considerations on hegemony. Chantal Mouffe in *Gramsci and Marxist Theory* (1979: 201), remarks on the “convergence” of Foucault and Derrida with Gramsci. She claims that Gramsci was the only theorist of the Third International who pointed to a break with economism, “reductionism” and “epiphenomenalism” (Mouffe, 1979: 169–70).

For Laclau and Mouffe (1981: 20, 21) then, Gramsci created “the possibility of conceiving political subjects as being different from, and much broader than classes,

and as being constituted through a multitude of democratic contradictions”. “New political subjects” appear who “cannot be located at the level of the relations of production” including “women, students, young people, racial, sexual and regional minorities, as well as the various anti-institutional and ecological struggles”. Roger Simon in *Gramsci’s Political Thought* (1991/1999: 80) agrees. For him, too, struggles emerge from the different ways people are grouped together “by sex, race, generation, local community, region, nation and so on”.

Simon was the editor at Lawrence and Wishart responsible from the beginning for the selection and publication of Gramsci’s political writings in English (Hoare 1977/1991, SPW 1910–1920: 21). David Forgacs (1989: 82–84) shows how Laclau and Mouffe’s work coloured Simon’s (1991/1999) interpretation of Gramsci which influenced “developments of Gramscianism within and around” the Communist Party in Britain. (Soon after, similar tendencies emerged in the Communist Party in Australia). He traces how Laclau and Mouffe contributed theoretically to Stuart Hall’s work, as does Peter Osborne (Poynting, 1995: 40 fn.14). Their effect on Hall was his abandonment of “the erroneous idea of necessary or given class interests” and the identification, apparently by Gramsci in the *Notebooks*, of new and proliferating points of social antagonism and sites of power (Hall, 1991/1999b: 138, 139). Gramsci is, for Hall (1991/1999b: 131, 144), “riveted to the notion of difference” with the possibility for social change provided by “popular energies of very different movements”, by “a variety of popular forces”. Thus Gramsci’s “pluri-centered conception of power” and his understanding of hegemony “force us to reconceptualize the nature of class and social forces” (Hall 1991/1999a: 9).

Earlier, Laclau had begun his project in *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory* (1977) by diminishing the causal power of class and less than a decade later, it had disappeared almost altogether from his analyses (Poynting, 1995: 54). In rejecting the salience of class, the social relations of production, Laclau and Mouffe (1985: 4; 1987) declared themselves “without apologies” to have gone beyond historical materialism to post-Marxism. For them, and for other post-Marxists, class is “dead” (Zavarzadeh, 1995: 42). A “narrow classist mentality” constitutes “a barrier to

significant social change” and Gramsci’s conception of hegemony, which “transcends class alliance”, is invoked as proof that politics of class are inadequate in the task of social transformation (Sears and Mooers, 1995: 231; Simm, 2000: 17). Subsequently, Ruccio (2006: 6) has remarked how, in much “progressive” thought, references to class have virtually disappeared. Often Gramsci is presented in the social sciences as a precursor of and justification for this apparent fatality (Morera, 1990: 29–30).

In this article, I show how this is simply incorrect, by outlining Gramsci’s theory of class, class composition, class formation and class alliance based on his own “detailed, accurate reconnaissance of the social classes and forces present in the society of his time” (Boothman, 1995/1999 FSPN: 72).

### **Capitalism and the Propertied Classes**

Gramsci worked within and developed Marx’s analysis of the structure and dynamics of capitalism while remaining critical of the economics of Adam Smith, David Ricardo and the marginalists, and of the crude materialism of Bukharin and Plekanov. His Marxism, always situational and historical, did not assume an abstract universal “economic man” (Rupert, 2005) because for Gramsci “production is the source of all social life” and human labour was the foundational concept of his work (Gramsci, 15/3/1924, SPW 1921–1926: 296; Boothman, 1995/1999, FSPN: 55). While writing in prison, he reflected that “one must take as one’s starting point the labour of all working people to arrive at definitions both of their role in economic production and of the abstract, scientific concept of value and surplus value” for “the unitary centre is value” (Gramsci, FSPN: 52; Bieler and Morton, 2003). The capitalist “appropriates the product of human labour” and “unpaid labour goes to increase capital” for working people are forced to let themselves be expropriated of their unpaid labour (Gramsci, 27/12/1919, 26/3/1920, 8/5/1920, IWC: 21, 30, 31). In “the search for the substance of history, the process of identifying that substance within the system and relations of production and exchange”, he discovered that society is divided into two main classes. And while “the play of the class struggle” is

complex, classes, nonetheless, have “permanent interests” (Gramsci, 3/7/1920, IWC: 26; 4/5/1918, Bellamy 1994: 56; 24/3/1921, 31/8/1921, 30/10/1922, *Lyons Theses* 1/1926, SPW 1921–1926: 72, 116, 132, 516).

It soon became clear to Gramsci that one of these two main classes was, in fact, two classes, for there were in Italy not one, but two “propertied classes”—the capitalists and the landowners (Gramsci, 24/3/1921, 21/4/1921, 15/1/1922, SPW 1921–1926: 72, 77, 133). These classes “own the means of production and exchange”, “possess the instruments of production” and have “a certain awareness—even if confused and fragmentary” of their “power and mission”. Their capacity to “organize, coldly, objectively”, meant that by the World War I, “60 per cent of labour-produced wealth was in the hands of this tiny minority and the State” (Gramsci, *Our Marx*, 4/5/1918, Bellamy 1994: 56; 27/12/1919, IWC: 21; 6–13/12/1919, SPW 1910–1920: 200).

Gramsci learned too, that sometimes there is conflict between the propertied classes. The industrial capitalists and the landowners disagreed sharply over tariffs (Gramsci, 24/3/1921, 2–3/3/1926, SPW 1921–1926: 70, 547) but they are also connected in a myriad of ways, not least by the “fact that the landowners today own the banks” and by the interests, values and ideas they share (Gramsci, 24/3/1921, SPW 1921–1926: 116).

Relations between these two classes were further strengthened by the emergence of a third propertied class. During the war, labour shortages, the increasing capital intensity of agricultural production and new divisions of land holdings had all facilitated the development of rural capitalists. This new class differed from the old landowning class in that it derived its profit less in the form of ground rent and more in the form of surplus value. Investing in large tracts of land, rural capitalists relied on specialised equipment, scientific technique, fertilisers and wage labour to boost output per hectare, opening the way for the further penetration of finance capital into the countryside (Gramsci, 7/1923; *Lyons Theses* 1/1926; *Some Aspects of the Southern Question*, 10/1926; SPW 1921–1926: 233, 477, 608; Cammett 1967: 179; Togliatti 1935/1976: 125–6).

While the two propertied classes became three, Gramsci became interested in the existence of strata within classes. As well as the land lords, the “*latifundist* barons” and aristocrats of the traditional wealthy land-owning families, there existed, too, within the rural propertied class “the petty and medium landowner who is not a peasant, who does not work the land...but who wants to extract from the little land he has—leased out either for rent or on a simple share-cropping basis—the wherewithal to live fittingly” (Gramsci, 4 & 9/9/1920 SPW 1910–1920: 464, 472; *Some Aspects of the Southern Question*, 10/1926, SPW 1921–1926: 614–15).

Within the urban bourgeoisie, Gramsci was keenly aware not only of conflicts *between* industrial and finance capital, particularly over tariffs (Gramsci 5/6/1920, 13/1/1921, SPW 1910–1920: 359, 516; 15/1/1922 SPW 1921–1926: 133; Q3§160, FSPN: 365), but also of the differences *within* the industrial capitalist class. In January 1926, noting that the Italian bourgeoisie was “organically weaker than in other countries”, Gramsci considered it “necessary to examine attentively the different stratifications of the bourgeois class” (Gramsci, 21–26/1/1926, SPW 1921–1926: 453). In prison, in his seventh notebook, he began working out how to analyse these strata. From the quantitative standpoint, he suggests starting from the number of workers employed in each firm, establishing average figures for each stratum: “from 5 to 50 small industry, from 50 to 100 medium-sized industry, 100 upwards big industry” (Gramsci, Q7§96, FSPN: 468). Qualitatively and more scientifically and precisely, he says, the difference between the strata can be understood by discovering the type of energy and the type of machinery used by businesses (Gramsci, Q7§96, FSPN: 469).

Over nearly two decades, Gramsci’s analysis of the propertied classes had become deeper and subtler. There were strata within the landowning class and within the industrial capitalist class that required identification and analysis. He early understood the shared interests as well as the tensions between these two classes and by 1923 he had recognized the emergence of a new class of rural capitalists whose

role he identified in 1926 in *The Lyons Theses* and *On the Southern Question*, as pivotal to the consolidation of fascism.

### **Masses, Multitudes and Toilers**

Standing against the three propertied classes were the propertyless. In Italy and elsewhere, “great”, “broad” and “popular masses”, “diverse, chaotic multitudes”, the “common people”, were constituted by their subjugation to the laws of capitalism, by their exclusion from the exercise of power and by their propertylessness. Yet they are capable of “rising up” and are “driven to rebel”, the revolutionary process unfolding “subterraneously” in their consciousness. Revolution is produced by “mass action”; by organizing themselves around the industrial and rural proletariat, the popular masses are “capable of carrying out a complete social and political transformation, and giving birth to a proletarian State”, for within their “resurgent movement” exist “the germs of a new order of things” (Gramsci, 5/6/1920, IWC: 6; 29/6/1921, 20/9/1921, 1/11/1924, *Lyons Theses* 1/1926, SPW 1921–1926: 93, 119, 376, 472; Q8§89, FSPN: 398).

Communism is “the spontaneous, historically determined movement of the broad working masses, who want to free themselves from capitalist oppression and exploitation, and to found a society organised in such a way that it is able to guarantee the autonomous and unlimited development of those without property” (Gramsci, 29/6/1921, SPW 1921–1926: 93). But while those without property include the multitudes, “those not tightly bound to productive work” who live in “the limbo of the lumpen-classes”, “social debris and rubbish”, and criminals (Gramsci, 6–13/12/1919, SPW 1910–1920: 200; Q23§14, SCW: 532; *The Study of Philosophy*, SPN: 591, 593), perhaps the bulk of the propertyless were comprised of tens of millions of the “toiling population oppressed and exploited by capitalism”, most of whom were rural (Gramsci, 27/12/1919, IWC: 21; 1 & 15/4/1924, 3/7/1925, 10/1926, SPW 1921–1926: 325, 408, 580). In 1921 in *Parties and Masses*, Gramsci identified in the working population, “three basic classes”, the proletariat, the petty bourgeoisie and the peasantry. About six months later, cognisant of significant

changes in social relations in the countryside (see above and below), he included agricultural workers (Gramsci, 25/9/1921, 6/4/1922, SPW 1921–1926: 123, 189).

Of these toilers, the working class, particularly the industrial proletariat, was the “most politically educated” (Gramsci, 26/3/1920, IWC: 29) and its task was to win the trust of the multitudes to construct a state and organise a government participated in by “all the oppressed and exploited classes”. Critically from the point of view of power and its organisation, within the multitudes there existed by 1926 an urban working class of four million, a rural working class of three-and-a-half million and four million peasants whose class interests were permanent, and an unnumbered petty bourgeoisie of “unhealthy quantity” whose interests vacillated but whose disposition was crucial (Gramsci, 25/9/1921, 30/10/1922, *Lyons Theses* 1/1926,1/10/1926, SPW 1921–1926: 123, 132, 472, 468–9, 506, 564; *The Modern Prince*, SPN: 366).

Opposing the three propertied classes, then, are the propertyless masses. These are made up, not exclusively but in their majority, by millions of toilers. This working population, predominantly rural, is comprised of four classes: the urban proletariat, the rural working class, the peasantry and the petty bourgeoisie. But as Gramsci’s concern for the rural areas, particularly for the South, became more articulate, so did his analysis of the peasantry deepen.

### **Peasants and Rural Workers**

In Gramsci’s Italy, “the rural masses [who] make up the majority of the working population” were spread unevenly across the country (Gramsci, 10/1926, SPW 1921–1926: 580–581). The “toiling classes” in the countryside, “those who work the land”, comprise two main types of people, peasants and rural workers whom “we too often confuse” for, in fact, “they are two different classes”. The essential difference is that peasants own property (land and/or means of labour) that they are willing to struggle to defend, while workers, particularly the *braccianti*, do not, but are rather characterised by their landlessness and the sale of their labour power to

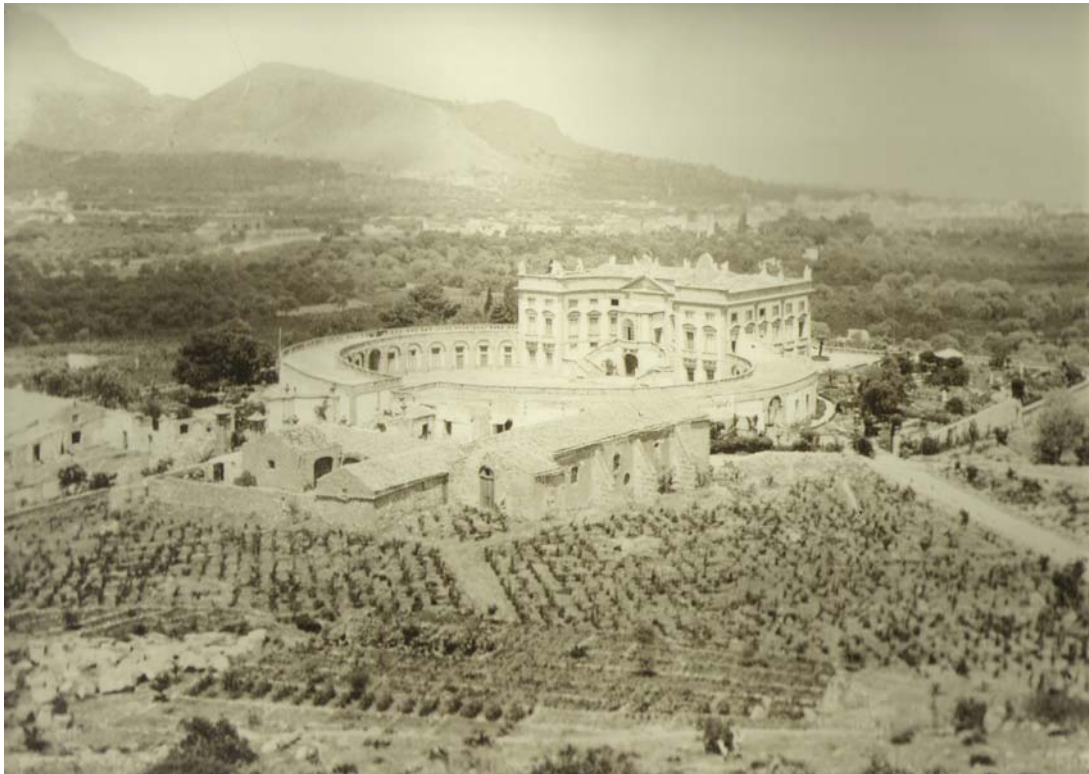
the rural bourgeoisie (Gramsci, 6–13/12/1919, SPW 1910–1920: 206; 6/4/1922, *Some Aspects of the Southern Question*, 10/1926, SPW 1921–1926: 185, 608). The “extremely varied conditions of the terrain, and the resulting differences in cultivation and in systems of tenancy” caused a “high degree of differentiation” (Gramsci, *Lyons Theses* 1/1926, SPW 1921–1926: 468–9). Thus the peasantry generally comprises rich peasants who shade into petty landlordism, and middle and poor peasants who live in various relations of exploitation by the big landowners. The main mechanisms of surplus extraction of the former by the latter are ground rent and share-cropping. The middle peasantry generally produce for the market. In this they are unlike the poor peasants (of “particular importance”) made up of small holders who mainly consume what they produce, share-croppers (*mezzadri*), tenant farmers and sub-tenant farmers, husbandmen and herdsmen. These poor peasants endure poverty and prolonged labour with many suffering a “chronic state of malnutrition” (Gramsci, 26/3/1920, IWC: 29; 6/4/1922, 20/11/1922, *Lyons Theses* 1/1926, *Some Aspects of the Southern Question*, 10/1926, SPW 1921–1926: 189, 190, 194, 481, 495–6, 614–15, 616; *State and Civil Society, The Study of Philosophy*, SPN: 453–459, 569; Q3§77, Q6§179, FSPN: 123, 271; Togliatti, 1935/1976 : 125, 132).

It is this relationship to property, the ownership of objects and/or means of labour, which means that the revolutionary movement of the peasants can only be “resolved in the sphere of property rights” (rather than in the abolition of property rights), and thus:

...the principle remains firm that the working class must be the one to lead the revolutionary movement, but that the peasants too must take part in this movement, since only with the help of the workers will they be able to free themselves from the exploitation of the big landowners; while on the other hand, without the consent or at least neutrality of the peasants in the struggle against capitalism, the workers will not be able to accomplish the communist revolution (Gramsci, 6/4/1922, SPW 1921–1926: 190).

In the task of winning the peasantry, the industrial proletariat had an ally, the rural working class, who almost matched them in size and in some places, even

outnumbered the peasantry (Gramsci, 6/4/1922, SPW 1921–1926: 186). Between 1900 and 1910 there was a phase of intense agrarian concentration and, along with the newly forming rural bourgeoisie, the rural proletariat grew rapidly, by as much as 50 per cent, as share croppers and tenant farmers were proletarianised. The post-war depression did its part, too, wiping out large numbers of small rural firms and proletarianising elements of the rural petty bourgeoisie (Gramsci, 18/10/1923, *Lyons Theses* 1/1926, SPW 1921–1926: 238, 471, 475; Hoare and Nowell Smith 1971/1999, SPN: 48). In Gramsci’s view, the burgeoning rural proletariat was the “vehicle for the proletariat’s influence over the peasantry” and he was heartened by the creation in 1924 of “farm councils” modelled on the *Ordine Nuovo*-influenced Turin factory councils (Gramsci, 21–26/1/1926, SPW 1921–1926: 460, 461; Boothman, 1995/1999 FSPN: 40).



**Villa Valguarnera, Bagheria, 1934**

The landowners sought to prevent the consolidation of the rural working population into a single class and worked to bring about a stratum of privileged sharecroppers who would be their allies (Gramsci, *On Italian History*, SPN: 241). But above all, particularly in the South, the peasant was:

...bound to the big landowner through the mediation of the intellectual, and so did peasant movements always end up by finding themselves a place in the ordinary articulations of the State apparatus—communes, provinces, Chamber of Deputies. This process takes place through the composition and decomposition of local parties, whose personnel is made up of intellectuals, but which are controlled by the big landowners and their agents. (Gramsci, *Some Aspects of the Southern Question*, 10/1926, SPW 1921–1926: 616).

The peasantry, characterised by “an extremely rich tradition of organization”, have “always succeeded in making their specific mass weight felt very keenly in national political life” because the “organizational apparatus of the Church” has “specialized in propaganda and in the organization of the peasants in a way which has no equal in other countries”. This mediation and organization, widespread in the mainland South and in Sicily, created “a monstrous agrarian bloc” whose “single aim is to preserve the status quo” (Gramsci, *Some Aspects of the Southern Question*, 10/1926, SPW 1921–1926: 617; 10/1926, SPW 1921–1926: 580–581).

In identifying the points of tension among the rural population, Gramsci relied upon the form of exploitation they suffered (rent in money or kind, or wage labour) and the ownership or non-ownership of productive resources (land and means of labour). However, as he understood, reality is too complex to suggest that there is always a neat fit between the antagonistic classes—landlords and peasants; capitalists and rural workers. Certainly, large landowners employed wage labour and rural capitalists dealt with the peasantry, for the peasantry and rural workers themselves were not always discrete classes. Poor peasants engaged in wage labour on a casual or seasonal basis and every rural worker’s family sought to produce its own subsistence. And while the differentiation between the peasant strata was real enough, a fall in prices, bad harvests, a rise in the cost of living, or rent rises could quickly reduce a middle peasant to a poor one. What increasingly fascinated Gramsci was how this shifting and tumultuous array of social relations, this “monstrous agrarian bloc”, remained intact for so long. He found a good part of the answer to this question in his analysis of the petty bourgeoisie and the intellectuals.

### **Intermediate Classes, the Petty Bourgeoisie and the Intellectuals**

Gramsci notes that in “peripheral states” like Italy where the proletariat is numerically small and unevenly dispersed and the state is undeveloped, there exists “a broad stratum of intermediate classes”, which, as we have seen, includes in the countryside wealthy and middle peasants, and in the cities a middle bourgeoisie and small and medium industrialists. But also included are the numerous petty bourgeoisie many of whom share a mentality with the other intermediate classes and who are “fairly extensive” in town and country, making up “the only class” that is “territorially” national (Gramsci, 6–13/12/1919, SPW 1910–1920: 199, 200; *The Intellectuals*, SPN: 144; 25/10/1921, 1/9/1924, 3/7/1925, *Lyons Theses* 1/1926, 2–3/8/1926, SPW 1921–1926: 124, 353, 413, 468–9, 554).

In the cities and larger towns, the petty bourgeoisie included artisans (the self-employed trades and those employing not more than five workers), industrial small owners, shopkeepers, merchants, professionals (e.g. lawyers, accountants, doctors, priests), middle managers, lower ranking army officers whose numbers grew rapidly during the war, middle-ranking public servants, political professionals, and officials of large trade unions and co-operative societies who emerged from the working class (Gramsci, 27/12/1919, IWC: 21; 5/11/1920, SPW 1910–1920: 472; 15/1/1922, *Lyons Theses* 1/1926, SPW 1921–1926: 127, 468–9; Q7§96, FSPN: 468–469; Fiori, 1973: 256; Davidson, 1977: 249–250).

In the countryside, where the land of the small landowners and middle peasantry is broken up through the generations until it vanishes altogether, those not keen on manual labour became petty bourgeois: minor municipal officials, notaries, clerks, usurers, messengers and teachers (Gramsci, *State and Civil Society*, SPN: 551–553). Particularly important in the countryside are the clergy who “must always be taken into account in analysing the composition of the ruling and possessing classes”. In the South, the priests are rentiers and usurers, as well as the organic intellectuals of the feudal aristocrats and their descendents, the rural propertied classes (Gramsci, 6–

13/12/1919, SPW 1910–1920: 238; *Some Aspects of the Southern Question*, 10/1926, SPW 1921–1926: 615; Q3§77, FSPN, 1995/1999: 123; Simon, 1991/1999: 106).

In both the cities and the countryside, the petty bourgeoisie form the majority of the traditional and organic intellectuals (Gramsci, Q24§2, SCW: 686). Simon (1991/1999: 109) lists the organic intellectuals as: managers, engineers, technicians, politicians, prominent writers and academics, broadcasters, journalists, civil servants, officers of the armed forces, judges and magistrates. It is these people, along with the priests above all, who produce the ideas, values and beliefs that consolidate the rural social formation:

The petty bourgeoisie and the intellectuals, through the position which they occupy in society and through their way of life, are naturally led to deny the class struggle and are thus condemned to understand nothing of the development of either world history or the national history which forms a part of the world system (Gramsci, 19/10/1920, SPW 1910–1920: 492).

They “make news, not history”. Apart from their significance in the manufacture of consensus and commonsense, it was the petty bourgeoisie, especially in the country areas, which provided the forces for fascism, and while elements of the petty bourgeoisie were anti-fascist, the Southern petty bourgeoisie went over *en masse* to fascism providing “the troops” for the fascists, and the urban petty bourgeoisie “allied itself with the landowners and broke the peasant organisations on their behalf” (Gramsci, 24/3/1921, 25/9/1921, 24/11/1925, 24/ 2/1926, SPW 1921–1926: 71, 127, 425, 539; *The Modern Prince*, SPN: 366). In fact:

...the characteristic feature of fascism consists in the fact that it has succeeded in creating a mass organization of the petty bourgeoisie. It is the first time in history that this has happened. The originality of fascism consists in having found the right form of organization for a social class which has always been incapable of having any cohesion or unitary ideology (Gramsci, 1/9/1924, SPW 1921–1926: 359)

Gramsci considered the petty bourgeoisie to be important because of their relative size, their national dispersion, their strong sense of their own detachment from the class relations and as the social basis of both organic and traditional intellectuals who were particularly crucial in cementing the rural population. Failure to take them seriously as a winnable class, and indeed, at times, open hostility to them, as Gramsci ruefully admitted, cost the Party and the anti-capitalist forces dear. In the end, their weight proved decisive in the balance of the social forces.

### **The Working Class**

A worker is a person “totally without property”, “condemned to have no property” and “never likely to anyway”. Under capitalism, people are valued only as owners of commodities and workers are forced to become traders in their only property—their labour power and professional skills (Gramsci, 11/10/1919, 8/5/1920, IWC: 11, 35–36, 31/1/1921, SPW 1921–1926: 46, 28/2/1920 & 6/3/1920, SPW 1910–1920: 244). Workers are those employed in factories such as manual workers, clerical workers and technicians, as well as servants, coachmen, tram-drivers, railwaymen, waiters, road-sweepers, private employees, clerks, intellectual workers, farmhands, hodmen, cab-drivers and others, who together make up “the whole working class” (Gramsci, 8/11/1919, SPW 1910–1920: 110; 12/4/1921, *Some Aspects of the Southern Question*, 10/1926, SPW 1921–1926: 75, 611).

Workers acquire the means to live only by entering into a relationship with capitalists in which they are obliged to produce more than they will consume and give up the difference. A necessary condition of workers’ existence is a relationship to another who appropriates part of their labour or product. Class is not the only form of oppression, or necessarily the most frequent, violent or constant form of social conflict. But it is the only constantly recurring conflictual social relationship that emerges from the social organisation of production itself and which creates the very conditions of human life.

The intrinsic power of the working class is that it is “indispensable” and “irreplaceable” and the “most important factor of production” (Gramsci, 5/6/1920, IWC: 8; 13/1/1921, SPW 1921–1926: 47). “Capable and conscious elements” of the working class are “aware of their own value and importance—which cannot be eliminated—in the world of production” (Gramsci, 18/10/1923, SPW 1921–1926: 242). That the working class is the only source of surplus value means that it is the only class “essentially and permanently revolutionary”, “the only class capable of reorganising production and therefore all the social relations which depend on the relations of production” (Gramsci, 26/4/1921, 25/10/1921, SPW 1921–1926: 83, 124).

Within the working class, the industrial proletariat is hugely important, for “in the factory, the working class becomes a determinate ‘instrument of production’ in a determinate organic system”. Capitalists, who desperately want to destroy all forms of organisation of the working class, cannot (Gramsci, 5/6/1920, IWC: 7; 18/10/1923, SPW 1921–1926: 241), for the factory, which they created:

...naturally organises the workers, groups them, puts them into contact with one another...The worker is thus naturally strong inside the factory; he is concentrated and organised inside the factory. He is, however, isolated, dispersed, weak outside the factory (Gramsci, 18/10/1923, SPW 1921–1926: 240)

But the working class is far from united in its ability to take advantage of such “natural” fault lines. It contains “most advanced”, “less advanced”, “backward and benighted” layers. There are, too, manual, semi-skilled and skilled strata. All sorts of “hierarchical relations and degrees of indispensability” in occupation and skill lead to friction and competition between different categories of workers and even to the formation of a labour aristocracy “with its appendages of trade-union bureaucracy and the social-democratic groups” and the possibility of co-option (Gramsci, 24/11/1925, 21–26/1/1926, SPW 1921–1926: 77, 431; Q7§96, FSPN: 469; 14/2/1920, SPW 1910–1920: 238; Hoare and Nowell Smith 1971/1999, SPN: 89). In the face of this variation within the most powerful and best organised popular class,

Gramsci thought long and hard about where classes come from and how they become conscious of themselves as active and determining forces.

### **Class Formation**

There was, Gramsci thought, a “continuous process of disintegration and reintegration, decomposition and recomposition” of strata and classes in the Italian population. New classes and strata develop out of existing classes. Powerful elements of the capitalist class were constituted out of the old feudal aristocracy. The rural bourgeoisie grew mainly out of the upper stratum of the peasantry and the petty bourgeoisie, and it in turn created a type of petty bourgeoisie different to that produced by the urban bourgeoisie. The urban bourgeoisie itself grows by assimilating new elements from other classes (Gramsci, *The Intellectuals, State and Civil Society*, SPN: 144, 529, 546).

Class, then, is above all relational. “Man is aristocratic in so far as man is a serf”. There is never one class. The rural bourgeoisie emerging during the war by its expropriation of land from the middle peasantry effected the latter’s proletarianisation (Gramsci, *The Study of Philosophy*, SPN: 675; Togliatti, 1935/1976: 119–120). The actions of one class, the rural bourgeoisie, led to the partial decomposition of another, the middle peasantry, and the development of a third, the rural proletariat. Class is a relation and classes shape each other.

The state—and through it political parties—is active in class formation, too, often through the imposition of duties, tariffs and taxes. Since 1887, protectionist policies that favoured the growing industry of the north, meant that peasants were no longer able to export their produce, while at the same time forced to buy Italian manufactures rather than the cheaper goods made in more industrialised countries (Hoare and Nowell Smith, 1971/1999, SPN: 26). The immiserated peasantry and the bankrupted rural petty bourgeoisie were the raw material for the new industrial proletariat. The Italian state’s policy of entente in WWI led to the spectacular and rapid development of the iron, steel, coal, shipping, cotton, wool and vehicle

industries which sucked up “elements...originating from the peasantry and the petty bourgeoisie” who formed “the great bulk of the industrial proletariat”. FIAT’s capital increased tenfold during the war and its workforce grew from 4,000 to 20,000 (Gramsci, *Lyons Theses* 1/1926, SPW 1921–1926: 464; Hoare and Nowell Smith, 1971/1999, SPN: 33; Hoare, 1977/1991, SPW 1910–1920: 11). For Gramsci, there is no doubt that the industrial proletariat is at the heart of the revolutionary enterprise. But like himself, it was mostly new to the city and to industrial discipline. How could it shape its own future and that of the multitudes of which it is part?

### **Class Consciousness, Class Alliances and the Communist Party**

Gramsci wrote at length, in *The Modern Prince* (SPN, especially 405–406), on the different levels of collective political consciousness that classes possess. The most elementary, the economic-corporate level, is a “guild” or “craft” mentality whereby a “tradesman feels obliged to stand by another tradesman, a manufacturer by another manufacturer...in other words, the members of the professional group are conscious of its unity and homogeneity, and of the need to organise it”, but not outside it. The next level is consciousness of class beyond trade, craft, profession, occupation; a sense of the “solidarity of interests among all the members of a social class” and the struggle to advance the class’s interests “within the existing fundamental structures”. The third level is “that in which one becomes aware that one’s own corporate interests, in their present and future development, transcend the corporate limits of the purely economic class, and can and must become the interests of other subordinate groups too”.

The relative smallness of the industrial proletariat and its location predominantly in the north-west, made it necessary, Gramsci thought, for the urban proletariat to build alliances with the other toiling classes, the rural proletariat, the medium and small peasantry and the rural and urban petty-bourgeoisie. “The only way these other classes will ever emancipate themselves is to enter into a close alliance with the

working class, and to hold by this alliance through even the harshest sufferings and the cruellest trials”.

Only this alliance could break apart the alliance of the propertied classes, the northern industrialists, the rural capitalists and the southern landowners, cemented by the petty bourgeoisie that constituted the backbone of fascist reaction. Building this necessitated the working class winning the support of classes and strata presently swayed by hegemonic ideologies and beliefs, particularly Catholicism. Accomplishing the alliance of all of the toiling population presupposed the destruction of the Vatican’s influence, particularly over the peasants, strong in central and northern Italy and even worse in the South where, Gramsci told a Central Committee meeting of the CP in November 1925, 80 per cent of peasants are controlled by the priests. In order to challenge this authority successfully, the working class must overcome its own narrow “economic-corporate” consciousness and at times act even against its own immediate class interests in favour of those of the popular masses who bear the seeds of the new order (Gramsci, *Lyons Theses* 1/1926, 21–26/1/1926, SPW 1921–1926: 431–432, 484; 13/1/1921, SPW 1910–1920: 517; Forgas and Nowell Smith, SCW: 332; Hoare and Nowell Smith, SPN: 107–108).

The bourgeoisie was winning the class struggle because its allies, whom it controls and leads, help it. While building its own alliance of classes, the proletariat attempts to win away some of the bourgeoisie’s allies, notably the intermediate classes—the petty bourgeoisie, middle peasants, small manufacturers—and at least neutralise them, or better still, mobilize them together with the majority of the working population against capitalism and the State (Gramsci, *Some Aspects of the Southern Question*, 10/1926, 13/10/1926, SPW 1921–1926: 572–3, 598).

But how and by whom is class consciousness developed, good sense created and class alliances made? Without doubt, the direct experience of revolutionary struggle is the best teacher. “The meetings and discussions in preparation for the Factory Councils were worth more for the education of the working class than ten years of

reading pamphlets and articles written by the owners of the genie in the lamp” (Gramsci, 14/2/1920, SPW 1910–1920: 238).

But the rub is always what to do when the times are not revolutionary, and particularly when the working class is in retreat. Gramsci told Mussolini and the Chamber of Deputies in May 1925, “a class cannot remain itself, cannot develop itself to the point of seizing power, unless it possesses a party and an organization which embodies the best, most conscious part of itself” (Gramsci cited in Fiori 1973: 195). Earlier he had written that parties are:

...the reflection and nomenclature of social classes. They arise, develop, decline and renew themselves as the various strata of the social classes locked in struggle undergo shifts in their real historical significance...(Gramsci, 9/9/1920, SPW 1910–1920: 463).

But the relationship between party and class is dialectical. “In fact,” he write “if it is true that parties are only the nomenclature for classes, it is also true that parties are not simply a mechanical and passive expression of those classes, but react energetically upon them in order to develop, solidify and universalize them” (Gramsci cited in Camfield 2004/2005: 426).

Parties are the indispensable agents of change. They emerge and develop to “influence the situation at moments which are historically vital for their class”, but the outcome is never predestined for they are not always capable of “adapting themselves to new tasks and to new epochs”. When this occurs, classes detach from them, and they are “no longer recognised by their class (or fraction of a class) as its expression”. Thus was the Popular Party, in a relatively short period of time, the organization of the peasantry; of artisans and small farmers; and of the urban and rural semi-proletariat and the petty bourgeoisie (Gramsci Q24§2, SCW: 686; 28/5/1921, 18–22/6/1923, SPW 1921–1926: 113; *State and Civil Society*, SPN: 224, 450, 452; Cammett, 1967: 192, 193).

The Communist Party is not the party of the multitude, not even of the toiling masses. It is the party of the industrial working class (Gramsci, 3/7/1920, IWC: 25;

Fiori 1973: 198). There are many anti-capitalist elements that are non-proletarian. The Party, however, wrote Gramsci, must be a “part” of the working class. This meant, he said in his report on the Lyons Congress, that the Communist Party was a class party, “not only abstractly” but “physiologically”—the great majority of its members should be proletarians (Gramsci cited in Cammett 1967: 172, 173) for Party members are “the most highly developed form of its consciousness, on condition that they remain with the mass of the class and share its errors, illusions and disappointments” (Gramsci, 18/10/1923, SPW 1921–1926: 239).

But the Party’s reach is much wider than its social base. In fact, the Communist Party provides:

... the links capable of giving the masses a form and physiognomy. The strength and capacity for struggle of the workers for the most part derive from the existence of these links, even if they are not in themselves apparent. What is involved is the possibility of meeting; of discussing; of giving these meetings and discussions some regularity; of choosing leaders through them; of laying the basis for an elementary organic formation, a league, a cooperative or a party section. What is involved is the possibility of giving these organic formations a continuous functionality; of making them into the basic framework for an organized movement (Gramsci, 1/11/1924, SPW 1921–1926: 371–2)

Part of the Party’s task of making links among, and giving form and capacity to the mass of the working people, is to help form alliances of the classes that make them up. This, he reflected in prison, had become an “extremely delicate and difficult operation”. But, he added, if it does not form class alliances, then “the proletariat cannot hope to undertake serious revolutionary action. If one takes account of the particular historical conditions within which the political evolution of the Italian peasantry and petty bourgeoisie must be understood, it is easy to see that any political approach to these strata by the Party must be carefully thought out” (Fiori, 1973: 256).

## **Conclusion**

Class happens when, in order to live, large numbers of people are systematically forced by their lack of access to productive resources to give a substantial part of their life's activity, more than what they need to keep themselves alive, to others, purely because those others control this access. As a necessary condition of survival, people must give up part of their lives simply in order to live. The nature of the compulsion to "give away" years of one's life, and how this arrangement is organised and sustained, is what class is all about. And as Marx noted, the only way to understand this, why and how "surplus labour is pumped out of direct producers", is to have a good, close look at "the empirically given circumstances" that systematically require some people to give to others large parts of their time and effort or the results of them. I have argued in this article that this is exactly what Gramsci did, and that class was not a concept that he used and then abandoned. Rather, it was basic to his whole analysis, unfolding through his life as a revolutionary up until the moment when his intellect could fight no longer.

Gramsci was not a post-structuralist, not a vulgar materialist, and certainly not a Crocean post-Marxist. He thought and wrote within the revolutionary Marxist tradition and employed its methodology and concepts to elucidate reality and to inform political strategy. In doing so, he thought new thoughts not found in Marx, Lenin, Luxemburg and Labriola. If class is dead, it is not Gramsci who killed it.

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