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Fawwaz Traboulsi

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## Reading and Translating Gramsci in the 70s

### Abstract

This is the Abstract of the English-language article by Fawwaz Traboulsi on the history, starting from the 1960s and 1970s of the translation into Arabic of Gramsci and its subsequent diffusion and influence. The author looks at the way in which currently neoliberalism has been changing political language in the attempt to bend it to its own purposes.

### Keywords

Gramsci; Lebanon; Arab world; Gramsci in translation; creation of neoliberal language; taboos on words

## ***Reading and Translating Gramsci in the '70s***

Fawwaz Traboulsi

### *1. The Earliest Gramsci Translations in Arabic?*

In mid-1960s, a group of leftist Lebanese intellectuals met to launch a Marxist study group named after their clandestine publication 'Lubnan al-Ishtiraki' ('Socialist Lebanon', SL).

Their ambition was to use Marxist theory in order to produce knowledge on society and state in Lebanon in view of building a radical organization of what came to be called 'the New Arab Left', one among many groups and organizations that were emerging in the Arab World and which was to have a greater impetus after the defeat of the Arab armies in June 1967.

Much of the intellectual activity revolved around a return to Marx-Engels-Lenin, but we also defiantly read the works of Trotsky, Gramsci, Kollontai, Rosa Luxemburg and other dissident Marxists leaders and thinkers. But a lot of our education came from more contemporary interpreters like Jean Paul Sartre, Henri Lefebvre, Louis Althusser, Ernest Mandel and from the vast literature on national and social liberation: Mao Zedong, Fidel Castro, Che Guevara, Frantz Fanon, Amilcar Cabral, Samir Amin, Régis Debray, etc.

We translated the writings of quite a few of those authors. Antonio Gramsci's, *The Modern Prince* (London., Lawrence and Wishart, 1957) was translated from French and English by Waddah Sharara and Aziz Al-Azmeh, (under the pseudonyms of Zahi Sherfan and Qays al-Shami, 1970), and *Questions of Historical Materialism*, from English, by myself in 1971. I used the early Quintin Hoare translation, a friend on the editorial board of the *New Left Review*. As far as I know, those were the first translations of Gramsci into Arabic.

Our attraction to Gramsci partly came from our admiration of the Italian Communist Party as an anti-Stalinist communist party, but, most importantly, from the inspiration and challenges of his life and thought. His historicism confirmed the role of subjectivity in the face of prevailing historical determinism; the 'relative autonomy' of the superstructure and of the political instance,

contrasted with economic determinism; the discrepancy between the political superstructure and the economic base especially in transitional periods, severely modified the modernist illusion that capitalism destroyed pre-capitalist formations; the role of the intellectuals confirmed our political engagement as intellectuals. I should add Gramsci's concepts of class power and class representations; hegemony and cultural struggle, and his notion that new ideas, new 'world views', start with a critique of the old, etc. Those last concepts would be discovered gradually.

We were also particularly attracted to 'the Southern Question' which helped us think out the emergence of South Lebanon as a subaltern underdeveloped, and socially deprived, region and its entry into political life as a border region with occupied Palestine, especially as many of us, and of the young generation of leftists, came originally from that region.

## 2. Personal Debt

I have lived with Gramsci's concepts and ideas beyond the Socialist Lebanon period (1965-1970) and still do. His concepts of 'hegemony' and 'consent' inspired my book on Michel Chiha, banker, journalist and organic intellectual of the Lebanese financial-commercial bourgeoisie and architect of its free trade and sectarian post-independence system (*Silat Bila Wasl, Michel Chiha and the Lebanese Ideology*, Beirut, Riyad al-Rayyis lil-Kutub wa-al-Nashr, 1999). The 'national popular' and 'common sense' directed my research on world-views embedded in popular culture and folklore. My work on the musical theatre of Lebanese Diva Fayruz and the Rahbani Brothers (*The Treasure, the Stranger and the Miracle*, 2006) studies the representation of the social and political transformations in Lebanon, by analysing a dozen of their 'soap operas' based on folklore and popular culture, during a transitional period between the two the civil wars (1958-1975), a period characterized by the penetration of financial and commercial capital in the countryside and the vast immigration waves from the countryside to the cities. "*In Can baddak Ti`shaq...*" (*In case you decide to fall in love*, 2004, 2019) is a collection of essays on some aspects of popular culture: the role of women in the silk industry in nineteenth century Mount Lebanon; rites of fecundity and solidarity in the *dabkeh*, the popular dance of Lebanon and the Arab East; the traditional rural festivities

of the *Birbara* (Saint Barb) and their bloody urban reenactment during the 1975 civil war; in addition to a short lexicon of popular dictums and proverbs, analyzed as elements of popular wisdom and philosophy.

In the 1990s I also published a translation of *Notes on Italian History* (the Risorgimento) also from English, 2018.

### *3. An Inventory in a New World Lexicon*

In the rest of my intervention, I would like to share with you some thoughts on work I am doing, with a number of colleagues, collecting and analyzing a lexicon of neoliberal terms that trickles down into ‘common sense’ and ‘popular philosophy’. The terms are propagated not only by states, ruling classes, politicians, and intellectuals, but also by UN financial and development agencies, the social media, the media, and NGOs. I would like to show, using examples from words, terms and concepts addressed to the ‘developing countries’, how one language erases an older one, substitutes its terms, imposes taboo on words, propagate others, covers a social phenomenon by another, invents new words, changes the meaning of older words; etc. The result: we are no longer dealing with how ideology seeps into language but rather with the creation and imposition of a new language.

#### *3a. Culturalism*

Post-modernists pretend to be against all grand narratives. They have nevertheless raised one to the realm of a grand narrative: Culture. After the end of the Cold War, Samuel Huntington presented a new paradigm for the new age, his argument went as follows: Marxism, and what he called the ‘economic interpretation’, ended with the collapse of the Soviet Union; the doctrines of national liberation ended as the colonized peoples achieved independence, there remained only one possible paradigm – Culture. Though not evident why Culture should be the only possible alternative, it has been raised to the rank of an absolute universal value. This new paradigm, which should be called ‘Culturalism’, has become an interpretation of life, of social phenomena and of the behavior of men according to immutable essences and identities usually grounded in religion and language. Being said, in passing, that this definition goes totally against what

culture commonly means: production, growth, variety, invention, etc. Nevertheless, the founding fathers of culturalism, among them the Orientalist Bernard Lewis, attributed to communities and collectivities cultural essences and singular identities, which by necessity implied distinctions and inequalities. In Huntington's geopolitical theory on the 'clash of civilizations', civilizations are grounded essentially in religion, and seen through a geopolitical lens in which they appear as challenges and dangers to US world unilateral domination: the Confucian civilization (China's economic threat), the Christian Orthodox (Russia's military power), the Christian Catholic (Latin American migration to the US) and Muslim civilization (equated with Muslim fundamentalism and 'terrorism'). Another relevant concept by Huntington is that of the uniqueness and supremacy of the West in his 'The West and the Rest': what qualities the West possesses, others necessarily lack.

### *3b. Cultural deficiencies/economic reforms*

In the 1990s, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) produced a new approach to development deemed more efficient than the GDP measure, Human Development. In 2002, it inaugurated a series of reports Arab Human Development Reports (AHDR), edited by Arab experts, which happened to start coming out just after the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center in New York on September 9, 2001 and the invasion of Afghanistan, October 2001 and Iraq, March 2003. The main theme of the seven reports was the notion that the Arab World is 'lagging' behind in development, suffering from cultural **deficits** notably in human rights, democracy, access to knowledge society, and empowerment of women.

Needless to show how, by a classical Orientalist turn, the Arab World is transformed into one essential bloc of 370 million people with one 'culture'. What is of interest in our context is how cultural progress slides into structural adjustments and neoliberal reforms.

In March 2004, UNDP and a number of Arab and international organizations organized a conference in Alexandria, Egypt, attended by some 250 Arab intellectuals, upon the invitation of the Egyptian President, Husni Mubarak. What is striking about the Alexandria Charter produced by the conference, is how mending cultural deficits delves into neoliberalism: under the sign of acced-

ing to the ‘knowledge society’, the conference recommendations call for more ‘structural adjustments’ and neo-liberal ‘reforms’: integrating of Arab economies into the world economy, opening them up to Direct Foreign Investments, adopting free competitive market economies, putting the financial sector as the leading sector of the Arab economies; building big banking institutions; liberating trade in services (why only services?); implementing privatization; ending government monopolies, etc. It is worth mentioning, that less than two decades after the implementation of these measures, we are told that we have become ‘rentier’ economies and that we should build productive economies!

Isn’t all this a good illustration of Gramsci’s maxim: ‘Political questions (and economic) questions become insoluble when disguised as cultural ones.’!

When everything becomes culture, terrorism (with and without ‘) is seen as a cultural-religious product and the answer: encourage ‘moderate Islam’. As for women ‘empowerment’ (ex-liberation; ex-equal rights for women) is now envisaged in terms of ‘changing the culture of women’; no need for changing the culture of men! And last but not least, the royal highway to the ‘knowledge society’ is ...translation (language again!). Here the Arab World is drastically lagging behind not only from the rest of the world with a few hundred, but its golden age during which one Abbasid caliph supervised the translation of 100,000 books, the number seemed boisterous and was reduced to 10,000 in the next AHDR report.

### *3c. Unattainable Capitalism*

As in Magritte’s famous painting, *Ceci n’est pas une pipe* – in which what we see is not a painting, but the representation of an object on a canvas – we are asked to believe that all manifestations of capitalism are not capitalism. To begin with, the term itself is rarely used, replaced by ‘political economy’ or ‘market economy’. As the developing nations suffer from ‘cultural’ deficiencies so do they suffer from economic ones. All forms of capitalism that can be expected to exist in the global south are not ‘capitalism’ they suffer, for example, from ‘crony capitalism’ (the free workings of the market obstructed by political power), patrimonialism, neo-patrimonialism (remnants of primordial structures control political power), rentier economies (they are not productive economies),

monopoly capitalism (infringes the laws of competition). Leading American-Lebanese financial economists, finely analyzing their country's financial crisis, would shout at you in anger: 'this is feudalism. Even the Greek ex-minister of the economy, Yannis Varoufakis, lent a hand to this negationist trend by coining the term 'techno-feudalism' for contemporary (or 'late') capitalism. It seems, here also, that this is not capitalism because capitalism only applies to free market competitive economy. But, as Mr. Varoufakis seems to know that competitive markets beget mega-monopolies (the likes of Microsoft, Amazon, General Electric, Exxon Mobil, Nestle, etc.), he has qualified his argument by saying that Microsoft and its sisters 'swallow' the market. Nuance.

### *3d. Social Justice.*

In its early meaning, social justice was seen as an answer to social inequalities and as the application of the right to equality. In the new lexicon, it has been purged of all references to fair, just, or **equal** distribution of wealth, income, resources, public services, life and job opportunities, or to the reduction of class and regional differences, etc. In short, social justice now come quite closer to mean its opposite, as Nancy Fraser notes, i.e. the **right to difference**, since it is most frequently used in an identitarian sense concerning feminism, anti-racism and sexual rights. The term has also acquired a set of novel meanings among which this jumble definition of the European Union: 'Strengthening Parliament, protecting human rights, encouraging social dialogue, reinforcing drug prevention and treatment, empowering women, and advocating for Youth'.

### *3e. Class.*

The 'five-letter word', as Chomsky called it, was practically banned under the Cold War. It made a modest, yet devious, appearance in the latter phase of neo-liberalism. Yet the appearance of one class served to hide other classes and the class structure as a whole. During the Cold War and the wars of national and social liberation in the three continents, the United Nations' agencies used to measure social hierarchy according to revenue. With triumphant globalization and neo-liberalism, since the eighties, the measure shifted to consumption. A study on 'The Arab middle class' by ESCWA (the UN Economic and Social Commission for Western



Asia, 2014) is a good example of this transformation. At the bottom, you have the **poor** (who consume 1-4\$/day; 12\$/day, for the United States) and on top, the **affluent**, who **earn** more than 40,000\$/year. Thomas Piketty, author of *Capitalism in the Twenty-First Century* (2014), had inquired why there are these modest figures for the top category, and why 'affluence' not 'wealth', and got for his answer: 'not to promote "social envy"'.

In between the two groups of individuals, lies the '**middle class**' which you can join if you consume more than 4\$/day (outside the US) – which is close to the pre-2019 minimum wage in Lebanon – and earn less than 40,000\$/year.

After the failed attempts to 'eradicate' poverty by the year 2015 according to the program of the Millennium, the project was downsized a few times from 'eliminating' to 'targeting' and 'reduction', before settling at providing 'social protection'. The reinvention of a 'middle class' with such a low access, was a great statistical boost: it helped magnify the importance of the meagre results in the global fight against poverty. Thus, reaching the middle class at 4+USDollars became a double fetish and a double promise: liberation from poverty on the one hand and social promotion to join the consumer society, on the other. No wonder so much efforts and funds have been invested in UN institutions on the progress of Africa, Asia and Latin American toward reaching the status of 'Middle Class Continent'! Until now, Asia seems to be at the top of the race.

### *3f. Corruption.*

Corruption has reached enormous dimensions under neo-liberalism in as much as it has been used as to cover up on other socio-economic problems (exploitation, for example, another taboo) and, ironically enough, to push for the application of more neo-liberal measures. The circle is closed. Focus is on the 'corrupt' - i.e. the politicians – the 'corruptors', the business men are excluded, to them is reserved the recommendation of 'promoting business ethics'. Though 'conflict of interests' is a current anti-corruption procedure in the private sector, it rarely appears, if ever, among the World Bank anti-corruption measures for states and governments. Typical among these for 'developing countries' are the same neo-liberal 'reforms' for liberating market forces: light budgets, down-

sizing the civil service, ending government subsidies for vital products, and the dismantling and privatization of the public sectors, etc. One wonders who were initially the victims of corruption.

*3g. Advocacy/solidarity.*

When large sections of the world population were fighting for rights, trade union demands, national and social liberation goals, ‘solidarity’ meant a bond of unity, brotherhood, and mutual help against a common adversary and for a common cause. ‘Advocacy’, which has progressively replaced it in the new vocabulary, now refers to the activity of groups, associations, civil society organizations, etc. arguing **in favor of** the cause, demands, rights, of sections of the population other than themselves and lobbying in their favor - typically minorities, refugees, immigrants, youth, marginal groups, etc.

*3b. Activist/militant.*

Another key term that has mutated is ‘militant’, a person who is active in support of a cause a goal a program of rights and demands, and who fights for them against authorities, institutions, or even raises arms against foreign occupation. The militant is being replaced by the neutral ‘activist’, a man of action, irrespective what his/her action is, or what direction it takes, and toward which goals. The keyword here is action, a value in itself. The term ‘militant’ now applies, with negative connotation, to the armed fighter and is indiscriminately applied to the terrorist jihadists of the Islamic State as to a Palestinian resistant against occupation, whereas the armed Israeli citizens who shout ‘Kill all Arabs’ – and succeed in killing a few – are still officially called ‘settlers’, which is in itself a bizarre denomination for citizens of a state who are considered illegal occupants of another people’s land!

I try to imagine how my grandson will learn about Che Guevara... Probably something like this:

‘Ernesto Guevara (alias ‘Che’): Argentinian social activist; occupied a number of government posts in post-Batista Cuba; killed in a motorcycle accident in Bolivia’.

And probably my grandson will not have the esthetic and emotional privilege or pleasure to appreciate the image of Che’s ‘descent from the cross’ as it will be banned under strict Politically Correct rules.