The Forms of a Travelling Theory: A New Approach to Gramsci's Texts

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Abstract: *Since 2000, Gramscian concepts have been undergoing an unprecedented process of dissemination, and this process has occurred along two specific axes: The geographic axis and the disciplinary axis. This process, which is also a hybridization resulting in political innovation, often has been interpreted in terms of fidelity/infidelity to Gramsci's ideas, and as a result has been interpreted as somewhat of a degenerative process. In contrast, my analysis focuses on the transit of Gramscian theory, that is, on what ideas transit, on how they transit, and why they transit rather than starting with a presupposed "original" theory or the arrival points of "corrupted" or "translated" theory. By looking beyond an essentialist notion of his theory, this inquiry into Gramscian concepts ends up discussing the problems of contemporary history and politics rather than simply the revival of interest in a Sardinian Marxist.*

Key Words: *Cultural studies; Epistemology; Antonio Gramsci; Gramscism; Italian Political Thought; Edward Said; Sociology Cultural of Knowledge; Subaltern studies; Translation; Travelling theories*

In 1987, Eric J. Hobsbawm wrote an article for the Italian journal *Rinascita*, informing readers that Antonio Gramsci was among 'The 250 most cited authors in the Arts and Humanities Citations Index, 1976-1983.'[1] Together with Gramsci, this ranking, which included famous names from the sixteenth century onward, included only four other Italians: Giorgio Vasari, Giuseppe Verdi, Benedetto Croce and Umberto Eco.

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[1] Eric J. Hobsbawm (1987) Per capire le classi subalterne [Understanding the Subaltern Classes], *Rinascita – Il contemporaneo*, special issue "Gramsci nel mondo [Gramsci in the World]," 8, 28 February, pp. 15-34. For "The 250 most cited authors in the Arts and Humanities Citations Index 1976–1983" see Eugene Garfield (1986), *Current Comments*, p. 48.

Gramsci died on April 27, 1937, and his fame was very much of a posthumous nature, starting at the end of the Second World War with the publication of the thematic volumes of his prison writings.[2] What exactly happened during the thirty-year period from the late 1940s to the end of the 1970s? During that period an important political figure, the Secretary of the Italian Communist Party (1924-1927), who had been imprisoned by the Fascist regime in 1926 and subsequently died just a few days after his release, became not only a leading intellectual figure for the international left and for critical thought in general, but also a classic political theorist.[3]

The political-cultural atmosphere in Europe and the US during the 1960s and 1970s was particularly influenential in this success, as well as an intense period of anti-colonial and emancipation movements in the rest of the world. During this period, Gramsci's writings were disseminated to the four corners of the world, largely thanks to the publication of a famous selection of his *Prison Notebooks* translated into English.[4] This initial phase of the internationalization of Gramsci's thought was characterized by the explicit political use of his writings within the context of emancipatory struggles that were quite different from the struggles in which Gramsci himself had been involved: Struggles against Latin American dictatorships; against colonial regimes in Asia and Africa; in the context of crisis generated

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[2] This first edition of the *Prison Notebooks* comprised six volumes in which the notes were arranged on a subject basis. These volumes were published between 1948 and 1951, edited by Felice Platone & Palmiro Togliatti (*Il materialismo storico e la filosofia di Benedetto Croce* [Historical Materialism and the Philosophy of Benedetto Croce]; *Gli intellettuali e l'organizzazione della cultura* [The Intellectuals and the Organization of Culture]; *Il Risorgimento* [The Risorgimento]; *Note sul Machiavelli, sulla politica e sullo Stato moderno* [Notes on Machiavelli, Politics and the Modern State]; *Letteratura e vita nazionale* [Literature and National Life]; *Passato e presente* [Past and Present]). Just a very few passages, considered politically "inappropriate", had been eliminated from this edition, together with all the rough writings that Gramsci subsequently redrafted.

[3] In 1947 Togliatti, the true promoter of Gramsci's posthumous success, already warned: «We Communists should be very careful not to believe that the work of Antonio Gramsci is ours alone. No, this is the heritage of everyone, of all Sardinians, of all Italians, of all workers fighting for their freedom, regardless of their religious or political beliefs»., In: Palmiro Togliatti (1947) Gramsci, la Sardegna, l'Italia [Gramsci, Sardinia, Italy], in Togliatti (2001) *Scritti su Gramsci* [Writings on Gramsci], edited by G. Liguori (Rome: Editori Riuniti), p. 128.

[4] Antonio Gramsci (1971) *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, edited and translated by Quintin Hoare & Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (London: Lawrence & Wishart).

by the Arab defeat in the Six-day War;[5] and in the 1968 movements in Europe and the US and at the same time in favour of Euro-communism.

This initial phase since has been accompanied by a second phase coinciding with the start of the new millennium.[6] In the last twenty years, in fact, there has been a significant revival of interest in Gramsci's work, thus marking a strong reversal in the trend that had characterized the final twenty years of the previous millennium. This second wave of interest appears not only more substantial, but also of a more far-reaching nature than the previous one. It has proven capable of reaching the most varied of cultural contexts and disciplines. While the first phase was characterized by its evocation of the historical experience of international communism, aided by the hagiography of the martyr of the Fascist regime, and based on the attempt to identify a version of socialism different from that of the USSR[7], the second phase has been distinguished by a less constrained approach to Gramsci's historical experience. The focus this time has been on the use of Gramscian concepts within various disciplines, in particular in the social sciences. Although this at times has led to interpretations and "uses" of Gramsci's writings of a somewhat misleading or little documented nature, and the arbitrary disengagement of his concepts from the Marxist and materialist sphere in which they were forged, nevertheless in the majority of cases the

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[5] See Anouar Abdel-Malek (1970) *La pensée politique arabe contemporaine* [Contemporary Arab Political Thought] (Paris: Seuil); Hisham Sharabi (1970) *Arab Intellectuals and the West: The Formative Years, 1875–1914* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press); and Abdallah Laroui (1970) *L'idéologie arabe contemporaine: essai critique* [Contemporary Arab Ideology: Critical Essay] (Paris: Maspero).

[6] See the graph of the recurrence of the name "Gramsci" in "British English" books over the last 60 years, available online at: https://books.google.com/ngrams, accessed January 10, 2021.

[7] See, for example, the readings of Gramsci that appeared in Latin America, also in the wake of the work of José Carlos Mariátegui: (1996) *The Heroic and Creative Meaning of Socialism* (New Jersey, Humanities Press); Cf. Dora Kanoussi, Giancarlo Schirru, & Giuseppe Vacca (2011) *Studi gramsciani nel mondo: Gramsci in America Latina* [Gramscian Studies around the World: Gramsci in Latin America] (Bologna: Il Mulino).

"political character" of Gramsci's writings, together with their emancipatory and critical spirit, largely have been preserved.[8]

It is also true that Gramsci has not left the reader with a hodgepoge of random reflections, to be assembled as one likes in order to support one theory or another. In fact, his thought constantly is situated, never generic: It is always historical, never absolute; and it is rooted in a specific circumstance such as that of the prison, which did not allow for any immediate, more direct transfer to the sphere of political practice. His imprisonment, in fact, defines the form of Gramsci's work, at least in part, through those restrictions resulting from the lack of contact with the outside world: From the impossibility of having the materials he required in order to study more systematically; and from the necessarily precarious, contracted, allusive character of his brief notes.

This *form of writing*, which in prison became a *form of thinking*, forced Gramsci to channel his thought through constant marginal notes to a "diverse" thought, which at that moment in time, explicitly or implicitly, is the subject of study or interpretation. This way of proceeding, which constantly forced Gramsci's arguments, rather than impoverishing his reasoning, produced a series of deviations, reformulations and openings that would be unthinkable under different conditions of "theoretical production."[9]

Gramsci therefore constantly reformulated and reutilized the vocabulary of other theoretical traditions different from Marxism, such as anthropology, linguistics and

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[8] I have long been part of the community of Gramscian scholars who in the last 20 years have worked in depth on Gramscian conceptuality, trying to reconstruct the most accurate genealogy possible. Unlike other scholars, I believe that the accuracy of these reconstructions must be of service with respect to the free use of Gramscian concepts, to the extent that it can help to investigate better their historical-conceptual assumptions and connections, but that it never should take the judging posture regarding the "truth" and correctness of such readings. On this subject, see Guido Liguori (2015) Conceptions of Subalternity in Gramsci, in Mark McNally (ed.) *Antonio Gramsci* (London: Palgrave Macmillan), pp. 118-121; and Marcus Green (2011) Gramsci Cannot Speak: Presentations and Interpretations of Gramsci's Concept of the Subaltern, in M. Green (ed.) *Rethinking Gramsci* (London-New York: Routledge), pp. 68-89.

[9] Cf. Michele Filippini (2015) *Una politica di massa. Gramsci e la rivoluzione della società* [A Mass Politics: Gramsci and the Revolution of Society] (Rome: Carocci).

sociology, which today, 80-plus years after his death, has been revived in contemporary debates. These intellectual terrains have been part of what we may call the "Gramscian challenges" being played out, namely, the study of the ideological levels of modern capitalism, the critique of methodological individualism, the general crisis of the "intermediate bodies," the new form of global society, the analysis of the economic crisis and the nature of time in a globalized world.[10] Thus, Gramscian tools fruitfully may be employed on such terrains, without any "Gramscianism" – as a political program, or worse as a "worldview" of a political subject – polluting the wells of scientific curiosity in order to provide sustenance to small-scale political experiments.

New approach to Gramsci's texts

So we need to proceed along that narrow path permitting us to maintain a broad view of the text together with the interpretative accuracy required in order to avoid simple generalizations. Thus, specification of the viewpoint from which the interpretation of the writings proceeds not only clarifies the adopted approach, but is also a sign of scientific seriousness. What characterized, for example, my attempt to suggest a "new approach" in the book *Using Gramsci*[11], was to emphasize the explicit and implicit fundamental theoretical articulations of Gramsci's thought within a given historical framework, but in the absence of any precise prescriptive pointers. In fact, Gramsci's reflections are situated at a time of epochal transformation – a period that marks the transition from "free-market competitive" capitalism to "organized-monopoly" capitalism, from bourgeois society to mass society, from the "liberal" nineteenth century to the "political" twentieth century – and he constantly

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[10] Attempts of this kind have been made by various scholars, including in particular Sandro Mezzadra & Paolo Capuzzo (2012) Provincializing the Italian Reading of Gramsci, in Neelam Srivastava & Baidik Bhattacharya, (eds.) *The Postcolonial Gramsci* (New York: Routledge), pp. 34-54.

[11] Michele Filippini (2016) *Using Gramsci: A New Approach* (London: Pluto Press).

endeavours to regulate and calibrate his own theoretical tools in order to take on this new reality[12]. This is another reason why one century later, within the context of similarly epochal changes, there is renewed interest in Gramsci's writings.

A new possible approach to Gramsci's work is set within the context of this "shifted" use of Gramsci's theoretical instruments in a broad range of disciplines (political science, pedagogy, geography, language studies, cultural studies, postcolonial and subaltern studies, international relations and anthropology) and the most diverse geographic contexts. An indication toward this kind of work was offered by Gramsci himself when he wrote that the «Search for the Leitmotiv, for the rhythm of the thought as it develops, should be more important than that for single casual affirmations and isolated aphorisms»[13]. As rightly claimed by Alberto Burgio, what is felt here is «the genuine concern that an overly respectful reader may prove the least well equipped to understand».[14] One of the effects of a new approach to Gramscian concepts could therefore be to liberate the theoretical power of some Gramscian insights in actual social and political struggles.

In this regard, I would like to propose an explanation of *why* some Gramscian concepts – «hegemony», «passive revolution», «historical block», «organic and traditional intellectuals» among others – seem to be useful today for analysing postcolonial experiences around the globe and Arab countries in particular. Gramscian concepts were created in fact to analyse the political history of Italy that, over the past two centuries (but we could say since the fifteenth century), was in a very peculiar position: that of a State fully integrated into Western modernity – in a Europe where the bourgeoisie have triumphed and where first

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[12] See Peter D. Thomas (2009) *The Gramscian Moment: Philosophy, Hegemony, and Marxism* (Leiden: Brill); and the still relevant, even if dated, Christine Buci-Glucksman (1975) *Gramsci and the State* (London: Lawrence & Wishart).

[13] Gramsci (1971) *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, pp. 383-4 (N16§2).

[14] Alberto Burgio (2014) *Gramsci: il sistema in movimento* [Gramsci: The Moving System] (Rome: DeriveApprodi), p. 107.

liberal, then democratic conceptions have come to the fore – but that continues to preserve its own specific backwardness, as a result of which each innovation that emerges is of a dubious, mediated, "corrupt" form compared to the ideal (and idealized) model of development. This backwardness is in turn the product of a gap that is, paradoxically, due to the precocity of certain developments – such as economic growth, the history of Italy's Communes, the Renaissance – that has destroyed the possibility of any political development in the "classical" sense such as that seen in France and Britain. This backwardness/precocity has conditioned Italy's entire political history (and that of the dominions prior to Unification), thus providing a unique field of application for concepts that lie *within* the bounds of modern development, but are *decentralized* in relation to its principal axis.[15]

Gramscian thought is an integral part of this *eccentric* theoretical production. In fact, how could we define his reflections on the peasantry – a key feature of all backward countries – within the context of a Western World protected by the «fortresses and emplacements» of modern civil society[16], as other than eccentric? How could we not consider the concepts of *passive revolution* or *revolution/restoration*, used to account for modern transformations that are, however, guided from above by conservative forces, as being oxymoronic? And why should we try logically to conciliate the contradiction between the State as «political society + civil society»[17] and the State as just «political society»[18] contrasted with civil society, when

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[15] One classical example of "Italian" political theory that lies at the centre of modern politics, but which considerably predates it and is situated within a very different context from the establishment of the modern State, is that of Niccolò Machiavelli, who not surprisingly is a favoured interlocutor in Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*: «It is impossible to understand Machiavelli without taking in to account the fact that with the European (international, for his times) experience he went beyond the Italian experience; without the European experience, his "will" would have been utopian». Antonio Gramsci (2007) *Prison Notebooks*, Vol. 3, edited and translated by J.A. Buttigieg (New York: Columbia University Press), p. 72 (N6§86). Cf. also Benedetto Fontana (1993) *Hegemony and Power: On the relation between Gramsci and Machiavelli* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press) and Louis Althusser (1999) *Machiavelli and Us* (London: Verso).

[16] Gramsci (2007) *Prison Notebooks*, p. 169 (N7§16). Cf. also Antonio Gramsci (1926) Some Aspects of the Southern Question, in Antonio Gramsci (1994) Pre-Prison Writings (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp. 313-337.

[17] Gramsci (2007) *Prison Notebooks: Vol. 3*, p. 75 (N6§88).

this contradiction indeed expresses the two aspects of a spurious condition, and one that is now more common than ever before[19]? The list is endless. However, what I would like to show right now is that Gramsci's heritage is an integral part of a conceptualisation of modern politics that developed along spurious, secondary, peripheral lines, but within the sphere of European modernity all the same.

In this context, Gramsci is a real exception to other Western thinkers, since the relationship established between his thoughts and his appropriation by different fields of inquiry never is characterized in terms of the faithful translation or emulation of his ideas, but in terms of their appropriation and re-utilisation. In the light of all this, my argument is that the multiplication in the uses made of Gramsci's theoretical instruments, and the plurality of readings in which this multiplication has resulted, constitute the specific character of his "provincialization" in the words of Dipesh Chakrabarty. If, in fact, the attempt to *Provincialize Europe* entailed the relativisation of ideas regarding European political modernity in relation to the plurality of political and social forms that the world always had produced,[20] then the real explosion in the use of Gramscian concepts, categories or terms in

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[18] Gramsci (1971) *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, p. 12 (N12§1).

[19] This is one of the ambivalences that led Perry Anderson to judge Gramsci's position as being inconsistent and incoherent. What Anderson failed to grasp, however, was that this ambivalence is, on the contrary, a constituent part of the hegemonic reality of many social formations. Cf. Perry Anderson (1976) The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci, *New Left Review*, 100, pp. 12-34; for a different critique of Anderson's thesis, cf. Thomas (2009) *The Gramscian Moment*, pp. 93-95.

[20] Chakrabarty believes that two principles need to be rejected: «The first is that the human exists in a frame of a single and secular historical time that envelops other kinds of time […]. The second […] is that the human is ontologically singular» Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000) *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), p. 16. Provincializing – that is, pluralizing the forms of historical time, and de-substantiating concepts such as "the social" or "the political" – in this case was not so much a way of rejecting modern western thought (the structures of which constitute the bases for Chakrabarty's very own book), but on the contrary, a way of revitalising such thought within different contexts and traditions which, since then (20 years ago), have increasingly become central to global processes. Chakrabarty goes on to say that: «European thought is at once both indispensable and inadequate in helping us to think through the experiences of political modernity in non-Western nations, and provincializing Europe becomes the task of exploring how this thought – which is now everybody's heritage and which affect us all – may be renewed from and for the margins» (Ibid).

what we might call "global critical theory," offers proof of what was a largely successful experiment.

Starting from this new approach to Gramsci's writings, which postulates the "political fact" of the multiplication of uses through their provincialization, then those analyses of such uses that are based on an assessment of their adherence or non-adherence to the author's text (or worse still, to his "intentions") are of little value, and they inevitably end up reconstructing the history of a degenerative process. However, those approaches, that tend to place greater importance on the passage, the transition from one context to another, acquire value. Likewise, those analyses that search for the lines of dissemination, the methods of appropriation, the role of historical and social contexts in this process, together with those uses of Gramsci's work that set in motion new forms of historical research that produce significant shifts in the approaches of consolidated academic disciplines, and that open the way for new fields of research and political engagement are valuable. The *Prison Notebooks* themselves represent the great unfinished project of a failed transition that is still possible: That of the "revolution in the West" which led Lenin to state: «We have not been able to "translate" our language into the "European" languages.»[21]

Hegemony: An example of provincialization

Among the numerous concepts coined or substantially reformulated by Gramsci, that of hegemony is probably the most successful, widely adopted one internationally,[22] and represents a good example of successful provincialization. Therefore I shall analyse three

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[21] Antonio Gramsci (2007) *Prison Notebooks: Vol. 3*, p. 157 (N7§2). At the fourth Congress of the Communist International (November 13, 1922), which Gramsci attended, Lenin said: «We have not learned how to present our Russian experience to foreigners» Vladimir Ilyich Lenin (1966) *Collected Works*, Vol. 33, *August 1921-March 1923* (London: Lawrence and Wishart), p. 430.

[22] Given the plethora of references available, it is virtually impossible to present even a brief bibliography of the successful evolution of this concept; consequently, references can be made to the online Gramscian bibliography: http://bg.fondazionegramsci.org/biblio-gramsci, accessed January 10, 2021. It is possible to search for articles on both a subject basis and according to language.

ways in which the concept has been "appropriated" by three authors who marked, with their readings, precisely the passage from the first to the second phase – in the late 70s and 80s – of the internationalization of Gramscian thought. These three readings have in a certain way "cleared the way" for an innovative and politically productive reading of the Gramscian texts in three different continents (Asia, Europe and Latin America), creating the conditions of possibility for the current second phase of Gramscian studies. The hope of this reconstruction, therefore, is to provide some theoretical tools for a further "Arab provincialization" of the concept of hegemony, the main features of which initially are delineated in this special issue of *Middle East Critique*.

The journey that the concept makes during its first displacement starts in Gramsci's Italy of the 1930s, then moves to the Peronist movement in Argentina during the 1940s and 1950s, before returning to this side of the Atlantic in the second decade of the 21st century, specifically in the countries of southern Europe.Ernesto Laclau, an Argentinian post-Marxist philosopher, offers the channel by which this migration takes place, and his formulation of the concept of hegemony is largely contained in his 1985 work, written jointly with Chantal Mouffe, entitled *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy.* [23] Here, the growing centrality of the concept of hegemony in the semantic field of European Marxism, is interpreted as a sign of the transition from a conception of political action characterised by economic determinism, to one distinguished by political contingency.[24] Gramsci is considered to be the point of arrival of this evolutionary process within Marxism characterised by a movement away from the notion of historical necessity. Hegemony expresses the logic of contingency in the formation of historical subjects, although it is subject to a limit:

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[23] Ernesto Laclau & Chantal Mouffe (1985) *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso).

[24] Cf. ibid, pp. 7-91.

*For Gramsci, even though the diverse social elements have a merely relational identity –
achieved through articulatory practices – there must always be a single unifying principle in
every hegemonic formation, and this can only be a fundamental class [...]. This is the inner
essentialist core which continues to be present in Gramsci's thought, setting a limit to the
deconstructive logic of hegemony.*[25]

Laclau aimed to do away with this limit by formulating a theory of hegemony – fully
contingent and structured in a discursive manner – that erases all remaining necessity.[26]
The recovery of the full complexity of Gramscian concepts is an integral part of this project,
and one that enabled Laclau to recoup the entire richness of a Marxist theory formulated in
exceptional, decentralised conditions, and thus better suited to a politics of «contingent
articulations». Thus, Laclau started from Gramsci when constructing the hegemonic-
discursive system seen in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, and that was to sustain his
subsequent works, in which the notion of hegemony was accompanied by (partly
superimposed and partly replaced by) the notion of populism, as in his *On Populist Reason*.[27]

The second channel of transformation of the concept of hegemony takes us from
Jamaica to England, following Stuart Hall, one of the major figures of British cultural studies,
founder of the *New Left Review* and a moving spirit of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural
Studies in Birmingham (CCCS). Hall was another scholar who was to use Gramsci's concept
of hegemony as the starting point for his studies, in particular for his interpretation of the
construction of Margaret Thatcher's conservative "historical block" in the 1980s, which
proved capable of appropriating certain key words that once had been the popular heritage of

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[25] Ibid, p. 69.

[26] On the notion of discourse in Laclau, which is specific and is not limited to mere verbal acts, see Ernesto
Laclau (1990) *New Reflections on the Revolution of our Time* (London: Verso), pp. 100-103.

[27] Cf. Ernesto Laclau (2005) *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso). Cf. also Ernesto Laclau (1990) *New
Reflections on the Revolution of our Time*; Ernesto Laclau (1996) *Emancipation(s)* (London: Verso); Ernesto
Laclau (2014) *The Rhetorical Foundations of Society* (London: Verso).

the left: «The process we are looking at here [Thatcherism] is very similar to that which Gramsci once described as *transformism:* the neutralization of some elements in an ideological formation and their absorption and passive appropriation into a new political configuration.»[28] Thatcherism thus was framed as both a political and a cultural phenomenon:

The Thatcherites know that they must "win" in civil society as well as in the state. They understand, as the left generally does not, the consequences of the generalization of the social struggle to new arenas and the need to have a strategy for them too.[29]

'The great moving right show'[30] – the evocative title of a famous essay written by Hall – was thus not a pure coincidence, but rather was conceived, constructed and implemented as a reaction to the breakdown of the historical compromise between capital and labour which in England, from the 1940s onwards, was tacitly accepted by governments of all political hues. Therefore, Thatcherism should not be seen as a disease of the political system, but as one of the most successful wagers ever witnessed within that system. It is no coincidence that Thatcherism was the result of a tough battle against "other right-wings" within the Conservative Party. Thatcher's masterstroke was that of having built an independent, hegemonic narrative, and of having understood the political nature of cultural terrain. His reference to Gramscian concepts in this context served Hall as a theoretical picklock with which to overcome the English left's impasse when faced with changes that it did not appear to comprehend fully. The problem of ideology returned to the centre of

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[28] Stuart Hall (1988) *The Hard Road to Renewal: Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left* (London: Verso), p. 49.

[29] Ibid, p. 154.

[30] Stuart Hall (1979) The great moving right show, *Marxism Today*, January.

political discourse, in the sense of «the languages, the concepts, categories, imagery of thought, and the systems of representation.»[31] Gramsci is important here, because:

He altogether refuses any idea of a pregiven unified ideological subject [...]. He recognizes the "plurality" of selves or identities of which the so-called "subject" of thought and ideas is composed. He argues that this multifaceted nature of consciousness is not an individual but a collective phenomenon.[32]

Thatcherism, unlike the left, was the first to understand the articulated – using Laclau's expression – and hegemonic nature of contemporary society.

The final displacement once again started from Europe and was directed toward India, before, as usual, returning back to Europe enriched by different nuances and innovations which rendered Gramsci's provincialization a weapon of political-theoretical change. *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World* by Partha Chatterjee reconstructs the history of Indian nationalism in three different phases. During the first phase of that history, nationalism was a pre-constituted theory that the colonial powers imposed on India's elites; a "theoretical device" deriving from the colonisers' experiences, ideas and history. This nationalism – Chatterjee writes – was at one and the same time «imitative and hostile to the models it imitates.»[33] This ambiguity was largely responsible for the separation of India's elite and subalterns. This is where Gramsci's "toolbox" comes into play:

Gramsci's writings provide another line of enquiry which becomes useful in the understanding of such apparently deviant, but historically numerous, cases of the formation of capitalist nation-states. [...] In situations where an emergent bourgeoisie lacks the social

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[31] Stuart Hall (1986) The Problem of Ideology: Marxism without Guarantees, *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, 10, pp. 29.

[32] Stuart Hall (1986) Gramsci's Relevance for the Study of Race and Ethnicity, p. 22.

[33] Partha Chatterjee (1986) *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse* (London: Zed Books), p. 2.

conditions for establishing complete hegemony over the new nation, it resorts to a "passive revolution" [...] [with] a partial appropriation of the popular masses, in order first to create a state as the necessary precondition for the establishment of capitalism as the dominant mode of production.[34]

The creation of an independent State thus needs to come prior to the construction of a relationship with subalterns. During the Italian Risorgimento, faced with the poor organisation of the masses, Gramsci focused specifically on the role of Piedmont: «*a State replaces the local social groups in leading a struggle of renewal. It is one of the cases in which these groups have the function of "domination" without that of "leadership": dictatorship without hegemony*» (and this is the origin of Guha's *Dominance without Hegemony*).[35] The second and third phases of Indian nationalism therefore are characterised by Gandhi's bringing of the masses into action and by the passive closing of the movement by the emergent leadership of the new Indian State headed by Nehru. This is where Chatterjee suggests the similarity with the history of Italy's Risorgimento as proposed by Gramsci through the concept of *passive revolution*: Gandhi is India's Mazzini or Garibaldi, while Nehru is its Cavour. The non-inclusion of the subalterns, or rather the lack of any "classical" form of their inclusion in the nation State, remains a characteristic feature of the Indian State even during its post-colonial history. It goes without saying that this Indian development as recounted by Chatterjee throws light on contemporary forms of differential inclusion or exclusion also in the so-called "Western countries."

Seven theses on the diffusion of theoretical paradigms

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[34] Ibid, pp. 29-30.

[35] Antonio Gramsci (1971) *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, pp. 105-106 (Q15§59). Cf. Ranajit Guha (1997) *Dominance without Hegemony: History and Power in Colonial India* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press).

Having seen that the new period of Gramscian studies appears to have opened the way for eccentric, unexpected, but potentially extremely valuable, developments, perhaps the time has come to reflect on the form and limits that this "rebirth" will have in the Arab world, particularly in the analysis of those societies which were crossed by the revolutions of the early 2010s. The MENA countries in fact present themselves as one of the most promising fronts for the spread of Gramscian thought, both for the rich and contradictory relation between State, society, and religious life forms,[36] as well as for the (relatively) late assumption of the Gramscian paradigm in academic studies and the political left.

This particular position that the MENA countries have with regard to the "uses" of Gramscian thought must, in my opinion, warn against the use of interpretative paradigms already consolidated in other contexts. Walking along the path of a new use of Gramscian concepts cannot in fact mean expecting that the canons of a new specialism be established; likewise, it must not mean reproducing readings that have been developed in quite different contexts and times. Instead, it would be much more profitable (both scientifically and politically) to address the investigation of Gramsci's "uses" from a new perspective, which would focus on radicalizing precisely that element which, in a well-known essay, Edward Said had identified as central to the "fortune" of a theory: its travel.

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[36] As Ali El-Kenz stated at the first Conference on Gramsci in Africa in 1989: «A new form of political action has taken shape in Arab societies. Concurrent and parallel to that of the left, but closely entrenched in the widespread religious culture, it developed in successive phases, according to a diachrony analogous to the Gramscian dynamics. By practically turning her back on the State apparatus, from which she expected nothing, she focused on society and its mobilization. Preferring the long to the short term, cultural hegemony to the immediate taking of power, it succeeded in framing the social movement through a dense network of charitable and cultural, economic and social associations, and ended up "encircling" the State and the political society giving life to a "counter-society" autonomous at all levels: economic, cultural and political. The typical example of this experience is the Egyptian case of the Muslim Brotherhood, but everywhere in the other Arab countries, in different forms and degrees, the Gramscian strategy of political action is found in the modern Islamist movement». Ali El-Kenz (1994) Gramsci et les Arabes: une rencontre tardive? in M. Brondino, T. Labib, D. El-Bizri, A. El-Kenz, A. Krichen, *Gramsci dans le monde arabe*, International Conference held in Tunis on February 24-26, 1989 (Tunis: Alif – Les éditions de la Méditerranée).

In *Traveling Theory* Said indeed analyzed «the movement of ideas and theories» as «a fact of life and a usefully enabling condition of intellectual activity», trying to describe the stages of a journey that, from a «point of origin», through «a distance transversed», led to a different place, characterized by «a set of conditions – call them conditions of acceptance or, as an inevitable part of acceptance, resistances – which then confronts the transplanted theory.»[37] The example that Said analyzed was the Lukacsian analysis of reification and how it – passing from the conditions of his "production" in 1920s Hungary to those of post-war France and 1970s England (through Lucien Goldmann and Raymond Williams) – had changed along this journey.

Said deprecated the liquidation of those who judged this transit only with the measure of betrayal, claiming instead the «misreadings (as they occur) as part of a historical transfer of ideas and theories from one setting to another.»[38] Far from reproducing a "culturalist" deterministic view, the contexts in which these theories found new life were identified as «irreducibly first conditions [that] provide limits and apply pressures to which each writer, given his own gifts, predilections, and interests, responds.»[39]

Within this framework, and in relation to the possibility of a fruitful future season of "Gramscian uses" in the MENA countries, I would like to propose some research lines functional to a *radicalization* of Said's paradigm of traveling theories. A radicalization that, *together* with Said, points to go *beyond* its scheme, coming to question the very object of the transit (the Theory, with the capital letter), along a path that leads, in the words of Miguel Mellino, to «disassembling or deconstructing Gramsci, rather than pinning him down».[40]

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[37] Edward Said (1983) 'Travelling Theory' in Ibid., *The Text, the World, the Critic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), pp. 226-227.

[38] Ibid, p. 236.

[39] Ibid, p. 237.

[40] Miguel Mellino (2016) Gramsci in Slices: Race, Colonialism, Migration And The Postcolonial Gramsci in García Agustín, Óscar Jørgensen, Martin Bak, *Solidarity without Borders: Gramscian Perspectives on*

This is what I am going to do in the form of seven hypotheses on the *diffusion of theoretical paradigms*, with the aim to set out a few markers in an open and often stormy debate.

1) Theoretical paradigms, now more than ever before, travel rapidly and constantly around the world, thanks to increasing academic interconnections and shared technologies, which offer unprecedented access to academic writing. The diffusion of such paradigms differs fundamentally in form from that of the past, when there was considerable reliance on organized political structures on the one hand (Universities, States), and on consolidated, clearly defined intellectual traditions on the other (Liberalism, Marxism). The current massive diffusion of theoretical paradigms "from below," resulting from the fact that political theory today is globally accessible and globally discussed, radically changes the way in which a theoretical paradigm is generated, the way it penetrates different contexts, is approved or rejected, reformulates itself, and becomes an instrument of institutional power or of challenge to such power. The Arab spring season in the MENA countries between 2011 and 2012 was the clearest expression of this transformation. The type of content, practices and tools put in place by social movements and local political actors – as well as the rapidity of the spread of the protest – influenced a global season of movement, grafting on such European and American anti-austerity protests as the May 2011 Indignados in Spain and the September 2011 Occupy Wall Street.[41]

Migration and Civil Society Alliances (London, Pluto Press) p. 58. Said himself had reformulated his reading on the "necessary deterioration" of a traveling theory, discovering instead the possibility of its "reinvigoration." in a new historical and geographical context, through Adorno's analysis of music and Fanon's analysis of colonialism in Edward Said (2000) Traveling Theory Reconsidered, in*Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press), pp. 436-452.

[41] Asef Bayat (2017) *Revolution without Revolutionaries: Making Sense of the Arab Spring* (Stanford: Stanford University Press); Baccar Gherib (2017) *Penser la transition avec Gramsci. Tunisie* [trans.]*(2011-2014)* (Tunis : Diwen); John Chalcraft (2016) *Popular Politics in the Making of the Modern Middle East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press)*;* Brecht de Smet (2014) *A Dialectical Pedagogy of Revolt: Gramsci, Vygotsky, and the Egyptian Revolution* (Chicago: Haymarket Books); and Yasser Munif (2013) The Arab Revolts: The Old Is Dying and the New Cannot Be Born, in *Rethinking Marxism,* 25:2, pp. 202-217.

2) The diffusion of theoretical paradigms relating to political theory – that specific form of knowledge that claims to be, at one and the same time, both universal and strictly linked to given historical situations – is completely different from the diffusion of theoretical paradigms of a scientific, literary or sociological nature – mainly linked to just one of the aforesaid two forms. The interpretation, contextualisation and transformation of the "original" content in the case of political theory, in fact prevails over the type of change to which the presumed "original nucleus" is subjected. It is this "nucleus" that is defined and limited *ex post* on the basis of processes triggered by its interpretation, contextualisation and transformation, given that political theory's subject-matters also include the use of formulations of that theory on the part of historical forces, ultimately confirming its practical validity. In this regard, the reconstruction of the use that has been made of the concept of hegemony in the MENA countries is crucial.[42]

3) This way of seeing the diffusion of theoretical paradigms poses the problem of the consistency of a theoretical paradigm, that is, of its very definition. If cross-contamination among different paradigms always has occurred, nevertheless it never challenged the recognisability of such different, coherent paradigms. This new approach presupposes that it is the journey that constitutes the paradigm itself. The massive, rapid diffusion of information in contemporary societies in the absence of "institutional" filters, together with the immediate possibility of hybridization in different cultural contexts, makes it impossible to identify "at the source" a clearly-defined paradigm at the beginning of its journey. The mediations are so numerous and so important that the "object" designed to travel only can be defined in relation to the journeys it undertakes. The history of the subsequent mediations and grafts that Gramsci's thought experienced in the MENA countries makes them a unique terrain for this

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[42] See the articles by Hicham Safieddine and Gilbert Achcar in this Special Issue.

investigation. The overlapping of the most diverse traditions of struggle – religiously connoted or daughters of nationalist secularism, heirs of the international socialist tradition or the product of geopolitical tensions[43] – constitutes that jagged plan that shapes the "paradigm" itself and decrees its success.

4) The scientific analysis of political/theoretical paradigms: The Gramscian paradigm is without doubt an excellent example, although within Italian Marxism there is at least one other current of thought with considerable power of diffusion: the workers tradition of the 1960 and 1970s, which should focus more on the patterns of their diffusion than on the (more or less accurate) contents of political theory itself. The pattern of its diffusion is what identifies its core characteristics. This would be a case of a genuinely multidisciplinary study, because if the paradigm was formed through its transformation, then we would need to understand its fundamental stages from different perspectives: the theoretical-political perspective, the perspective of the sociology of knowledge, the philosophical perspective, that of comparative literature, etc. The history of the French, English and above all Arabic translations that supported the spread of "Gramscism" in the MENA countries is extremely interesting from this point of view. The multilingual context in which different groups of activists and academics have accepted Gramscian conceptuality – unlike individual European countries with their own national language translation, but also of countries such as India in which the English language was the only expansion vector of Gramscism – makes it a unique terrain of investigation.

5) The analysis of the diffusion of theoretical paradigms as presented here clearly relates to Said's idea of "travelling theories." Said, in fact, was concerned with the effect of the spatial displacement of a theory in terms of its altered political meaning. His vision still

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[43] Adeed Dawisha (2016) *Arab nationalism in the twentieth Century: From triumph to despair* (Princeton & Oxford: Princeton Univ. Press); and Tareq Y. Ismael (2009) *The Communist Movement in the Arab World* (Routledge, 2009).

implied a "core" theoretical meaning, a set of basic principles, and a strong link with the author (Lukacs in this case) who establishes the travelling theory. This led Said to study the strengths and weakness of travelling theories in their encounters with other cultures. The approach presented here is different however, since its goal is not to determine the influence of *a theory* on a given culture and its changing features, but to investigate the formation and the *pattern of diffusion* of a theoretical paradigm. The peculiarity of this investigation in the MENA countries is given by the cultural proximity of these countries and at the same time by their different Gramscian receptions. The differences that are found in the "crossing" of a national political and academic culture compared to the journey of a theoretical paradigm are then questionable, in the MENA countries, more as a result of specific political configurations than as an effect of hypostatized "national cultures."

6) The core of such theoretical paradigms – what we usually refer to as "the theory" – is not however erased from our understanding, since it remains a key feature of the "ideological" identification of the paradigm's users. The endeavour to de-substantiate the object of study must avoid seeing the analysis become a naïve idealistic practice. The relational and political nature of the diffusion of theoretical paradigms is the specific form that the materiality of ideas takes. Thus, the study of the diffusion of theoretical-political paradigms is a materialistic analysis. The links between the political and intellectual life in the MENA countries and the socialist and communist universe could therefore represent a consistent part of the "material" analysis of the diffusion of a theoretical-political paradigm.

7) This de-essentialized approach to the diffusion of political concepts falls within the framework of the rethinking of the classical paradigm of the history of political thought, toward a Global history of political concepts. On the one hand, with regard to certain outcomes of English intellectual history, it is necessary to avoid those distortions that may lead to the «juxtaposition of geographically distant contexts of use, without reflecting on the

way in which these different uses are related to each other, or how linguistic-politically similar words and concepts acquire similar or distinctive meanings.»[44] On the other hand, with regard to the German *Begriffsgeschichte* (history of concepts), the fundamental concepts of analysis need to be rethought and broadened, thus going beyond the one single, Eurocentric point of reference represented by the western experience of the modern state. Eradicating the colonial imprinting from political theory also means reconstructing these patterns of diffusion, following a gaze that from the periphery has the ambition to "explain the center."

Conclusion

This article attempted to identify two different phases in the reception and interpretation of Gramscian texts: The first in the 1960s and 1970s; and the second in the last two decades, and tryied to emphasize their respective specificities. I argued in favor of the last wave of Gramscian studies, emphasizing in particular their capacity for political activation in contexts very distant in time and space. This new approach to Gramsci's writings, in fact, recognizes the "political fact" of the multiplication of "uses," and interprets this multiplication – following Chakrabarty – as the specific character of its "provincialization," In this context, I used the analysis of three different interpretations of the concept of hegemony in the late 1970s and 1980s (Hall, Laclau, Chatterjee) as an example of "transition" from the first phase of Gramscian readings to the second, with the scope to show *one* of the possible paths to "cleared the way" for an innovative and politically productive reading of Gramscian texts. This move was preparatory to my final argument that focuses on a proposal for a further "Arab provincialization" of Gramscian thought, which should proceed, through its

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[44] Raffaele Laudani & Anthony Bogues (2018) *Theses for a Global History of Political Concepts*. Available online at https://aghct.org/political-concepts-thesis, accessed January 10, 2021.

radicalization, from Said's paradigm of traveling theory, whose last lines admirably express this possible development:

To measure the distance between theory then and now, there and here, to record the encounter of theory with resistances to it, to move skeptically in the broader political world where such things as the humanities or the great classics ought to be seen as small provinces of the human venture, to map the territory covered by all the techniques of dissemination, communication, and interpretation, to preserve some modest (perhaps shrinking) belief in non coercive human community: if these are not imperatives, they do at least seem to be attractive alternatives. And what is critical consciousness at bottom if not an unstoppable predilection for alternatives?[45]

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[45] Edward Said, *Travelling Theory*, p. 247.

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