

BUILDING OVER PLANNING: RADICAL COUNTER-HEGEMONY AND THE DINOSAURS OF THE OLD LEFT

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Recent economic crises have catalyzed a surge of Leftist, progressive and radical discourse, particularly in the US and Europe. Among this diverse body of work, The Nation's 'Reimagining Socialism' forum and ZCommunications' ongoing 'Reimagining Society Project' are among the most widely read and prestigiously authored. Unfortunately, an unacceptable bulk of this literature repeats tired socialist maxims, arguments circumscribed by a narrow vision of how productive social change manifests. The danger is that alternative, particularly radical visions, may suffer because of the dominance of this staid discourse, forestalling opportunities for cooperation, consensus and progress. In response, this article presents a more processual approach to understanding both the modern social landscape and the complex mechanics of social change, drawing from the work of Antonio Gramsci. The Gramscian perspective suggests that those seeking radical social change cannot rely on elaborate stratagems as they risk falling into the trap of static models and totalized subjects. Instead, it is the manner in which activists articulate their vision that gives them power; careful articulation permits the flexibility needed to navigate shifting social realities. Further, careful articulation allows for seemingly disparate and common practices to be woven into a more cohesive vision of social change.

Introduction

Beginning in the March 23rd 2009 issue, *The Nation* magazine, self-described as “the flagship of the Left” and easily one of the most widely read political and cultural opinion publications in the US, invited numerous authors to participate in a forum titled “Reimagining Socialism” (Amazon.com 2009). In the opening essay, Barbara Ehrenreich and Bill Fletcher Jr. assert that they, as socialists, were not adequately prepared for the financial tumult that has swept the globe. While global capitalism trudges through this crisis, they lament, “we” don’t have a plan:

At least we don’t have some blueprint on how to organize society ready to whip out of our pockets. Lest this sound negligent on our part, we should explain that socialism was an idea about how to rearrange ownership and distribution and, to an extent, governance. It assumed that there was a lot worth owning and distributing; it did not imagine having to come up with an entirely new and environmentally sustainable way of life. (Ehrenreich and Fletcher 2009)

This oddly defensive tone is persistent throughout this piece (and many of the forum’s other articles), giving it a familiar ‘wail and moan’ undertone. Consequently, the article ends up reading something like this: *This isn’t the way it was supposed to be, there was supposed to be a socialist revolution; it*

was supposed to be easy. Capitalism has entered a crisis stage and ‘we’ don’t have a plan; ‘we’ need a plan. Moving forward ‘we’ must focus on organized solidarity as the emotional core for some larger plan that will come into being at a later date. It ends,

And we have to be serious, because the capitalist elites who have run things so far have forfeited all trust or even respect, and we—progressives of all stripes—are now the only grown-ups around. (Ehrenreich and Fletcher 2009)

Ehrenreich and Fletcher’s piece stands among many books, articles and papers that form a body of work I will refer to as ‘crisis literature,’ scholarship that has emerged in response to swelling economic crises. Though *The Nation*’s forum and ZCommunication’s ongoing ‘Reimagining Society Project’ have been among the most widely read and prestigiously authored, crisis literature is by no means confined to these examples. In a surprising number of cases, however, crisis literature has mirrored the work found in these two examples in an important way: it is dominated by the vanguard of the Old Left in what is apparently a significant resurgence of socialist discourse.

Unfortunately, much of this contemporary socialist discourse runs over familiar ground, repeating maxims of the 1960s and 70s, apparently insensitive to the drastically different landscape of resistance of today, in terms of both the diversity of today’s radical progressive social formations and the challenges they face. This tension is palpable when looking over the articles in ZCommunication’s ongoing ‘Reimagining Society Project;’ the project’s website prominently features a quote from Ehrenreich and Fletcher’s essay, while more than a few contributions build off of a rejection of its tired, socialist-centric discourse.

Indeed, also contributing to *The Nation* forum, Rebecca Solnit replies to these authors’ arguments, highlighting an apparent willful prejudice in their understanding of how resistance manifests. She argues that their rather narrow, specifically socialist call-to-arms suggests an underlying ‘I haven’t seen it, it hasn’t happened’ theoretical stance. Solnit argues that there are indeed points of resistance, referencing not only uprisings and challenges to capitalism’s dominance outside of the US, but changes happening within the US as well:

“Do we have a plan, people?” Ehrenreich and Fletcher ask. We have thousands of them, being carried out quite spectacularly over the past few decades, from gardens and childcare co-ops and bicycle lanes and farmers’ markets and countless ways of doing things differently and better. The underlying vision is neither state socialist nor corporate capitalist, but something humane, local and accountable—anarchist, basically, as in direct democracy. The revolution exists in little bits everywhere, but not much has been done to connect its dots. We need to say that there are alternatives being realized all around us and theorize the underlying ideals and possibilities. But we need to start from the confidence that the revolution has been with us for a while and is succeeding in bits and pieces. (Solnit 2009)

Solnit’s reply highlights a recurring problem found in crisis literature, particularly within the socialist resurgence, a problem with what I’ll call ‘ways of looking.’ Here, Ehrenreich and Fletcher’s ‘us vs. them’ tone of inevitability and simultaneous plea for invigoration suggests a highly collapsed and essentialized view of both the modern social landscape and the complex mechanics of social change. For example, disregard or ignorance of those activities Solnit pointed to suggests that because they aren’t specifically ‘socialist,’ they do not constitute a viable ‘plan,’ a position that foreshortens the scope of change to ‘socialist’ margins while also suggesting that within those boundaries, grandiose blueprints are in order.

Unfortunately, it may be that these reductive tendencies, problems with ‘ways of looking,’ are somewhat endemic to elements of socialist thought. Indeed, these problems can be found in post-World War II Marxist/Socialist literature and, it seems, socialist resurgence literature continues this tradition. It suffers from the same problems of model rigidity and narrowness of vision that led earlier authors to fatalistically throw up their hands in the face of expanding capitalist social relations. This cannot continue; historically pivotal moments such as the one we find ourselves in now are too important to be given over to stale debate and delimited perspectives.

That said, I want to make clear that it is not my intention here to promote unproductive disputes over the views of individual theorists; insular divisiveness and unhelpful bickering has hindered resistance discussions for far too long. Instead, my aim is to challenge some of the reductive tendencies that plague resistance discussions on a broad scale. Though I may criticize individual approaches, my goal is constructive response and fruitful dialogue. Similarly, while some of the work discussed below stretches back to the early 20th century, I am chiefly interested in its impact on current debates. There should be no doubt that my aim is to aide *contemporary* discourse.

I begin this discussion by teasing apart the fatalist trend mentioned above, linking it with two general theoretical themes: 1) the rise of the one-dimensional modern man and, 2) that the complexity of modern society has effectively neutralized the potential for social change. I then move on to demonstrate that such conclusions are frequently rooted in problems with ‘ways of looking,’ that is, an overly simplified and collapsed view of the social landscape, individual actors, and the myriad mechanisms and social processes that influence any project for social change.

Of course, such simplification is not due to ignorance, necessarily, but comes instead from theorists’ focus on coherence and unity in the pursuit of large-scale models, subjugating a clear understanding of forces of antagonism and dissonance. In an effort to move away from the limiting simplicity of static blueprints and plans, I present instead a framework for theorizing reality and process. Drawing on the work of Antonio Gramsci, I present a method of approaching the complex internal dynamics of social actors, morphing social landscapes and processes of social change that remains flexible and responsive to the needs of the moment. Finally, this Gramscian perspective suggests that those seeking truly radical and progressive social change cannot rely on elaborate stratagems as they risk falling into the trap of static models and totalized subjects. Instead, it is the manner in which those forces *articulate* their project that gives them potency; careful articulation permits the flexibility needed to navigate shifting social realities. Further, careful articulation allows for ‘the dots to be connected,’ as Solnit solicits, weaving seemingly disparate and common practices into a more cohesive fabric of social change.

History of Hopelessness

As noted above, the problems of identity essentialization and collapsed social analyses found in socialist resurgence literature are only the recent manifestations of a much longer trend. If begin in the mid-20th century, towards the end of the second World War, the pronounced fatalism of many marxist/socialist writers of the time can be attributed to these same problems with ‘way of looking.’

Written under the gloom of advancing fascism, Horkheimer and Adorno’s 1944 *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is understandably pessimistic about the potential for throwing off the mantle of capitalist social relations. The authors argue that we have witnessed a neutralization of capitalism’s tension between relations of production and the material productive forces of society, aided in large part by expansion of centralized planning and quasi-socialized ownership of the means of

production. As a result, “...gone are the objective laws of the market which ruled in the actions of the entrepreneurs and tended towards catastrophe” (Horkheimer and Adorno 1944: 38).

However, they lament, the dissolution of capitalist contradictions did not initiate social upheaval. Instead of ushering in a proletarian Revolution, the world suffered under totalitarianism and fascism. Instead of weakening capitalism, the authors point to a growing system of domination that has supported an ever-expanding capitalist economy and a *strengthening* of capitalist social relations. The revolutionary potential of capitalism’s contradictions are neutralized through these elaborate webs of domination, weaving through and utilizing both social and cultural practices and institutions.

The view of modern Western culture as a harbinger of permanent domination is a theme continued in Adorno’s *Minima Moralia*, though with a decidedly darker tone. He declares in the opening paragraph,

What the philosophers once knew as life has become the sphere of private existence and now of mere consumption, dragged along as an appendage of the process of material production, without autonomy or substance of its own. (Adorno 1951: 15)

The collection of short essays and aphorisms opines the essential inhumanity of modern society, taking up topics that range from the culture industry and the authority of positivist science to the false equality of ‘equal-pay’ feminism and the effect of profit economics on human tenderness. These social problems and malignancies are, he argues, systematic, part and parcel of the elaborate socio-cultural web of domination within late capitalism.

This critique of cultural bankruptcy has influenced numerous perspectives on the possibilities for resistance and progressive social change. Anxiousness over eroding spaces and opportunities for rational-critical debate within the public sphere, deepening commodification and the elaboration of modern frameworks of domination (e.g. Habermas) have fueled, for example, the regressive, unhelpful, and unfortunately familiar New Left politics of authenticity. Rather than producing discourse that seeks to find those points of powerful (if transitory or isolated) resistance, acknowledging the problems and setbacks that exist while still teasing out the positives, it is much more common to encounter elaborate discussions of flaws and pitfalls, barriers and shortcomings.

These arguments are imbued with two interrelated themes: 1) that modern social actors are increasingly one-dimensional culture-consumers who are forever losing the tools for Revolution as they sink into a uniform mass and, 2) a pervasive sense that the potential for change is slim within, to borrow a phrase from Adorno, the ‘incomprehensible framework’ of modern life (Adorno 1951: 37).

Not surprisingly, these twin fatalist themes can also be found in a great deal of crisis literature, though they are particularly popular within the *Nation* forum, a testament to their persistence. Ehrenreich and Fletcher flirt with the tone of Adorno’s ‘incomprehensible framework’ in their elaborate picture of capitalist destruction, declaring that “[i]n recent years, capitalism has become increasingly and almost mystically abstract” (Ehrenreich and Fletcher 2009). Immanuel Wallerstein offers the US Left both short-term and medium-term plans. The first amounts to a program of concession, recognizing that Obama neither wishes to nor is able to offer social transformation, and instead ‘we’ should press him to “minimize the pain and suffering of most people right now” (Wallerstein 2009). The medium-term goals remain vague and amount to little more than a call to dismantle capitalism:

What must the left do? Promote intellectual clarity about the fundamental choice. Then organize at a thousand levels and in a thousand ways to push things in the right direction. The primary thing to do is to encourage the decommmodification of as much as we can decommmodify. The second is to experiment with all kinds of new structures that make better sense in terms of global justice and ecological sanity. And the third thing we must do is to encourage sober optimism. Victory is far from certain. But it is possible. (Wallerstein 2009)

I do not mean to criticize Wallerstein's optimism, but the indefinite enormity of the second part of the plan seems to doom the Left to the interim goals of, essentially, 'taking what you can get' within the 'incomprehensible framework.'

Indeed, a number of the contributions to the forum exude a reformist quality, suggesting an underlying belief that the potential for change is slim. For example, Tariq Ali celebrates the Obama stimulus package as a "first major step in the right direction" (Ali 2009). Saskia Sassen admits her "growth sites" investment plan is "not a revolution," adding, "[t]his would occur within capitalism, but it begins to lay the ground for a widespread and distributed economic network" (Sassen 2009). In particularly nasty dig, Doug Henwood criticizes the relatively concrete examples offered by Solnit for being unrealistic:

I also want to dissent from another prescription: Rebecca Solnit's contention that the revolution is already happening, via 'gardens and childcare co-ops and bicycle lanes and farmers' markets and countless ways of doing things differently and better.' While many of these things are very nice, they're well short of a transformative vision. The package draws heavily on an ancient American fantasy of self-reliance and back-to-the land escapism. It's no model for running a complex industrial society. Such a system couldn't make computers or locomotives, and it probably couldn't feed 6 billion earthlings either. Maybe Solnit wants to give all that up. If so, she should tell us. (Henwood 2009)

Henwood concludes his piece, "While the current economic crisis probably won't be the magic intervention that will deliver us to a post-capitalist future, there are opportunities to advance the socialist cause" (Henwood 2009).

Overstatement and Repressed Antagonism

Again, the fatalist - and subsequently reformist - tendency discussed above leans heavily on two assumptions: the one-dimensional man and the increasing impossibility of progressive social change (i.e. 'it' is over). However, as will be discussed below, these are both *limited* and *limiting* foundations for envisioning alternative ways of life. They are limited in their ability to explain many modern social formations or any view of social actors or social action that strays from its narrow analytical lens. Thus, they are limiting in their general air of fatalism and resignation, encouraging readers to explore and lament the ornate expanses of their tomb rather than searching for cracks in its foundation.

It's Over

I want to first address the notion that the potential for progressive social change is slim within the 'incomprehensible framework' of modern life. It is worth noting that this theme is frequently manifest alongside a eulogy for a specifically socialist revolution (recall Henwood's conclusion

above). However, the notion that socialist revolution is no longer possible has at its core an obvious historical apriorism regarding the specific nature of social revolution. Here, strict adherence to socialist ideology may be one reason authors come to such dire conclusions; though socialist strategy may no longer be a viable agent of change, that does not mean change is no longer possible.

Further, at a more fundamental level, the basic notion of a socialist ‘revolution’ has at its core a highly collapsed view of processes of change. As Laclau and Mouffe observed, this classic socialist version of ‘Revolution,’

...implied the *foundational* character of the revolutionary act, the institution of a point of concentration of power from which society could be ‘rationally’ reorganized... The classic conception of socialism supposed that the disappearance of private ownership of the means of production would set up a chain of effects which, over a whole historical epoch, would lead to the extinction of all forms of subordination. (Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 178)

Not only does this approach presuppose the Revolution (capital ‘r’) will somehow address all wrongs in an inherently progressive way, it is also predicated upon a determinate, essentialized view of society. This Revolution envisions a single pivot for the *quick* reorganization of the whole of society, predicated on the belief that societies behave as cohesive, sutured wholes, vulnerable to the targeted rupture of Revolution and receptive to redesign across the board.

The fatalists’ view that the potential for change has shrunk arises because of their adherence to a predetermined, narrow notion of what that change must look like, who will orchestrate it and what the result will be. Again, just because socialist visions and strategies may be losing traction or relevance does not mean that change is impossible. Finally, at the most fundamental level, these preconceived blueprints are built on a highly collapsed view of how social change actually happens, of the numerous social and psychological processes and practices involved and their potential impact on any project of social change, progressive or otherwise.

One-dimensional Modern Life

This brings me to the second common theme suggested above: modern societies’ creation of a one-dimensional man. Consider for example Adorno’s view that “everyone, however powerful, is an object,” Habermas’ debased public sphere and “great mass of consumers,” or Horkheimer and Adorno’s claim that “[t]he standard of life enjoyed corresponds very closely to the degree to which classes and individuals are essentially bound up with the system...everyone can be happy, if only he will capitulate fully and sacrifice his claim to happiness” (Adorno 1951: 37; Habermas 1962: 175; Horkheimer and Adorno 1944: 150-3). In *The Nation* forum, numerous authors lament the magnitude of contemporary social problems and individuals’ apparent inability to act, chalked up to the “hyper-individualism” of a disengaged, aggregated “public” (McKibben 2009; Henwood 2009). The expansion of capitalist relations into many aspects of individual and collective life leads fatalists to a vision of modern life as little more than robotic consumption and production where individuals are part of a great mass of undifferentiated consumers who have transformed from “a public critically reflecting on its culture to one that merely consumes it” (Habermas 1962: 175).

However, as with the image of Revolution, this interpretation of individual identity in modern capitalist societies is rife with overdetermination. The notion of the one-dimensional man - aggregated in the ‘great mass’ - rests on an essentialized view of individual and class consciousness. In this view, ‘social class’ is the primary subject, each delineated by a unity constituted around

interests determined by relations of production. The problem lies is not so much in the centrality of production relations in the formula, but the assertion of unity and complete acquisition of social identity by the individual; it is implied that there is no internal antagonism within and among the 'great masses.'

But homogenizations of identity and consciousness are not confined to *pessimistic* readings modern lives, it is more endemic than that. Take for example Habermas' development of the public sphere as a locus for rational debate. It presupposes that the political identities of participants are malleable, as consensus is achieved through the reconstitution of these identities through debate. However, Habermas' final rational consensus, an inclusive 'we,' simultaneously implies an end to the very antagonism that creates diverse political identities, the life-blood of deliberative democracy. An inclusive 'we' can only exist in a totalizing, authoritarian sense; the tolerance of antagonism is the justification for a deliberative democratic system (see Laclau and Mouffe 1985). Similarly, the repeated invocation of 'solidarity' as a prime catalyst for change in the *Nation* forum neglects the inherent complications of the term and the murky, possibly repressive reality of its realization.

Repressing Antagonism

Indeed, if we step back and look at both of these fatalist themes, it seems there is a common tendency to downplay or remove elements of conflict, difference and division. This simplification may only be a discussion tool, or, it may be stem from issues deeper within the socialist theoretical foundation; namely, a desire for unity and harmony in society that ultimately colors analyses of reality.

This is an issue that has seen debate on numerous fronts, notably in discussions over dialectical materialism's potentially deterministic reading of consciousness formation. Briefly, if dialectical materialism suggests that consciousness is determined by the nature of an individual's or class's social existence, as reemphasized by Lukacs, then it follows that analyses of consciousness are forever subordinate to analyses of social relations, here, relations of production. Thus, the broad and simplified strata of economic analyses (workers, bourgeoisie) are applied to consciousness analyses, rolling over subtle variations and points of conflict within these ideal-typical categories. When Lukacs argues that the consciousness of the proletariat will be the "last class consciousness in the history of mankind," it is because the proletarian Revolution has been predestined to eliminate classist social relations simply by virtue of its economic aims, bringing this argument to the point of a self-referential feedback loop (Lukacs 1968: 70). Again, it is difficult to accept the social unity implied here. Indeed, it only appears plausible if consciousness is understood as *entirely* and *constantly* determined by specific social processes, here, relations of production and consumption.

A clear problem with this line of thinking is that the focus on coherence and integration may come at the expense of a recognition of dissonance and antagonism. Again, I make this point not to engage in a squabble over theory, but because it has serious implications for the goal of progressive social change, a goal I share with the authors discussed here. Collapsing identity in this way not only overshadows antagonisms that may give depth to the one-dimensional individual and make visible spaces for resistance, but it threatens to mask antagonisms within forces for change as well. For example, there is no necessary connection between, say, anti-capitalism and anti-racism or anti-sexism. To ignore these points of dissonance because of a focus on social relations of production and consumption is to subordinate the importance of social relations of race and gender.

What should be pursued is a framework that allows for flexibility in identity and consciousness, one that allows antagonism and dissonance to remain visible without losing sight of the points of

unity and coherence.

An Alternative Framework

The key first step in building this framework is to accept that no social identity can be applied in a totalized way; there always remain elements of dissonance and spaces for antagonism within a given subject. As suggested above, totalizing identity requires complete confidence in the labels applied, introducing an historical apriorism that leaves models vulnerable to the shifting reality of social relations.

Indeed, insensitivity to morphing social relations is one reason the fatalist, one-dimensional man came into being. There should be no doubt that capitalist social relations have reached deep into individual and collective life, but this does not necessarily negate the possibility that antagonisms remain. Indeed, the way forward does not necessarily involve rejecting these fatalist visions entirely, but rather in developing ways to incorporate their merits. Though the landscape may look thoroughly commodified and subordinated to the logic of capitalist social relations, we are obliged to look deeper. Indeed, we must accept the notion of commodification as an integral part of modern social relations, incorporating this recognition into our analyses in order to skirt its effect on our conclusions. We must prepare to look deeper, recognizing and examining its nuances, strengths and weaknesses without being blinded by its extent. To do this, we must develop the right tools. If there are indeed spaces for dissonance and antagonism, they lie beneath the surface of the one-dimensional man and between the cracks of mass culture.

The process of theorizing cracks and dimensions is greatly aided by incorporating a Gramscian perspective in the analysis.

A Gramscian Perspective

I want to emphasize the use of the word perspective here. A clear problem with drawing from Gramsci's thought is the contentious history of his usage. For example, David Harris writes that within the field of culture studies, Gramsci's use has been uneven and, unfortunately, often as a weapon in academic rivalries rather than in constructive debate. He is bothered by,

the astonishing tendency for the figure of Gramsci to keep coming to the fore, as a leading theorist and guide, as a source of specific pieces or concepts which guide analysis or less specifically as a kind of model of good practice, able always to 'teach a lesson', keep the faith, and see off the rivals. For me, this tendency is linked to the academic context of the production of these works: briefly, it is conventional in academic writing to conduct a debate with rivals before allowing the chosen theorist to emerge as the person most likely to synthesise the offerings, make sense of the debates, or offer some suitably pleasurable resolution and closure. (Harris 1992: 7)

Harris' account suggests that the reputation of Gramsci's thought may suffer from irresponsible use. Unfortunately, while Harris' intention may have been to question the use of Gramsci at certain times, his tone only seems to fan the flames, further subordinating Gramsci's original work to modern academic theatrics.

Despite this hurdle, Gramsci remains helpful in attempting to create a framework capable of incorporating antagonism, commodification and shifting social realities. As Adam David Morton

argues, “rather than simplistically believing Gramsci has the answers or holds the key to different historical and contemporary problems,” stress should be placed on “the importance of thinking in a Gramscian way” (Morton 2007: 35). Scholars should aim to internalize his method so as to approach their subject with the aid of Gramsci’s thought without leaning dangerously the figure of Gramsci himself. His work should be reexamined in order to develop “a point of departure to deal with similar problematics in our own time” (Morton 2007: 36).

With this advice in mind, I want to move on to those elements of Gramsci’s thought most helpful to this discussion of collapsed identities, prescriptive analyses and processes of social change. Of particular interest here are Gramsci’s development of the concept hegemony and his elaboration of the importance of articulatory practices.

Domination through Hegemony

The best way to incorporate a Gramscian perspective in our discussion is to first make clear the loose framework for understanding modern power relations that undergirds Gramsci’s work. This can be easily seen in Gramsci’s two-part theory of the state:

For it should be noted that certain elements that fall under the general notion of the state must be restored to the notion of civil society (in the sense, one might say, that state = political society + civil society, that is, hegemony protected by the armor of coercion). (Gramsci 2007: 75)

Here, Gramsci establishes ‘the state’ broadly, as an array of social relations that represents the domination of a particular social group over others and not in the more common and narrow definition of the state as simply government. Within the framework of this broad ‘state,’ Gramsci theorized that dominant groups maintain their position through a mix of sheer force (coercion through political society) and, more importantly, with the active participation of the subordinate groups (consent through hegemony in civil society).

The use of coercion in the process of domination is the domain of what he calls ‘political society,’ meaning “the armed forces, police, law courts and prisons, together with all the administrative departments concerning taxation finance, trade, industry, social security, etc.” (Simon 1990: 71). In Gramsci’s view, however, these are only a portion of the state’s domination framework. Indeed, the role of political society, the “apparatus of state coercive power,” is to enforce “discipline on those groups who do not ‘consent’” (Gramsci 2003: 12). The state, or dominant group, only turns to coercive tactics if efforts to manufacture consent fail.

Consent to domination, the second portion of Gramsci’s formula of power, is developed within civil society. It is an internalized form of domination that differs from the external, “direct domination” achieved through the coercive force of political society (Gramsci 2003: 12). Civil society is the sphere within which the state pursues (and maintains) hegemony, a social order where “a common social-moral language is spoken, in which one concept of reality is dominant, informing with its spirit all modes of thought and behaviour” (Femia 1981: 24).

Hegemony, however, is not simply achieved through the alignment of the free choices of subordinate groups. Consent is actively manufactured within civil society; hegemony is pursued through “extremely complex mediums, diverse institutions, and constantly changing processes” (Buttigieg 1995: 7). “Through their presence and participation in various institutions, cultural activities and many other forms of social interaction, the dominant classes ‘lead’ the society in

certain directions” (Buttigieg 2005: 44). Hegemony operates through the social institutions of civil society: the church, the educational system, the press, all the bodies which help create in people certain modes of behavior and expectations consistent with the hegemonic social order.

One of the key strengths of Gramsci’s ‘state = political society + civil society’ formula is its versatility. In contrast to defining boundaries or components based on specific, tangible characteristics, he presents these elements as a theoretical spaces, planes where the myriad processes of domination and resistance take place. The model attempts to account for the fact that mechanisms of domination can and will vary between different societies and different times. Consequently, in applying it to this discussion, we are able to incorporate issues of commodification into our models rather than being blinded by their apparent totality. Approached in this somewhat generalized way, hegemony becomes a useful tool for beginning to look for the cracks in the ‘incomprehensible framework’ and finding the hidden edges of the one-dimensional man. If there are indeed spaces for antagonism, difference and contestation, the hegemony model can help us explore them.

Culture and Counter-hegemony

The gramscian plane of contested hegemony is a useful model not only for large social systems, but for small groups and even an individual’s internal struggles as well. This brings us to the role of culture in the production of (and resistance to) domination. The term ‘culture’ is used here to indicate the systems of values and norms that underpin individual practices, the behavior of the elements of civil society and, in the case of a hegemonic culture, the behavior of political society as well. Culture is the wellspring from which the rationale and validation for innumerable institutions and practices flows. Like ripples in water, the existence, structure and behavior of the myriad facets of political and civil society can be traced back to culture. We might also use the word ‘ideology’ in the sense that culture provides social phenomena with a set of rules, codes, and conventions imbued with meanings particular to specific social groups. Gramsci understood cultures as *groupings* of “all the social elements which share the same mode of thinking and acting” (Gramsci 2003: 324). Thus, different cultures may view the same phenomena in disparate ways as their particular ideological systems (Gramsci refers to this as a culture’s ‘common sense’) colors their experiences in different ways.

Thus, the term is not meant to indicate any *particular* group of values and norms. While it is possible to speak of a dominant culture, it is by no means the only culture. Further, cultures are ‘precipitates,’ ways of being and living that are formed by the “interaction of a multitude of historical processes at particular moments of time” (Crehan 2002: 72). Thus, cultures (and their ‘common sense’) are somewhat transitory and, in this sense, are themselves arenas where “dominant, subordinate and oppositional cultural values meet and intermingle...vying with one another to secure the spaces within which they can [frame and organize] popular experience and consciousness” (Bennett 1986: xix). It is important to understand this view of culture as we begin to discuss Gramsci’s ideas about social change.

Gramsci conceived of two methods for challenging domination: a ‘war of maneuver’ and a ‘war of position,’ best understood as points on a continuum rather than mutually exclusive options. A ‘war of maneuver’ involves physically overwhelming the coercive apparatus of the State, that is, the institutions of political society. However, the success of this strategy depends on the nature of the State’s hegemony, that is, its position within civil society. In a comparison of the State in Czarist Russia with that in liberal democracies (referred to as the East and the West respectively), Gramsci notes that the strength of the latter lies in a sturdy civil society [here Gramsci uses the term *State* to mean government, or political society, as opposed to his more broad definition used elsewhere and

throughout this text (i.e. State= political society + civil society)]:

In the East the State was everything, civil society was primordial and gelatinous; in the West, there was a proper relation between State and civil society, and when the state tottered, a sturdy structure of civil society was immediately revealed. The State was just a forward trench; behind it stood a succession of sturdy fortresses and emplacements. (Gramsci 2007: 169)

Though Gramsci's specific aim in the above passage was to rule out any idea that what worked for Lenin in 1917 would work in the Western liberal democracies of the time, the core idea remains useful in a contemporary context. In modern liberal democracies, direct confrontation (armed uprising, general strike, etc.) will not threaten the dominant groups so long as their credibility and authority is firmly rooted in civil society. Buttigieg notes, "civil society, in other words, far from being a threat to political society in a liberal democracy, reinforces it—this is the fundamental meaning of hegemony" (Buttigieg 2005: 41).

However, Gramsci does not give up on the notion of radical change in liberal democracies, he was a writer principally focused on a radical transformation of capitalist society. His central concern was "how might a more equitable and just order be brought about, and what is it about how people live and imagine their lives in particular times and places that advances or hampers progress to this more equitable and just order" (Crehan 2002: 71). Consequently, it was his view that "one should refrain from facile rhetoric about direct attacks against the State and concentrate instead on the difficult and immensely complicated tasks that a 'war of position' within civil society entails" (Buttigieg 2005: 41).

Described by Gramsci as "the only viable possibility in the West," a 'war of position' is resistance to domination with culture, rather than physical might, as its foundation (Gramsci 2007: 168). Cox succinctly describes a 'war of position' as process which "slowly builds up the strength of the social foundations of a new state" by "creating alternative institutions and alternative intellectual resources within existing society" (Cox 1983: 165). As discussed above, the dominant system of values and norms simultaneously advances the goals of the hegemonic group and works to reenforce hegemony, discouraging behavior that does not advance their goals or challenges their supremacy and encouraging behavior that sees subordinate groups adopting and internalizing the hegemonic system of values and norms. Thus, for Gramsci, issues of culture are what lie at the heart of any revolutionary project; culture is "how class is lived," it shapes how people see their world and how they maneuver within in it and, more importantly, "it shapes their ability to imagine how it might be changed, and whether they see such changes as feasible or desirable" (Crehan 2002: 71). Consequently, it is through the development and strengthening of alternative cultures that deep and lasting social change is wrought in societies where domination is insured by hegemony within civil society.

Applying a Gramscian Perspective

It is relatively easy to re-approach the 'incomprehensible framework' of capitalist social relations in modern society from a Gramscian perspective and it has been done by numerous authors with myriad variations and subtleties. Generally, though, we might say that the array of power associated with contemporary capitalist society can be described as something akin to a global State in the Gramscian sense whereby, again, "[S]tate = political society + civil society, that is, hegemony protected by the armor of coercion" (Gramsci 2007: 75). These social forces are "dominant in their ability to provide material rewards and impose sanctions" and they are perhaps even more

successful at articulating capitalist values as universal, "...portraying specific definitions of 'free trade' and 'competitiveness' as representing the general interests of all citizens," instead of a few (Evans 2000: 230). Indeed, Gramsci also commented on the hegemonic subterfuge of the 'free-trade' movement in his time:

Thus it is asserted that economic activity belongs to civil society, and that the state must not intervene to regulate it. But since in actual reality civil society and state are one and the same, it must be made clear that *laissez-faire* too is a form of state 'regulation,' introduced and maintained by legislative and coercive means. It is a deliberate policy, conscious of its own ends, and not the spontaneous, automatic expression of economic facts.(Gramsci 2000: 210)

Thus, the most powerful forces of capitalist expansion, then and now, are the legions of ordinary people who believe in it, who truly feel it is a practical and functional system based on economic fact as opposed to being a political project. Therefore, instead of focusing on the thin head of power through socialist Revolution and the reorganization of government and economic authorities, it is the wide base that must be first addressed. And though this base is subject to hegemonic articulation - internalizing capitalist values and replicating them in social relations - hegemony can never be settled, it is always contested and must constantly reproduce itself. As Gramsci once noted, any radical project of social change must be,

preceded by an intense labour of criticism, by the diffusion of culture and the spread of ideas amongst masses of men who are at first resistant, and think only of solving their own immediate economic and political problems for themselves...(Gramsci 2000: 58)

Those seeking change must look for those spaces where hegemonic articulation is weakest, drive their wedges there, and articulate an alternative culture upon which a new social landscape can be built. Finally, it must be remembered that domination may ultimately turn to coercion in order to maintain power when hegemony is threatened. It is only the careful articulation of an alternative culture that can create the necessary psychological and social foundations for productive resistance and continued struggle in the face of such violence.

Articulating Antagonisms

I want to return now to the problems of totalization and false social coherence I raised earlier. I argued that the two fatalist themes I presented both stem, in part, from a focus on coherence and integration at the expense of fully evaluating areas of dissonance and antagonism. The Gramscian perspective, as it is developed above, offers a way to incorporate the slippery reality of social relations, avoiding the totalizing problem without denying or contesting the specifics of the socialist project. Indeed, this perspective offers an alternative way of framing the socialist project, or, for that matter, any other project for social change.

A Gramscian perspective allows us to avoid becoming fatalist about the potential for change in modern society. If we approach the intense expansion of capitalist social relations in terms of hegemony, it becomes easier to theorize those places where the hegemony is contested, those spaces of antagonism and dissonance. While old sites of disruption and dissonance may appear to have faded, tension remains. Consider for example the rise of numerous new forms of resistance in the ecology movements, urban justice movements, LGBT movements and the corpus of activists known as the 'movement of movements.' However, rather than leaping on these movements as

new saviors with a 'plan,' they are best seen here as evidence of the potential for resistance. Laclau and Mouffe celebrate this diverse blossoming of activism as representative of,

the multiplicity of social relations from which antagonisms and struggles may originate: habitat, consumption, various services can all constitute terrains for the struggle against inequalities and the claiming of new rights. (Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 161)

It seems then that the potential for contesting the hegemony of capitalist social relations is not necessarily gone, but the antagonisms may have shifted in location and form. Thus, the development of a modern project of social change, informed by Gramsci, has two key elements: 1) identifying the direct relationships between particular social problems and the hegemonic value system and 2) identifying the mechanisms by which the hegemonic value system masks its relation to those problems, insinuates itself into the minds of the subordinate, and creates behavior that reenforces its primacy. This careful analysis is vital in order to accurately articulate an alternative system of values and norms, subsequently expressed through alternative social institutions and intellectual resources, aimed at dismantling hegemony by subverting it.

Thus, when Ehrenreich and Fletcher highlight the need for 'a plan,' they misunderstand the source of power for a project of social change. Forces for change cannot rely on elaborate stratagems as they risk falling into the trap of static models and totalized subjects. Instead, it is the manner in which those forces *articulate* their project that gives them power; careful articulation permits the flexibility needed to navigate shifting social realities.

For example, consider the unique historical moment in which Ehrenreich and Fletcher have sounded their call. The past twelve months have witnessed capitalist ideology come under criticism and scrutiny, the scope of which has not been seen since the early part of the 20th century. Not only have tangible problems like ecological damage and workers' rights come into public debate, but more subtle cracks in the ideological base have begun to widen to a point where even the world's wealthiest populations feel the uncertainty. These crises have provided the seedbed for frequent, public and relatively detailed discussions about the interplay of economics, society and politics - crisis literature. The discourse is wide-ranging. From the Left, much of the discourse is dominated by the socialist resurgence discussed here. On the political right, the crises have sparked deep reevaluations of conservative politics, moving away from a more or less universal support of American-style capitalism. For everything in between, the discourse draws on both of these elements, producing a vague sense of 'rupture' or instability.

However, what this amounts to is not necessarily a crisis of capitalism, but a crisis of capitalism's hegemony, that is, capitalism's ability to create in people certain modes of behaviour and expectations consistent with the hegemonic social order. Thus, the *Nation* authors' proposals of institutional confrontation and alteration are premature. In modern liberal democracies, direct confrontation (armed uprising, general strike, etc.) will not threaten the dominant groups so long as their credibility and authority is firmly supported by this hegemony. However, crises in the material world, such as those we have seen recently, *do* have the ability to weaken hegemony. Indeed, what is at stake here is the extent of capitalist ideology's hegemony. As the hegemonic cues and messages become less convincing, actors begin to shy away from those practices that previously reenforced capitalist ideology, expanding their ability and willingness to listen to counter-hegemonic alternatives.

When recognized as a hegemonic process, the focus on Revolution gives way to efforts aimed at strengthening counter-hegemonic articulatory practices. Those seeking change must develop

and disseminate discourse that offers the tools necessary conceive of different modes of life. The difficulty with fighting hegemonic domination is that the subordinator and subordinated are presented as the same, that is, the subordinated are absorbed in the system so as to mask their externality to the relations to which they are subjected. Precise, timely and appropriate counter-hegemonic articulation can drive wedges and construct (reveal) externality and antagonism. Once the subordinated are no longer be considered 'absorbed,' once there is a relationship of antagonism and a recognition of externality, a snowball effect may occur. Armed with the language of an alternative discourse, anyone becomes capable of describing (to themselves most importantly) the relations of subordination and oppression of which they are a part of.

Alternative Articulations

Thus, the question that concludes this essay is 'What does counter-hegemonic articulation look like?' Here I would like to return to Rebecca Solnit's reply to Ehrenreich and Fletcher. I have argued here that much of the crisis literature - particularly the socialist resurgence - suffers from the same problems of rigidity and narrowness that lead earlier authors to fatalism. I have tried to present this as a problem with 'ways of looking' rather than make value judgments about the socialist project in particular, largely to avoid discussions that might distract from my intended focus on processes of change.

However, it is difficult to answer this final question without addressing the way the socialist resurgence has framed this moment of unstable capitalist hegemony. As I noted above, this is a unique moment in recent history, but it should not be taken lightly or allowed to be framed in a debilitatingly rehearsed way. Unfortunately, I believe anti-capitalists of all stripes have suffered from the reanimation of well-trod 'socialism vs. capitalism' discourse. I have experienced deep frustration as this moment has been co-opted and dominated by what I feel are somewhat threadbare positions.

Of course, it could be argued that this resurgence is itself a counter-hegemonic articulatory practice, framing the moment within particular discourse, and, in a way, it is. But, interpreted in the worst way, this articulation of contemporary antagonisms seems focused more on reviving the careers and relevance of Old Left thinkers rather than fomenting forces for broad social change. Any articulatory practice must be understood as a sort of 'branding' effort. However, this portion of the socialist resurgence appears to be embracing 'branding' in a more capitalist-marketing sense, meaning it may be an articulatory practice, but it is far from counter-hegemonic. Indeed, the apparent ignorance of those activities Solnit pointed to - and Henwood's outright patronization of them - suggests that because they aren't specifically 'socialist,' they do not constitute a serious enough 'plan' for change.

But the social networks, activities and institutions Solnit highlighted may have transformative power specifically because they are not part of a broad 'plan.' I argued above that those seeking a 'plan' are making a crucial error in focusing on powerful, top-of-the-chain institutions, that is, loci of political and economic power. From a Gramscian perspective, if 'socialist planners' seek the sort of broad change hinted at in phrases like "mass democratic planning," "a new world out of the ashes of the old" or even simply a "point where the revolution seems more than a distant dream," perhaps a deeper skepticism of the social institutions of capitalist society is called for (Ehrenreich and Fletcher 2009; Duggan 2009; Moody 2009). Sassen's "small steps that would occur within capitalism" and Henwood's economic facelifts through "state action, prodded by organized and thoughtful activism" do little to address underlying social structures (Sassen 2009; Henwood 2009).

Indeed, there appears to be a basic assumption that the sphere of economic activity and the social sphere are somehow distinct from one another, that is, it would be possible to develop more sensible and egalitarian economic models on top of and in concert with the social and political institutions of the democratic capitalist state. This is a mistaken belief. These are intertwined ideological systems that affect behavior, values and expectations in astoundingly complex ways. It is not enough to simply suggest that current social structures be steered toward a more socialist paradigm; the possibility that they must be scuttled entirely needs to be taken seriously.

In contrast, the activities and practices Solnit highlighted have the potential to create entirely new social arrays, altering the expectations, values and belief systems of individuals by linking counter-hegemonic social conventions with foundational, everyday material practices. ‘Gardens, childcare co-ops, bicycle lanes and farmers’ markets’ can combine theory with practice in ways that form strong social-material-psychological bonds, bonds that are the bedrock for developing alternative ways of living. Beyond that, these practices can and are undertaken now, today, and that gives them the power of demonstration. Rather than relying on a fetishized, instant ‘Revolution’ in the eternal tomorrow for movement energy and passion, these activities offer simple, predictable and demonstrable rewards today. Again, Henwood criticized Solnit’s suggestions, arguing such things were “no model for running a complex industrial society” (Henwood 2009). While we might ask if that is necessarily a bad thing, Henwood is right. Taken together, these practices may not form global, national or even regionally-scaled models. However, they are powerful, even central elements of *locally-scaled* projects of social change, their power particularly evident within (though not confined to) radical communities across the US and Europe.

Social movement literature has recently begun to emerge from a primary focus on radical communities and movements’ engagement with political and economic institutions, a practice that has masked the power of activism that does not directly confront such institutions and overlooked the fact that, for the majority of activists, battling with police is not generally seen as an important step towards change. In the words of John Sellers, director of the Ruckus Society, ‘[t]o truly be radical, you’ve got to go for the roots, and the cops aren’t the roots’ (Sellers 2004: 185).

What has emerged is a recognition that the articulation of contemporary radical politics has evolved its early focus on style, moved past a focus on confrontation with economic and political institutions, and has blossomed into a complex network of communities, organizations and institutions. Radical communities are doing their best to operate outside of those systems they wish to change, building potentially powerful foundations for their vision of another world. Heavily influenced by the DIY (Do-it-Yourself) ethic of the modern DIY/Punk community, these efforts reflect a growing understanding among activists of the important differences between reflex, reaction, and action:

REFLEX is to get pissed off...To talk shit...To get drunk...To bicker and complain.

REACTION is throwing bricks...It’s stealing food and eating out of dumpsters... It’s a defense...It’s saying “NO!”

ACTION is growing vegetables...Action is saying “yes” to community needs...It is building our own future. (Augman 2005: 236)

This Anti-Capitalist’s Articulation

Given radical communities’ potentially potent move towards a counter-hegemonic, culturally-

grounded, everyday forms of resistance and creation, when I encounter ‘we don’t have a plan, let’s make one’ pleas akin to Ehrenreich and Fletcher’s, I can’t help but feel both angry and, in many ways, scared. I’m angry when authors approach resistance discussions unaware of the work and progress being made by many, exuding an air of confidence in tired mantras and stale programs for change. I am scared that other anti-capitalist struggles may suffer because of it.

In moments like these I find myself speaking directly to these authors, on a very personal level, at times out loud and frequently through blog postings. While these outbursts are certainly not the most clearly articulated arguments, they are ardent expressions of my reaction as part of an anti-capitalist community that takes great issue with being co-opted by a Leftist vanguard and subsumed under the banner ‘progressives of all stripes.’ So, in the interest of helping to articulate a non-socialist anti-capitalist position, in closing, I present the following screed from my personal blog, the original inspiration for this article:

Who is this ‘We?’ Because you and I do not have a plan, Ehrenreich and Fletcher, but my friends and I do. In fact, as Solnit points out, there is a whole lot of ‘planning’ going on that you appear unsurprisingly unaware of. Further, the implication that the flawed logic of capitalism would inevitably create a situation where, as you put it, socialist ‘seizure’ would occur is rather lazy. Crises in capitalism create spaces, but not the wedge needed to widen these gaps and exploit the crises. Indeed, you cannot wait for crises, you must be prepared for them and then push them over, otherwise the wounds heal and the Beast limps on.

But again, who is ‘We?’ I assume you are speaking to ‘socialists’ and yet you try to link with ‘progressives of all stripes.’ But what about those progressives that take issue with activists of the 1960s and 70s stealing energy and legitimacy from today’s activism with tracts like this. You’re right, YOU don’t have a plan. Dr. Eherereich, your United Professional, a union for “white collar workers” whose mission is to “protect and preserve the American middle class,” is probably not in any shape to create the necessary institutions to support deep, radical social change.

The assertion that there is no plan so clearly demonstrates the disengagement and false radicalism of such Dinosaurs of the Left. There is no plan that includes an Obama, as you suggest. In fact, socialist support for Obama is perfect: the co-option of farm workers’ ‘Si Se Puede’ lends radical cred to an upper-middle class dream: ‘Yes We Can’ while sipping imported Bordeaux in a million dollar loft, pleased that a soft revolution, using familiar methods in familiar routes of economic and political power, has allowed the trappings of the ‘good life’ to remain.

So no, I’m sorry, ‘we’ don’t have a plan. But while you scramble to *plan* your vision of a new world, there are many of us who have already begun to *make* a new world, one practice at a time, one day at a time. (Ruggero 2009)

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