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## Dizionario gramsciano / Gramsci Dictionary: Collective Will

### Abstract

This is a translation into English of the Dizionario gramsciano entry 'Collective Will' by Carlos Nelson Coutinho. The concept of and need for the creation of a collective will, sometimes qualified as 'national-popular collective will', finds its most extensive development in a second draft text of Notebook 14. As such it is determining in the formation of social reality and, indeed, of democracy in Gramsci's sense of rule by the people. The emphasis placed on a collective will, 'attained through concrete individual effort', forms part of Gramsci's critique of the 'positivist and naturalist encrustations' of the determinist forms of Marxism, both of the Second International and those expressed notably at the time by Bukharin in the Soviet Union and is a factor in Gramsci's formulation of his 'philosophy of praxis'. The expression of this collective will is intimately linked to another Gramscian concept, that of the 'modern Prince' which becomes the 'protagonist of a real and effective historical drama', the aim in which is to reach concrete and rational goals: expressed otherwise it plays a key role in the struggle to create a new hegemony, an 'intellectual and moral reform', and a genuine democracy, one of whose expressions is the 'legislator', understood as a person expressing a 'specific collective will' and attempting through that 'to modify reality according to certain directive lines'. In conclusion the formation of such a collective will is essential in overcoming the direction-spontaneity (elsewhere 'leaders-led') dichotomy. (Note: Abstract written by the editors).

### Keywords

Collective will, national-popular, modern Prince, legislator, causality, democracy

## ***Collective Will / Volontà collettiva: Gramsci Dictionary***

Carlos Nelson Coutinho

From his early years onward Gramsci emphasized the central role of will in the construction of a social and political order. In a celebrated article written in December 1917, after having defined the soviet Revolution as a ‘revolution against *Capital*’, in which he asserted that the Bolsheviks had overcome the ‘positivist and naturalist encrustations’ claimed to be present even in Marx, Gramsci wrote that the most important factors in history are not ‘raw economic facts, but man, men in societies, men in relation to one another, developing through these contacts (civilization), a collective, social will: men coming to understand economic facts, judging them and adapting them to their will until this becomes the driving force of the economy and moulds objective reality, which lives and moves and comes to resemble a current of volcanic lava that can be channelled wherever and in whatever way men’s will determines’ (Gramsci, 1982, p. 514; in English, 1977, pp. 34-5).<sup>1</sup> This idea of a ‘collective, social will’ that comes as a result of the contacts between people, and which has a determining role in the creation of social reality – even if directly influenced by the neo-idealism of Croce and above all Gentile – is very similar to the contractualism of Rousseau. It is however true that, with this voluntaristic position, Gramsci was reacting against the ‘positivist and naturalist encrustations’ that marked the position not of Marx’s thought, as he then supposed, but certainly the Marxism of the Second International.

If Gramsci had kept faith with this ‘omnipotence’ of the will, he would not have gone beyond the neo-idealism that was indebted not so much to the objective dialectic of Hegel as to the subjective dialectic of Fichte. In his mature thought, i.e. in the *Notebooks*, Gramsci completed his assimilation of historical materialism, which he would later designate the philosophy of praxis. As a result of this

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<sup>1</sup> Hereafter we include reference to English translations after the principal reference to the Gerratana 1975 critical edition (trans. note).

theoretical conquest, he was able to deal with the concept of collective will – which remained central to his reflections – at a different level of concreteness. Now the teleological moment of human action appears as organically articulated with the causal-genetic moment. Collective will continues to play an important role in the construction of the social order, no longer as moulding reality but as a decisive moment that is articulated with the determinations that stem from objective reality, in particular from the social relations of production.

In the *Notebooks* the concept of collective will (sometimes found requalified as ‘national-popular collective will’) finds its most extensive treatment in the long first paragraph of *Notebook 13* (Gramsci, 1975, Q13§1, pp. 1555-61; 1971, pp. 125-33), which is Gramsci’s rewrite, without substantial alteration,<sup>2</sup> of Q8§21 (1975, pp. 851-3; 2007, pp. 246-9). In analysing the role of the modern Prince (that is of the revolutionary political party) in the construction of the national-popular collective will, in other words of a new hegemony, Gramsci brings out – as he had not done in his early writings – the twofold determination of will. On the one hand, he emphasizes the active role of will, thereby distancing himself from those who, following in Hegel’s footsteps, understand collective will as some-thing that imposes itself objectively, ‘spontaneously’. It seems to me that it is here that one finds the nub of Gramsci’s critique of Sorel and his conception of the ‘myth’. Gramsci says, in effect, that ‘It is true that for Sorel the “myth” found its fullest expression not in the trade union as organisation of a collective will, but in its practical action – sign of a collective will already operative. The highest achievement of this practical action was to have been the general strike – i.e. a “passive activity” , so to speak, of a negative and preliminary kind [...] *an activity which does not envisage an “active and constructive” phase of its own.* [...] The outcome was left to the intervention of the irrational, to chance (in the Bergsonian sense of “*elan vital*”) or to “spontaneity” (Gramsci, 1975, pp. 1556-7; 1971, p. 127: emphasis added – C.N.C). Gramsci goes on to say that ‘In Sorel’s case it is clear that behind the spontaneity there lies a purely mechanistic<sup>3</sup> assumption, behind the liberty (will–

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<sup>2</sup> Where deemed necessary, there is however a requalification of ‘collective will’ in the first draft as ‘national-popular collective will’ in the rewritten text (trans. note).

<sup>3</sup> This word may also be rendered, more literally, as ‘mechanicist’, which Hoare and Nowell-Smith choose in the passage below from Q11§59 (trans. note).

life-force) a maximum of determinism, behind the idealism an absolute materialism? (Gramsci, 1975, p. 1558; 1971, p. 129).

The role of the ‘modern Prince’ is instead that of *actively constructing* a new collective will: in consequence Gramsci’s critique is not only of Sorel but all those who do not see ‘that a new collective will must be created from scratch, to be directed towards goals which are concrete and rational, but whose concreteness and rationality have not yet been put to the critical test by a real and universally known historical experience’ (Gramsci, 1975, p. 1558; 1971, p. 130). On the other hand, already in this passage Gramsci draws attention to the fact that the goals must be concrete and rational, in other words must be teleologically planned starting from and taking into consideration the causal conditions objectively posed by historical reality. Such is what it seems to me is contained in the following words: ‘The modern *Prince* must have a part devoted to Jacobinism (in the integral sense which this notion has had historically, and must have conceptually), as an exemplification of the concrete formation and operation of a collective will which *at least in some aspects* was an original, *ex novo* creation. And a definition must be given of collective will, and of political will in general, in the modern sense: *will as operative awareness of historical necessity*, as protagonist of a real and effective historical drama (Gramsci, 1975, p. 1559; 1971, p. 130: emphasis added – C.N.C.). It is therefore only for ‘some aspects’ that the collective will is the ‘operative awareness of *historical necessity*’ (loc. cit.). We see here the dialectical articulation between teleology and causality, between the subjective and objective moments of human praxis, of which will is the ineliminable moment. The collective will that becomes the ‘protagonist of a real and effective historical drama’ (loc. cit.) – in other words becomes an epistemologically constitutive moment of social reality – is the one marked by this two-fold determination.

This conception of will, now formulated at a more purely philosophical level, appears in a still clearer way in another context, where Gramsci deals with the question of ‘what is philosophy?’. He says ‘To escape simultaneously from solipsism and from mechanistic conceptions implicit in the concept of thought as a receptive and ordering activity, it is necessary to put the question in an “historicist” fashion, and at the same time to put the “will” (which in the last analysis equals practical or political activity) at the base of philo-

sophy. *But it must be a rational, not an arbitrary, will, which is realised in so far as it corresponds to objective historical necessities, or in so far as it is universal history itself in the moment of its progressive actualisation.* Should this will be represented at the beginning by a single individual, its rationality will be documented by the fact that it comes to be accepted by the many, and accepted permanently: that is, by becoming a culture, a form of “good sense”, a conception of the world with an ethic that conforms to its structure’ (Gramsci, 1975, Q11§59, p. 1485; 1971, pp. 345-6: emphasis added – C.N.C.). Gramsci proposes here a conception of will, otherwise identified in the last analysis with political praxis, capable of going beyond both solipsistic idealism and vulgar mechanistic materialism, which see only subjective determinism, and the objective determinism of the will, respectively.

It should be remarked that in the common context given by this dialectical articulation of teleology and causality, Gramsci conceives of different historical manifestations of collective will. The one on which he insists more strongly is that of the collective will as an element of democracy. Speaking of the differentiation between the historical evolution of Italy and France, when for the first time he uses ‘collective will’ in the *Notebooks*, Gramsci observes that ‘the beginning of the divergence between Italian and French history can be witnessed in the Strasbourg oath (about 841),<sup>4</sup> namely in the fact that the people (the people-army) participated actively in history by becoming guarantors of the observance of the treaties between the descendants of Charlemagne. The people-army gave its guarantee by “swearing in the vernacular”; in other words, the people introduced their language into the history of the nation, assuming a political function of the highest importance, *presenting themselves as a collective will, as a component of a national democracy*’ (Gramsci, 1975, Q5§123, p. 646; 1996, p. 367: emphasis added – C.N.C.). The negative side of this relation between collective will and democracy is, as Gramsci notes, that the absence of such a will leads to a bureaucratic despotism. In the ‘absence of a real democracy, of a real national collective will, and hence, because of this passivity of individuals, the need for a more or less disguised despotism of the

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<sup>4</sup> The ‘first time’, apart that is, apart from a use in Q3§87, predating the paragraph cited here by about half a year; the oath referred to was actually sworn on 14 February 842 (editorial note).

bureaucracy is shown.<sup>5</sup> The collectivity must be understood as the product of painstaking will and collective thought attained through concrete individual effort and not through a reliance on a process of destiny that is extraneous to the individual, hence the need for inner discipline, not just external and mechanical discipline' (Gramsci, 1975, Q6§79, pp. 750-51; 2007, p. 63). But the formation of a collective will can also originate from the action of a charismatic leader; in this case however, this collective will – if one can attest to its existence – is fragile. In criticizing the theory of the charismatic leader in Weber and above all in Michels, Gramsci writes: 'But did collective man exist in the past? He existed, as Michels would say, under the form of charismatic leadership. In other words, a collective will was obtained under the impetus and direct influence of a "hero", of a paradigmatic individual, *but this collective will was promoted by extraneous factors, and once formed would disintegrate, repeatedly* (Gramsci, 1975, Q7§12, p. 862; 2007, p. 165 and also 1995, p. 276: emphasis added – C.N.C.).

Collective will in Gramsci also appears together with the traditional concept of sovereignty or, more precisely, it is posed as the basis for the action of the legislator. In effect, in Q14§9 (Gramsci, 1975, p. 1663),<sup>6</sup> after having claimed '1) that the individual legislator (and individual legislator must be understood not only in the restricted case of parliamentary State activity but also in every other "individual" activity that attempts, in greater or lesser spheres of social life, to modify reality according to certain directive lines), that these individual legislators cannot but undertake "arbitrary", anti-historical actions since, once their act of initiative has been put into practice, that act functions as a force in itself in the given social circle, thereby giving rise to actions and reactions that are intrinsic to this circle, beyond the act in itself; 2) that every act, legislative or of directive or normative will, must also and especially be judged objectively for the effective consequences that it may have'. Gramsci concludes (loc. cit): '3) that all legislators cannot but be abstractly and by convenience of language considered as individuals since in reality they express a specific collective will such as to render effective their "will", which is will only in so far as the

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<sup>5</sup> The last two words were added editorially in Gramsci (1975) to complete the syntax (trans. note).

<sup>6</sup> Not yet contained in a standard English translation (trans. note).

collectivity is disposed to put it into effect; 4) that therefore all individuals who differentiate themselves from a collective will and do not attempt to create, give rise to, extend, reinforce, organize it, are simply coachman-flies,<sup>7</sup> “disarmed prophets”, will-o’-the-wisps’.

Finally, in Gramsci the concept of collective will is closely bound up with that of ‘intellectual and moral reform’, in other words with the question of hegemony. In effect, an important task of the ‘modern Prince’ is indeed that of being the ‘promoter of intellectual and moral reform, which constitutes the terrain for a subsequent development of the national-popular collective will<sup>8</sup> rooted in a complete and accomplished form of modern civilization. In the end the modern Prince should focus entirely on these two basic points: the formation of a national-popular collective will, of which the modern Prince is the active and operative expression, and intellectual and moral reform’ (Gramsci, 1975, Q8§2, p. 953; 2007, pp. 248-9).

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<sup>7</sup> A metaphor stemming from La Fontaine’s *Fable* of the fly who thinks that due to its efforts a coach drawn by six horses manages to climb a steep hill: cf. n. 19 on p. 224 of Gramsci, 1971 (trans. note).

<sup>8</sup> In the published English translation of Q8§21 (Gramsci, 2007) the word ‘will’ was inadvertently omitted; it is here reinstated (trans. note).