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Althusser as Reader of Gramsci

Abstract: *The article reconstructs the complex relation between Althusser and Gramsci. Considering both published and unpublished writings, the article argues that this relation is profoundly ambivalent: on the one hand, Gramsci is considered the sole precursor in the Marxist tradition who tried to think the superstructure, and particularly politics; on the other hand, he is the paradigm of a conception of temporality and politics from which Althusser wants to take distance.*

Keywords: *Gramsci, Historical time, Ideology, Hegemony, Force.*

Resumen: *Este artículo reconstruye la compleja relación entre Gramsci y Althusser. Considerando tanto trabajos publicados como inéditos, este artículo argumenta que esta relación es profundamente ambivalente: por un lado, Gramsci es considerado el precursor único en la tradición marxista que trató de pensar la superestructura, y particularmente la política; por otro, es el paradigma de la concepción de temporalidad y política de las cuales Althusser quiere distanciarse.*

Palabras clave: *Gramsci, Tiempo histórico, Ideología, Hegemonía, Poder.*

Among the authors whom Althusser confronts while working out his theory, Gramsci is probably the most constantly present. From the beginning of the 1960s through the 1970s, his references to Gramsci, either recognitions of debt or distances taken, allow us to identify the contours

and developments of Althusserian theory as on a negative image: from *For Marx to Reading Capital*, from ‘Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses’ to the texts on the crisis of Marxism, Althusser never ceases to define his own position in relation to Gramsci. However, if we consider the posthumously published texts and documents held in the IMEC Archive, we receive an even stronger impression. From the early 1960s onward, we find a large number of extracts and notes (drawn from the *Notes on Machiavelli*, Gramsci’s *Selected Writings*, *Historical Materialism and the Philosophy of Benedetto Croce*, and the critical edition of the *Quaderni*), a projected article for *Rinascita*, the final chapter on hegemony in *Marx in His Limits*, and finally a text with the title *What is to Be Done?*, which is entirely dedicated to Gramsci.

With respect to this layered confrontation, it is helpful to establish some schematic points:

First, Althusser’s encounter with Gramsci in the summer of 1961 also carries an encounter with Machiavelli, which makes it such that the two authors are constantly thought in one another, the one through the other.

Second, there is a strong ambivalence in Althusser’s judgment towards Gramsci. On the one hand, he is considered the sole precursor in the Marxist tradition who tried to think the superstructure, and particularly politics. On the other hand, Gramsci is the paradigm of a conception of temporality and politics from which to take distance.

Third, in terms of taking distance, two temporally distinct phases must be highlighted. Starting with a critique of the misrecognition of the specificity of the status of science in general and



the science of history in particular, typified by the second half of the 1960s, Althusser passes, through the end of the 1970s, to a critique of the concept of hegemony in which class domination would be lost.

1. The Encounter with Gramsci

Althusser's encounter with Gramsci took place at the beginning of the 1960s. In a letter to Franca Madonia dated 28 November 1961, Althusser refers to a letter from the previous summer that he sent to Bertinoro (Althusser, 1998b, 122). This earlier letter bears witness to several pages of extracts and typewritten notes preserved in a dossier 'Gramsci sur Machiavel (renvoi au texte italien).' Here Althusser carefully notes the essential features of Gramsci's reading of Machiavelli, probably in view of the course he will dedicate to the latter thinker in 1962 (Althusser 2006a, 193-254). However, along the way, his attention is also drawn to other themes. For example, a passage of Gramsci's on ideology that he translates (p. 294 Does not conceive ideology as something artificial and mechanical (like a coat on the skin), conceives of it as 'skin that is produced organically' by the entire animal organism') (ALT2. A31-05.06, 20.); or a page (128) on the educative function of the state in relation to the masses, carried out positively by the school and repressively by the courts, but also, 'a multitude of other initiatives aim to this end, *other so-called private activities, which form the basis of the political and cultural hegemony of the dominant classes,*' (14¹) which Althusser comments on as follows:

Important idea of Gramsci: that the state is not reducible to the state apparatus, but includes all kinds of other forms of pressure etc. that the state is political society + civil society = armored hegemony of coercion (p. 132)/// G. against the identification of state and government. /// (p. 16)

Finally, he takes note of some of Gramsci's reflections in a section on 'Animality and Industrialism' on pages 326–329 and comments:

very important theme, in G. and in itself. That any new progress of productive forces and the mode of production supposes new attitudes towards labor, and, through these new *technical* attitudes, a whole upheaval of the *existing mode of life*. [...] The essential idea of G. is that to create these new habits of life, this new way of life ordered according to new content of the division of labor, it is necessary to make violence to nature– i.e., the old disciplines become 'nature and correspond to the old mode of production–, this violence, this training, are inevitable –all of human history is considered from this point of view as a training for animality, if it can never be heard of... Incredible violence most often. Which supposes, this violence, a coercion characterized, and organized [...] (24)

2. From 'Contradiction and Overdetermination' to 'The Object of Capital'

Althusser's first approach to Gramsci is followed by two public, antithetical positions, the first in the essay 'Contradiction and Overdetermination,' published in *La Pensée* in December 1962 (and then in 1965 in *For Marx*) and the second, famously, in 'The Object of Capital' in 1965.

In 'Contradiction and Overdetermination,' Althusser argues that Marxist philosophy is neither the object of an inversion [*renversement*] nor the object of an extraction. Instead, Marxist philosophy is a matter of thinking '*the transformation of its* [TN: the Hegelian dialectic] *structures*' (Althusser, 2005, 55). In this framework, revolution cannot be thought through the category of simple contradiction; it is the product of an accumulation of partially heterogenous contradictions, 'which do not all have the same origin, the same sense, nor the same level or point of application, but which nevertheless 'merge' into a ruptural unity' (2005, 62, trans. mod.). The concept of overdetermination allows the Russian revolution to be thought not as the exception to the rule of simple contradiction, but precisely as the rule of the rule.

The basic notion [is] that *the Capital-Labour contradiction is never simple, but always specified by historically concrete forms and circumstances in which it is exercised*. It is specified by the forms of the *superstructure* [...]; specified by *the internal and external historical situation* which determines it on the one hand as a function of the *national past* [...] and on the other as functions of the existing *world context*. (2005, 68-69)

Althusser's reference to Gramsci here is still implicit, expressed in the need to establish the concept of overdetermined contradiction in a Marxist conception of history that is not the simple inversion [*renversement*] of the Hegelian conception, but its radical transformation. The concepts of mode of production and social class in fact change the concepts of civil society and state, as well as their relation. Rather than a 'tacit identity (phenomenon-essence-truth-op...) of the economic and the political,' it is a 'relation between the *determinant instances* in the structure-superstructure complex which constitutes the essence of any social formation' (2005, 74).

Althusser uses Gramsci to intervene with regard to the theory of the specific efficacy of the elements of the superstructure and their essence:

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. (2005, 77)

And he adds in a footnote:

Gramsci is of another stature [in relation to Lukács]. 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? (2005, 77, fn. 29)

Thus in 1962, Althusser considers Gramsci the only Marxist author who has opened the path on which he is attempting to advance; in particular, the concept of hegemony makes it possible to rigorously think (Althusser uses the strong expression 'theoretical solution in outline [*esquisse de solution théorique*]') the relation of the economic and the political without forcing it into the essence-phenomenon relation. In 1965, at the height of the seminar on *Capital*, things will already have greatly changed, probably as a result of a deeper knowledge of Italian Marxism.

The announcement of this change is located in two series of excerpts which are likely datable to when Althusser was preparing for the seminar. The first series considers some extracts from Gramsci's *Selected Works*, which Althusser titles 'selected morsels [*morceaux choisis*] (17 sq)' (ALT2.A57-01.03).² It is made up of a few extracts from pages 17-45, which take as their object the Gramscian concept of philosophy as a unitary and coherent conception of the world in its relation to religion, common sense, intellectuals, the masses, ideology, and politics.

Althusser rarely intervenes within these extracted passages. In this sense, there are two brief, noteworthy comments which appear to indicate the point of attack of his later criticism.

First, after an initial group of extracts (1-2) Althusser comments: 'interesting: G. identifies religion, ideology, philosophy, and politics' (2). Second, commenting on a passage on the philosophy that becomes a cultural movement, an ideology of an epoch, he writes alongside: 'cf. Hegel!' (2).

The second series of extracts is entitled 'Gramsci's "historicism"' and was likely written in preparation for the seminar. Here he translates several passages from *Historical Materialism and the Philosophy of Benedetto Croce*, which he describes as a 'Reference Text,' including of

course the famous passage on the philosophy of praxis as absolute historicism, and also copies a series of passages from the *Selected Works*. He summarizes their meaning as follows:

fundamental theme of the interpretation of Marxist materialism ('philosophy of praxis') by Gramsci. Croce's influence is extremely clear: Croce represents, in Gramsci's eyes, a speculative 'historicism' that must be 'inverted' [*renverser*] in order to obtain the 'historicism' of the philosophy of praxis. (ALT2.A57-01.05, 1)

Althusser will base his oral presentation in the spring of 1965 on these notes. However, the criticism is not formulated lightly—there are many doubts and hesitations, as expressed in a number of letters to Franca during the period of writing 'The Object of *Capital*.' In a letter dated 17 June 1965, while he is rewriting the passage on Gramsci, he calls it 'very important' and 'necessary' even if this will make 'the Italian friends, who have the religion of Gramsci, shout.' (Althusser, 1998b, 618). Two weeks later (in a letter dated 2 July) Althusser returns to the question. He wonders if his comments on Gramsci are correct, and above all if it is politically opportune to speak in those terms, and in rereading them, realizes that he hadn't seen 'certain important things' and yet not only does he not change his basic judgment, he reinforces it ('reading his Mat. st. e B. C., I discovered things were more serious than I thought...' (1998b, 623-624)). His judgment on the political Gramsci is quite contrary to this:

It is a politics 100%: the Machiavelli of modern times, he reads Lenin through Machiavelli as much as Machiavelli through Lenin, and that is saying something. (1998b, 624)

A few days later, in a letter from 8 July, he announces that the work is finished (1998b, 625), although the desire to further investigate the question remains.³

We can now turn to the passage in 'The Object of *Capital*' on Gramsci. The context here is the fundamental philosophical question about

the object of Marx's theory and its specific difference from political economy. It is not a matter of conceiving Marxism as a dialecticization of the categories of political economy by employing a Hegelian concept of time, or of thinking 'economic phenomena [...] in the infinity of a homogenous planar space, but rather in a region determined by a regional structure and itself inscribed in a site defined by a global structure: therefore as a complex and deep space, inscribed in another complex and deep space.' (Althusser *et al.*, 2015, 337). In order to do this, a complex concept of historical time is necessary, because it requires thinking the rhythm of each level of the structure, each relatively autonomous with respect to the others, while also dependent on the social whole, whose efficacy on its elements can only be thought, each time, by forging a new philosophical concept. In this framework, Gramsci is called to center stage as a paradigm of Marxist historicism. This move is certainly not made without methodological concerns, but it is also extremely decisive: Althusser maintains that the famous passage where Gramsci claims 'the philosophy of praxis is absolute "historicism", the absolute secularization and earthliness of thought, an absolute humanism of history' (2015, 277) is not a simple polemic against Croce, nor limited to indicating the practical role of Marxism, the unity of theory and the workers' movement. There is in Gramsci a genuine 'theoretical interpretation affecting the very content of Marx's thought': a historicist conception of the relation of Marx's theory to real history, founded on Croce's theory of religion as a conception of the world which subsumes Marxism under its categories. For this reason, Gramsci 'easily identifies religion, ideology, philosophy and Marxist theory, without calling attention to the fact that what distinguishes Marxism from these ideological 'conceptions of the world' is less the (important) formal difference that Marxism puts an end to any supra-terrestrial "beyond", than the distinctive form of this absolute immanence (its "earthliness"): *the form of scientificity.*' (2015, 281).

This is why Gramsci attempts to bring together under one term Marx's scientific theory and his

philosophy, thinking this unity in the form of a conception of the world, and also why he tends to think the relation between Marxist science and real history ‘according to the model of the relationship between an “organic” [...] ideology and real history’ (2015, 281). Starting here, Althusser constructs a paradigm, or limit-form, of the historicist reading, whose fundamental nucleus is the Hegelian historicization of absolute knowledge, a move that flattens the Marxist totality onto Hegelian totality: by grasping one and the same time in the different levels or instances, ‘the effects of distortion and dislocation’ are excluded, ‘which in the authentic Marxist conception, contradict this ideological reading of a contemporaneity.’ Further, this move reduces or omits ‘the real difference separating levels’ (2015, 282-283).

The symptomatic point where this reduction of levels emerges is, on the one hand, the fusion of science and ideology, and on the other, philosophy and history, a fusion that is produced through a series of conceptual slides [*glissements conceptuels*] which have the effect of reducing the distance between levels. On the one hand, this involves the reduction of science to history, making ‘science a superstructure, [...] one of those “organic” ideologies which form such a close “bloc” with the structure that they have the same “history” as it does!’ (2015, 283). On the other hand, this involves the reduction of philosophy to politics, since ‘philosophy is the direct product (assuming all the ‘necessary mediations’) of the activity and experience of the masses, of politico-economic praxis’ (2015, 284).

However, it is not sufficient for Gramsci to minimize the distance within the social structure that separates the specific place of theoretical, philosophical, and scientific (the place of theoretical practice) formations from the place of political practice. He requires a conception of theoretical practice that demonstrates and consecrates the identity of philosophy and politics, a latent need that explains the ‘conceptual slides, whose effect is once again to *reduce* the distinction between the levels’:

In this interpretation, theoretical practice tends to lose all specificity and to be reduced to historical practice in general, a category

which is made to include forms of production as different economic practice, political practice, ideological practice and scientific practice. (2015, 285)

Gramsci would find this model in ‘experimental practice, borrowed not so much from the reality of modern science as from a certain ideology of modern science’ (2015, 285). And here again there is a reduction of one level to another:

For example, only on condition that it reduces all practice to experimental practice, or to ‘praxis’ in general, and then assimilates this mother-practice to political practice, can all practices be thought as arising from ‘real’ historical practice; can philosophy, even science, and hence Marxism, too, be thought as the ‘expression’ of real history. (2015, 287)

In this way, the distinction between the science of history and Marxist philosophy also disappears. Marxist philosophy becomes nothing more than ‘a mere “historical methodology”, i.e., [...] the mere self-consciousness of the historicity of history, [...] a reflection on the presence of real history in all its manifestations’ (2015, 288).

Certainly, Gramsci takes up these formulas from Croce, intending to invert them, but he actually remains prisoner to them: all of the necessary theoretical reductions allow us to see clearly the basic structure of every historicism: ‘the contemporaneity which makes possible a reading in essential section’ (2015, 289).

The polemics that this reading of Gramsci stirred up in Italy led Althusser to a new confrontation with Gramsci in some extracts entitled ‘Gramsci ϕ et pol.’ (ALT. 057-01.06).⁴ These extracts deal blow by blow with the first section of the *Selected Works*, involving copied passages and long comments. Althusser in part takes up the critiques of *Reading Capital*, insisting on the link between the Gramscian conception of philosophy and historicist concepts of universal history, epoch, and society that would end up expunging class struggle. However, there is an interesting insight with respect to the question of the relation between the conception of the world and philosophy that reflects the discussions in those years around the *Philosophy Course for Scientists*.⁵

Note: ‘The pathos of Gramsci: thinking/not thinking a distinction between the “conception of the world” and “philosophy” cf. p. 46-47.’ (ALT. 057-01.06, 10). And again: ‘no break for him’. But then how to demarcate the difference? For Gramsci it is not a matter of a qualitative difference, but quantitative, ‘of homogeneity, coherence, logicity.’ (10). Althusser comments:

striking how G. does not manage to get away with his vocabulary. No difference between quality but rather quantity. Ok. Quantity of what? Of ‘logicity’ [...] But the nature of this ‘logicity’ is not at all defined: we have the feeling that it is the same, and that it does not bring anything logically in history (the sciences... silence). [...] The historicism of G. in fact leads to a total denial of the events of theoretical history, i.e., the ‘breaks’ which occur there. (10)

And a few lines below confirm this: ‘we really feel that for G. there is no history of logicity...’ (10).

This is precisely the key point of the letter on Gramsci’s thought that Althusser published on 15 March 1968 in *Rinascita* with the title ‘La filosofia, la politica e la scienza.’ (1968, 23–24). If philosophy, as he had said just a few days earlier in the conference on ‘Lenin and Philosophy,’⁶ is characterized by the relation on one side with politics and on the other with science, Gramsci thought the former with force, but ‘has not seen with as much vigor, nor isolated, nor thought the other dimension, the relation between philosophy and science’ (Althusser, 1968, 23).

For Althusser, this is Gramsci’s weak point, as ‘only in hasty and superficial pages [...] [he] supports a clearly insufficient, if not false, conception of the sciences,’ not moving beyond the repetition of Croce’s equivocal formulas. These formulas assign to the sciences a place in the topic, but they do not capture what is specific to them, namely ‘the production of objective knowledge.’ From this derives the tendency to ‘reduce and completely assimilate [...] “philosophy” to “conception of the world”.’ (1968, 23) The distinction is simply given by a greater coherence of the former, an only formal difference, if we

consider that the same systematic and rational character that Gramsci attributes to it is due to coherency. And yet in order to grasp what Gramsci means by ‘coherence’ it is necessary to think the relation of philosophy with the sciences, which only ‘confers to philosophy the characteristics (coherence, systematicity, and rationality) required by Gramsci: but at this point such characteristics will not have only a formal value, but rather acquire a precise content, defined not by “rationality” in general, but by the specific form of dominant “rationality” that exists in a determinant moment of the sciences with which philosophy established a specific relation.’ (1968, 23-24). To safeguard what is authentic in Gramscian historicism, despite its dubious formulations and theoretical equivocations, for Althusser it is necessary to establish two points:

The history of theoretical concepts (and also scientific and philosophical concepts, in their own sense of the term) is certainly a history. But:

1) this history must not be conceived as a pure and simple empirical becoming recorded in a chronicle. Rather, it must be conceived within the theoretical concepts of the Marxist science of history;

2) it is a *sui generis* history which, although part of the history of social formations and articulated within this history [...] is not reducible in a pure and simple way to the History of social formations [...]. (1968, 23-24)

3. From ‘Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses’ to ‘What is to be Done?’

May 1968 opens a new season of Althusser’s thought, characterized by his reprisal of the question of the base-superstructure relation, most clearly demonstrated by the posthumously published text *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*

(2014).⁷ In this context, Gramsci again becomes a resource, as indicated by the famous note ‘Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,’ in which, albeit with some caution, he is given the role of the sole precursor of forming the concept of the ideological apparatus:

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 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 intuitions, which remained in the state of acute but fragmentary notes. (Althusser, 2014, 242, fn 7)

This note opens up a period for which Gramsci is present as a positive reference in Althusser’s thought. The strongest example of this is the 1972 course on Machiavelli, which is revised and reworked in 1975. Here the Florentine is presented through a deeply Gramscian interpretation. Althusser poses his reading as a reflection on the origins of the state, on what he will later call a ‘political primitive accumulation’ (1999, 125). Reading Machiavelli through Gramsci, Althusser seizes on the problem of the constitution of a national state and the class struggle at the heart of it, ‘pitting the elements of the new, growing mode of production against the dominant forms of the feudal mode of production’ (1999, 11). In other words, the nation is the indispensable form for the ‘implantation’ of the capitalist mode of production, but ‘a nation is not constituted spontaneously. The pre-existing elements are not unified into a nation of their own accord’ (1999, 12). The instrument of unification is the unique national state: ‘But beware: this state performs its military functions of unification, defense and conquest only on condition that it simultaneously undertakes others: political, juridical, economic, and ideological’ (1999, 12). This form of unification is ensured by absolute monarchy, where absolute means ‘unique and centralized, but not arbitrary’, hence, ‘the dual aspect of the power of the absolutist state according to Gramsci:

it involves violence and coercion, but at the same time consent, and hence “hegemony”’ (1999, 12).

This positive reference to Gramsci reaches its apex in the March 1976 Granada conference, ‘On the Transformation of Philosophy,’ (Althusser, 1990, 241-266) and has its *terminus ad quem* at the Barcelona conference on the dictatorship of the proletariat in July of the same year, where Althusser suspends judgment on Gramsci and attacks ‘certain commentators who follow a line of interpretation from Togliatti’ (Althusser, 1976). Starting at this moment, there is a radical change, which is influenced from a historical viewpoint by the rise of Eurocommunism and the abandonment of the dictatorship of the proletariat at the 22nd Congress of the PCF, and from a theoretical viewpoint, strictly in relation to political events, from a debate in 1976–77 among socialist and communist intellectuals in Italy on the theme ‘abandoning Gramsci?’, and a series of important texts which appeared in those years (from Buci-Glucksmann, 1975 and Poulantzas, 1976 and 1978, and Anderson, 1977, 4-78). These leads Althusser to take up Gramsci in Gerratana’s critical edition of the *Prison Notebooks*, published in 1975 by Einaudi. There are two series of translated extracts with commentaries preserved in the archive, the first of which is mainly on the concept of hegemony and the concept of civil society (ALT2.A57-01-08) and the second on a series of terms, among which the concept of passive revolution is predominant (ALT2.A57-01-10). In the former instance Althusser thinks of intervening in the Italian debate and plans an article for *Rinascita*: in the archive we find several dossiers in which Althusser collects together the debate between Bobbio, Salvadori, Gerratana, and others (ALT2.A26-02-01; ALT2.A26-02-02) as well as other material (ALT2.A26-01-03) and several versions of the article (ALT2.A26-01-01; ALT2.A26-01-02) which he decided not to publish. At the center of Althusser’s interest is the question of the dictatorship of the proletariat and the reason the PCI did not officially abandon it, thinking of it due to Gramsci as a form of hegemony (Althusser, 1976). I will not dwell on the reading of Gramsci that Althusser offers in these sketches,

because it will be reworked and systematized in *Marx in his Limits and What is to Be Done?*

Both texts are from 1978, with the former published in 1994 and the latter still unpublished.⁸ They are closely related, insofar as the treatment of Gramsci in the former volume is also found in the latter, where it is inserted into a wider context. *Marx in his Limits* reprises the themes of the Venice conference ‘At Last, the Crisis of Marxism!’ (in Althusser 1998a, 267-280). The final section is dedicated to Gramsci. This is not by chance, because Althusser considers him to be the fundamental theoretical inspiration of Eurocommunism, as clearly emerges from a passage in chapter nine where, in advancing the thesis that the state is a separate instrument from class struggle and not traversed by it (here the reference is to Poulantzas), he takes distance from a widespread Gramscianism in France and Italy:

I maintain, precisely, that the state, the core of the state –which comprises its physical, political, police and administrative forces of intervention– is, so far as possible, constructed in such a way as not to be affected, or even ‘traversed’, by the class struggle. (Althusser, 2006b, 80)

Althusser introduces his treatment of Gramsci with several remarks in chapter nineteen on ‘The Absolute Limits of Marx on Ideology.’ Here Althusser emphasizes that Marx spoke of a collective dimension of ideology without truly thinking it, to which Gramsci would add very little, insisting ‘that the function of ideology is to serve a social group as a unifying “cement” [...], and replaces the question of ideology with that of “culture”’ (2006b, 136). As for the concept of hegemonic apparatus, returning to the considerations in ‘Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,’ Althusser now finds the limitation of not specifying precisely what the hegemony-effect is produced through (2006b, 139). And with this Althusser comes to the heart of Gramscian thought, the concept of hegemony, which he deals with in the final section of the text. The concepts Gramsci uses in his theory of the state (with its two moments, force and hegemony) and civil society constitute the set of hegemonic

apparatuses. He therefore denies the structure and the ‘state-determined conditions of exploitation and the reproduction of social relations,’ ensuring that the question of the State can and must ‘be decided *for itself*, on the basis of the four concepts at his disposal, and without bringing the infrastructure into play. Gramsci is reluctant to refer to the infrastructure, for the Marxist distinction between infrastructure and superstructure seems to him to be, fundamentally, a mechanistic-economic error on Marx’s part’ (2006b, 140-141).

In this way, moving to what is essential, ‘*the “moment” of Force is ultimately swallowed up by the moment of hegemony*’ (2006b, 141), and this is the case for a precise political reason, because what seems to be a theory of the state in Gramsci is actually nothing other than ‘*a political examination of the “nature”, hence of the “composition” or internal arrangement [dispositif] of the states of the day, undertaken with a view to defining a political strategy for the workers’ movement after all the hope that the schema of 1917 would be repeated had faded*’ (2006b, 141). In other words, the reasons for the definition of civil society and its hegemonic apparatus, the distinction and later the identification of political society with this, and finally the absorption of both into the unique category of hegemony, are to be found in the theory of war of maneuver and war of position.

Schematically, for Althusser hegemony represents a whole constituted by ‘(1) “*civil society*” (which is its domain); (2) *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’ (2006b, 143). Thus, hegemony occurs three times in the Gramscian schema. In a first sense hegemony is that of the hegemonic apparatuses which allow the power of the state and its ruling class to be accepted without violence. It is, with force, one of the two moments of the state. In a second sense hegemony is the hegemony-effect of the state itself, of the good balance of force and hegemony in the state, wherein force does not disappear but is so integrated into hegemony that it does not need to show itself and exercise itself: ‘There we have [...] the ethical state [...] whose “organic intellectuals” see to it

that the hegemonic apparatuses of “civil society” operate smoothly’ (2006b, 143). In a third sense of the term, hegemony is the hegemony of the party of the working class that causes it to lead without violence, both its members and allies, extending its influence on civil and political society. All of this therefore plays out at the level of hegemony, and insofar as hegemony also designates class domination, a Leninist reading of Gramsci is possible, but at the price of ‘a strange silence about the reality of the economic, political and ideological class struggles. They are represented in this scheme in the form of a Hegemony-effect alone, and at the price 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’ (2006b, 144). This misunderstanding has actually produced a rightist reading, which masks the structure of the concept of ‘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’ (2006b, 144). Hegemony then becomes not only a supreme effect, but also a supreme cause, because it is at once self-caused and an effect of itself, and has the extraordinary power that its crisis can make the domination of the dominant class vacillate or founder.

If hegemony means a direction that is neither dictatorship, coercion, or domination, suggesting an effect of voluntary consensus, then Althusser sees in this work ‘the old Hegelian idea, adopted by Croce and Gentile, that the state is, by its nature, an educator.’ Althusser concludes:

However surprising it may seem, Gramsci has not got beyond the Hegeliano-Crocean conception of culture as the ultimate End of Humanity (2006b, 146).

This explains the sublimation of the state into hegemony, and also why Gramsci, while attributing the element of force to the state, does not explain its place, matter, and exercise (2006b, 146).⁹ Force actually appears so limited [*poco*] because it is hegemony in the first sense that

‘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’ (2006b, 146). The state therefore realizes the ideal of a self-forming universal in which ‘the supersession [*Aufhebung*] of all Force’ is realized. Therefore, it is a natural consequence that ‘Force disappears from the ultimate “definition” of the state as the “unity of the state and civil society”, of the state as Hegemony, and, finally, of Hegemony all by itself (since the state itself has been “superseded”).’ (2006b, 147). According to Althusser, Gramsci’s profoundest idea is expressed here, which is reflected with perfect symmetry in his conception of the party:

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. (2006b, 147)

Gramsci’s conception, for Althusser, carries three precise consequences. First, it makes the problem of the state as a special machine, with a special body, the instrument of the perpetuation of class domination, disappear: ‘The specific reality of the state clearly does disappear in a formula in which Hegemony = Force + consensus, or political society + civil society’ (2006b, 147). Thus, if ‘Hegemony [is] the last word on the state,’ the material nature of the state machine is disguised, creating reformist misunderstandings and meditations on the nature of the state and the becoming-state of the party. This leads to the second consequence, the reduction of ideology to culture, or the substitution of a concept that requires class struggle with a notion that leads to ecumenism and elitism. Finally,

the third consequence, “the autonomy of politics” or “of the political” –in other words, in trying to think political strategy for the workers’ movement, Gramsci ends up thinking ‘politics (and the politician, its agent)’ as *causa sui*, as autonomous (2006b, 149-150).

As I mentioned above, this final chapter of *Marx in His Limits* is actually part of a broader confrontation with Gramsci in the same year (ALT2.A26-05.06/07, titled ‘Que faire?’). In this text, which reposes the old Leninist question in its title, Gramsci is evoked in order to explain the originality of the PCI’s politics: Gramscian historicism, in a communist horizon dominated by Stalinism, had a strong anti-dogmatic charge. And yet, for Althusser its merits seem to be exhausted. Recalling the criticism he made in the 1960s, he claims that Gramsci has the tendency of reducing historical materialism to philosophy, philosophy to politics, and politics to history. From this, two relevant consequences follow. First, historical materialism tends to be erased in Gramsci, reduced to Marxist philosophy or philosophy of practice:

This does not mean that Gramsci evacuates all of historical materialism, but for example [...] he does not have a very precise idea of what a theory of infrastructure can be, which is practically absent, except for a few allusions, in these writings. (36)

If the structure disappears, what remains is the superstructure. It is not by chance then that Gramsci was the first Marxist theorist to take an interest in the phenomena of the superstructure, the state, and ideologies.

However, the second relevant consequence is that if the structure disappears, then its links with the superstructure, the fact that it plays a decisive role in the reproduction of the relations of production, are not ‘really taken into account and thought in all their reality.’ (36) This ends up leading to ‘a phantom-like existence’:

All that can be done for the superstructure is to describe it, and analyze its functioning at the same level of its manifestation, as if it were not controlled by the hidden links that connect it to the infrastructure. (36)

Althusser recognizes the merit to Gramsci of emphasizing their importance ‘and having (although timidly) suggested that the superstructure penetrates the infrastructure, but the unity of “this penetration”, though described, was not really thought, and in addition this penetration itself was thought from the viewpoint of the superstructure, without knowing what else this superstructure penetrates’ (37). Now, if ‘the infrastructure is neglected’ (38) and we are forced to think the superstructure starting from itself, all that remains is to describe it and compare its elements. Gramscian historicism would be no more than an empiricism that produced its most interesting results on the question of intellectuals:

that intellectuals are normally ‘organic’ [...] that intellectuals have the function of organizing, of being the self-consciousness of a culture that it disseminates in the masses, that the types of intellectuals vary with the forms of society. (39)

However, this conception is founded on ‘another idea, deeply rooted in him, on the type of normal historical unity that must be present in his eyes for any veritable historical “epoch”.’ In other words, Althusser holds that ‘for Gramsci, history does not really come into being until it reaches the state of a ‘beautiful totality’ [...] when a real ‘historical bloc’ is constituted that is capable of uniting the ensemble of men in the unity of practice and ethics, in short, of a culture’ (39).

The concept of organic intellectual depends on this general conception. There is an organic intellectual when culture is not the property only of the learned, but rather when it penetrates the masses. If this does not happen, ‘we do not have a real “historical period”, a true “historical bloc” capable of securing its hegemony, of dominating and convincing, by persuasion and the general popular spread of its own ideas’ (40). In this sense the concept of the organic intellectual is linked to the educative role of the state. In other words, educators are needed who teach the people the ideas that bind the unity of the historic bloc. However, this is not a matter of the simple transmission of ideals, but rather a ‘set of practices, from the practices of production to moral and

political practices,' that is, 'a veritable *concrete universal ethic*' (41).

Althusser notes that the example from which Gramsci drew his reflections on organic intellectuals is the church and its focus on avoiding the distance between the learned and the pious, with its creation of the monastic order. 'This is an amazing example,' Althusser points out, 'because ultimately the church is not a "historic bloc", but an ideological apparatus which is always more or less of the state' (41). Gramsci's other example is the comparison between French and Italian history:

[...] Gramsci prolonged his reflections on the Church with a comparison between the history of France and Italy, opposing France which had, in the revolution, succeeded in constituting a 'historic bloc' by endowing itself with a true educating state and forming a comprehensive body of organic intellectuals for all of the tasks of hegemony, against Italy, which had not known how to accomplish its bourgeois revolution, and thus founding a true historic bloc, and which as a result, did not have a true body of organic intellectuals. (41)

From the unity of these themes, Althusser draws a series of conclusions about Gramsci's thought. First, not only does Gramsci neglect structure for the sake of superstructure, 'but he replaces the Marxist concept of the mode of production with the concept of "*historical bloc*"' (42). Second, by extracting his concept of organic intellectual from the history of the church, he 'borrowed its model of perfect and universal ethics' (42-43) from an element that belongs to the superstructure. Finally, third, although he 'described the politics of the Church, he did not sketch at one moment a theory of the Church,' which is further proof that he did not possess a 'theory of ideology' (43). This is not so, however, because he was not interested in ideologies, but rather because his historicism prevented him from posing the question of the links between ideologies and structure. In Gramsci, the Church is not an example, 'but the essence itself, *realized*, of the beautiful ethical totality that he projected on the state due to the "historical bloc". [...] The result is

that the state was thought starting from ideology. It is a new, "historicist" reduction' (43).

Therefore, absolute historicism turns out to actually be unthinkable, and ends up showing the philosophical thought that founds it on the church and state: 'a normative and hence idealist thought' (44), normative because it assumes models (church, France) and counter-models (Italy), and thus assumes that 'there is in history the normal and the pathological' (45).

According to Althusser, a further demonstration of this point is Gramsci's concept of passive revolution, which is evoked for example in the context of 'a state that functions well, but is not the [result] of a French revolution, for example the Italian state' (45). This is a passive revolution for Gramsci because it did not come from the bottom but was made by the monarchy in allegiance with the bourgeoisie, excluding the people: 'the course of history [...] has not been *what it would have been*' (45). Again there is a norm which measures historical events.

Moreover, Althusser emphasizes the immense extension of the concept in Gramsci: risorgimento, fascism, Nazism, as well as the USSR. Certainly, this concept grasps important aspects, such as the absence of popular initiative, the separation between popular masses and the state, the penetration of the state 'for organizing men into the forced and artificial unity of unions and the state party.' However, the opposition between the normal and pathological requires a normal model: 'And as is always necessary in the passive, abnormal revolution, Gramsci is not far from opposing to all these states which are non-ethical, non-universal in their unity, another sort of revolution, which operates at the same time overseas: namely in Roosevelt's America with the New Deal' (46).

In order to understand the implications of this concept, Althusser proposes two preliminary observations: 1) Gramsci never uses the term counter-revolution, and 2) Gramsci does not seem sensitive to the phenomena of regression, delay, or stagnation. This signals that Gramsci thinks history through the category of revolution, 'either in the form of active revolution, or in the form of passive revolution, which takes place in a bad, unethical state, which does not produce a true

cultural unity among its citizens' (47). This concept certainly reveals a normativism and finalism in Gramsci's thought insofar as it indicates that there are tasks that can be accomplished by either the dominant class or popular movement (49). But even more strongly, it signals that for Gramsci the essence of history is activity: 'either the presence of activity or the absence of activity' (47). Everything is linked: praxis is the interiority of all practices, namely activity, whose essence is politics. Again at the heart of Gramsci's thought, Althusser finds politics as *causa sui*.

Conclusion

We have referred to Althusser's ambivalence with respect to Gramsci's thought. At the end of the path we have charted, the terms of this ambivalence should be specified. The judgment on theoretical merits that Althusser attributes to Gramsci in *For Marx* and 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses' can perhaps be read in light of a passage from 1977:

Now, when we have read and re-read, both to the letter and with all of the theoretical and historical perspective they are owed, the notes in Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* on the state, we cannot but be struck by a strange impression, which Freud has called the uncanny (*Unheimlichkeit*): the feeling of being at home, but coupled with an uneasiness of not feeling quite at home. (ALT2. A57-01.09, 4)

Fundamentally, in an extremely synthetic way, what remains indigestible for Althusser is a model of temporality and historicity that prevents thinking the difference and specificity among levels.

As for the criticisms, we cannot fail to emphasize how strongly these were overdetermined by the theoretic-political conjuncture in both the sixties and seventies. In this sense it is clear that in Gramsci's text—sometimes by doing violence and reducing the complexity—Althusser looks for a limit-form of the positions that are contemporaneous with him. In 1965 he attacks

historicism as a paradoxical form which ultimately mirrors economic justification of Stalinism, and in 1977-78 he attacks the concept of hegemony as the inspiration of Eurocommunism.

However, the proximity and criticisms trace a path, that difficult road that Althusser tries to follow, not without hesitation and rectification, by thinking together determination in the last instance (whose 'lonely hour never comes') and the autonomy of levels (relative, surely, but how much?). If as Althusser says, the essence of philosophical labor consists in demarcation, in the detour through other positions in order to define and hold one's own, then I think that a good key to reading the Althusserian position is constituted by the incessant labor that he carried out on Gramsci, a labor which was all the more necessary insofar as he felt there was something in Gramsci's concepts which played out something essential in his own philosophy.

Notes

1. All emphasis in quotations from Althusser is Althusser's own.
2. Translator's note: the reference here is to Althusser's copy of Gramsci's *Œuvres choisies* in French, which are held in the IMEC archive. Throughout the essay I have translated the title of the work, noting the citation to the material held in IMEC.
3. See the letter of 19 July, in Althusser, 1998b, 628.
4. This text is part of a large set of texts that Althusser and his collaborators exchanged between October 1966 and February 1968. See the presentation by F. Matheron in Althusser, 'Notes sur la philosophie,' in Althusser 1995, 299-300.
5. See in particular Althusser, 'Du côté de la philosophie,' in Althusser 1995, 255-297.
6. The conference was held on 24 February 1968. Now published in Althusser 1998a, 103-144.
7. For a reconstruction of the historical-political context and collective project which gave birth to this text, see Balibar's preface in Althusser, 2014, vii-xviii.
8. When this article was originally written.
9. In *What is to Be Done?*, Althusser will claim the superiority of Machiavelli over Gramsci on this point: 'We see how much Gramsci, who exalted Machiavelli, is worse than his master.'

For Gramsci never supported, as Machiavelli did, the primacy of the moment of force (the army) over the hegemony of the state. While highly present in Machiavelli, force appears in Gramsci only to prepare its pure and simple disappearance from the concept of state as hegemony' (ALT2.A26-05.07, 73).

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