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## No. 4 GRAMSCI: A PERSPECTIVE FROM CHINA

ZHENG CHUXUAN

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## 1. Introduction

At the end of the 1960s and early 1970s there was a movement which studied and spread Antonio Gramsci's Marxism. This movement soon influenced intellectuals in the socialist bloc of Eastern Europe and even in Socialist China. However, Gramsci's thought has been interpreted in many different ways. Whilst in the west Gramsci is usually sympathetically viewed by his interpreters, in the socialist world, due to deep-rooted prejudices and the difficulties of getting hold of Gramsci's original works, his writings are usually labelled 'false Marxism', 'subjective idealism', 'revisionism' and so on. I am a visiting lecturer in England from China who views Gramsci's work favourably. I am much more in tune with western commentators but believe my own understanding of Gramsci's Marxism has its own special characteristics because of my background.

## 2. Gramsci Espoused Marxism Mainly as a Result of Criticizing the So-Called 'Marxist Orthodoxy' and Criticizing Croceanism

The 'Marxist Orthodoxy' which Gramsci criticized mainly consists of the theories presented by Bernstein and Kautsky at the time of the Second International.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Bernstein and Kautsky accepted the positivist 'vulgar theory of evolution'; they revised the dialectics of Marxism and advocated reformist theory. Spencer, a positivist, claimed himself to be more advanced than Darwin, in that he applied evolutionary theory to

everything in the universe including the social progress of human society, whereas Darwin only applied it to natural biology. According to Spencer's view, evolution is propelled simply by the reconciling of contradictions, leaving no room for class struggle; that is, he recognized quantitative but not qualitative changes. Lange, a neo-Kantian, claimed 'Social Darwinism' as his own important discovery, arguing that history can be included in the unique natural law of 'The Struggle for Existence' (incorporating Malthus's 'Law of Population Surplus'). Lange thought that the conflict between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie was caused by the fact that the increase in population was not adapted to the development of the productive materials, and so could be solved through reformist means and by developing production through technical change. Bernstein strongly commended Spencer's and Lange's theories. He deemed that Spencer's theory expressed Hegel's theory of dialectical development in a completely new form and caused fewer misunderstandings and false conclusions.

Bernstein admitted that he himself accepted Lange's account of historical evolution and that of other neo-Kantians. In this way, Bernstein denied the dialectics of revolution and advocated reformism which 'cannot touch even one thread of anybody's hair'. Moreover, Bernstein's theory was secretly supported and openly tolerated by Kautsky, the acclaimed authority of Marxist theory at that time. Kautsky often spoke of materialistic dialectics, but in fact followed Spencer's vulgar evolution, which he recognized departed from Darwin. He studied first Darwin and then Marx - first the development of the organism, then class struggle. Furthermore, Kautsky

claimed that it was Bernstein who inspired his beliefs. The influence of Bernstein and Kautsky in Italy at the time was reflected mainly in the reformism of Turati and his followers in the Social-Democratic Party. They held a positivist interpretation of Marxism. They understood the relationship between the productive forces and productive relations as a form of vulgar economic determinism and believed that the advance towards Communism was a form of natural evolution. Marxists could only propagandize and wait for Communism to develop of its own accord.

Gramsci also criticized another form of Marxist orthodoxy represented by Plekhanov, Bukharin and others of the Third International. According to Gramsci the Marxist Orthodoxy of the Third International contributed to the struggle against reformism but also contained errors. That is to say, they emphasized the unity between Marxism and the old materialism but failed to point out their differences, and so finally ended with a mechanistic theory.

Early in his development Gramsci accepted Croce's subjective idealism, which led him to oppose Marxist orthodoxy in Crocean terms. He believed that will and desire could determine everything, describing the Russian October Revolution as the complete affirmation of man's will and the complete negation of determinism. He often stated that the Bolsheviks were theorists of revolution not evolution; they believed that time was not an important element of social progress for socialism could be attained at any given moment. After experiencing revolution Gramsci believed that the formation and

role of man's will is a long objective process and he began to criticize Croceanism and to be attracted by Marxism. He made the final break with Croceanism when he understood Marxism more fully, recognizing the theoretical mistakes in Croce's work. Gramsci felt it was necessary to carry out a counter-critique and counter-negation of Croceanism, to set against Croce's right-wing criticism of and complete negation of the rational elements of Hegelianism and Marxism. He constantly referred to the need to combat Croceanism both as diffuse ideology and as a specific philosophical system. On occasion he cast Croce in the role of a Duhring, to be destroyed by polemic. Gramsci's criticism of Croceanism mainly relates to Croce's reduction of historical movement to a merely conceptual dialectic, the 'dialectic of distinction.' According to Gramsci, man's will, spirit etc are included in and cannot be separated from historical movement. They become rational and valuable to the historical movement insofar as they reflect the real development and course of historical movement. So, in the final analysis, Croce's philosophy is 'theology' or 'mysticism'. However, Gramsci never went to the other extreme, retaining his immunity to positivism, vulgar theories of evolution, and mechanism. According to Gramsci, Croceanism, subjective idealism and the Marxist orthodoxy are all denials of true Marxism, each with its particular point of departure. Croceanism or subjective idealism springs from man's feelings or will and Hegel's idea of absolute spirit, whilst Marxist orthodoxy arises from the 'natural evolution of matter' and 'dirty economic interests'. The former departs from Marxism's material elements but absorbs its spiritual elements, the

latter attacks Marxism's spiritual elements but absorbs its material elements. Either way the results are the same.

Gramsci writes:

'What happened is this: the philosophy of praxis has undergone in reality a double revision, that is to say it has been subsumed onto a double philosophical combination. On the one hand, certain of its elements, explicitly or implicitly, have been absorbed and incorporated by a number of idealistic currents (one need mention only Croce, Gentile, Sorel, Bergson and pragmatism). On the other hand, the so-called orthodoxy, concerned to find a philosophy which, according to their extremely limited viewpoints, was more comprehensive than just a 'simple' interpretation of history, have believed themselves orthodox in identifying this philosophy fundamentally with traditional materialism. Another current has gone to Kantianism.' [1]

It was through criticizing the Marxist orthodoxy and the subjective idealism of Croce and his followers that Gramsci fully espoused and finally elucidated his own original conception of Marxism as 'Praxis Monism' and 'Absolute Historicism'.

### **3. Gramsci's Conception of Marxism: 'Praxis Monism' and 'Absolute Historicism'**

According to Gramsci, the Marxist orthodoxy and the subjective idealism of Croce are reflections of the two trends in the apparent contradiction between materialism and idealism which Marx so severely criticized in his Theses on Feuerbach. So, in order to recover Marxism, it was necessary to elucidate the higher dialectical unity between materialism and idealism. In Gramsci's view, Marx united materialism with idealism through

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[1] Antonio Gramsci, **Selections from the Prison Notebooks** edited and translated by Q. Hoare and G. N. Smith, (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1973), p. 389.



the concept of praxis which underlies the great historical revolution in the history of philosophy. Gramsci accordingly called Marxism 'Praxis Monism', and furthermore gave the term a new and original meaning:

'What will be the meaning of the term 'monism'? It will certainly not be idealistic or materialistic monism, but rather the identity of contraries in the concrete historical act, that is in human activity (history-spirit) in the concrete indissolubly connected with a certain organicized (historicised) 'matter' and with the transformed nature of man. A philosophy of the act (praxis, development), but not of the 'pure' act--rather of the historical 'impure' act, in the most profane and worldly sense of the word'.[2]

It is obvious that Gramsci's monism is not about the question, often discussed by Marxists, of the relation between matter and spirit: which is the noumenon and which the derivation? Which comes first and which comes second? Gramsci's monism is a theory couched in terms of dialectics and of the theory of knowledge. What it studies is the dialectical unity between those opposites: man and nature. According to Gramsci, it is only through praxis that man relates to nature, and they meld so as to produce the meaning of everything in the world.

Except for the changes in the form of man's praxis, there is no sense or meaning in the world. Here lies the essence of Gramsci's praxis monism.

Concretely speaking, what concepts and significance does Gramsci's praxis monism contain? Gramsci elucidated and explained them in his account of 'Absolute Historicism'. Or, we could say, Gramsci's absolute historicism comes simply from his elucidations of praxis monism.

[2] Gramsci, **Selections**, p. 372.

It can be seen from the above that Gramsci's 'praxis' is the relation and unity between man and nature. This relation must have the natural world as a precondition; Gramsci saw it not as mechanical and passive, but as active and conscious, becoming an organic unity. The progress of unity is in accordance with man's activity and creativity. It is exactly in this sense that Gramsci said:

'That man cannot be conceived other than as living in society is a commonplace. But not all the necessary consequences have been drawn from this, even on an individual level. That a specific human society presupposes a specific 'society of things', and that human society is possible only insofar as there exists a specific society of things, is also a commonplace. It is true that up to now the significance attributed to these supra-individual organisms (both the societas hominum and the societas rerum) has been mechanical and determinist: hence the reaction against it. It is necessary to elaborate a doctrine in which these relations are seen as active and in movement, establishing quite clearly that the source of this activity is the consciousness of the individual man who knows, wishes, admires, creates (insofar as he does know, wish, admire create, etc) and conceives himself not as isolated but as rich in the possibilities offered him by other men and by the society of things of which he cannot help having a certain knowledge. Just as every man is a philosopher, every man is a man of science (etc)' [3]

In this way, Gramsci argued that man is the subject of praxis, so as to put forward his theory of absolute historicism. If the meaning of everything in the world cannot be separated from praxis, it necessarily has relations with the subject of praxis, that is, with man and man's history: this is indubitable and absolute. It is precisely in this sense that Gramsci called Marxism absolute historicism. He said:

'It has been forgotten that in the case of a very common expression (historical materialism) one should put the accent on the first term--'historical'--and not the second, which is of metaphysical origin. The

[3] Gramsci, Selections, pp. 353-354.

philosophy of praxis is absolute historicism, the absolute secularization and earthliness of thought, an absolute humanism of history. It is along this line that one must trace the thread of the new conception of the world.'[4]

It is obvious that Gramsci is as original in his use of the term absolute historicism as he is with praxis monism. Unlike the method of enquiry into everything in movement and development which is generally understood, Gramsci absolute historicism is mainly a theory about the relations between man and things, which holds that the meaning given to everything in the world cannot be separated from man and man's history.

According to his theory of absolute historicism, Gramsci argued that 'matter', as a basic concept of philosophy, had not been understood correctly by many people. What is 'matter'?

Gramsci argued:

'Clearly, for the philosophy of praxis, 'matter' should be understood neither in the meaning that is acquired in natural science (physics, chemistry, mechanics, etc--meanings to be noted and studied in the terms of their historical development), nor in any of the meanings one finds in the various materialistic metaphysics. The various physical (chemical, mechanical, etc) properties of matter which together constitute itself (unless one is to fall back on a conception of the Kantian noumenon) should be considered, but only to the extent that they become a productive 'economic element'. Matter as such therefore is not our subject, but matter, how it is socially and historically organized for production, and natural science should be seen correspondingly as essentially an historical category, a human relation. Has the ensemble of the properties of all forms of matter always been the same? The history of all the technical sciences shows that it has not. For how long was the mechanical power of steam neglected? Can it be claimed that this mechanical power existed before it was harnessed by man-made machines? Might it not be said in a sense, and up to a certain point, that what nature provides the opportunity for are not discoveries and inventions of pre-existing forces--of

[4] Gramsci, *Selections*, p. 465.

pre-existing qualities of matter-- but 'creations', which are closely linked to the interest of society and to the development of forces of production?'[5]

On this point, Gramsci made two criticisms. First, he criticized those thinkers who understood matter in terms of natural sciences: that is, they considered matter in physics, chemistry, mechanics and so on. Secondly, he criticized as 'materialistic metaphysicians' some Marxists who understood matter as something natural outside man, unchangeable by man's will. In Gramsci's view matter is 'essentially an historical category, a human relation', that is, something concerning social interests and man's creations. Therefore, it is simply nonsense to talk about matter without referring to man.

How should we understand the term 'object' philosophically? According to Gramsci's theory of absolute historicism, this must also be explained with the help of man and man's history. In order to understand the concept correctly, Gramsci suggests, we should consider the two geographical concepts 'East' and 'West'. The terms have objective meaning and can be factually misused, but they also have historical meanings, or are products of human civilization, 'since every point on the Earth is East and West at the same time.' 'Japan is the Far East not only for Europe but also perhaps for the American from California and even for the Japanese himself.' This fact must be relative to European civilization, since the European cultured classes have established their world-wide hegemony. Just the same, 'Italians often, when speaking of Morocco, call it an 'Eastern' country, to refer to its Moslem and Arab

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[5] Gramsci, **Selections**, pp. 415-416.

civilization.' It is obvious that these examples all have historical meaning and are all products of human civilization. But the examples are all real. 'They correspond to real facts, they allow one to travel by land and by sea, to arrive where one has decided to arrive, to "foresee" the future, to objectify reality, to understand the objectivity of the external world. Rational and real become one.' In a word, they are objective reality and yet 'they would not exist without man and without the development of civilization'. [6] Arguing thus, Gramsci maintained that object cannot be separated from man; it should be 'mankind's object', 'history's subjectivity' or 'general subjectivity'. 'Gaining objective knowledge' is only possible to the extent that 'the knowledge is realistic to all the people who are historically unified in an unified culture system'. If someone insists on the so-called 'pure object', that is, on the existence of something objective outside human existence, he must be influenced by the Kantian idea of noumenon and finally end up with metaphysics and mysticism. And if this is taken as Marxism and used to criticize idealism, then the result is to damage Marxism's reputation and give succour to idealism.

What does 'regularity' mean in the light of Gramsci's absolute historicism? Gramsci argued that Marx's concept of 'regularity' should not be thought of as a derivation from natural science but rather as an elaboration of Ricardo's concept of the 'determined market'. According to Gramsci, Marx's view was that 'the determined market is equivalent to a 'determined relation' of social forces in a determined

[6] Gramsci, **Selections**, pp. 447-448.

structure of the productive apparatus, this relation being guaranteed (that is, rendered permanent) by a determined political, moral and juridical superstructure.' This statement contains the crucial criterion for the definition of 'regularity'.[7] The definition of regularity is not the discovery of a universal law of metaphysics of determinism, but 'brings out how in historical evolution relatively permanent forces are constituted which operate with a certain regularity and automatism.'[8] Furthermore Gramsci maintained that regularity is concerned with and can be explained by necessity. 'Necessity' in the 'speculative-abstract' and in the 'historical-concrete' sense exists when there is an efficient and active premiss, which operates in people's consciousness to propose concrete goals, convictions and beliefs, and acts powerfully in the form of 'popular beliefs'. The premiss must contain, already developed or in the process of development, the necessary and sufficient material conditions for the realization of the impulse of collective will; but it is also clear that a certain level of culture cannot be separated from this 'material' premiss, which can be quantified. By this we mean a complex of intellectual acts and, as a product and consequence of these, a certain complex of overriding passions and feelings, overriding in the sense that they are the power to lead men to action "at any price".[9] It is precisely from the above definition of necessity that we can draw conclusions about what Gramsci meant by regularity. That is, when there exists a certain mode of material production together with its

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[7] Gramsci, **Selections**, p. 410.

[8] Gramsci, **Selections**, p. 412.

[9] Gramsci, **Selections**, pp. 412-413.

corresponding classes or groups and their politics, culture, morality, ethics and so on, society moves with a certain necessary regularity. In a word, regularity is contained in the organic unity of various social elements, each of which is necessary but not sufficient for regularity. According to Gramsci, this can be explained by the historical fact that many great mass movements disintegrated or were suppressed by opposition forces, but that the material conditions for these movements continued to exist. It is precisely because it lacked the corresponding politics, culture and ethics that the Italian bourgeoisie did not succeed in going beyond the economic and corporative stage in the epoch of developed capitalism. Similarly, the working class's change from the ruled class to the ruling class is not a natural process ensured by the 'universal law', but requires the creation of certain types of politics, culture and ethics.

Gramsci's Marxism, as I indicated at the beginning of this paper, has been interpreted in various ways. It is precisely because of his praxis monism and absolute historicism, which emphasizes man's subjective role in the knowledge of the world and in social history, and because of his close relationship with Croce when he was young, that some people considered that Gramsci's theory originated from Croce's works and interpreted him as Crocean or Neo-Hegelian. This is also why, to some extent, Gramsci's Marxism is considered 'false Marxism' or 'subjective idealism' in the socialist bloc. All of these interpretations have been proved incorrect by Gramsci's criticism of Croce as shown above. But this does not mean that Croce had no influence upon the formation of Gramsci's Marxism.

Gramsci's Marxism as a praxis monism and absolute historicism is a synthetic development which, on the basis of Gramsci's philosophical ruminations on the reality of society, originated from Marx's early works 'in the forms of aphorisms, and practical criteria' and absorbed the rational elements of Croceanism which are useful for criticizing positivism. This can be explained by two facts. Gramsci indicated repeatedly in The Prison Notebooks that Marx's Theses on Feuerbach and Preface to the Critique of Economics are the sources from which to recover Marxism, and that even after Gramsci became a Marxist he continued to praise Croce considering him one of the greatest philosophers in Europe comparable with Hegel.

#### **4. The Significance of Gramsci's Marxism for the Contemporary Socialist and Capitalist Worlds**

The fact that many people, both in the capitalist and socialist worlds, have recently become interested in Gramsci's Marxism indicates the significance of his thought today.

The significance of Gramsci's Marxism for the socialist world lies mainly in the direct and active influence of his work on the development of Marxism there; this stems from the unified and logical development of Gramsci's thought there.

As has been mentioned above, Gramsci arrived at Marxism mainly through criticizing Marxist orthodoxy, which pointed to the theories in the Second and Third Internationals. According to Gramsci, in praxis, the Third International was the reaction to the Second International; but in theory, they had the same



base: namely, 'objective philosophy' or 'mechanism'. The Second International considered that socialism would occur naturally in the course of evolution, while the Third established its philosophy on the basis of the simplified historical materialism of Plekhanov, Bukharin and others who despised the Marxist dialectic. Nevertheless, after the 1930s, this objective philosophy or mechanism was ossified by Bukharin's Theory of Historical Materialism and Stalin's Dialectical Materialism and Historical Materialism. In the form of textbooks of Marxist philosophy they have dominated the theoretical circles of the socialist world for over half a century. In China, probably because of the cultural tradition of the country, which pursues a comprehensive and perfectionist system of knowledge, the textbooks of Marxist philosophy contain an objective philosophy or mechanism which is more systematic and perfect still. Take, for example, the textbooks of historical materialism. China's version of historical materialism claims, at the very least, to study the law of development of society; but the law lies in the theory that productive forces mainly determine productive relations and that the economic base mainly determines the superstructure. Furthermore, although man's role is contained in productive forces and productive relations, it is mainly determined by matter. Therefore, man cannot but be the handmaiden of economic base: he only sticks a trade-mark on the superstructure according to the economic base. It seems that history moves in this way, following the 'Iron Logic'. But facts prove the contrary. Looking back to the periods of socialist revolution and construction, one realizes that they

and many tragic social movements were not precipitated by the economic bases of their times but by a few charismatic personalities. Nevertheless, we prefer to say that there is a subtle relation between theory and reality rather than that there is no relation between them. That is to say: if historical movements have their own 'Iron Logic', then it is not necessary for ordinary people to take the trouble of thinking; they may take every social change as natural and need do nothing to help bring it about. It is precisely this subtle relation that assisted many historical tragedies to develop one after another. So it is necessary for the people in the socialist world to overcome this kind of objective philosophy or mechanism and rebuild Marxism within theoretical and philosophical circle if they want to develop Marxism in existing conditions. So far it has been proved that the main theoretical background of Gramsci's Marxism and the current development of Marxism in the socialist world are unified logically: that Gramsci's Marxism has a direct and active influence on the latter is very obvious.

The significance of Gramsci's Marxism for the capitalist world is reflected in two ways.

On the one hand, Gramsci's Marxism can help people in the capitalist world to reconsider Marxism. For a long time, because of the dominant position of mechanism or objective philosophy of Marxism in the socialist world and the setbacks in some socialist countries, many people in the capitalist world took objective philosophy or mechanism to be Marxism and criticized it for paying insufficient attention to man, man's

role, man's dignity and value; they lost confidence and hope in Marxism. But Gramsci criticized the Marxist objective philosophy or mechanism and considered Marxism as praxis monism and absolute historicism, emphasizing the role and value of man and man's activities and elevating man to the position of the 'leading character of the long historical play'. This could help people in the capitalist world to reconsider Marxism and fully comprehend it, so as to find out the value of Marxism to capitalism. This is why, to some extent, after Gramsci, more and more people became interested in Gramscism and Marxism and the theories of 'Contemporary Western Marxism' were developed. This can also be explained by the fact that many conceptions of contemporary western Marxism could be considered to be related to or derived from Gramsci's praxis monism and absolute historicism. One instance is Lukac's conception of 'Man Becoming the Subject of History', which studies man as the 'subject of history' and 'the base of historical dialectics', and maintains that without a subject, there would be not any real process, since the subject is both the producer and the product of the real process; even the object relative to the subject could become objective only if it was first objectified by man. Another example is Fromm's 'Historical Conception of Anthropology' which argues that Marx's understanding of history was established on the basis of the fact that man is 'the creator and actor of his own history', and that Marx's 'materialistic base' means the basic conditions of human life. A further example is Lefeivor's conception of 'Subjective Activity' which maintains that the purpose of recovering Marxism is to take the principle of subjective activity as the

point of departure of the Marxist conception of the world. It is in this sense that some people take Gramsci as the creator of contemporary Marxism.

On the other hand, on the basis of praxis monism and absolute historicism, Gramsci established a politics which is basically different from that of Marxist orthodoxy, so as to realize a revolution in the history of Marxist politics. The shifted emphasis from nature to man, from matter to spirit, from violence to civilization. For instance, addressing the argument of the Marxist orthodoxy that 'the state is a tool of violence', Gramsci said that in modern times, the state is first and foremost the 'hegemony' of the ruling class, that is, the ruling class's preponderance over the classes and people in the ideological arena. Directing his argument at the conception of Marxist orthodoxy that 'violent revolution is the general form of social revolution', Gramsci said that the main policy of social revolution in the Western World is the 'war of positions'. The policy should be to create an ideological struggle in organic areas by sabotaging the ruling class's dominance in every area of thought within 'civil society', so as to strive for and develop a 'hegemony' of the working class, and create a powerful revolutionary subjective force.

Contending that Marxist orthodoxy laid too much emphasis on the elite character of the Communist Party, Gramsci argued that only if the Communist Party became the 'party of the masses' as the 'Modern Prince' which represents the radical interests and real aspirations of the working class and its allies, could it become an elite party and complete its historical mission; that is to say, Gramsci emphasized it as the 'party of the masses'

and not the 'elite party'. All these theories are not only significant for the development and perfection of the Communist Parties and socialist countries in the socialist world, but also for the activities of the advanced classes, groups and parties in the capitalist world which are striving for the advancement and perfection of society.

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