

Althusser and Poulantzas: Hegemony and the State

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The aim of this paper is to examine Althusser's and Poulantzas's confrontation with the work of Antonio Gramsci regarding in particular questions of hegemony and State theory. I try to retrace their various encounters and missed encounters with the work of Gramsci in order to show both the profound influence it had upon them but also how they both in fact misinterpreted crucial aspects of Gramsci's work. Regarding Althusser, I stress the influence Gramsci had upon his conceptualization of the Ideological Apparatuses of the State but also his inability to discern the non idealist and non teleological character of Gramsci's historicism and his tendency to underestimate the complexity of the notion of hegemony and Gramsci's conception of the integral State. Moreover, I try to see this in the context of Althusser's interventions in the debates on the State and strategy of the 1970s. Regarding Poulantzas, I stress his continuing dialogue with Gramsci, and how Gramsci influenced his theory of the State. I also stress that one of the contradictions of Poulantzas's work was that the closer he came to thematic and conceptualization that were compatible with Gramsci's theory of hegemony and the integral State, the more critical he tended to be towards Gramsci. Based on this elaboration, I try to stress the need for new theorizations of both State and strategy based upon both Gramsci and the work of Althusser and Poulantzas.

Key words: Althusser; Poulantzas; Gramsci; Hegemony; Integral State.

Introduction

Both Louis Althusser and Nicos Poulantzas in their theoretical trajectories confronted the work of Gramsci, saw it as an important theoretical and political challenge, criticized it and the same time were forced to enter into a dialogue with it. In this article I try to revisit their confrontation with Gramsci's conceptualization of hegemony, going back to a series of encounters and missed encounters with Gramsci that also bring forward important tensions running through Marxist theory.

1. *Althusser: the missed encounter with Gramsci?*

1.1. Althusser encounters Gramsci

Althusser's encounter with the work of Gramsci in the early 1960s was an important event in his theoretical development. Althusser

discovered Gramsci along with Machiavelli¹ and was initially enthusiastic about these discoveries. We know from his correspondence with Franca Madonia that he read Gramsci during the summer of 1961² and that he returned to Gramsci during the preparation of his 1962 course on Machiavelli³. On January 1962 during the preparation of the course on Machiavelli, the ‘forced writing’ as he describes it, he again remembers «that ease [*aisance*] that I had found in Gramsci»⁴. This first course on Machiavelli was intense for him, both on a philosophical and on a personal level, with Althusser insisting that «it was about me that I had spoken: the will of realism (will of being someone real, to have something to do with real life) and a “de-realising” [*déréalisante*] situation (exactly my present delirium)»⁵. Althusser maintained this respect for Gramsci’s reading of Machiavelli, making positive references to Gramsci in *Machiavelli and Us*, his 1970s manuscript on Machiavelli, in which he basically accepts Gramsci’s position that the theoretical and political challenge Machiavelli faced was that of the formation of a national state in Italy⁶. The importance of this initial encounter with Gramsci is evident in “Contradiction and Overdetermination”.

«[T]he *theory of the specific effectivity of the superstructures and other “circumstances” largely remains to be elaborated*; and before the theory of their effectivity or simultaneously (for it is by formulating their effectivity that their *essence* can be attained) there must be elaboration of *the theory of the particular essence of the specific elements of the superstructure*. Like the map of Africa before the great explorations, this theory remains a realm sketched in outline, with its great mountain chains and rivers, but often unknown in detail beyond a few well-known regions. Who has *really* attempted to follow up the explorations of Marx and Engels? I can only think of Gramsci»⁷.

¹ MORFINO 2015, p. 62.

² See the reference in his 28 November 1961 letter (ALTHUSSER 1997, p. 122).

³ In ALTHUSSER 2006b.

⁴ ALTHUSSER 1997, p. 161.

⁵ *Ivi*, p. 163.

⁶ ALTHUSSER 1999, p. 11.

⁷ ALTHUSSER 1969, pp. 113-14. One could also see the reference that Althusser makes to Gramsci in a letter to Hélène Rytman in August 1962, during the preparation of “Contradiction and Overdetermination”. Althusser there refers to his need to proceed with real «*discoveries* [...] in the line of what Gramsci

In a footnote on the same passage Althusser opposes the originality of Gramsci to the Hegelianism of Lukács:

«Lukács's attempts, which are limited to the history of literature and philosophy, seem to me to be tainted by a guilty Hegelianism: as if Lukács wanted to absolve through Hegel his upbringing by Simmel and Dilthey. *Gramsci* is of another stature. The jottings and developments in his *Prison Notebooks* touch on all the basic problems of Italian and European history: economic, social, political and cultural. There are also some completely original and in some cases genial insights into the problem, basic today, of the superstructures. Also, as always with true discoveries, there are *new concepts*, for example, *hegemony*: a remarkable example of a theoretical solution in outline to the problems of the interpenetration of the economic and the political. Unfortunately, at least as far as France is concerned, who has taken up and followed through Gramsci's theoretical effort?»⁸.

I think that this reference to Gramsci in "Contradiction is very important". At the moment that Althusser presented a highly original anti-teleological and anti-metaphysical reading of historical materialism, based upon the singularity of conjunctures and the complexity of determination, he thought of Gramsci and hegemony as a crucial conceptual innovation to deal with these questions. The same line of reasoning regarding the importance of Gramsci as a thinker of the superstructures is evident in Althusser's elaboration on the concept of the Ideological State Apparatuses (with its analogy with the concept of hegemonic apparatuses). Althusser cites Gramsci as an important influence in the development of the concept of Ideological State Apparatuses.

«To my knowledge, Gramsci is the only one who went any distance in the road I am taking. He had the "remarkable" idea that the State could not be

had started to make» (ALTHUSSER 2011, p. 411). For a reading of Gramsci in relation to the analysis of the conjuncture see Juan Carlos Portantiero "Gramsci y el análisis de coyuntura (algunas notas)", in PORTANTIERO 1981. For a reading of Althusser's references to Gramsci in *For Marx* see FROSINI 2006.

⁸ ALTHUSSER 1969, p. 114.

reduced to the (Repressive) State Apparatus, but included, as he put it, a certain number of institutions from “*civil society*”: the Church, the Schools, the trade unions, etc. Unfortunately, Gramsci did not systematize his institutions, which remained in the state of acute but fragmentary notes»⁹.

However, in many instances Althusser chose Gramsci as a theoretical opponent. First, with his attack on Gramsci’s historicism in *Reading Capital* and then with his attack on Gramsci’s theorization of hegemony in the 1970s.

1.2 The attack on “historicism”

In *Reading Capital* Althusser feared that Gramsci’s attempt towards a theorization of the historicity of social forms would undermine his own project of bringing back scientific rigour to Marxism. The interconnection between a theory of ideology and a theory of the scientificity of Marxism and Marxist philosophy seemed to him incompatible with Gramsci’s conception of theory.

«Gramsci constantly declares that a scientific theory, or such and such a category of a science, is a “superstructure” or a “historical category” which he assimilates to a “human relation”. [...] To make science a superstructure is to think of it as one of those “organic” ideologies which form such a close “bloc” with the structure that they have the same “history” as it does! [...] As for science, it may well arise from an ideology, detach itself from its field in order to constitute itself as a science, but precisely this detachment, this “break”, inaugurates a new form of historical existence and temporality which together save science [...] from the common fate of a single history: that of the “historical bloc” unifying structure and superstructure. Idealism is an ideological reflection of the temporality peculiar to science, the rhythm of its development, the kind of continuity and punctuation which seem to save it from the vicissitudes of political and economic history in the form of a historicity and temporality; in this way it hypostasizes a real phenomenon which needs quite different categories if it is to be thought, but which *must be thought* by distinguishing between the relatively autonomous and peculiar history of scientific knowledge and the other modalities of historical existence

⁹ ALTHUSSER 1971, p. 142.

(those of the ideological and politico-legal superstructures, and that of the economic structure)»¹⁰.

In a July 1965 letter to Franca Madonia Gramsci is praised for his political outlook and criticized for his positions on philosophy and ideology

«G. had never read *Capital* and it was manifest that he did not know the content of the Book, he almost never talks about political economy [...] He is political 100%: the Machiavelli of modern times, he reads Lenin through Machiavelli and also Machiavelli through Lenin [...] His analysis remains purely formal [...] he does not pose the question *for what reason* an ideology (philosophy) can be organically diffused into the people and become “historical”»¹¹.

Therefore Gramsci was to be considered an important theoretician of the superstructures and of questions of state ideological apparatuses, but he was accused of lacking the necessary theoretical rigour and of reproducing idealist and historicist elements. Althusser's distinction between «practical concepts»¹² – and proper theoretical concepts in the sense of what he termed Generalities III – helped this critical inclusion of certain Gramscian notions without excluding the philosophical polemic. In a March 1965 letter to Franca Madonia we find a mixture of political admiration and philosophical critique regarding Gramsci:

«the disrespect I have for Gramsci is purely philosophical, because he was a master spirit, without a rival in his theoretical insight in the domain of history»¹³.

Althusser could not accept the complexity and full force of Gramsci's elaborations and his attempt to think the philosophy of

¹⁰ ALTHUSSER AND BALIBAR 1970, p. 133.

¹¹ ALTHUSSER 1997, p. 624. In the same letter, he insists that Gramsci's writings have «profound weaknesses», that he held the Catholic Church as the model for philosophy as world-view and that his theory of ideology is purely formal. On Althusser's reading and misreading of Gramsci see THOMAS 2009 and THOMAS 2013.

¹² ALTHUSSER 1969, pp. 243-45.

¹³ ALTHUSSER 1997, p. 609.

praxis as theoretical form that transcends the philosophy/scientific theory dichotomy, as an actual historical materialism, a laboratory of concepts that would enable us to think the complex and over-determined histories and historicities traversing the terrain of social praxis, that had to be conceptualized and at the same time transformed. Despite the analogies with Althusser's own attempts at that period to think over-determination and plural historical times condensed in the singularity of the conjuncture, it was impossible for him to incorporate the full force of Gramsci's investigations.

However, this was based upon a surface reading of the notion of absolute historicism in Gramsci. Gramsci's historicism had nothing to do with any teleological and metaphysical conception of history. Gramsci's own detailed references to the complex, uneven and multi-temporal character of the process of the emergence of bourgeois hegemony attest to this. Instead of a grand narrative of a linear historical tendency, what we have are histories of many singular processes and practices. Gramsci's conception and emphasis on the molecular also point to this direction¹⁴. Historical tendencies, such as the emergence of the hegemony of a class, are the result of molecular processes. The "social ontology" underneath Gramsci's historicism is in fact an ontology of singularities and encounters, closer in this sense to Deleuze or Althusser's own later aleatory materialism¹⁵, rather than Hegel. The following passage exemplifies the distance between Gramsci and any teleological historicism:

«It would be possible to study concretely the formation of a collective historical movement, analysing it in all its molecular phases –a thing which is rarely done, since it would weigh every treatment down. Instead, currents of opinion are normally taken as already constituted around a group or a dominant personality. This is the problem which in modern times is expressed in terms of the party, or coalition of related parties: how a party is first set up, how its organisational strength and social influence are developed, etc. It requires an extremely minute, molecular process of exhaustive analysis in every detail, the documentation for which is made up of an endless quantity of books, pamphlets, review and newspaper articles, conversations and oral

¹⁴ On the notion of the molecular in Gramsci see FORENZA 2009; FILIPPINI 2015, pp. 96-102.

¹⁵ See the texts in ALTHUSSER 2006a.

debates repeated countless times, and which in their gigantic aggregation represent this long labour which gives birth to a collective will with a certain degree of homogeneity-with the degree necessary and sufficient to achieve an action which is coordinated and simultaneous in the time and the geographical space in which the historical event takes place»¹⁶.

This distrust is also related to Althusser's fear that Gramsci underestimated the importance of the relation of philosophy to sciences. Even after abandoning his initial conceptualization of a potential «Theory of theoretical practice» Althusser insisted on the specific relation of philosophy to the sciences. This is evident in his 1968 letter to "Rinascita" on Gramsci's thought:

«Because Gramsci did not think the specific relation that philosophy establishes with the sciences, he constantly tends to reduce and completely assimilate "philosophy" to a "worldview," leaving only a simple formal difference to distinguish them»¹⁷.

Consequently for Althusser, what «is authentic in Gramsci's historicism is the affirmation of the political nature of philosophy, the thesis of the historical character of social formations (and of the modes of production of which they are composed), the correlative thesis of the possibility of revolution, the demand for the unification of theory and practice»¹⁸. However, in his manuscript *Philosophy for non-philosophers* Althusser has a more positive appreciation of Gramsci, especially when discussing the question of the spontaneous conception of philosophy people tend to have:

«Here I am simply summarizing the thought of the Italian Marxist philosopher Gramsci on this point. You can see, from this example, how a materialist philosopher reasons. He doesn't "tell himself stories"; he doesn't make lofty speeches; he doesn't say that "everyone is a revolutionary". He lets people talk and he tells things the way they are»¹⁹.

¹⁶ GRAMSCI 1971, p. 194; GRAMSCI 1977, p. 1058; Q8, § 195.

¹⁷ ALTHUSSER 2016a, p. 4.

¹⁸ *Ivi*, p. 5.

¹⁹ ALTHUSSER 2017, p. 25.

Although Althusser has in *Philosophy for Non-Philosophers* a conception of philosophy as theoretical laboratory²⁰, which is reminiscent of Gramsci's conception of «philosophy of praxis», in the sense of philosophy's ability to forge and adjust concepts, he nevertheless confines it to philosophies associated with dominant ideologies, maintaining for the materialist practice of philosophy the more deconstructive role of undermining the idealism of dominant philosophical forms. This is the tension running through other texts of that period such as the 1976 "Transformation of Philosophy":

«To support our argument by comparison with the revolutionary State, which ought to be a State that is a "non-State" – that is, a State tending to its own dissolution, to be replaced by forms of free association – one might equally say that the philosophy which obsessed Marx, Lenin and Gramsci ought to be a "non-philosophy" – that is, one which ceases to be produced in the form of a philosophy, whose function of theoretical hegemony will disappear in order to make way for new forms of philosophical existence. And just as the free association of workers ought, according to Marx, to replace the State so as to play a totally different role from that of the State (not one of violence and repression), so it can be said that the new forms of philosophical existence linked to the future of these free associations will cease to have as their essential function the constitution of the dominant ideology, with all the compromises and exploitation that accompany it, in order to promote the liberation and free exercise of social practices and human ideas»²¹.

Althusser insisted on a distinction between philosophy, science and political practice and on a certain conception of philosophy as under-labourer of revolutionary practice and theory that made it impossible to fully endorse something like Gramsci's philosophy of praxis as a theoretical laboratory producing new forms of theoretical and political thinking at the intersection of philosophy, science and politics²².

²⁰ *Ivi*, pp. 168-76.

²¹ ALTHUSSER 1990, pp. 264-5.

²² For a more detailed comparison between Althusser's and Gramsci's conceptions of philosophy see SOTIRIS 2016.

1.3 The difficult confrontation with the notion of hegemony

Althusser returns to the notion of hegemony in the texts on ideology and in particular “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses”. Althusser preferred hegemony, as a notion, rather than domination when referring to the ideological level: «*no class can hold state power over a long period without at the same time exercising its hegemony over and in the Ideological State Apparatuses*»²³. However, there are also references to political hegemony²⁴. Similar references to hegemony can be found in other texts of the 1970s such as his 1975 “Soutenance d’Amiens”²⁵ or his 1976 “Note on the ISAs”²⁶. There is also a reference to hegemony in the lectures that were later published as *Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists*: «We are speaking here of an enterprise of *hegemonic* character (Gramsci): obtaining the *consent* of the masses through the diffusion of ideology (through the presentation and inculcation of culture)»²⁷. However, in all these references to hegemony he did not attempt to think more thoroughly its content, treating “hegemony” as just a form of exercise of power that was not limited to coercive political domination.

In the second half of the 1970s Althusser became even more critical of Gramsci. The target now was not Gramsci’s historicism but his conception of hegemony. As Vittorio Morfino has stressed, Althusser «[i]n 1965, he attacks historicism as a paradoxical [...] form of justification of Stalinism. In 1977-78 he attacks the concept of hegemony as the inspiring concept for Eurocommunism»²⁸.

An entire section of his 1978 *Marx in his Limits* is devoted to criticism of Gramsci and his notion of hegemony²⁹. This criticism is over-determined by political considerations. Althusser’s interventions in

²³ ALTHUSSER 2014, p. 245

²⁴ *Ivi*, p. 249.

²⁵ In ALTHUSSER 1976.

²⁶ In ALTHUSSER 2014.

²⁷ ALTHUSSER 1990, p. 93.

²⁸ MORFINO 2015, p. 81.

²⁹ ALTHUSSER 2006a, pp. 139-149. Aspects of this criticism can also be found in other texts of the same period. See for example his 1977 intervention on the Crisis of Marxism (ALTHUSSER 1998, pp. 267-80).

the late 1970s were an effort to fight against what he perceived as a right-wing eurocommunist turn away from a revolutionary politics of smashing the State apparatus³⁰. This critique was intensified in another unpublished text by Althusser from the same period, entitled *Que faire?*, in which Althusser accuses Gramsci's concepts as being tainted by an idealist and normative conception of the state and the different political forms³¹.

Althusser insisted on the distinction between his own conception of ideological State apparatuses and Gramsci's notion of the *hegemonic apparatuses*, stressing that Gramsci defined these apparatuses on the basis of their result, whereas Althusser insisted on the need to define them on the basis of their cause:

«Gramsci, in sum, defines his apparatuses in terms of their effect or result, hegemony, which is also poorly conceived. I, for my part, was attempting to define the ISAs in terms of their “motor cause”: ideology»³².

This is also related to the metaphor of the machine that Althusser used for the theorization of the State. If the State is a machine transforming social force into political power and force of law, then it is important to examine the particular “energy” that is being transformed in every apparatus: «a petrol engine runs on petrol; an Ideological State Apparatus runs on ideology; but what does a hegemonic apparatus run on?»³³. Althusser criticizes Gramsci for his conception of civil society, since for Althusser it is as if Gramsci on the one hand maintains the distinction between the “private” and the “public” realms and on the other confuses all of them in the State. For Althusser this is the problem with the «adventures of *hegemony*»:

«Furthermore, Gramsci affirms that the hegemonic apparatuses are part of “civil society” (which is nothing but the whole set of them, unlike traditional civil society, which is all of society minus the state), on the pretext that they are

³⁰ For Althusser's political and theoretical considerations of that period, see GOSHGARIAN 2006.

³¹ MORFINO 2015a, pp. 77-81.

³² ALTHUSSER 2006a, p. 139.

³³ *Ivi*, p. 140.

“private”. Thinking, as he does, in terms of the distinction between public (the state) and private (civil society), Gramsci nevertheless does eventually come round, in one of those stupefying reversals that make one dizzy because they contradict, word for word, a formula he defends in the same breath, to saying that “civil society... is the State” [...]. When one thinks in this perspective, one embarks on the adventures of, not the dialectic (Gramsci had plenty of them, and to spare – adventurous verbal manipulations, at any rate), but hegemony»³⁴.

Althusser thinks that the starting point for Gramsci’s conception of hegemony (which he considers contradictory, referring positively to Perry Anderson’s “Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci”³⁵) remains trapped in a classical conception of power as force and consent, in fact reproducing the Machiavellian image of the Prince as centaur, man and beast. The consequence is that for Althusser Gramsci does not define hegemony:

«He has the state, with its two “moments” or “elements”: namely, Force, and hegemony or consensus. He has “civil society”, which, for him, comprises the whole set of “hegemonic apparatuses”; we do not know what they run on (a petrol engine runs on petrol; an Ideological State Apparatus runs on ideology; but what does a hegemonic apparatus run on?). And that is all! That is all; for Gramsci, who cannot be unaware of the existence of the “infrastructure”, hence of production and the state-determined [étatique] conditions of production law, currency and control over the reproduction of social relations, hence of the class struggle, in the interests of the dominant class), does not discuss them»³⁶.

Althusser accuses Gramsci of over-generalizing the notion of hegemony and of underestimating the role of force. «The point is that, *in Gramsci, the “moment” of Force is ultimately swallowed up by the moment of hegemony*»³⁷. Althusser tends to treat hegemony in opposition to force: «Similarly, Gramsci proposes a long series of

³⁴ *Ivi*, p. 139.

³⁵ Althusser refers to «contradictions that Perry Anderson has analysed extremely well» (ALTHUSSER 2006, p. 140). For a criticism of Anderson’s reading of Gramsci see Thomas 2009.

³⁶ ALTHUSSER 2006a, p. 140.

³⁷ *Ivi*, p. 141.

equivalents for Hegemony: consensus, agreement, voluntary consent and nonviolent leadership, with all the possible variants (active, passive, and so on)»³⁸. He refuses to see in Gramsci a theory of the State, treating Gramsci's positions as being extensively over-determined by the open political exigencies of his time. Instead of a theory of the State, what we have is «a political examination of the “nature”, hence of the “composition” or internal arrangement [dispositif] the states of the day, undertaken with a view to defining a political strategy for the workers' movement after all hope that the schema of 1917 would be repeated had faded»³⁹. The result is that «the absorption of political and civil society by the single category of “Hegemony”»⁴⁰. For Althusser,

«The novelty that Gramsci introduces is, rather, the idea that Hegemony can, as it were, be representative of the whole constituted by (1) “civil society”, (which is its domain); the state as Force or coercion; and (3) the effect, also called Hegemony, that results from the functioning of the state as a whole, comprising, be it recalled, Force and Hegemony»⁴¹.

Althusser criticizes Gramsci not for insisting on the need for a long-term strategy for the hegemony of the working class over its allies –a position he considers part of the Marxist tradition– but exactly for using hegemony as the central concept. Althusser accuses Gramsci of inscribing hegemony twice or thrice in the same schema. The initial hegemony, of private hegemonic apparatuses, is one of the moments of the State, the other being force. The second hegemony is «the effect of the hegemony of the state itself considered in its entirety – that is to say, the effect of the “well-balanced” union, in a proper state, of Force and Hegemony»⁴². Here we have hegemony enveloping force. There is also a third hegemony, that of that of the party of the working class. Consequently,

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ivi*, p. 142.

⁴¹ *Ivi*, p. 143.

⁴² *Ibid.*

«everything can be played out at the level of Hegemony: first, the Hegemony of the working class, its party, and its allies; second, the Hegemony exercised by the dominant class by means of the state; and, finally, the Hegemony-effect that the dominant class derives from the unity of Force and Hegemony in its state (“civil society”))»⁴³.

Althusser realizes that hegemony has a much broader reference than simple consensus, comprising all forms of class domination. «[Hegemony]clearly designates class domination, that is to say, what Marx and Lenin called class dictatorship, either bourgeois or proletarian»⁴⁴. However, he is afraid that this will come at the theoretical cost of a «strange silence about the reality of the economic, political and ideological class struggles» and of «the absolute idealism of a Hegemony lacking a material basis, with no explanation of the Coercive Apparatuses which nevertheless play an active part in engendering the Hegemony-effect»⁴⁵. For Althusser such a conception underestimates the economic structure and downplays the role of the State and coercion, thus opening the way for right-wing and reformist interpretations of Gramsci:

«In reality, this ambiguity has pushed most of Gramsci’s commentators into making “right-wing interpretations”, which are, moreover, authorized by the fact that Gramsci almost completely hides the infrastructure behind the arbitrary concept of a private “civil society”, and therefore also hides both reproduction and the class struggle, with its different levels and its stake, the state. The Force of the state is accordingly regarded as virtually nil, since it is fully integrated into the Hegemony-effect»⁴⁶.

As Vittorio Morfino has shown in his reading of Althusser’s unpublished manuscript on Gramsci, entitled *Que faire?*, Althusser – who at that time used the Gerratana edition, instead of the compilations – was theoretically very critical of Gramsci’s concept of the historical bloc considering it to be a problematic replacement of the concept of

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ivi*, p. 144.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

*mode of production*⁴⁷. Althusser felt unease with Gramsci's *strategic* notions such as historical bloc and hegemony. Consequently, in *Marx in his limits* Althusser accused the Gramscian notion of hegemony for not being able to incorporate both the reality of production and exploitation and the role of law and the State, thus leading to an idealist conception:

«the idea that it is possible to decipher everything about the terribly material nature of production and exploitation (hence of the class struggle in production) and the terribly material nature of the constraints and practices of the law, of the political and ideological class struggles, by referring exclusively to the reality that Gramsci christens Hegemony (without telling us just what the word might mean!) is an astoundingly idealist notion»⁴⁸.

For Althusser this process of «*process of the sublimation of the state into Hegemony*»⁴⁹ suggests a rather idealist conception of the political party and the state as an educator and of emancipation as education:

«We must trace matters further back: to the old Hegelian idea, adopted by Croce and Gentile, that the state is, by its nature, an educator, and that men become men, that is to say, are educated, only under constraint – an argument that can be defended; but also that mass education [Bildung] is the ideal which humanity sets itself as its ultimate task»⁵⁰.

The danger for such a conception is to underestimate Force in favour of consent, education and culture, thus underestimating exactly the violence of the State that for Althusser is exactly the point of confrontation for a potential revolutionary strategy:

«Force, however, is as discreet as it is only because there are better things to do than to use or display it: Hegemony (H I) is far superior, since it obtains the same result of “training” (Gramsci’s word) as Force, at lower cost, and, what is more, simultaneously anticipates the results of “culture” itself In hegemony

⁴⁷ MORFINO 2015, pp. 79-80.

⁴⁸ ALTHUSSER 2006a, p. 145.

⁴⁹ *Ivi*, p. 146.

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*.

(that of the “apparatuses of civil society”), one learns without violence and solely by virtue of one’s recognition of... the truth»⁵¹.

For Althusser this is what leads to Gramsci’s problematic conception of communism as a «regulated society» which for Althusser comes directly from this conception of Hegemony as education and mass “bildung”:

«The End and Task of this “modern Prince” is the “regulated society” (!) known as communism. But it will not attain it unless it plays, as a party, its pre-state role, by educating its members and the masses over whom it extends its “leadership”, its “hegemony”. Just like the state, the Party has to educate men, with a view, once the revolution has been made and “the party has become the state”, to ensuring the triumph of the End of humanity in this regulated society in which Hegemony, its Hegemony, will continue to rule, until it vanishes before the end result of universal cultivation become self-cultivation: the infinite development of free individuals in free association»⁵².

It is obvious that Althusser failed here to fully appreciate the force of Gramsci’s references. «Regulated society» as absorption of political society by civil society points towards communism as collective emancipation and self-determination and not towards some end of politics. At the same time the references to «education» have more to do with the establishment of new forms of mass critical intellectuality, in the sense of the cultural revolution envisaged by Lenin during the NEP period⁵³. Instead, Althusser saw here an underestimation of class struggle but also of the role of the State as a special «machine»:

«The specific reality of the state clearly does disappear in a formula in which Hegemony = Force + consensus, or political society + civil society, and so on. When the realities of class struggle are treated in the guise of Hegemony-effects alone, it is obviously no longer necessary to scrutinize either the nature or the function of the state as a “special machine”»⁵⁴.

⁵¹ *Ibidem*.

⁵² *Ivi*, p. 147.

⁵³ On this see FROSINI 2003, pp. 95-97 and THOMAS 2009, pp. 232-34.

⁵⁴ ALTHUSSER 2006a, p. 147.

Althusser was afraid that such a conception of Hegemony, along with what he designates as Gramsci's «little formulas» will make it impossible to think of the specific materiality of the state and its role in class reproduction. Moreover, he was afraid that in such a conception there is no possibility to theorize the state and at the same time it opens up the way for reformist deviations:

«It does not much matter which arguments are brought to bear here. They all boil down to the fact that, since Gramsci talks about a “crisis of Hegemony”, and thus about Hegemony itself as if it were the last word on the state, the effect of his little formulas is to hide the question of the material nature of the state-machine behind a hyper-allusive invocation of Hegemony. This breeds all manner of misunderstanding. It can also give rise to every imaginable sort of reformist lucubration about the nature of the state and the “development of the party into the state”»⁵⁵.

Moreover, he thinks that Gramsci's conception of culture will make it impossible to have a theory of ideology and such a replacement of ideology with culture will underestimate class struggle and reproduce an elitist conception of cultural hegemony:

«For if ideology rather quickly comes to mean ideological struggle, hence an inevitable, necessary form of class struggle, the notion of culture leads straight to the ecumenism of the notion that an elite (in the Party as well as in bourgeois society) is the guardian of culture's own values of “production” (“creators”) and consumption (“connoisseurs”, “art-lovers”, and so on)»⁵⁶.

Althusser also fears that such a conception of Hegemony could also lead to a variation of the «autonomy of the political or of politics» position, which he thinks that it cannot offer a way to conceive of politics. This referred to the debates within the Italian Communist Party at the period of the “Historic Compromise”. It is exactly here, on the question of politics, that Althusser's manuscript ends. The final phrase seems like a confrontation with the open question of communist politics:

⁵⁵ *Ivi*, pp. 148-49.

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*.

«For to ask what politics might be implies that one state one's views on the Party. But what does one do in the Party, if not politics?»⁵⁷.

In his recently published lecture of the dictatorship of the proletariat, from 1976, we also see such a dialogue with Gramsci. Turning his attention to the abandonment of the dictatorship of the proletariat by Western Communist Parties, Althusser criticized the tradition of Italian Communism to abandon the dictatorship of the proletariat, in the name of the concept of hegemony, and in particular the conception that there could be hegemony of the proletariat over society (and not just its allies) before taking power. For Althusser this leads to what he defines as a «vicious circle», since it implies that hegemony could exist «*before the historical conditions – meaning the economic, political and ideological conditions – for its own existence [...] even before the seizing of state power*»⁵⁸. Regarding the absence of the concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat in the *Quaderni*, Althusser thinks that if Gramsci had the full liberty of expression he would have used the notion of the dictatorship to refer to the dictatorship of the proletariat and not hegemony.

For Althusser, speaking in term of class domination or of class hegemony cannot account for this idea of an «absolute power», beyond any law, that the notion of dictatorship implies. Consequently, the dictatorship of the proletariat entered explosively into the theoretical and the political stage «as violent language, as a violent language to express the violence of class rule»⁵⁹. But since the notion of class dictatorship does not limit itself to the proletariat, we must turn to the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie in order to understand the dictatorship of the proletariat and the distinction between class dictatorship and the political forms it would take, forms that, in the case of the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie could even be even democratic:

«because class relations are, in the last instance, extra-juridical (with a force distinct from right and laws), and these are thus “above the law”, and because

⁵⁷ ALTHUSSER 2006a, p. 150.

⁵⁸ ALTHUSSER 2015, p. 154. Althusser also included this lecture in his manuscript *Les Vaches Noires* (ALTHUSSER 2016b).

⁵⁹ ALTHUSSER 2015, p. 161.

they are, in the last instance, relations of force and violence (whether openly so or otherwise), the rule of one class in the class struggle must “necessarily” be thought as “power above the law”: dictatorship»⁶⁰.

However, in another lecture from the same period, again delivered on Spanish soil, the “Transformation of Philosophy” lecture in Granada, Althusser speaks much more positively of Gramsci:

«The constitution of a dominant ideology is, for the dominant class, a matter of class struggle; in the case of the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie, a matter of class struggle on two fronts. Now, this is not all. It is not simply a question of manufacturing a dominant ideology because you have need of one, by decree; nor simply of constituting it in a long history of class struggle. It must be constructed at the basis of what already exists, starting from the elements, the regions, of existing ideology, from the legacy of the past, which is diverse and contradictory, and also through the unexpected events that constantly occur in science as well as politics. An ideology must be constituted, in the class struggle and its contradictions (on the basis of the contradictory ideological elements inherited from the past), which transcends all those contradictions, an ideology unified around the essential interests of the dominant class in order to secure what Gramsci called its hegemony»⁶¹.

In all these interventions, we find the contradiction running through all the interventions by Althusser in the second half of the 1970s. A deep and agonizing apprehension of the dangers associated with the right-wing turn West European Communist Parties along with an inability to confront the full complexity of both the capitalist “integral State” but also of any potential revolutionary strategy, exactly the subject matter of Gramsci’s own agonizing work-in-progress.

1.4 The many encounters and non encounters of Althusser and Gramsci

Are we are dealing here with an important “missed encounter”? What is obviously missing is a confrontation with the depth of hegemony as a theorization of the complex modalities of power in

⁶⁰ *Ivi*, p. 162.

⁶¹ ALTHUSSER 1990, p. 258.

capitalist social formations. Although the evolution of left wing politics in Europe and the strategic impasses that Eurocommunist parties faced from the end of the 1970s onwards, seems to retrospectively justify Althusser's criticism, at the same time his critique of Gramsci is based on a miscomprehension of the latter's conceptualizations. Althusser fails to realize that hegemony refers to the complexity of the exercise of power in capitalist social formations and not simply to consent. He also fails to realize that Gramsci confronted the question of the complexity of the revolutionary process, including the *longue durée* of the transition to a «regulated society», and was not proposing some form of reformist or gradualist approach.

Moreover, lacking a concept close to Gramsci's *integral State*, that would offer a much more dialectic conception of the relation of social movements to the State, through a theorization of the expansion of both the State and of the forms of organization of the subordinate classes and the «mutual interpenetration and reinforcement of “political society” and “civil society”»⁶², Althusser is pushed to a rather schematic distinction between the State as a machine for political power and the space of social movements and consequently to his theoretical and political limits of his externality to the State position. In a way what is missing in Althusser is exactly this insight that subordinate classes and their movements are already always within and outside the State, exactly because the State is neither a fortress nor simply a machine but a complex an expanded network of relations, practices and apparatus that is traversed by class struggles. So the question is not one of simple externality; what is need is a political strategy that would make this necessarily contradictory and uneven relation antagonistic and transformative. Such a conception of the *integral State*, which was beginning to emerge in the series of readings of Gramsci that followed Valentino Gerratana's critical editions of the *Quaderni di Carcere* such as Christine Buci-Glucksmann's *Gramsci and the State*⁶³, could have helped Althusser answer both the question of the defeats of the Left (the actual extent and depth of bourgeois hegemony even in a period of social radicalization), but also the challenges for Left strategy. These challenges could not be answered simply by a combination of a turn

⁶² THOMAS 2009, p. 137.

⁶³ BUCI-GLUCKSMANN 1980.

towards the strength of the popular movement. They demanded a hegemonic project, a strategy for a new historical bloc, a strategy to transform radicalization into a coherent strategy both at the level of civil society (emerging new social forms and forms of organization) and the State (new political forms) beyond simply taking up governmental power. Instead, Althusser offered lines of demarcation but the theoretical choices he made regarding the theory of the State, however welcome they were as criticism of electoralism and reformism, fell short from providing answers.

However, the question remains. Why did Althusser choose such an open attack on Gramsci, taking into consideration that other Marxist thinkers of “historicist” tendencies, such as Lukács and Korsch do not have the privilege of such an attack (even though *History and Class Consciousness* seems as being the “absent opponent” in many instances in *Reading Capital*). I think that there are two reasons for this insistence. The first is actually Althusser’s interest in Gramsci, which is contemporary with his own attempt to theorize a break with idealism and economism. The second had to do with Althusser’s particular political and theoretical strategy in the early 1960s. As it is a well-known page in the history of Marxism, Althusser’s initial project was to induce a left-wing correction of the political line of the communist movement, during a period of right-wing reformist deviation, through a theoretical turn towards a much more scientific version of Marxism. The scientific character of this redefined Marxism would guaranty, in its fusion with political leadership, the making of correct political decisions. This scientific character would itself be guaranteed by the development of a Marxist materialist philosophy, including a Marxist materialist epistemology, which would provide the necessary protocols of scientificity, what Althusser termed the «Theory of theoretical practice». In its turn, this Marxist «science of sciences» was not to be considered an arbitrary theoretical construction, but it was already existing in a practical, latent form in Marx’s mature works and especially *Capital*, thus all this insistence on a return to Marx. Gramsci posed a very important challenge to this endeavour. While Gramsci did not by any means support a typical historicist – metaphysical conception of a messianic Subject of history, or an all-encompassing substance at the centre of historical dialectics, which seemed to be the

main targets of Althusser's attack on Hegelian Marxism, he did insist on Marxism being not a science in the positivist sense of the term. Instead, he insisted on the need for a different theoretical modality for historical materialism. This was expressed in his call for a philosophy of praxis. As Peter Thomas correctly points out:

«The philosophy of praxis therefore insists upon its necessarily partial and incomplete nature, as the theoretical expression of an historical subjectivity that wants to help create the conditions of a genuinely human objectivity, that is, a "universal subjectivity". Its truth, in other words, is located in the world rather than transcending it. As a mode of knowing the world from within it, "immanently", it challenges both the metaphysical materialism of Bukharin and the idealist traditions of Western Philosophy by offering a radically alternative conception of the relation between thought and Being»⁶⁴.

This was something that Althusser obviously thought that it posed a very important challenge to his strategy of a scientific correction of a political line. In addition, Althusser was highly sceptical of any attempt to historicize both social reality and the concepts used to theorize it, despite his insistence on the co-existence of different historical times and their specific structures of historicity⁶⁵, which, at least in my opinion, opens the way for a highly original conception of historicity. Here Althusser's negative position is also over-determined by his

⁶⁴ THOMAS 2009, p. 306.

⁶⁵ «[I]t is only possible to give a content to the concept of historical time by defining historical time as the specific form of existence of the social totality under consideration, an existence in which different structural levels of temporality interfere, because of the peculiar relations of correspondence, non-correspondence, articulation, dislocation and torsion which obtain, between the different 'levels' of the whole in accordance with its general structure. It needs to be said that, just as there is no production in general, there is no history in general, but only specific structures of historicity, based in the last resort on the specific structures of the different modes of production, specific structures of historicity which, since they are merely the existence of determinate social formations (arising from specific modes of production), articulated as social wholes, have no meaning except as a function of the essence of those totalities, i.e., of the essence of their peculiar complexity» (ALTHUSSER AND BALIBAR 1970, p. 108-09).

identification of any reference to historicity with a historicist conflation of real history and theory and with a humanist vision of human actors as the authors of their destiny⁶⁶. This aversion towards historicization marks both his conception of science and of a potential scientific «Theory of theoretical practice». Even his more political conception of «philosophy as in the last instance class struggle in the field of theory»⁶⁷ is presented more as a negative turn towards a materialist deconstruction of idealist position than as a positive construction of concepts and theories.

If this can offer an explanation of Althusser's rejection of Gramsci's supposed historicism, the question remains regarding the rejection of the notion of the hegemony. To try and understand this we must also return to Althusser's own theoretical and political self-critique that started in the second half of the 1960s. This included a new emphasis on the materiality of apparatuses and practices (instead of latent structures), on the effectivity of class struggle and popular movements, and on the need to insist on a revolutionary strategy of "smashing the state". At the same period Althusser elaborated a new approach to the question of materialism, a materialism of the encounter, rejecting all forms of teleology and historical metaphysics. However, Althusser continued to be critical of Gramsci, continued to be unable to incorporate the conceptualization of hegemony and the historical bloc.

⁶⁶ «It must be said that the union of humanism and historicism represents the gravest temptation, for it procures the greatest theoretical advantages, at least in appearance. In the reduction of all knowledge to the historical social relations a second underhand reduction can be introduced, by treating the *relations of production* as mere *human relations*. This second reduction depends on something "obvious": is not history a "human" phenomenon through and through, and did not Marx, quoting Vico, declare that men can, know it since they have "*made*" all of it? But this 'obviousness' depends on a remarkable presupposition: that the 'actors' of history are the authors of its text, the subjects of its production. But this presupposition too has all the force of the "obvious", since, as opposed to what the theatre suggests, concrete men are, in history, the actors of roles of which they are the authors, too. Once the stage-director has been spirited away, the actor-author becomes the twin-brother of Aristotle's old dream: the doctor-who-cures-himself» (ALTHUSSER AND BALIBAR 1970, p. 139).

⁶⁷ ALTHUSSER 1976, p. 72.

This has to do also with Althusser's inability to realize that Gramsci's "social ontology" is also strongly anti-teleological and anti-metaphysical. Moreover, he also misses the point that hegemony emerges through a complex and over-determined series of singularities in the form of multiple histories and historicities, exactly what expresses the central notion of the molecular in Gramsci. What is more impressive is that as we showed Althusser in fact had already realized in "Contradiction and Over-Determination" that hegemony is the missing conceptual link, only to abandon it.

The other reason is more political. Althusser almost never discusses a single theory or theorist; he always discusses a debate, to be more precise, a theoretical and political conjuncture. In the conjuncture of the 1970s, with the debates on the Left on the question of political power, Althusser felt that the main enemy was a reformist conception of politics which also included a certain use of the notion of hegemony, thus this strong criticism. Moreover, focused as he was on the need for a confrontation with the State, instead of a reformist conception of a "re-appropriation" of the State, Althusser could not come in terms with the complexity of the Gramscian notion of the integral State which was beyond and simple "outside/inside" dichotomy.

2. Poulantzas, Gramsci and the quest for a Marxist theory of the State

Nicos Poulantzas' work in his entire theoretical trajectory from his encounter with Gramsci and Althusser to his highly original relational conception of State power and the materiality of State apparatus as condensed social relations has been one of the most important contributions to a possible Marxist theory of political power and the State. In contrast to other representatives of the broader Althusserian tradition, Poulantzas never avoided the dialogue with Gramsci's concepts and questions. At the same time, he never fully confronted the theoretical and philosophical implications of Gramsci's elaborations and during the last phase of his work he was critical of Gramsci, despite the fact that he was moving closer to Gramsci's problematic.

2.1 Poulantzas reading Gramsci

Both the Althusserian ambivalence towards Gramsci and a strong influence by Gramsci is manifest in Poulantzas's writings. Although he was never a member of the Althusserian inner circle, Poulantzas was one of the first Althusserians actually to work on Gramsci. Gramsci along with Althusser was an important aspect of Poulantzas' turn away from his original influence by Sartre and Goldman⁶⁸. Poulantzas's own militancy in the Greek Left made him interested in the debates regarding political strategy and a potential renovation of communist strategy. Besides, as it is evident in his reading of Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason*⁶⁹, what initially draw Poulantzas towards Sartre was exactly the latter's complex attempt at a materialist and dialectic historical ontology. Poulantzas presentation and criticism of Althusser in his 1966 article on *For Marx*⁷⁰ is not only an expression of his turn towards Althusser but also of his continuing theoretical debt to Sartre⁷¹.

Poulantzas's 1965 text on hegemony in "Les Temps Modernes"⁷² offers evidence of the strong influence of Gramsci upon Poulantzas and

⁶⁸ As Poulantzas noted in a 1979 interview: «Developing an interest in Marxism through Sartre, I was much influenced by Lucien Goldmann and by Lukács. My doctoral thesis was undertaken in the philosophy of law, in which I tried to develop a conception of law drawing on Goldmann and Lukács. It was published in 1964; but from the moment it was published I began to feel the limitations of that orientation within Marxism. At this time I began to encounter Gramsci through "Critica Marxista" which was the most important journal of Marxism at that time. I began also to work with Althusser, while still being influenced – as I always am – by Gramsci – which created a kind of agreement and disagreement, from the beginning, with Althusser» (POULANTZAS 2008, pp. 387-88).

⁶⁹ POULANTZAS 2008, pp. 47-73.

⁷⁰ *Ivi*, pp. 139-65.

⁷¹ «[T]ogether with Sartre's *oeuvre*, which pertains to a different interpretation of Marxism, and alongside the works of the Italian theoreticians, Althusser's enterprise is of capital importance. It marks a milestone in the history of Marxist theory; it is already an essential instrument of work for every Marxist researcher» (POULANTZAS 2008, p. 165).

⁷² I disagree with Bob Jessop's downplaying of the importance of Gramsci's influence in this text (JESSOP 1985, pp 53-57).

his critique of the vulgar Marxist theory of the State, with its oscillation between economism and voluntarism. For Poulantzas «[t]he Marxist problematic of an objective relationship between the objective structures and practices of the base and the superstructure is conjured away in favour of *a radical division in the respective status of the base – economism – and the superstructure – voluntarism*»⁷³. To this, he opposed the theory of the capitalist state that we can deduce from Marx's mature work, and the specific modality of domination it represents:

«The structure of domination is not some unchanging “socioeconomic interests of the dominant classes + state as repression”, but corresponds to a universalizing, mediated form which these interests must assume with respect to a political state that at the same time has the *real*/function, while remaining a class state, of representing a formal and abstract “general interest” of society»⁷⁴.

For Poulantzas this specific form of the political marks the «scientific field of constitution of the concept of hegemony»⁷⁵. This has to do specifically with both the institutionalized political structures and the political practices of the dominant classes. For Poulantzas the hegemonic aspects of contemporary states comprise, firstly, «at the specific political level of class struggle, a guarantee of certain of the dominated classes' economic-corporate interests – a guarantee in accordance with the hegemonic constitution of the class in power, whose political interests are asserted by the state»⁷⁶. Secondly, «[t]he concept of hegemony assumes major importance in connection with the study of the function, the specific effectivity, and the political character of ideologies in the context of hegemonic class exploitation»⁷⁷. To this Poulantzas adds his own definition of the mystifying nature of political ideologies, a definition that combines Althusser's early conception of

⁷³ POULANTZAS 2008, p. 77.

⁷⁴ *Ivi*, p. 86.

⁷⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁷⁶ *Ivi*, p. 92.

⁷⁷ *Ivi*, p. 93.

ideology as a lived or imaginary relation to real conditions⁷⁸ and Marx's insistence on the inverse relation between formal political equality and freedom and real social inequality and oppression:

«The specific role of ideologies consists in resolving, through numerous mediations, the real division of men-producers into private beings and public beings, in presenting – and this is what their “mystifying” character consists in – their real relations in civil society as a replica of their political relations, in persuading them that what they are globally is their political relations in the state»⁷⁹.

For Poulantzas contemporary “mass society” ideologies that exemplify the evolving relation between civil society and the state in monopoly capitalism. Moreover, he stresses Gramsci's elaborations on the question of intellectuals insisting on the need to examine their role in the reproduction of ideologies and their importance in the organization of capitalist production. Poulantzas insists that the concept of hegemony can account for the complexity in the exercise of political power, insisting that «[r]elations of direct oppression develop into political relations of hegemony»⁸⁰. It is in relation to the necessary relation of coercion and consent that Poulantzas criticizes Gramsci, insisting that an element of coercion of force exists along intellectual and moral leadership even in those social practices that seem to have to do more with obtaining consent. However, one might think that Poulantzas's criticism of Gramsci is more in line with Gramsci's own conception of hegemony as a complex form of social and political leadership and domination and not simply a combination of coercion and consent. Poulantzas also takes from Gramsci elements of his conception of *power bloc*. Hegemony has also to do with the way a fraction of the dominant classes becomes hegemonic through the state:

«[T]he class fraction which accedes to institutionalized power only attains it by constituting itself as a hegemonic fraction. In other words, despite the contradictions that separate it from other dominant fractions, it succeeds in

⁷⁸ ALTHUSSER 2005, pp. 233-34.

⁷⁹ POULANTZAS 2008, p. 95.

⁸⁰ *Ivi*, p. 99.

concentrating them “politically” by organizing its own specific interests into the common general interest of these fractions»⁸¹.

It is in this way that the dominant classes are constituted politically into a «power bloc». This allows Poulantzas to account for the development of capitalist forms of domination, the emergence of managerial strata and their organizing role, and for the increasingly regulatory function of the capitalist state, which is an important aspect of the capitalist state's hegemonic function:

«The state's “social” public activities correspond to the general interest of the dominant fractions which, in their entirety, benefit both from the concrete results in the production process and from the fact that these activities render the capitalist system more tolerable for the dominated classes. Considered within the political relations of domination of a class-divided society, the state's organizing practice with respect to “society as a whole” can thus be globally related to the state's hegemonic role with respect to the dominant classes and fractions»⁸².

Consequently, this text shows how from the beginning Poulantzas was influenced by Gramsci, especially his search for a theory of class power and/as state power, in break with traditional Marxist instrumentalist conception of state power. Hegemony refers to the complexity of class domination, the combination of force, direction and consent, to the formation of the power bloc (hegemony within the leading classes) and to the role of State.

2.1 Poulantzas's contradictory relation to the work of Gramsci

In light of the above, *Political Power and Social Classes* strikes a rather different note. A “tour de force” of theoretical rigour and the most Althusserian in terms of epistemology of all Poulantzas's books, at the same time includes strong criticisms against Gramsci. Poulantzas feels the need to distance his problematic from Gramsci, at the exact time that he is trying to tackle the same open questions regarding class

⁸¹ *Ivi*, p. 104.

⁸² *Ivi*, p. 119.

hegemony. However, he limits the use of the notion of hegemony only to the relation of the dominant classes within the power bloc, and the political practices of the dominant classes:

«Because of his particular relation to Lenin's problematic, Gramsci always believed that he had found the concept in Lenin's writings, especially those concerning the ideological organization of the working class and its role of leadership in the political struggle of the dominated classes. But in reality he had produced a new concept which can account for the *political practices of dominant classes in developed capitalist formations*. Gramsci admittedly uses it in this way but he also incorrectly extends it so that it covers the structures of the capitalist state. However, if we severely restrict the application and constitution of the concept of hegemony, his analyses of the subject are very interesting»⁸³.

Poulantzas insisted that hegemony is a notion reserved only for the political practices of the dominant classes and not of the dominated: «we shall apply [the concept of hegemony] only to the political practices of the dominant classes»⁸⁴. It refers to how the political interests of these classes are constituted as representative of the general interests of society and to how a fraction or class becomes hegemonic in the power bloc.

Such a theorization of hegemony fails to see the importance in Gramsci of the relation of hegemony and the State and of the importance of hegemonic apparatuses. As Christine Buci-Glucksmann has stressed, «Poulantzas's reduction of the concept of hegemony [...] involves further consequences that [...] displace Gramsci's dialectic»⁸⁵. Poulantzas thinks that Gramsci's reference to the possibility of a class

⁸³ POULANTZAS 1973, p. 137-38.

⁸⁴ *Ivi*, p. 140. Some of the formulations of Gramsci's concepts might seem as justifying such a conception of hegemony. «A social group dominates antagonistic groups [...] it leads kindred and allied groups» (GRAMSCI 1971, p. 57; GRAMSCI 1977, p. 2010 Q19, § 24, [GRAMSCI 1977, p. 41; Q1, § 44]). However, as Peter Thomas has noted «[l]eadership-hegemony and domination are therefore conceived less as qualitatively distinct from one another, than as strategically differentiated forms of a unitary political power» (THOMAS 2009, p. 163).

⁸⁵ BUCI-GLUCKSMANN 1980, p. 60. See also LIGUORI 2015, pp. 180-81.

being at the same time politically dominated and ideologically hegemonic is misguided, insisting that Gramsci misreads Lenin who insisted on the ideological organization of the proletariat as a means to combat a dominant ideology that even after the conquest of power by the proletariat remains «bourgeois and petty bourgeois»⁸⁶. What Poulantzas misreads is exactly Gramsci's dialectical distinction between two forms of leadership⁸⁷. In contrast Buci-Glucksmann insisted on the broader scope of Gramsci's concept of hegemony:

«The Gramscian concept of hegemony is far more than a shade removed from the critical left-wing functionalism that speaks of consensus, integration and norms so as to challenge the power of the bourgeoisie as a "social order". For a dominant class is hegemonic, in its progressive historical phase, because it really does carry the whole of society forward: it has a universalist aim, and not an arbitrary one. The arbitrary moment, recourse to the more direct or more concealed forms of authoritarianism and coercion, mark a "developing crisis of hegemony", to take up a formulation of Poulantzas»⁸⁸.

For Poulantzas, hegemony as fusion of leadership with an ideological relation founded on consent can bring us back to a historicist problematic of the class-subject of history. Moreover, he criticizes Gramsci's notion of the «historical bloc» as the unity of ideology, science and structure for being an example of historicist «expressive totality»⁸⁹. We find here the shortcomings of "High Althusserianism" with its insistence on different «instances» of the social whole having very specific functions and attributes and on the inability to have concepts of practices that refer to more than one instance of the social whole. As Jessop notes, Poulantzas criticizes Gramsci «for failing to locate the specificity of the various regions of capitalist society in terms of its particular institutional matrix»⁹⁰. However, Poulantzas praises

⁸⁶ POULANTZAS 1973, p. 205.

⁸⁷ «The first is a hegemony that tends towards, or forms the preconditions of, a future position of dominance; the second is a moment within such achieved dominance that assures that it is maintained» (THOMAS 2009, p. 163).

⁸⁸ BUCI-GLUCKSMANN 1980, pp. 57-8.

⁸⁹ POULANTZAS 1973, p. 200.

⁹⁰ JESSOP 1985, p. 193. For an example of Poulantzas' criticism see the following extract: «in this use of the concept of hegemony, Gramsci conceals

Gramsci's notion of ideology as "cement" of a society and insists that a «*symptomal reading*»⁹¹ of Gramsci would bring forward the scientific and original features of his work. In similar line, we can say that a «*symptomal reading*» of Poulantzas's references to Gramsci in *Political Power and Social Classes* would bring forward his theoretical debts to Gramsci despite the attempt to impose a strictly Althusserian methodology.

Poulantzas' analysis of fascism and the positions adopted by the Third International in *Fascism and Dictatorship* necessarily imply a reading of Gramsci's writings on fascism. He stresses the importance of Gramsci's references to a catastrophic equilibrium and to the crisis of hegemony, but he thinks that he is «*wrong on one essential point*»⁹², namely the fact that for him throughout the rise of fascism in Italy and Germany the bourgeoisie did not face catastrophic equilibrium, insisting more on the clear-sightedness of Trotsky on this subject. However, he insists on the *crisis of hegemony* as being an important aspect of the rise of fascism, based upon the definition of *hegemony* as having to do mainly with the possible hierarchy within the dominant classes. Poulantzas refers positively to the importance of Gramsci in theorizing the State ideological apparatuses and their role in the organization of hegemony, following on this point Althusser's own positive appreciation and open acknowledgment of theoretical debt towards Gramsci in his article on Ideology and the Ideological State Apparatuses:

«Gramsci repeatedly pointed out in great detail that the State should not be seen only in the "traditional" way as an apparatus of "brute force", but also as the "organizer of hegemony"»⁹³.

precisely those real problems which he analyzes in the schema of the separation of civil society and the state. These problems, which actually imply the specific autonomy of the instances of the CMP and the effect of isolation in the economic, are masked» (POULANTZAS 1973, p. 139).

⁹¹ POULANTZAS 1973, p. 201.

⁹² POULANTZAS 1974, p. 60.

⁹³ *Ivi*, p. 299.

Poulantzas is critical of Althusser, insisting that he underestimated the importance of the economic role of the State and the ideological role of «units of production»⁹⁴. In all *Fascism and democracy* marks an important point in Poulantzas' relation to Gramsci. Contrary to the highly critical tones of *Political Power and Social Classes*, here he enters into a much more direct dialogue with Gramsci, including the greater emphasis on the role of the State in the organization of Hegemony.

Classes in Contemporary Capitalism marks a turning point in Poulantzas' work. Contrary to the rather abstract and even theoreticist tone of *Political Power and Social Classes*, here the importance of class struggle and of particular class strategies in the articulation of social and political domination is stressed. We find in this book the first thorough presentation of his conception of the State as the condensation of a relation of class forces that marks his turn towards a more strategic-relational and less abstract-structural conception of state apparatuses: «The state is not an instrumental entity existing for itself, it is not a thing, but the condensation of a balance of forces»⁹⁵. Moreover, Poulantzas insists on the role of the State in the organization of hegemony, an aspect strongly underestimated in *Political Power and Social Classes*. He also stresses the fact that the bourgeois State as a whole and not the bourgeois political parties assume this organizing role:

«In Gramsci's profound intuition, it is the capitalist state with all its apparatuses, and not just the bourgeois political parties, that assumes an analogous role, with respect to the power bloc, to that of the working-class party with respect to the popular alliance, the "people"»⁹⁶.

The Gramscian overtones are not limited to the new emphasis on the role of the State as the political organizer of hegemony but also to the conception of the working-class party. The working-class party is not presented as an «expression» or political translation of the working-class consciousness and strategy, but as the organizer of a wider popular bloc in an analogy to Gramsci's conception of the working-class party

⁹⁴ *Ivi*, p. 304.

⁹⁵ *Ivi*, p. 95.

⁹⁶ POULANTZAS 1975, p. 98.

as the «Modern Prince» of a new popular unity and potential hegemony⁹⁷.

Social Classes in Contemporary Capitalism offers a more complex theory of the State. He rejects the simplistic conception of the State as having to do only with coercion and ideological mystification which cannot account for the organizing role of the State in social production and reproduction. The State is indispensable in guaranteeing the necessary conditions of capitalist production. The relative autonomy of the State guarantees the hegemony of monopoly capital and at the same time the long-term reproduction of the interests of the bourgeoisie as a whole, in a complex process of strategic adjustments:

«This relative autonomy here refers to the specific role of the state and its various apparatuses in elaborating the political strategy of monopoly capital, in organizing its hegemony in the context of its “unstable equilibrium of compromise” *vis-à-vis* non-monopoly capital, and establishing the political cohesion of the class alliance in power. The scope of this relative autonomy can be grasped by contrasting it to the thesis of fusion and the single mechanism. Just as the state does not belong to this or that monopoly group, [...] nor does it tend to be their “common property”, for the state is not a thing but a relation, more exactly the condensation of a balance of forces. The relative autonomy of the state must be understood here as a relationship between the state on the one hand, monopoly capital and the bourgeoisie as a whole on the other, a relationship which is always posed in terms of class representation and political organization»⁹⁸.

In his detailed analysis of the new petty bourgeoisie Poulantzas chooses Gramsci as his main theoretical interlocutor, especially in the question of intellectuals and the importance of the division between mental and manual labour. Poulantzas offers a complex and concrete analysis of class fractions and the strategic results of their different class positions, much more on line with Gramsci's insistence on particular historical analyses. The influence of Gramsci on Poulantzas is also

⁹⁷ «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 2007, p. 249; GRAMSCI 1977, p. 953; Q 8, § 21).

⁹⁸ POULANTZAS 1975, p. 161.

evident on his insistence that politics and the political balance of forces is always a question of forming (and undermining the formation) of alliances and the relation of hegemony within these alliances⁹⁹.

2.3 From crisis of the State to strategy

Beginning with the text on the crisis of the State and then with *State Power and Socialism*, Poulantzas confrontation with the questions that Gramsci also faced is even more evident. The attempt to theorize the role and crisis of the State in a period of capitalist crisis and transformation necessarily leads to a more broad conception of the state and its relation to hegemony. The concepts that have to do with political crisis, crisis of representation, crisis of authority and crisis of the State were an important theoretical consideration for Poulantzas in the 1970s. The reasons were not only theoretical but also political. The capitalist crisis of 1973-74, the fall of European dictatorships (Greece, Portugal, Spain)¹⁰⁰, the intensification of class struggles and the possibility of Left-wing governments, the turn towards «authoritarian statism» in advanced capitalist formations, made such questions urgent. One could witness at the same time a crisis of the State and the strategies materialized there, an aspect that opened the possibility of an intervention by the Left, and a series of transformations leading to the reinstatement of bourgeois power and the neoliberal turn of the 1980s. In a dialogue with other currents within Marxism, such as the German derivation school, and in opposition to the PCF's theory of State Monopoly Capitalism, Poulantzas insisted on the complex political, ideological and economic role of the State.

This brings Poulantzas close to the questions associated with Gramsci's conceptualization of the integral State, namely «the entire

⁹⁹ This is exemplified not only in his many references to the “people” as a potential alliance of the subaltern classes but also in his insistence that we are always dealing with power blocs, alliances under the hegemony of the dominant fraction of monopoly capital and not simply with the direct domination of the monopolistic fraction as it was suggested by the PCF analyses in the 1970s concerning “state-monopoly capitalism”. For Poulantzas' criticism of such positions see POULANTZAS 1975, pp. 103-06.

¹⁰⁰ POULANTZAS 1976.

complex of practical and theoretical activities with which the ruling class not only justifies and maintain its dominance, but manages to win the active consent of those over whom it rules»¹⁰¹. As Peter Thomas has stressed:

«With this concept, Gramsci attempted to analyze the mutual interpenetration and reinforcement of “political society” and “civil society” [...] within a unified (and indivisible) state form. According to this concept, the state (in its integral form) was not to be limited to the machinery of government and legal institutions [...] Rather the concept of the integral state was intended as dialectical unity of the moments of civil society and political society»¹⁰².

Poulantzas's 1976 introduction to a collective volume on the Crisis of the State he edited¹⁰³ is important. Contrary to the economism of the traditional Marxist analysis of the capitalism crisis and the economism of the tendency to think of the economic crisis as leading directly to the political crisis, Poulantzas insists that it is the class struggle that matters. Poulantzas tries to distinguish his conception of a political crisis from the fatalist conception of capitalism always facing economic and political crisis, insisting that the economic crisis can be turned into a «*crisis of hegemony, following Gramsci, or structural crisis, following a current term*»¹⁰⁴ only in certain specific conjunctures related to the escalation of social and political struggles:

«In other words, we must make the very notion of structural crisis relative: if the current economic crisis distinguishes itself from the simple cyclical economic crises of capitalism, it does not constitute a structural crisis or a crisis

¹⁰¹ GRAMSCI 1971, p. 244; GRAMSCI 1977, p. 1765; Q 15, § 10. As Christine Buci-Glucksmann notes the *Prison Notebooks* must «be seen in their full temporal dimension, isolating the various modalities of a work leading from a deeper investigation of the intellectuals [...] to a new problematic of the state as *integral state*» (BUCI-GLUCKSMANN 1980, p. 24).

¹⁰² THOMAS 2009, p. 137.

¹⁰³ POULANTZAS (ED.) 1976. English translation of Poulantzas' introduction in Poulantzas 2008.

¹⁰⁴ POULANTZAS 2008, p. 299.

of hegemony except for certain capitalist countries where it translates itself into a political-ideological crisis in the proper sense of the term»¹⁰⁵.

However, even in the second half of the 1970s Poulantzas insisted on considering hegemony a notion that is not rigorous enough and on using it only when referring to the relations inside the dominant bloc. This is evident in an interview he gave to David Kaisergruber for *Dialectiques* in 1977, where he insisted that «I continue to think that the term of hegemony is not a term that could be applied in a rigorous manner, namely a non-descriptive way, to the State [...] the problem of hegemony designates a real problem: the leading role of a class fraction inside of an alliance of classes and fractions in power»¹⁰⁶. That is why Poulantzas refused to apply the notion of crisis of hegemony at the State itself, preferring to speak of «crisis of hegemony inside the power bloc that manifests itself as crisis of the State»¹⁰⁷.

Despite such reservations and distances from the part of Poulantzas, I think that there are important Gramscian elements in his approach, beginning with the way he avoided the easy identification of economic and political crisis and at the same time to point to particular manifestations of this crisis especially in those capitalist social formations that were experiencing not only the effects of the economic crisis, but also an escalation of struggles. This emphasis on the class struggle as the element determining whether we enter an open crisis of hegemony or not, is also politically motivated. Contrary to a reformist gradualist conception of conditions maturing for socialism, which was a central tenet of the reformist conception of «peaceful-democratic transition to socialism», Poulantzas insists both on the need to radicalize struggles that would aggravate the political crisis and the crisis of the State, especially if State Apparatuses are material condensations of the balance of class forces.

This new emphasis on the class struggle leads Poulantzas to a much more complex conception of how class strategies determine political strategies articulated by the State.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 299.

¹⁰⁶ POULANTZAS 1977, p. 58.

¹⁰⁷ *Ivi*, p. 59.

«[W]hat is really at work is a process of structural selectivity: a contradictory process of decisions and of “non-decision”, of priorities and counterpriorities, each branch and apparatus often short-circuiting the others. The politics of the state are therefore established by a process of interstate contradictions insofar as they constitute class contradictions»¹⁰⁸.

Poulantzas links the crisis and the restructuring of the State to an attempt to re-establish hegemony against an increased militancy of the dominated classes that is itself an aspect of the political crisis¹⁰⁹, insisting on the organic relation of the State to the economy, materialized in increased State intervention and especially in the activation of counter-tendencies to the tendency of the rate of profit to fall.

*State Power and Socialism*¹¹⁰ remains Poulantzas's most advanced confrontation with the question of a possible historical materialist theory of the State and the closest he come to an actual dialogue with the questions posed by Gramsci's concepts. We can say that at that period, it was at that period the closest someone came to a theorization of the integral State, in all its complex production of strategies, knowledges, discourses, forms of subjectification, divisions, and hegemonic projects.

Firstly, Poulantzas criticizes the tendency to think of the State only in terms of either ideology or repression. On the contrary, he insists on the active role of the State in the constitution and reproduction of social relations of production, thus enlarging the very scope of State intervention:

¹⁰⁸ POULANTZAS 2008, p. 309.

¹⁰⁹ «We return to the political crisis. For the dominated classes this manifests itself (here again, it is necessary to distinguish between various sorts of political crisis) in a considerable intensification of their struggles: these struggles are politicized and the relations of force between the power bloc and dominated classes are modified; the relations of the power bloc and supporting classes are broken and emerge as effective social forces; ideological crisis enables the dominated classes to challenge the “consensus” of the dominant classes and their representation-regimentation biased by the state apparatuses» (POULANTZAS 2008, p. 312).

¹¹⁰ POULANTZAS 2000.

«Right from the beginning the State marks out the field of struggles, including that of the relations of production: it organizes the market and property relations; it institutes political domination and establishes the politically dominant class and it stamps and codifies all forms of the social division of labour – all social reality – within the framework of a class-divided society»¹¹¹.

Secondly, Poulantzas tries to locate the specific «institutional materiality»¹¹² of the State. He stresses the way the State is constitutive of the division of between intellectual and manual labour and its role in the production of discourses and knowledge, beyond the simple political control of ideological apparatuses, thus introducing a much wider conception of the State's role in the production of socially constituted forms of intellectuality¹¹³.

Thirdly, he offers a highly original theory of the nation-state, presenting at a spatiotemporal matrix that leads to the «*historicity of a territory and the territorialization of a history*»¹¹⁴. Poulantzas insistence on the «spatiality and historicity of each working class»¹¹⁵, in ways analogous to Gramsci's meticulous attention to specific national histories, is the basis of his insistence that only a national road to socialism is possible:

«Only a national road to socialism is possible: not in the sense of a universal model simply adapted to national particularities, but in the sense of a multiplicity of original roads to socialism, whose general principles, drawn from the theory and experience of the worker's movement, cannot be more than signs on the road»¹¹⁶.

¹¹¹ *Ivi*, p. 39.

¹¹² *Ivi*, p. 49.

¹¹³ See in particular POULANTZAS 2000, pp. 54-62. Poulantzas acknowledges here a certain intellectual debt to Gramsci when he stresses that «Gramsci had a presentiment of this when he saw in the general organizational role of the capitalist State the supreme realization of intellectual labour separated in characteristic fashion from manual labour» (POULANTZAS 2000, p. 56).

¹¹⁴ POULANTZAS 2000, p. 114.

¹¹⁵ *Ivi*, p. 118.

¹¹⁶ *Ibidem*.

Fourthly, Poulantzas' formulation of the State as a *material condensation* of a relationship of forces among classes and fractions of classes, which here appears in its fullest elaboration, marks exactly an attempt to think of State apparatuses not in terms of "functions" or "wills" but in terms of a relational conception of power, of class strategies and practices. This brings Poulantzas closer to Gramscian themes, even though, as Peter Thomas has argued, one can find in Gramsci an even broader conception of political power¹¹⁷.

Fifthly, Poulantzas' elaborations on the economic role of the State and the countertendencies to the law of the fall of the profit rate it activates, also offer valuable insights on the workings of hegemony as class leadership. Both his emphasis on the extensive interventions in the reproduction of labour power subsumed to the imperatives of capital accumulation and the various forms of compromises with the dominated class attest to this.

Sixthly, Poulantzas expands his analyses of the political crisis and insists that the «*hidden but permanent instability of the bourgeoisie's hegemony*»¹¹⁸ is the basis of the turn towards *authoritarian statism*, expresses in the increased role of state administrative bureaucracy, the displacement of decision making away from the legislative towards the executive and the politicization of the administration. It is worth saying that Poulantzas insights concerning this authoritarian turn did indeed grasp a tendency that was later also expressed in the authoritarian character of the neoliberal project.

On the other hand, Poulantzas rejected a Leninist approach to the transition to socialism according to which «[t]he State must be entirely destroyed through frontal attack in a situation of *dual power*, to be replaced by a second power – soviets – which will no longer be a State

¹¹⁷ «[F]or Gramsci, political power is immanent not simply to the state as a condensation of power relations (relations between classes), as it arguably is for the late Poulantzas. Rather it is immanent to the hegemonic projects by means of which classes constitute themselves as classes (relations within classes) capable of exercising political power (as opposed to an incoherent mass of "corporative" interests confined to the terrain of civil society)» (Thomas 2009, p. 226).

¹¹⁸ POULANTZAS 2000, p. 212.

in the proper sense of the term»¹¹⁹. For Poulantzas this conception not only underestimates the difficulties of the transition period but also can lead, despite the evocation of the withering away of the State, to a new form of Statism, originating in the conception of the dual power as an anti-State, a displacement evident in both Stalinist and social-democratic statism. This criticism is directed against Gramsci as well:

«Gramsci was also unable to pose the problem in all its amplitude. His famous analyses of the differences between war of movement (as waged by the Bolsheviks in Russia) and war of position are essentially conceived as the application of Lenin's model/strategy to the "different concrete conditions" of the West»¹²⁰.

For Poulantzas Gramsci's war of position entails the same conception of the State as a castle or a fortress either to be taken by frontal assault (the Leninist war of movement) or by siege (the war of position). As he puts it in his 1977 interview with Henri Weber:

«What does Gramsci mean by the war of position? The war of position is to surround the strong castle of the state from outside with the structures of popular power. But in the end it's always the same story. It's a strong castle, right? So either you launch an assault on it – war of movement; or you besiege it – war of position. In any case, there is no conception in Gramsci's work that a real revolutionary rupture, linked to an internal struggle, can occur at this or that point of the state apparatus. It doesn't exist in Gramsci»¹²¹.

As Peter Thomas has argued¹²², Poulantzas seems here to pay little attention to Gramsci's conception of the integral State, despite the fact that Christine Buci-Glucksmann, a close collaborator of Poulantzas, was one of the first Marxists to bring forward the importance of this conception in her *Gramsci and the State*¹²³. According to Thomas, Poulantzas «is incorrect to argue that Gramsci posits a terrain outside

¹¹⁹ *Ivi*, p. 252.

¹²⁰ POULANTZAS 2000, p. 256.

¹²¹ POULANTZAS 2008, p. 341.

¹²² THOMAS 2011.

¹²³ BUCI-GLUCKSMANN 1980. The French original was published in 1975.

the state on which a new political power could emerge»¹²⁴. Thomas also insists that Lenin's original conception of dual power refers mainly to an exceptional historical situation, where the bourgeois form of State co-existed, in antagonistic relation, with the emerging new forms of state power based upon popular initiatives. In this sense, Gramsci's concept of «war of position» attempts to think of the ways, after a period of defeat, to regroup the forces «that would make possible the return of such a dual power situation»¹²⁵. Gramsci's conception of hegemony and of the transition to the «regulated society» indeed has indeed as starting point the question of revolution and Gramsci's own experience in the worker's councils but Poulantzas's reading underestimates all the complexity of Gramsci's confrontation with the challenges of a revolutionary strategy in advanced capitalist formations and the actual limitations that rendered impossible a simple repetition of an "October" sequence.

These positions by Poulantzas are also related to the entire debate around democratic road to socialism that took part in the second half of the 1970s. From the abandonment of the notion of the dictatorship of the proletariat by the French Communist Party to the debates inside the Italian Communist Party and the hopes created by the possibility of left-wing governments, many communist intellectuals argued in favour of the possibility of such a democratic transition. Althusser and Balibar chose to oppose this tendency, Althusser publicly in his text on the 22nd Congress¹²⁶ but also in unpublished manuscripts such as *Les Vaches Noires*¹²⁷ and *Marx in his limits*¹²⁸, and Balibar in his book on the dictatorship of the proletariat¹²⁹. Poulantzas on the other hand, along with other intellectuals such as Christine Buci-Glucksmann attempted to offer left-wing versions of such a democratic road to socialism. The reformism of some of the contributions to this debate was evident

¹²⁴ THOMAS 2011, p. 288.

¹²⁵ *Ivi*, p. 290.

¹²⁶ ALTHUSSER 1977.

¹²⁷ ALTHUSSER 2016b

¹²⁸ In ALTHUSSER 2006a.

¹²⁹ BALIBAR 1977. See also the round table on this book in an issue of *Dialectiques* from 1977 (BALIBAR ET AL. 1977).

especially those coming from the tradition of Italian communism¹³⁰, yet other were more complex.

Moreover, the relation between democracy and socialism in socialist transition was an open question ever since the big debate inside the international workers' movement after the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly in 1918. Lenin and Trotsky might have offered answers to Kautsky's criticism, especially since the latter was based upon a certain conception of the inherent superiority of parliamentarism and a rejection of any conception of revolutionary violence, yet the questions posed by Rosa Luxemburg's critique remained in a certain way unanswered especially those relating to socialism as a period of increased political freedom for workers to experiment with new social forms and practices:

«The socialist system of society should only be, and can only be, an historical product, born out of the school of its own experiences, born in the course of its realization, as a result of the developments of living history, which – just like organic nature of which, in the last analysis, it forms a part – has the fine habit of always producing along with any real social need the means to its satisfaction, along with the task simultaneously the solution. However, if such is the case, then it is clear that socialism by its very nature cannot be decreed or introduced by *ukase*. [...] The whole mass of the people must take part in it. Otherwise, socialism will be decreed from behind a few official desks by a dozen intellectuals»¹³¹.

However, such questions did not receive the attention they deserved. In most cases, it was assumed that a combination of parliamentarism with forms of participative democracy could offer the answer, whereas in most cases opposition to these positions took the form of a simple invocation of the need for a correct application of a soviet form of power, one that could be described as soviets with democratic freedoms¹³². Even in the most advanced confrontations with such questions, such as the Theses on Communism by Il Manifesto in the early 1970s¹³³, the advanced positions on the maturity of communism

¹³⁰ See for example GRUPPI 1977.

¹³¹ LUXEMBURG 1922.

¹³² See for example MANDEL 1976.

¹³³ IL MANIFESTO 1970.

and on the need to rethink the practice of council organizing did not fully confront such questions.

In this sense it is important to make a distinction between Poulantzas's political choices and his theoretical work. In *State, Power and Socialism* we find a richer analysis of the extensive, complex, uneven and ridden with contradictions character of State power as class power, as the material condensation of class strategies and resistances. This dialectical relation between the extended intervention of the State and a multitude of resistances and struggles, which are at the same time internal and external to materiality of the State, makes necessary a more complex conception of revolutionary practice¹³⁴. His call for the introduction of a combination of representative democratic institutions and direct democracy should not be read as a negation of the need to work for the «withering away of the State», but as an attempt to think such a process in advanced capitalist formations:

«There can be no question of a statist transformation of the State apparatus. *Transformation of the state apparatus tending towards the withering away of the State* can rest only on increased intervention of the popular masses in the State. [...] it cannot be confined to democratization of the State [...] This process should be accompanied with the development of new forms of direct, rank-and-file democracy and flowering of self-management networks and practices»¹³⁵.

In this sense, it is interesting to stress the affinities between such researches and Daniel Bensaïd's attempts of that period towards a more “problematized” conception of the relation between direct and representative democratic forms within the revolutionary process¹³⁶.

In light of this, we must also say that despite his criticism of Gramsci and his treating of the war of position as a variation of the «State as fortress» position, Poulantzas complex and uneven conception of the articulation of struggles within and outside the State is the closest he

¹³⁴ «The State is neither a thing instrument that may be taken away, nor a fortress that may be penetrated by means of a wooden horse, nor yet a safe that may be cracked by burglary: it is the heart of the exercise of political power» (Poulantzas 2000, p. 257-58).

¹³⁵ POULANTZAS 2000, p. 261-62.

¹³⁶ Bensaïd 1977.

came to Gramsci's own preoccupations regarding a possible revolutionary strategy in an age of bourgeois «passive revolution».

By this we do not want to underestimate Poulantzas's own contradictions. The way that Poulantzas opted to present his analyses under the thematic of a «democratic road to socialism» along with his optimism concerning «unity of the Left» governments as the possible starting points for processes of social transformation, which was sadly negated by the experience of the Mitterrand government in 1981 or the PASOK experience in Greece, should not make us miss the very force of his analysis. Poulantzas easy acceptance of some form of parliamentary democracy as the «representative» aspect of a democratic road, his conception of a «crisis of hegemony» as crisis inside the power bloc that could easily lead to the temptation of thinking of potential alliances with factions of the bourgeoisie¹³⁷, his over-emphasis on the contradictions inside the State and thus of the possibility of a self-transformation (in a way his underestimation of the integral character of the State), all these are obvious limitations. Yet at the same time the very complexity and richness of his analysis indeed point towards the theoretical importance of his mature work and of the fact that a return to such works along with the richness of Gramsci's insights remains an indispensable starting point.

Conclusion

In the case of both Althusser and Poulantzas we are dealing with theorists who at the same time were profoundly influenced by Gramsci, in certain aspects more than they ever admitted, and actually

¹³⁷ To be fair, Poulantzas himself warned insisted in the need to avoid such alliances. He stressed the «deep ambiguities associated with any process of alliance with fractions of the bourgeoisie, a process through which the domestic bourgeoisie most often succeeds in imposing its hegemony». He also stressed that they «prove, if proof is needed, that it is far better to avoid having to take this route at all – better not to wait until the popular movement is on the defensive, when various kinds of “historic compromise” appear as a possible recourse» (POULANTZAS 1976, p. 132).

confronted the notion of hegemony, even though they remained critical of it. There are many reasons for this. Some of them were philological, that is, the relatively late appearance of Gerratana's critical edition. Some of them were political, that is, the association between Gramsci and post-war Italian Communism that made the critique Gramsci part of the critique of Togliattism initially and Eurocommunism later. Some of them were historical, that is, apart from Italy, most of the "Italian" tendencies in other European communist parties were "right-wing" and were the target especially of post-1968 leftism (including in Italy itself the anti-gramscism of segments of the Far-Left and in particular *Operaismo*). And some of them were theoretical: In a theoretical debate marked by the cleavage between structural and humanist-teleological readings of Marx and in particular Marxist philosophy, Gramsci's highly idiosyncratic "historicism" (which in fact was a highly original, non-metaphysical, non-idealist, non-teleological, materialist theory of politics in their complex and over-determined historicity) run the constant risk misinterpretation.

However, both Althusser and Poulantzas in a profound way confronted the questions that Gramsci also faced, namely the very complexity of political power in advanced capitalist formations and at the difficulty of a revolutionary strategy. The limitations of the positions of both Althusser and Poulantzas, also had to do with their reluctance to confront some of the important insights that we can find in the work-in-progress of the *Quaderni*.

However, there have been other readings that have shown that such a missed encounter was far from inevitable. From the ground-breaking work of Christine Buci-Glucksmann in France and the important work done on Gramsci in Latin America by writers such as Juan Carlos Pontatiero in the 1970s to the continuous confrontation with the work of both Althusser and Gramsci by writers such as the late André Tosel¹³⁸, along with more recent readings of Gramsci such as the ones offered by Peter Thomas, there has been the possibility of a different dialogue

The new readings of Gramsci currently being produced, which bring forward Gramsci's highly complex and original conception of

¹³⁸ TOSEL 2016.

hegemony and the integral state and his reformulation of historical materialism away from both idealism and naturalistic materialism, offer the possibility to pick up this dialogue and also to expand it towards other debates that have emerged in contemporary social and political battles such as questions regarding the relation between crisis of neoliberalism and crisis of hegemony, the forms of political organization, the social alliances, the relation between horizontality and representation, the potential for the formation of new historical blocs. The global capitalist crisis and the intense political crisis along with and new intensified forms of struggle and contention, along with the emergence of new forms of right-wing or even extreme right-wing “populism” make the confrontation with such questions more urgent than before. Moreover, the question of power and hegemony has returned to contemporary discussions of the Left. The complexity of the articulation of economic and political dynamics and struggles along with emerging new form of political practices, from new forms of democracy from below to the open question of “left governance”, especially after the exhaustion of the “pink tide” in Latin America and the tragic capitulation of SYRIZA in Greece, all these have made our time more “Gramscian” than ever.

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