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(Re-)Engaging Gramsci: a response to Germain and Kenny

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In a recent issue of the *Review*, Randall Germain and Michael Kenny issued a serious challenge to neo-Gramscian scholarship in international studies,[1] claiming that 'the Italian school's appropriation of Gramsci is far more conceptually problematic than they [neo-Gramscians] acknowledge, and that their use of his framework is difficult to sustain with respect to the scholarship devoted to his ideas'.[2] In their critical probing of the neo-Gramscian IR literature, Germain and Kenny focus most closely upon two issues: Gramsci's ambiguous and contested legacy and the difficulty of establishing any 'definitive interpretation' of his work; and the appropriateness of attempting to understand transnational social relations in terms of a broadly Gramscian concept of 'civil society'. I will discuss each in turn.

Gramscian legacies

It is difficult to argue with the claim that Gramsci's legacy is fragmentary, fraught with analytical and political tensions, and eminently contestable. And the authors are, I think, correct in pointing out that Gramsci's relationship with the Marxian tradition, with its problems of base and superstructure, structural determination and potentially transformative agency, is one source of such tensions.[3] They frame some of the central issues in the following terms:

> . . . while historical change is undoubtedly understood in Gramsci's work as being mediated through collective and individual action, these actions are themselves often represented as occurring within parameters established, 'in the last instance', by political economy, that is, by the relations of class forces at particular moments of time.[4]

[1] Randall D. Germain and Michael Kenny, 'Engaging Gramsci: International Relations Theory and the New Gramscians', *Review of International Studies*, 24:1 (1998), pp. 3–21.
[2] Ibid., p. 3.
[3] For my interpretation of Gramsci's relationship to Marx, see Rupert, *Producing Hegemony* (Cambridge, 1995). Even then, I felt compelled to acknowledge 'the tension between Gramsci's dialectical openness and a Marxian teleology of proletarian revolution' and noted that I was 'increasingly troubled by this insofar as the Marxian teleology may entail too narrow an understanding of the possibilities of [historically situated political] practice' (p. 212, n.23). I am now even more uncomfortable with my earlier interpretation of historical materialism insofar as it represented the proletariat in terms of a presumptive identity of historical subject and object. Yet I do not believe this compels an abandonment of historical materialism or of a socialist political project; rather, it calls for a creative rethinking of these.
[4] Germain and Kenny, 'Engaging Gramsci', p. 9.

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> What remains open for question, in particular, is in what sense we are to understand social interaction and political change as challenging and redefining the limits of the 'possible'. How is the 'possible' constituted in real historical situations? By prior economic relations which set unbreakable limits? by actors' thoughts, which are the products of the prevailing, hegemonic 'common sense'? or by actors who, through lived experiences and shared cultural codes, learn what constitutes the 'possible'? It seems fair to argue that all three were possible for Gramsci . . .[5]

Gramsci was clearly committed to a Marxian project of socialist transformation, yet also maintained the importance and relative autonomy of non-economic forms of social agency and political struggle. He recognized the effective power over human social agents of the class-based social organization of production under capitalism, yet maintained the possibility of meaningful contests over social self-understandings and the potentially transformative implications of such contests. In light of their construal of these tensions, the authors conclude that Gramsci's thought and its more contemporary appropriations are 'ultimately problematic'.

But part of the reason these tensions begin to look like intractable and disabling problems is the way in which these authors have construed these various commitments and their implications. To begin with, it is not necessary to understand a Marxian vision of determination in terms of 'prior economic relations which set unbreakable limits'; indeed this is arguably contrary to the spirit of Marx's entire project which could be described as one of de-reification. Marx was at pains to argue that nothing in meaningful human experience is prior to the practices and (self-)productive activities of historically situated social agents, that the economic relations of capitalism are social products rather than transhistorical or natural givens, and that, far from setting unbreakable limits, they are riddled with contradictions and tensions which render them contestable and open to reconstruction.[6]

Gramsci set about attempting to understand the processes and struggles through which such a transformative agency might be constructed or thwarted. This would necessarily involve addressing social self-understandings or, as Germain and Kenny would have it, 'actors' thoughts, which are the products of the prevailing, hegemonic "common sense"'. On my reading, however, Gramsci understood popular common sense not to be monolithic or univocal, nor was hegemony an unproblematically dominant ideology which simply shut out all alternative visions or political projects.[7] Rather, common sense was understood to be a syncretic historical residue, fragmentary and contradictory, open to multiple interpretations and potentially supportive of very different kinds of social visions and political projects. And hegemony was understood as the unstable product of a continuous process of struggle, a 'war of position', a 'reciprocal siege', hardly a foreclosure of the horizons of meaningful political contestation. Once these terms are reinterpreted in these more open ways, it

[5] Ibid., p. 10.

[6] The best overview of Marx's critical project of which I am aware is Derek Sayer, *Capitalism and Modernity* (London, 1991), pp. 9–91. In addition to a brilliant exposition, Sayer provides a critical perspective on Marx's explicit Eurocentrism and his implicit masculinism.

[7] On common sense as a polyvocal and contradictory residue, see Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and tr. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Smith (New York, 1971), pp. 323–34, 419–25; on hegemony as reciprocal siege and open-ended relation see ibid., pp. 182, 210, 239, 350. For my appropriation of 'common sense', see M. Rupert, 'Globalization and Contested Common Sense in the US,' in S. Gill and J. Mittelman (eds.), *Innovation and Transformation in International Studies* (Cambridge, 1997), esp. pp. 138–40.

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becomes possible to imagine a Gramscian Marxism in which concretely situated social actors 'through lived experiences and shared cultural codes, learn what constitutes the "possible"', but could conceivably rearticulate those experiences and codes in potentially transformative ways.

There are viable interpretations of Gramscian historical materialism which, while not escaping altogether the tensions to which Germain and Kenny call attention, provide conceptual tools for negotiating them. In particular, I have found Stuart Hall's non-teleological conception of a 'marxism without guarantees' especially helpful in thinking about this set of issues. Hall frankly acknowledges the drawbacks inherent in many interpretations of classical Marxist theory, and seeks to address them through a sophisticated combination of discourse analysis and Gramscian historical materialism.[8]

> [T]he class/ideology identity marxism *assumes* in the beginning is, for me, the end result, the product of politics. Politics must always construct meanings and deliver the group to the slogans, not assume that the group always 'really' knew the slogans and always believed in them . . . It's quite possible for a class to be mobilized behind other slogans . . . That is what gives political practice a certain necessary openness. Somebody else might have a more effective politics and a organize the class around some other slogan; then the connections get forged in a different way.[9]

Hall borrows from Laclau the notion that there is no necessary correspondence between class position and ideology, no fixed set of social self-understandings with which a particular group must identify by virtue of its relation to the means of production.[10] And from Volosinov he takes the insight that language is 'multi-accentual', implying that there are multiple possible meanings which might be associated with any particular sign, and that these associations may be objects of social struggle. 'This approach replaces the notion of fixed meanings and class-ascribed ideologies with the concepts of ideological terrains of struggle and the task

[8] For a helpful overview of the British cultural studies movement with which Hall's work is associated, see Graeme Turner, *British Cultural Studies*, 2nd edn (London, 1996). The classic formulation of Hall's interpretation of historical materialism is his 'The Problem of Ideology—Marxism without Guarantees', in D. Morley and K. H. Chen (eds.), *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues* (London, 1996); see also the essays collected in S. Hall, *The Hard Road to Renewal* (London, 1988), and S. Hall, 'The Toad in the Garden: Thatcherism among the Theorists', in C. Nelson and L. Grossberg (eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Chicago, 1988); and on representation and discourse, 'The Work of Representation', in S. Hall (ed.), *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London, 1997). My claim that Hall's version of historical materialism is viable and helpful does not mean that it is uncontested: for critiques of Hall's work and tendencies toward 'ideologism' to which his approach may lend itself, see B. Jessop et al., 'Authoritarian Populism, Two Nations, and Thatcherism', *New Left Review*, 147 (1984), and Paul Smith, *Millennial Dreams* (London, 1997), pp. 152–7. I gratefully acknowledge the collegial support of Shampa Biswas and Mark Laffey, both of whom steered me in the direction of Hall's work at a time when I was becoming open to it. Particularly noteworthy is Mark Laffey's superb 'Ideology and the Limits of Gramscian Theory in International Relations', paper delivered to the annual meeting of the International Studies Association, Atlanta, GA, 1992, the first attempt, to my knowledge, to use Hall's work as a vehicle for critically rethinking Gramscian international studies.

[9] Hall, 'Toad', p. 60. On possible articulations of a regressive populist political agenda in the US, see M. Rupert, 'Contesting Hegemony: Americanism and Far-right Ideologies of Globalization', in K. Burch and R. Denemark (eds.), *Constituting International Political Economy* (New York, 1997); and M. Rupert, 'Globalization and American Common Sense', *New Political Economy*, 2 (1977).

[10] It is important to emphasize here that the thesis of 'no necessary correspondence' is not the same as claiming a necessary non-correspondence.

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of ideological transformation.'[11] Such transformations may be accomplished through practices of 'articulation', the forging of contingent discursive linkages between symbols and social systems of meaning, and between these ideologies and particular social subjects. According to Hall, this conception 'enables us to think how an ideology empowers people, enabling them to begin to make some sense . . . of their historical situation, without reducing those forms of intelligibility to their socio-economic or class location or social position'.[12]

This should not be understood as an abandonment of historical materialism or of an identifiable socialist project. Rather, Hall is seeking to understand the conditions and processes through which ideological self-understandings are formed and re-formed within particular historical circumstances.

> Ideologies may not be affixed, as organic entities, to their appropriate classes, but this does not mean that the production and transformation of ideology in society could proceed free of or outside the structuring lines of power and class.
>
> . . . class interest, class position, and material factors are useful, even necessary, starting points in the analysis of any ideological formation. But they are *not sufficient*—because they are not sufficiently determinate—to account for the actual empirical disposition and movement of ideas in real historical societies.[13]

'It is therefore possible', Hall tells us, 'to hold both the proposition that material interests help to structure ideas and the proposition that position in the social structure has the tendency to influence the direction of social thought, without also arguing that material factors univocally determine ideology or that class position represents a guarantee that a class will have the appropriate forms of consciousness'.[14] And here we arrive at Hall's appropriation of Gramsci as the theorist of open-ended ideological struggle, the 'war of position' waged across various social sites:

> Where Gramsci departs from classical versions of Marxism is that he does not think that politics is an arena which simply reflects already unified collective political identities, already constituted forms of struggle. Politics for him is not a dependent sphere. It is where forces and relations, in the economy, in society, in culture, have to be actively worked on to produce particular forms of power, forms of domination. This is the production of politics—politics as a production. This conception of politics is fundamentally contingent, fundamentally open-ended.[15]

While there are many Gramscis for which textual warrants may be produced, Hall's Gramsci is one which sees history as a complex and contradictory story of social self-production under specific social circumstances; it is, in Gramsci's words, a process of '"becoming" which . . . does not start from unity, but contains in itself the reasons for a possible unity'.[16] I understand this to mean that the class-based relations of production under capitalism create the *possibility* of particular kinds of agency, but these possibilities can only be realized through the political practices of

[11] Hall, 'Problem of Ideology', p. 41.
[12] 'On Postmodernism and Articulation: An Interview with Stuart Hall', in Morley and Chen (eds.), *Stuart Hall*, pp. 131–50, at p. 142.
[13] Hall, 'Toad', p. 45.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Hall, *Hard Road*, p. 169.
[16] Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, pp. 355–6.

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concretely situated social actors, practices which must negotiate the tensions and possibilities—the multiple social identities, powers, and forms of agency—resident within popular common sense. In Hall's appealing formulation, this means that social relations of production may be understood as having some determining effects in the first instance, rather than the last.[17]

Gramsci and transnational social relations

A second important theme in the critique offered by Germain and Kenny is that it may be illegitimate to attempt to understand transnational relations in terms appropriated from Gramsci insofar as the meanings which he ascribed to the concepts he employed were, for him, always embedded within the concept of the nation-state. They affirm that Gramsci developed his notion of civil society as a relational concept, an organic aspect of his theory of hegemony as secured within an 'integral' or 'extended' state, that is, the state understood as encompassing relations of coercion and consent, political society and civil society. Our critics ask, 'Can Gramsci's notion of hegemony, especially where it rests on developments within the sphere of civil society, sustain its explanatory power outside of the national social context within which it was developed?'[18]

Again I would suggest that what is at issue here is not whether neo-Gramscian scholars of IR (or, for that matter, their critics) have got their Gramsci wrong, but rather that there are many ways of reading him, some of which may be more enabling and less problematic than others. In this case, I believe the reading of Germain and Kenny to be an unduly narrow and constricting one.

On my reading, Gramsci was committed to a transformative political project which would entail more enabling, participatory and democratic forms of political practice. To the extent that the modern 'political' form of state is made possible by capitalism's abstraction of the explicitly political out of economic life—and the corresponding representation of social agents as abstract individuals instrumentally interacting in a market context—a project of socialist democratization would necessarily include supplanting this historically peculiar form of political organization.[19] It would not do, then, to theorize the politics of such a transformation in terms of concepts which are rigidly wedded to the historically specific political forms which the project must transcend.

I argue that the political significance of civil society and ideological contestation need not be circumscribed by the borders of the state, for the state itself is being transformed as the new hegemony is being constructed and new ways of organizing social relations are being learned. In Gramsci's words: 'Every relationship of "hegemony" is necessarily an educative relationship and occurs not only within a nation, between the various forces of which the nation is composed, but in the

[17] Hall, 'Problem of Ideology', p. 45.
[18] Germain and Kenny, 'Engaging Gramsci', p. 17.
[19] Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, pp. 253, 255, 257, 259, 263. This kind of critique is implied in Gramsci's critique of liberalism and economism: see ibid., pp. 158–68. For more contemporary analyses along these lines, see Paul Thomas, *Alien Politics* (London, 1994); Ellen Meiksins Wood, *Democracy against Capitalism* (Cambridge, 1995).

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international and world-wide field, between complexes of national and continental civilizations'.[20] The democratizing project of historical materialism necessarily entails a transnational political horizon precisely because capitalism is not coextensive with the 'political' state, but is a transnational system of democratically unaccountable and exploitative 'private' power, economistically representing itself in terms of 'the ideas of the Free Trade movement', as if it was not itself a political project, an emerging transnational structure of class dominance.[21] It is the transnational structure of capitalism, including its characteristic disjuncture of the economic and the political, which creates the potential for, and the need for, transnational political movements of resistance or transformation developing out of the public spaces of civil society. And, at the close of the twentieth century, these contestable public spaces are increasingly likely to have transnational aspects.

In Gramsci's time, the development of civil society in the West entailed the emergence of institutions and practices through which mass political participation might be mobilized or channelled, especially mass-based political parties and trade unions, but also churches, education, journalism, art and literature, and so on.[22] In our time, many of these have transcended the boundaries of particular states and represent important potential resources for the contestation of the powers of transnational capital. For example, in my own work I have become aware of emergent networks of religious and civic groups, unions, environmental groups, feminist organizations, and a variety of other sorts of associations linking communities and people across the North American continent, seeking to develop social self-understandings and common moral and political horizons which are not reducible to the imperatives of market competition and corporate profit.[23]

Gramsci repeatedly emphasized that the necessary starting points in the dialectic of global and local are the historically specific constellations of social forces at the local or national level; indeed this was the rationale behind his 'war of position' strategy for socialist politics in the West, where the institutions and practices of civil society were relatively highly developed.[24] Of course, these local constellations of forces do not emerge in isolation from the global, but are themselves shaped through the dialectic of global/local. 'It is also necessary', he reminds us, 'to take into account that international relations intertwine with these internal relations of nation-states, creating new, unique, and historically concrete combinations'.[25] In short, I see Gramsci arguing for a dialectical understanding of world politics which cannot proceed in abstraction from the specific constellations of factors—global and local—which have shaped the historical production of particular states, the

[20] That this 'educational' relationship is not merely the one-way imposition of a dominant (global) culture upon a subordinate (local) one, but a dialogue or negotiation, is suggested by the passage which appears immediately above the one just quoted, where Gramsci says: 'the relationship between teacher and pupil is active and reciprocal so that every teacher is always a pupil and every pupil a teacher'. Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, p. 350; see also pp. 240–1.

[21] Ibid., p. 159. For a critical analysis of the political project of the contemporary 'free trade movement', see my '(Re)Politicizing the Global Economy', *Review of International Political Economy*, 1995.

[22] Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, p. 243.

[23] For a listing of such organizations, see R. Hernandez and E. Sanchez, *Cross-border Links* (Albuquerque, NM, 1992).

[24] Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, pp. 176, 239–43.

[25] Ibid., p. 182; see also p. 116.

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emergence of international and transnational relations, and historical possibilities for transformative politics.

I would not disagree with our critics, then, when they suggest that Gramsci might be wary of any attempts to abstract global civil society from concrete processes of its production, but it is difficult for me to see how it would serve his larger purposes—or the political purposes of the present—to delineate the terrain of political struggle within the territorial boundaries of the nation-state, or to insist that the notion of civil society has no meaning at a transnational scale because we are unable to identify a global counterpart to the 'political' state. I read Gramsci not as insisting on a strict institutional correspondence of state/civil society, but as directing us toward the relations of coercion/consent at play in various historical social forms, none of which are wholly understandable in abstraction from their relation to capitalism and its peculiar forms of social organization. Among the historical forms of particular relevance to world politics in the late twentieth century, I will claim, are institutions and practices of civil society which may have emergent transnational dimensions. Such sites may be important for the development of social self-understandings, practices and organizations which are not circumscribed by state-based conceptions of politics, which are capable of (re-)politicizing the world economy, and through which various social actors may find the terms in which to frame a common interest to confront and challenge transnational capital. Absent such sites of negotiation and contestation, it is hard to imagine how such challenges might emerge.

Silences

I conclude by acknowledging what I take to be the most telling point made by our critics. Germain and Kenny accept that Gramsci has some very important things to say about international relations and world order, but insist also that there is much he does not say. In particular, they point to gender and the family as 'central locations and relations of social power within modern societies', largely unaddressed by Gramsci (and by Marx).[26] In this I think they may be correct.[27] The force of that admission is, for me, yet another reason to feel powerfully attracted to Stuart Hall's version of neo-Gramscian theory: I believe Hall's concept of 'articulation' can open the way to constructive engagements of historical materialist theories and political projects with those centrally concerned with challenging oppressions of race and gender.[28] Further, it seems to offer a language which might enable discussions of the complex intersection of hegemonic forces, resistances, and counter-hegemonies

[26] Germain and Kenny, 'Engaging Gramsci', p. 19. My thinking on these issues has been influenced by Sayer's discussion of Marx's preoccupation with wage labour and his corresponding failure to theorize the gendered division of labour (including unwaged 'domestic' labour) and the 'private' sphere of the family. Sayer, *Capitalism and Modernity*, pp. 30–2, 36–7.

[27] Although an anonymous reviewer has suggested to me that it is possible to read Gramsci in such a way that insights into gendered social relations may be gleaned. Yet another re-reading, it seems, is in order.

[28] See, e.g., S. Hall, 'Gramsci's Relevance for the Study of Race and Ethnicity', in Morley and Chen (eds.), *Stuart Hall*, pp. 411–40.

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across cultures, without foreclosing this reciprocally educative relationship by imposing upon it an implicitly Eurocentric teleology.

In the spirit of our critics, then, I remain engaged with reading and re-reading Gramsci and his latter-day interpreters, seeking to address tensions and lacunae in his thought and in mine. I am grateful to Randy Germain and Michael Kenny for encouraging us to continue to critically re-engage Gramsci and to assess his potential theoretical relevance in terms of the conditions and struggles of the late twentieth century.

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