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Abstract

This is the abstract of a review by Roberto Dainotto of the book by Francesca Antonini, *Caesarism and Bonapartism in Gramsci. Hegemony and the Crisis of Modernity* (Leiden and Boston, Brill 2020).

Keywords

Caesarism, Bonapartism, feuilleton, catastrophic equilibrium, charismatic leadership, crisis

From Catastrophe to Crisis: Francesca Antonini's Caesarism and Bonapartism in Gramsci: Hegemony and the Crisis of Modernity

Roberto Dainotto

In 1977, at the heyday of Italy's great wave of conjectures regarding the coming revolution, Franco De Felice had proposed an untimely meditation concerning the relevance of Gramsci's thought for political theory: it lay not in what Gramsci had to say regarding an imminent overthrow of the capitalist system, but rather in his analysis of capitalism's own tactics aimed at "the halting of the fundamental organic struggle, and hence the transcendence of the catastrophic phase" (Q9§136, p. 1198; in English, Gramsci 1971, p. 221).¹ After all, only by first understanding, with Gramsci, "the general tactics of the bourgeoisie in danger" — De Felice contended by quoting from the Lyon theses of 1926 — could a revolutionary movement devise successful tactics and a realistic theory of transition (De Felice 1977, p. 2009).

It has become since then an acquisition of Gramscian studies that the *Prison Notebooks* are in fact an attempt to propose a revolutionary alternative to the all-too-optimistic analyses of capitalist crises predicated, *ab origine*, on "the resurgence of economism in the international Communist movement in the late 1920s, with resulting 'Third-Period' catastrophism" (Thomas 2009: 140). Based on the "false assumptions [of] the imminent collapse of capitalism, and of the beginning of a world revolutionary crisis (understood as 'economic catastrophism')" (Coutinho 2012: 95-6), such theories, argued in the Communist International and to all appearances confirmed by the Wall Street crash of 1929 (to which many more would follow), had left communists and proletarians

¹ De Felice's comments: "what seems to me more important is the repercussion of this anti-catastrophism, namely the recognition of the possibility of development on the part of the capitalist social formation as a response to the crisis" (De Felice 1977: 207). [In the English translation of the passage quoted from the *Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci's original "superamento" would be more literally translated as "supersession" rather than "transcendence" – edit. note.]

alike utterly unprepared to understand and withstand the *longue durée* (Burgio 2014: 187) of capitalism's resilience in the face of crises – the perduring hold, that is to say, of its “hegemony protected by the armour of coercion” (Q6§88, p. 764; in English Gramsci 1971 p. 263, or Gramsci 2007 p. 75). Theoretically speaking, revolutionary catastrophism had completely missed “the fundamental point” of Marx's *Preface to the Critique of Political Economy* – namely, that “[a] social order does not perish until all the productive forces for which it still has room have been developed” (Q11§22, p. 1422; in English, Gramsci 1971 p. 432). In practical terms, it had left a revolutionary movement, at the closing of the revolutionary *biennio rosso* (Liguori 2021), ill-equipped to hold its own in a lengthy “war of position whose representative – both practical (for Italy) and ideological (for Europe) – is fascism” (Q10I§9, p. 1229; in English, Gramsci 1971, p. 120).

Against this background, the *Notebooks* did and can still offer a veritable taxonomy of concepts through which the resilience of capitalism vis à vis any crisis can be explained: “passive revolution,” “organic crisis,” “Americanism and Fordism,” fascism, “trench war,” and “war of position” have accordingly all received their share of attention as concepts through which it is possible to comprehend capitalism's ability to transform a crisis, in Gramsci's oxymoronic phrasing, into “a situation in which the forces in conflict balance each other in a catastrophic manner” (Q13§27, p. 1619; in English, Gramsci 1971, p. 219). Surprisingly little notice, however, has been given to the twin concepts from which many of the reflections on the “catastrophic balance” seem to unfold – namely, Caesarism and Bonapartism; which is to say the tactics whereby the bourgeoisie, when in ultimate danger, has customarily attempted to solve “a historico-political situation characterised by an equilibrium of forces heading towards catastrophe” through the intervention of a “great personality” tasked with the “arbitration” of the conflict at hand (*loc. cit.*).

Francesca Antonini can therefore rightfully claim, in *Caesarism and Bonapartism in Gramsci: Hegemony and the Crisis of Modernity* (Antonini 2020), that her new book “aims to fill a gap” (p. ix). That is not to say that Caesarism and Bonapartism had previously met with complete scholarly disinterest: the hints left by Luisa Mangoni in the Seventies regarding the centrality of those concepts in

Gramsci's understanding of fascism (Mangoni 1976; Mangoni 1979), along with the revival of authoritarian leaderships all around the world (from Berlusconi to Bolsonaro, the list would leave Leporello breathless), have gathered increased and timely interest in Gramsci's notes on the "Caesarist personality" (Burgio 2007; Fontana 2004; Cospito 2011; Santro 2012). What has been missing until the publication of Antonini's book, however, is a sustained – should we say "organic" – diachronic analysis of the genesis of Caesarism and Bonapartism in the pre-prison and prison writings, combined with a synchronic, historicist understanding of the specific valences that those same concepts acquire for Gramsci in specific historical situations and specific political conjunctures.

Caesarism and Bonapartism in Gramsci begins in fact from the presuppositions, which Gramsci himself would have shared, that concepts such as Caesarism and Bonapartism are not metaphysical propositions, nor are they "generated through 'parthenogenesis'" (Q6§64, p. 733; in English Gramsci 1985, p. 107 or Gramsci 2007 p. 47); they develop mutate and grow, rather, in their continuous dialectical encounter with the ever-changing reality that they strive to comprehend:

If, in the perennial flux of events, it is necessary to establish concepts without which reality cannot be understood, it is also necessary, in fact it is indispensable, to establish and remember that reality in motion and the concept of reality, though they may be logically distinct, must be conceived historically as an inseparable unit. Otherwise there happens what is happening to Croce, that history becomes a formal history, a history of concepts, and in the last analysis a history of the intellectuals (Q10II§1, p. 1241; in English Gramsci 1995, p. 370).

Coherent with this assumption, Antonini's book opens with a series of five chapters historicizing the concepts of Caesarism and Bonapartism "from Marx to Gramsci" (pp. 1-14) vis à vis the "flux of events" they were set to describe. Beyond the archival reconstruction of the origin of the debate, these chapters soon prove to be an invaluable tool for scholars of Gramsci (including the present reviewer) who have long wondered: "which Marx did Gramsci read? When? And how?" (p. 11). Through a most scrupulous research in archives, printers' catalogues, and Gramsci's own library preserved at the Gramsci Institute in Rome, Antonini does not only reiterate the centrality of the *Preface to the Critique of*

Political Economy, the *Theses on Feurbach*, *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, and *The Civil War in France* in Gramsci's own Marxist canon, but also establishes the translations and editions of those texts at his disposal (pp. 11-12).

Of these four texts, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Napoleon Bonaparte* is unsurprisingly the one that has the most direct bearing on the topic at hand – but only in a surprisingly complex, problematic way that Antonini carefully reconstructs for her reader. It was written in part in response to Pierre-Joseph Proudhon's rather cavalier use of "Caesarism," understood by him as an "alternative to non-government and anarchy, as well as the only possibility of producing a revolutionary situation" (p. 2). Proudhon's explanation of modern phenomena – stock market speculation, for instance, as "economic Caesarism" in *Le manuel du spéculateur à la bourse* – by making anachronistic recourse to a term from Roman history was for Marx, cited by Antonini, the mere concocting of some "superficial historical analogy" (p. 4). For Marx, on the contrary, Caesarism and Bonapartism had to be restored to their "historical dimension": the former, to classical antiquity, and the latter to the historical phase stretching from the July Revolution (1830) to the birth of the Second Empire of Napoleon III (1852).

Despite the letter of Marx's own writings, however, "[i]n the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the Caesarist-Bonapartist model spread widely among Marxist intellectuals, who adopted it as a means of political polemic in the day-to-day debate but also as a tool for historical interpretation"; it stood for a trans-historical model of "top-down intervention conceived of as an instrument of momentary neutralisation of [class] conflict, and also as a tool to preserve the existing order" (p. 7). The relevance of this tension between Marx and "Marxist intellectuals" becomes apparent in the following pages (pp. 61-72), which bear a hefty methodological value for Gramscian studies. By making an exemplary use of Gramsci's pre-prison writing – the kind of work sadly hindered by the lack of proper translations of these important documents in many languages, including English – Antonini traces back to Gramsci's early journalistic writings the sort of "antidogmatic approach" that will eventually provide Gramsci with "the conceptual tools to elaborate his original philosophy of praxis while in prison" (p. 14).

It is in fact in the pre-prison writings that Caesarism and Bonapartism appear for the first time in Gramsci's *oeuvre* – only seldom, to be sure, but dramatically posing already a central preoccupation of the later *Notebooks*: the dialectical necessity, that is to say, to understand a given historical reality through pre-existing concepts, which then ought to be, in turn, “translated” (Boothman 2004) into the specific historical situation. Written in the urgency of the political struggle, the pre-prison writings certainly deploy those concepts more for their “provocative and evocative character rather than for the sake of a concrete historico-political analysis” (p. 16). However, as Antonini convincingly maintains, “although Gramsci defines Bonapartism as an ‘approximate political term’, this is not completely true. Bonapartism, in Marx’s usage, but also in [...] Gramsci, is a well-defined concept, circumscribed in its content and used with a specific purpose” (p. 27) – and the same ought to be argued for the term “Caesarism” as well. This is true not only in the narrow sense that those terms do not prevent Gramsci from accounting for specific historico-political processes such as “the Italian parliamentary elections of May 1921” (p. 15), the later fascist *coup* (p. 17), or even the “Bonapartistic tradition of the PSI” (p. 20); more significantly, the use of seeming anachronisms such as “Caesarism” and “Bonapartism” to comprehend much later dynamics hints already at a central Gramscian concept – that of “organic crisis” – that will be “very significant in the future development of his thought” (p. 53).

Simply put, modernity (hence the subtitle of this book) is constituted for Gramsci by an unprecedented and protracted crisis that is “organic to the highest degree” (p. 156). Stretching from the Second Empire of Napoleon III (and, in Italy, the coeval *Risorgimento*) to the fascist *ventennio*, such a crisis comprises one long historical period which has not yet come to an end. The bourgeois system, throughout this entire period, has been undergoing a long-lasting “crisis of authority” (pp. 155-158): its leadership remains unacknowledged by a large swath of society, which revolts – in the barricades of Paris in 1871, as in the occupation of Turin’s factories between 1918 and 1919. However, while the crisis of feudalism had been brought to an end with the revolution of 1789, the “modern” crisis of has not yet been overcome: the bourgeoisie has been successful in preserving its authority, albeit in crisis, by making

recourse to military means (the repression of the Commune and fascist *squadristo* alike), *coups* (Louis Napoleon Bonaparte's and Mussolini's), and the general subversion or suspension of liberal parliamentary rule – by adopting, in short, “Bonapartist” solutions.

While a system in crisis has thus prevented its own collapse, no alternative to it has managed to conquer a position of sufficient strength to replace it. A catastrophic balance of forces is what has ensued. As Antonini sums it up:

Gramsci mentions [...] the ‘deadly equilibrium’ [...] the ‘static equilibrium of the conflicting forces’ and [...] the ‘interregnum’ due to the fact that ‘the old is dying and the new cannot be born’, and thus ‘morbid phenomena of the most varied kind come to pass’. Even if very synthetically, the double metaphor [...] highlights the salient aspects of Gramsci's conception: the polarisation of the socio-political scenario and the (apparent) ‘immobilism’ that characterises it (p. 112).

A distinct merit of *Caesarism and Bonapartism in Gramsci* is, in this context, its framing of Gramsci's writings on the “organic crisis” as a critical balance that “involves at the same time the structural and the superstructural dimension,” and that manifests itself not only at the economic, but also, and besides politics, at the very cultural level. Entering into a fruitful dialogue with the re-evaluation by recent scholarship of Gramsci's attention to literature (Gatto 2016; Desogus et al. 2018; Descendre 2021), Antonini makes here a brilliant use of Gramsci's early writings on the *feuilleton* to argue for the Romantic roots of a certain conception of the political (pp. 15-35): “Caesar” and “Bonaparte” are to be understood, in other words, as *figurae* (to borrow here Auerbach's diction), developments of concepts that “may grow into a historical situation” (Auerbach 1944: 76) to give intelligible shape to it.

What these concepts shape for Gramsci as for Antonini is precisely a provisional solution to a perduring “crisis of modernity” that keeps manifesting itself “in growing political ungovernability” (p. 156). Because, if Caesarism and Bonapartism can prevent the immediate collapse of a system, they cannot, on the other hand, resolve, once and for good, the very root causes that sustain the crisis – a crisis that therefore remains unsolvable by modernity's own “structure,” which is to say, the development of capitalism. The crisis is determined, to put it in different words, by the very internal contradiction that is and has to remain “organic” to

bourgeois capitalism itself. Q8§2 nails the reasons for the permanence of this crisis “to the highest degree” on its head: on the one hand, “[t]he bourgeois class poses itself as an organism in continuous movement, capable of absorbing the whole of society, assimilating it to its own cultural and economic level”; on the other, there is a structural limit – the accumulation of private property and capital – beyond which a large part of society cannot be assimilated at the economic level any more: the “process comes to a halt, and the conception of the State as pure force is returned to, etc. The bourgeois class is ‘saturated’: it not only does not expand – it starts to disintegrate; it not only does not assimilate new elements, it loses part of itself” (Q8§2, p. 937; in English Gramsci 1971, p. 260, or Gramsci 2007, p. 234). It is precisely the “organicity” of this crisis to the capitalist system – its being constitutive of its existence and development – that therefore makes it permanent. Until a new social force will have acquired enough strength to overcome the crisis and solve its causal contradiction in a new and revolutionary social order, the bourgeoisie, facing the constant risk of losing its hegemonic hold on the rest of society, is forced to return to certain tactics with some regularity (Frosini 2010: 201). The alternation between periods of formal democracy and periods of fascism, between consent and coercion, is one such tactic. Another is the rhythmic return to forms of Bonapartism – “a generic form of authoritarianism” (p. 27) often “connected with a military model” (p. 81) and realized in “a well-developed bureaucratic apparatus” (p. 95) – or of Caesarism – id est, “charismatic leadership” (pp. 105-110). These forms, in themselves incapable of “overcoming the organic crisis of modernity,” open for the bourgeoisie in crisis the possibility for a “molecular transformation of society, which postpones its catastrophic collapse” (p. 118).

Needless to say, as political forms concocted by a class at times hegemonic and at times merely dominant, and as tactical solutions to specific, if recurring, historical situations “represented by the ‘balance of class forces’” in which neither grouping can fully establish its leadership (p. 37), both Bonapartism and Caesarism end up describing, for Gramsci, political formations born in opposition to capitalism as well (Francioni 2020). While Bonapartism thus becomes a “profitable way to stigmatize the distance between leaders and led, as far as it concerns the working class” (p.

27), also “a ‘Caesarism without a Caesar’ will be imagined by Gramsci to describe politics in impersonal mass societies” (p. 110) – a “charismatic” Party imagined through the *figura* of a collective Modern Prince. In both cases, it becomes clearly apparent in Antonini’s exemplary readings how complex is Gramsci’s handling and evaluation of these concepts: potentially “progressive” in specific historico-political conjunctures (pp. 114-20), Bonapartism and Caesarism run in others the risk of “developing totalitarian characteristics” (p. 194). Such an “attention to the historical, concrete forms of Caesarism in their potential diversity,” concludes Antonini, make of Gramsci “one of the richest inheritors of Marx’s legacy” (p. 202); and of Antonini’s book, we would like to conclude as well, one of the richest inheritors of a scholarly and political tradition culminating in Gramsci – one for which “the terms ‘catastrophe’ and ‘catastrophic’ no longer have a specific strategic meaning” (p. 112) in the *longue durée* of the crisis of modernity.

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