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Gramsci, the United Front Comintern and Democratic Strategy

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Introduction

Antonio Gramsci is rightly regarded as one of the most important Western Marxists of the 20th century. This is largely due to the work of scholars like Perry Anderson, Noberto Bobbio, Stuart Hall and Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. They returned to the history of 20th century Marxism in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s to rediscover neglected intellectual currents, unsullied by the sins of Stalinism, which might still provide intellectual insights to radical socialist and democratic politics within and beyond the Marxist tradition.\(^1\) Gramsci’s Italian heritage – and critical interest in the work of Croce and Machiavelli – was obviously important here. But of equal significance was the fact that immediately prior to his imprisonment in 1926 by Mussolini’s fascist state, Gramsci had penned two important letters to the Comintern that were critical of the early phase of Stalinism and its attack on party democracy.\(^2\) For some at least, these letters represented a kind of parting of the ways between East and West within Marxism,\(^3\) and Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks* emerge as one of the first great works of the Western Marxist tradition in its rejection of Eastern-style Marxism (and Stalinism in particular), and its development of a body of ideas tailored to the unique challenges of Western societies and their democratic culture.

One of the most important aspects of this East/West distinction has undoubtedly turned on the issue of political strategy. Gramsci’s later writings in particular argue that a more democratic strategy would be required in the West than that which was employed in Russia in 1917. This strategy, while not rejecting a subsequent moment of revolutionary
force, would be primarily characterized by an ideological battle to manufacture mass consent in civil society (a key dimension of the battle for ‘hegemony’). From very different perspectives, Anderson and Laclau and Mouffe acknowledged the ‘Eastern’ sources of this Gramscian reconfiguration of political strategy for the West. Laclau and Mouffe, for example, identify the emergence of the concept of hegemony itself (and its ‘logic of contingency’) as partly a consequence of the necessity of Lenin and the Bolsheviks to develop a political strategy of building democratic alliances in response to the uneven development of capitalism in Russia and the need to defeat and transcend Tsarism.4 Anderson, by contrast, points to the ‘Eastern’ origins of Gramsci’s concept of hegemony by relating its emergence to debates in Russian social democracy and the strategic coordinates of the United Front tactic devised by Comintern leaders in 1921–2.5

In what follows in this chapter I pick up on Anderson’s second point in particular and explore further the Eastern sources of Gramsci’s theory of hegemony and more specifically the democratic strategy embedded in it. I do this by carrying out a closer analysis of the relationship of Gramsci’s thought to the United Front Comintern than Anderson accomplished which, I maintain, is a relatively under-researched aspect of Gramsci’s thought.6 Drawing on recent Comintern scholarship, the chapter considers the United Front as chronologically and spatially a broader and more uneven political phenomenon in the 1920s than Anderson or Laclau and Mouffe have recognized. They, in fact, tend to regard the United Front as a relatively short affair that was quickly and emphatically overtaken by extensive ‘Bolshevization’ and ‘Stalinization’ of Comintern parties in the aftermath of Lenin’s death.7 I maintain, by contrast, that as a Comintern Representative in Moscow in 1922–3 at the height of the United Front and then as leader of the PCd’I (partito comunista d’Italia) responsible for its implementation in Italy from 1924–6, Gramsci continued to engage in the politics of the United Front that had by no means been exhausted in this later period – at least not in Italy. In the above literature in general, Gramsci’s Western Marxism is rightly defined against the Stalinist ‘Third Period’ of the Comintern (1928–33), but the focus on ‘Bolshevization’ and ‘Stalinization’ leads to a certain neglect of the Comintern’s ‘second period’ (i.e. the period of stabilization and the United Front) and consequently obfuscates to some degree Gramsci’s full intellectual debt to the ‘Eastern’ leaders of the Third International in his later writings.8 Retrieving this Comintern intervention in Western democratic politics therefore not only complicates any crude distinction between East/West in terms of Marxist theory in the