

Modernity as “passive revolution”: Gramsci and the Fundamental Concepts of Historical Materialism

Peter Thomas

Volume 17, Number 2, 2006

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/016590ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/016590ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The Canadian Historical Association/La Société historique du Canada

ISSN

0847-4478 (print)

1712-6274 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Thomas, P. (2006). Modernity as “passive revolution”: Gramsci and the Fundamental Concepts of Historical Materialism. *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association / Revue de la Société historique du Canada*, 17(2), 61–78. <https://doi.org/10.7202/016590ar>

Article abstract

The recent revival of interest in Marxism within and beyond the academy has led to various proposals for contemporary reconstructions of historical materialism. This article proposes that the work of Antonio Gramsci could provide the basis for an historical materialist interdisciplinary research programme today that is capable of engaging productively in dialogue with other traditions of thought, while respecting their (and its own) differences. The article focuses in particular on Gramsci's development of the concept of “passive revolution,” arguing that his integration of elements from Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach* permits him both to break with various “determinist” deformations of Marx's thought while at the same time insisting upon the integrity of Marxist theory, as a tradition of thought capable of renewal through self-criticism. It proposes that Gramsci's thought offers resources for an explanatory historical narrative of modernity focused upon the political moment as the dialectical unity of “structure” and “agency”.

Modernity as “passive revolution”: Gramsci and the Fundamental Concepts of Historical Materialism

PETER THOMAS

Abstract

The recent revival of interest in Marxism within and beyond the academy has led to various proposals for contemporary reconstructions of historical materialism. This article proposes that the work of Antonio Gramsci could provide the basis for an historical materialist interdisciplinary research programme today that is capable of engaging productively in dialogue with other traditions of thought, while respecting their (and its own) differences. The article focuses in particular on Gramsci's development of the concept of “passive revolution,” arguing that his integration of elements from Marx's Theses on Feuerbach permits him both to break with various “determinist” deformations of Marx's thought while at the same time insisting upon the integrity of Marxist theory, as a tradition of thought capable of renewal through self-criticism. It proposes that Gramsci's thought offers resources for an explanatory historical narrative of modernity focused upon the political moment as the dialectical unity of “structure” and “agency”.

Résumé

On a noté, tant au sein qu'à l'extérieur du milieu universitaire, un récent regain d'intérêt pour le marxisme duquel ont surgi plusieurs propositions de reconstructions contemporaines du matérialisme historique. Dans son article, Peter Thomas montre que l'on trouve dans l'œuvre d'Antonio Gramsci de quoi justifier aujourd'hui la mise sur pied d'un programme de recherche interdisciplinaire sur le matérialisme historique, programme qui générerait entre d'autres écoles de pensée des discussions fructueuses et tolérantes des différences de chacune. Analysant plus particulièrement la façon dont Gramsci a développé le concept de « révolution passive », Peter Thomas soutient qu'en s'appuyant sur des arguments tirés des Thèses sur Feuerbach de Marx, Gramsci a pu à la fois prendre ses distances par rapport à diverses déformations « déterministes » de la pensée de Marx et défendre l'intégrité de la théorie marxiste, capable de se renouveler grâce à l'autocritique. Peter Thomas suggère que la pensée de Gramsci possède les éléments nécessaires à l'élaboration d'un récit explicatif de la modernité dont le moment politique constituerait l'unité dialectique de la « structure » et de « l'action ».

The last twenty years have not been the happiest period in the history of Marxism, either as a political movement or scholarly research programme. While individual scholars working in the Marxist tradition, including David Harvey, Terry Eagleton, and Ellen Wood, have elaborated significant research programmes, Marxist approaches and methodologies in general have been subjected to sustained critique in the human and social sciences. More importantly, academic Marxist work has only occasionally been able to call upon energies and interlocutors beyond the academy in the way that marked so strongly the preceding period. The social and political struggles of the 1960s and 1970s were accompanied by a growth of interest in radical theoretical perspectives in the academy, among which various currents of Marxism enjoyed a particular pre-eminence, to different degrees in different national cultures. The onset of a long period of retreat for popular causes and rise of neoliberal hegemony from the late 1970s onwards, however, witnessed a strong reaction against the spirit of the “Sixties,” in the universities, just as elsewhere. Many members of the radical intelligentsia began to turn to alternative research paradigms, unencumbered by what were then thought to be irremediable weaknesses in the Marxist tradition. Historical materialism as a scholarly research programme found itself accused of a variety of sins: teleology, totalitarianism, the overweening theoretical pride of a grand narrative, an abstract indifference to the shouts on the street of real history, outmoded modernist prejudices, and so on. If a focus upon modes of production and struggles between classes as the ultimately determining instances of social life had established a “weak” form of hegemony in the preceding period, this new conjuncture witnessed the emergence of more modest narratives, often organized around themes of identity, correspondence, or analogy. Their relationship to Marxism’s claim to develop not merely an analysis of particular historical periods but a theory of historical development as such remained at best ambivalent, and more often, antagonistic. This story of Marxism’s most recent fall from grace, in the sense of overcoming it through the integration of the most rational elements of new perspectives, while insisting upon the enduring relevance of the “hard core” of the historical materialist research programme, is well known from studies by figures such as Fredric Jameson, Terry Eagleton, and Alex Callinicos, among others.¹

As all these studies have stressed, there were, fundamentally, political determinants behind the transition from Marxism to what came to be known for a period as postmodernism. Stated in a grossly oversimplified (and deliberately polemical) form, it was the transition from the radical hopes of the New Left to the (more or less resigned) acceptance of the new neoliberal status quo.

1 Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991); Terry Eagleton, *After Theory* (New York: Basic Books, 2003); Alex Callinicos, *Against Postmodernism: A Marxist Critique* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991).

MODERNITY AS "PASSIVE REVOLUTION": GRAMSCI AND THE
FUNDAMENTAL CONCEPTS OF HISTORICAL MATERIALISM

Deprived of the social and political struggles that give it its *raison d'être*, Marxism could only with difficulty appear as anything but antiquated, a memory of another epoch that could on occasions embarrass the present, but was more often disregarded by it. In the midst of imperialist adventures internationally and the continued downsizing of what remains of the social welfare state in most domestic spheres, it would be premature to declare that this conjuncture has come to a close. Nevertheless, there have been signs for some time that a fundamental structure of feeling has changed: rebellion against neoliberal policies in both underdeveloped and overdeveloped countries; an anti-war movement that, while failing in its immediate objectives, nevertheless organized the largest day of international protest in world history and indirectly brought about the fall of at least one government; a crisis of legitimacy for the institutions of representative democracy in its heartland, accompanied by deepening frustrations with failed attempts to extend its reach; a "movement of movements" practically negating the Thatcher-inspired "There is no alternative" view of the 1980s with the slogan "another world is possible." If not different answers, then at least different questions seem to be "blowing in the wind."

It would seem, therefore, that there are new opportunities for re-proposing the relevance and fertility of historical materialism as a scholarly research programme alongside and within these revived political and social movements. With the return to general currency in scholarly debates of terms such as imperialism, such a process is already well underway.² An additional, more directly academic, reason can also be discerned: those currents of thought that proposed to replace historical materialism now find themselves in the position of their former antagonist, (graduate student) heterodoxies transformed into new (institutional) orthodoxies, the latest fashion inevitably going the way of the last when a new one arrives to contest its dominance. Fragmented and fragmentizing modes of thought are slowly giving way to attempts at a new synthesis. The most notable of these projects to date, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's *Empire*, has established what will arguably become an influential paradigm for future attempts: on the one hand, the integration of the conceptual and thematic gains of the previous season, drawing in particular upon the more fruitful insights of postmodernism; on the other hand, the inscription of these perspectives within an overarching framework or narrative that, at least at the level of rhetoric, can be identified as more or less Marxist.³

2 See, for example, David Harvey, *The New Imperialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), subject of a wide-ranging symposium in *Historical Materialism* 14, no. 4 (2006), with contributions from Wood, Castree, Sutcliffe, Brenner, Ashman, Callinicos, and Fine. See also Ellen Meiksins Wood, *Empire of Capital* (London: Verso, 2003).

3 The success of a work such as *Empire*, a grand totalizing work based upon a historio-philosophical conception of transitions between modes of production (in some senses reminiscent of the stagism of the Second International) if ever there was one, represents merely the tip of the iceberg of more general synthetic disposition or orientation in contemporary intellectual

In what follows, I want to suggest an alternative way in which the Marxist tradition may be able to make a contribution to a “cognitive map” (to adopt one of Jameson’s key concepts) of contemporary culture and society: namely, not by means of an attempted immediate fusion with other schools of thought, but through a critical re-examination of some of the fundamental concepts of historical materialism itself. In this perspective, I will propose that the work of Antonio Gramsci could provide the basis for an historical materialist interdisciplinary research programme today that is capable of engaging productively in dialogue and debate with other currents, while respecting their (and its own) differences. In particular, I will argue that Gramsci provides fertile tools and concepts for research into the “macro-” or “metanarrative” of modernity and modernization. With the concept of “passive revolution,” Gramsci proposes a particular interpretation of the foundational concepts of historical materialism that both breaks with various determinist deformations of Marx’s thought, while at the same time insisting upon the integrity of Marxist theory, as a tradition of thought capable of renewal through self-criticism.⁴

culture. Alternative synthetic approaches have emerged in a wide variety of disciplines, but have perhaps been most strongly registered to date in intellectual and socio-political historical writing, as evidenced by the projects of figures such as, for example, David Harvey, Mike Davis, and Domenico Losurdo. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 2000); for a critique, see Maria Turchetto, “The Empire Strikes Back: On Hardt and Negri,” *Historical Materialism* 11, no. 1 (2003); David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums* (London: Verso, 2006); Domenico Losurdo, *Contro storia del liberalismo* (Rome: Laterza, 2005).

- 4 There have been various attempts over the last 20 years to stem the tide and present a renovated Marxism as a viable academic research programme. “The moment of Althusser,” in Gregory Elliott’s felicitous phrase, proposed to do just that in the France of the 1960s and early 1970s, by productively engaging with other traditions of modern French thought. It eventually produced significant reverberations in other cultures, the Anglophone in particular. If we are not “all Althusserians now,” as Elliott acknowledges, it is nevertheless undeniable that Althusserian Marxism inspired a significant part of a generation of scholars to pursue “the class struggle in theory.” See Gregory Elliott, *Althusser: The Detour of Theory* (Leiden: Brill, 2006 [1987]), 316. Similarly, the “moment” of analytical Marxism grew from the publication of G.A. Cohen’s *Karl Marx’s Theory of History: A Defence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000 [1978]). While no longer as vibrant as its early years, it remains capable of inspiring attempts to articulate Marxism in new ways as a social theory, sometimes with the contribution of Althusserian perspectives. See Andrew Levine, *A Future for Marxism? Althusser, the Analytical Turn and the Revival of Socialist Theory* (London: Pluto Press, 2003). Also drawing together these two strands and adding a critical realist dimension is Alex Callinicos’s *Resources of Hope* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006). The proposal to (re)turn to Gramsci in order to outline a Marxism for our times offered in this paper follows these attempts insofar as it suggests that a re-examination of significant moments in the Marxist tradition could offer resources for renewal; it differs from them by consciously limiting the basis for such a re-examination to perspectives from within the Marxist tradition, rather than those drawn from other currents of thought. It therefore aspires to the status of an immanent critique rather than reconstruction, in the sense in which Gramsci insisted that “the philosophy of praxis” could

MODERNITY AS “PASSIVE REVOLUTION”: GRAMSCI AND THE
FUNDAMENTAL CONCEPTS OF HISTORICAL MATERIALISM

Gramsci is, of course, one of the Marxists whose work best weathered the storm of the 1980s and 1990s. The sheer range of the *Prison Notebooks* — ranging from political economy, history and historiography, literary and cultural criticism, comparative sociology, political theory, linguistics, and folklore — coupled with the openness of his elaboration of historical materialism, or, in his specific sense, the philosophy of praxis as an integral and non-reductive conception of the world, gave his thought a wide resonance in a period attuned to the diversity of “micronarratives.” If anything, there was an increase in the reception of Gramsci’s thought, in the Anglophone world at least, in a broad range of academic disciplines at precisely the same period when other Marxist theorists, who had been equally prominent in the prior years of political and social movements, found themselves consigned to the dustbin of history.⁵ Such popularity, however, arguably came at the cost of the simultaneous diffusion of a de-politicized and sometimes post-Marxist image of Gramsci, which bears little resemblance to the true historical picture of a militant of the early years of the Third International martyred by Fascism.⁶ There is further (theoretical) irony to this reputation, given that, of all the figures of so-called Western Marxism (Lukács, the Frankfurt school, Althusser, and other derivatives), Gramsci perhaps remains the closest to what we could call the classical historical materialism of Marx and Engels. By this, I am not concerned to assert or deny Gramsci’s “orthodoxy.” Rather, of all these thinkers, Gramsci remains in the closest contact with canonical or classical texts of Marx and Engels, such

be, at its best, “sufficient unto itself,” containing “all the fundamental elements needed to construct a total and integral conception of the world.” References are given to the Italian critical edition of Gramsci’s prison writings: Antonio Gramsci, *Quaderni del carcere*, Valentino Gerratana, ed. (Rome: Einaudi, 1975). I have adopted the internationally accepted standard of citation in Gramscian studies, giving the number of the notebook (Q), followed by the number of the individual notes. Thus, in this particular citation, Q 11, 27, which refers to the 27th note of Gramsci’s 11th notebook.

- 5 Gramsci was a particularly prominent influence on British Marxism in this period. See David Forgacs, “Gramsci and Marxism in Britain,” *New Left Review* 176 (July-August 1989): 83-4. Above all, it was in cultural studies that Gramsci found an Anglophone home, particularly in the work of Stuart Hall. See Stuart Hall, “Cultural Studies and its Theoretical Legacies,” in L. Grossberg, C. Nelson and P. Treichler, eds., *Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 281.
- 6 The seminal text in this regard was Ernesto Laclau’s and Chantal Mouffe’s *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 1985), spawning an entire movement of “soft” Gramscianisms. As Paggi had emphasised, however, such post-Marxist versions of Gramsci need to ignore the historical record of Gramsci’s engagement with the debates of the 4th Congress of the Third International, in particular, and their profound impact upon the research of the *Prison Notebooks*. “By means of participation in the debates of this international meeting, Gramsci was able for the first time to comprehend the sense and the profound implications ... of the slogan of the United Front.” This concept and its practice subsequently became Gramsci’s final recommendation to the working class movement in the *Prison Notebooks*. Leonardo Paggi, *Le strategie del potere in Gramsci: tra fascismo e socialismo in un solo paese 1923-1926* (Rome: Riuniti, 1984), 3.

as *The German Ideology*, *The Communist Manifesto* and the 1859 “Preface” of the *Contribution towards the Critique of Political Economy*, upon which various Marxist orthodoxies (and heterodoxies) were subsequently constructed.

This is nowhere more so the case than in the concept on which Gramsci’s contemporary fame largely rests: that of hegemony. The particular version of this concept that Gramsci develops in the *Prison Notebooks*, building upon the pre-revolutionary debates of the Bolsheviks and Lenin’s example in particular, is seen as his primary contribution to political, social and cultural theory.⁷ Less noted, however, has been an equally important contribution, upon which his theory of hegemony integrally depends: a reformulation of the unpopular base/superstructure (*Basis/Überbau*) metaphor as a fundamental criterion of what Gramsci calls “historical-political research.”⁸ Contrary to a common misperception regarding Gramsci’s supposed culturalism, he does not simply dispense with this metaphor as irremediably tainted by “economism” and “teleology.” Rather, he goes so far as to call it “the crucial problem of historical materialism.”⁹ The *Prison Notebooks*, or at least one important line of research within them, can be regarded as effectively an extended commentary on one of the key texts in which Marx outlined the fundamental concepts of what later became “historical materialism” (a phrase not used by Marx, who, in his early work at least, referred to his own thought as the “materialist conception of history”): namely, the 1859 “Preface” to the *Contribution towards the Critique of Political Economy*. Alongside the *Theses on Feuerbach*, Gramsci had in fact translated the “Preface” into Italian in an early phase of his incarceration. Concepts from these two works in particular play an increasingly important role as his project unfolds during almost six years of work under atrocious carceral conditions, a project that necessarily remained incomplete.¹⁰

7 Among the best recent studies of Gramsci’s concept of hegemony, Peter Ives’s *Gramsci’s Politics of Language* has the additional merit of emphasizing the integration of traditional Marxist references and insights drawn from Gramsci’s university training in linguistics in his concept of hegemony. Peter Ives, *Gramsci’s Politics of Language: Engaging the Bakhtin Circle and the Frankfurt School* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004).

8 Gramsci, Q 1, 44.

9 Gramsci, Q 4, 38.

10 It is necessary to enter a caveat regarding the famed fragmentary and elliptical nature of Gramsci’s texts, which have all too often been taken as a license to make Gramsci say whatever one wants him to say by cruelly ripping a citation from its context. Context is important when reading Gramsci — his ideas undergo transformation and refinement over the years, as he integrates new elements into his research project and articulates old ones in new ways, to such an extent that it is difficult to define any given position as definitively Gramscian or his final say on the matter. What the *Prison Notebooks* do show, however, are lines of research and tendencies, overdetermined by the fundamental concerns that Gramsci derived from his reading of Marx’s two seminal texts. An accurate reading of these texts needs to take into account this “rhythm of development” of the *Prison Notebooks* considered as an unfinished (and

MODERNITY AS "PASSIVE REVOLUTION": GRAMSCI AND THE
FUNDAMENTAL CONCEPTS OF HISTORICAL MATERIALISM

In the case of the base/superstructure metaphor, this development is decisive, for as his researches progress, Gramsci gradually reformulates it — or rather, returns to its origins in Marx — as a theory not of first causes or ultimate ends, but of the dialectical interaction of different social practices. In so doing, he thus gives the lie simultaneously to a series of interpretative traditions within and outside Marxism. Within both Second International and Stalinist constructions a progressivist ideology takes on a certain instrumentalization. Similarly, other leftist currents have condemned the 1859 "Preface" as a residue of the supposed teleology and essentialism of the young Marx. Outside of Marxism, as well, a series of retrospective attempts have been made to locate a classical Marxist theoretical model based on interpretations of the notion of a "mode of production" and different articulations of "relations of production" and "productive forces."¹¹ Gramsci demonstrates, however, that this difficult metaphor does not have "an in-built tendency to lead the mind towards reductionism" (as one of historical materialism's most able practitioners, E.P. Thompson, once argued); but rather, in at least one version, opens onto political practice as Marxism's Archimedean point.¹²

Against deterministic readings of the "Preface," Gramsci understands conflicts within the economic structure of society as the *content* for which the ideologies of the superstructure are the *forms*. As Guido Liguori has emphasised, Gramsci employs the concept of ideology throughout the *Prison Notebooks* in different senses; nevertheless, his most important and pervasive meaning can be defined as a neutral definition of ideology.¹³ Ideology here sig-

ngoing) research project. See Joseph Buttigieg's excellent introduction to the first volume of the English critical edition of the *Prison Notebooks*; Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks Vol. I*, Joseph A. Buttigieg and Antonio Callari, trans. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992). This complete multi-volume translation of Gerratana's Italian critical edition (with supplementary apparatus by the English language editor) remains incomplete at present. Its completion, scheduled for 2008-2009, will make available to the English-speaking reader for the first time the entirety of Gramsci's carceral production. It will undoubtedly mark the beginning of a new phase of Gramscian studies, philologically secured, in the Anglophone world.

- 11 In different ways, both Althusser's and Cohen's attempted reconstructions of Marx focused upon these categories and argued that they represented the hard core of the Marxist research programme, considered in its scientific dimensions. Louis Althusser and Étienne Balibar, *Reading Capital* (London: NLB, 1970), particularly 209-24, and G.A. Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History*.
- 12 E.P. Thompson, "Folklore, Anthropology and Social History," *Studies in Labour History* (1979): 18. Thompson's position developed in the context of his long-term struggle against what he understood as Stalinism and the "debts of 1956," reaching a crescendo in his influential critique of Althusser; E.P. Thompson, "The Poverty of Theory" in *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays* (London: Merlin Press, 1978). Perry Anderson later provided a nuanced discussion of the theoretical gains and losses of this move in *Arguments within English Marxism* (London: Verso, 1980). For a more nuanced discussion, also see Bryan Palmer, *E.P. Thompson: Objections and Oppositions* (London: Verso, 1994).
- 13 Guido Liguori, "Ideologia" in Guido Liguori and Fabio Frosini, eds., *Le parole di Gramsci: per un lessico dei "Quaderni del carcere"* (Rome: Carocci, 2004), 131-49.

nifies not falsity as opposed to a truth, but the way in which social groups (and not merely individuals, as the middle Althusser proposed) make sense of their world and construct themselves *as* social groups.¹⁴ It is by means of these ideologies or superstructural forms that the content is comprehended and ratified or, crucially, transformed. It is important to stress this element: for Gramsci, all forms of socially efficacious knowledge, of both classes — and not merely institutionalized ones of the dominant class such as law, ‘official’ politics and so forth — have a superstructural dimension.¹⁵ In Marx’s phrase from the 1859 “Preface,” the superstructure is the location of “the ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict [in the economic structure of society] and fight it out.”¹⁶ As both elements mutually determine and condition each other — no content without form, no form without content — Gramsci’s reading escapes charges of economistic essentialism; but, equally, as the relation of content and form ascribes particular qualities and capacities to each element, Gramsci avoids a reductive relativism that collapses the distinction between them (something that is explicitly done in certain discourse-oriented interpretations of the concept of hegemony, for instance).¹⁷ Gramsci names the dialectical unity of content and form — of an economic structure and its ratifying superstructure and ideologies — an “historical block,” the process of “structuration” of a social formation that permits it to endure as that which it is, or to maintain the established state of affairs. Such an historical block is not given as a permanent element, achieved once and for all. Rather, it is actively and continually forged by the “hegemonic apparatus” of a class — the various institutions and practices by means of which it concretizes its hegemonic project and continues to secure both social and political leadership, that is leadership both in civil society and at the level of the state. Equally, it is by means of the elaboration of a counter-hegemonic apparatus (a term not used by Gramsci himself) that another class or alliance of classes comes to contest and ultimately transform a given historical block into another.

-
- 14 One of the definitions of ideology Althusser proposed in his famous ISAs essay is that “Ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence.” For Gramsci on the other hand, ideologies are such only when historically effective and operative in the organization of a society that extends beyond merely individual ideas. Cf. Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (London: NLB, 1971), 127-88.
- 15 Buci-Glucksmann developed the concept of a “politico-gnoseological thesis” in order to comprehend this dimension of Gramsci’s elaboration of the *Theses on Feuerbach*. Christine Buci-Glucksmann, *Gramsci and the State* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1981).
- 16 Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Marx, Engels: Collected Works* (hereafter MECW), vol. 29 (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 2005 [1975]), 261-2.
- 17 The most detailed reading of Gramsci’s different formulations of the base/superstructure metaphor is Giuseppe Cospito, “Struttura-superstruttura,” in Liguori and Frosini, eds., *Le parole di Gramsci*, 227-46.

MODERNITY AS "PASSIVE REVOLUTION": GRAMSCI AND THE
FUNDAMENTAL CONCEPTS OF HISTORICAL MATERIALISM

This reformulation of the base/superstructure metaphor had a decisive impact upon Gramsci's historiography, helping him to avoid the teleological and sometimes essentialist conceptions of historical progress that characterized the Marxism of many of his contemporaries, formed in the late years of the Second International. Gramsci was well aware both of the risks of these sins and also the limitations of these critiques. This was not only because he had himself thoroughly criticized the presence of these themes in certain versions of Second International Marxism, but also because one central element of Gramsci's own project was to rebut precisely such critiques as they were purveyed in his own time. Foremost among these was his critique of Benedetto Croce. The importance that Gramsci assigns to Croce throughout the *Prison Notebooks*, not merely as a leading figure of Italian cultural and political life but as a grand intellectual of European and international stature, may appear to the contemporary Anglophone reader to be an arbitrary exaggeration, a projection of provincial concerns onto the world stage. Indeed, throughout the history of the reception of Gramsci's thought, particularly outside of Italy, his self-confessed youthful "Croceanism" has often been met with puzzlement (if not outright hostility).¹⁸ In the contemporary Anglophone world, Croce is largely remembered, if at all, as the author of the essay, "What is Living and What is Dead in the Philosophy of Hegel," a text that disappoints the interest aroused by its title. In Italy itself, Croce is today more often almost ritualistically invoked rather than seriously studied, as either a chief representative of the weakest elements of traditional Italian intellectual culture (its historicism, humanism, idealism, the weak implantation of modern scientific methods, etc.) or champion of a distinctive brand of Italian liberalism. Gramsci's extensive engagement with Croce in the *Prison Notebooks* would appear to have been merely his own idiosyncratic overestimation of the world historic importance of a passing phenomenon, or a concession to his own cultural-intellectual formation.

Yet Gramsci's assessment of Croce was not as willful or provincial as it may at first sight appear. Croce was one of the major intellectuals of his time, on a European scale, producing major texts in logic, ethics, aesthetics, literary criticism, history, historiography, and political theory, as well as countless interventions in contemporary culture and politics, and even collections of Neapolitan folklore. He founded, with Gentile, *La Critica*, one of the major intellectual journals of the early twentieth century, and with his editorial collaboration with the publishing house Laterza, he shaped an infrastructure of

18 For Perry Anderson, Gramsci's engagement with Croce was the origin of numerous weaknesses in his conception of Marxism, his state theory in particular. Perry Anderson, "The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci" in *New Left Review* 100 (November-January 1976-977): 5-79, in particular 39.

Italian culture that arguably remains operative to this day. Neither was Croce's influence confined to the ivory tower, as such prodigious productivity might lead one to suspect; independently wealthy, he in fact never held a university post, coordinating his extramural activities for a significant period from his home base under the shadow of the bell tower of Santa Chiara in Naples. Appointed senator for life in 1910 and involved in planning significant educational reforms as Minister of Public Instruction in 1920-1921, he remained officially a member of the state apparatus throughout the Fascist period, despite his withdrawal from public life and open opposition to Mussolini's regime (after 1925, when he felt that Fascism had outlived its usefulness as a strong hand against the left).

Significantly, Croce was also perhaps the first post-Marxist.¹⁹ Formed in the intellectual environment of the last great flowering of Hegelianism in the nineteenth century (the current of Italian neo-idealism that emerged following the *Risorgimento*), the young Croce, under the influence of his teacher Antonio Labriola, briefly flirted with historical materialism. However, he soon repudiated it and argued it was a not-so-disguised metaphysics, for which the economy functioned as a hidden god. Unlike some of his latter day avatars, Croce was not content to dissolve Marxism into an ultimately teleological narrative of philosophical superannuation, or to replace its regional distortions (economism) by another, equally regional and perhaps more provincial focus (such as, for example, more recent versions of discourse theory). More combatively, he attacked it root and branch, thundering against Marxism's dogmatism, its metaphysical disregard for empirical variation and theoretical abstraction, which made it impossible for historical materialism to comprehend the true variety of real history (interestingly, this did not, however, prevent Croce from openly admitting to having incorporated the more rational residues of his youthful excesses into his mature practice, as canons of historical research). At stake here was a wide-ranging struggle over the inheritance and reform of Hegelianism, particularly in terms of its systematic philosophical claims. However, given the strongly historicist dimensions of Hegel's thought, conceived not merely as a philosophical system but a representative moment of an entire movement of intellectual and moral reform, which Gramsci argues

19 Croce is properly regarded as a post-Marxist *avant la lettre* rather than a mere anti-Marxist because he explicitly admitted that Marxism had exerted a decisive impact on him and that he had incorporated its most rational residues in his own thought. Increasingly, particularly after 1917, he took his distance from the school in which he was formed until he eventually could declare that "from Marxism, properly so called [...] I obtained nothing theoretically, because its value was pragmatic and not scientific, and scientifically, it offered only a pseudo-economics, a pseudo-philosophy and a pseudo-history." Benedetto Croce, "Come nacque e come morì il marxismo teorico in Italia (1895-1900). Da lettere e ricordi personali" in *Materialismo storico ed economia marxistica* (Bari: Laterza, 1968), 291.

MODERNITY AS “PASSIVE REVOLUTION”: GRAMSCI AND THE
FUNDAMENTAL CONCEPTS OF HISTORICAL MATERIALISM

culminated in Marx and Engels’ reform of Hegelianism itself,²⁰ it necessarily had a direct impact upon Croce’s concept of history and historiographical practice.

Croce’s alternative to historical materialism’s supposed determinism was a conception of history not as the history of class struggle or the rise and fall of modes of production and their corresponding political forms, but as a history of liberty.²¹ What this perspective amounted to in concrete terms can be seen in such influential (in their time) works as *A History of Italy 1871-1915* and *A History of Europe in the Nineteenth Century*.²² As Gramsci wryly noted, for an historian who claimed to have dispensed with metaphysical grand narratives and to have proposed an “absolute historicism,” these works left something to be desired. In each case, they conveniently began by excluding the periods of struggle that founded the periods they sought to comprehend: in the case of Italy, Croce’s history begins only after the *Risorgimento*; in the case of nineteenth-century Europe, after the French Revolution and Napoleonic wars. Having dispensed with such moments of force and dislocation in the forging of a new historical block, history could not but appear as the story of a pacifically unfolding and self-realizing liberty, which effectively meant, as Gramsci recognized, writing “history from above,” that is, from the perspective of the state and the class that dominated it. Rather than the “interest free view of the eternal becoming of human history”²³ that Croce claimed, Gramsci argued that he had instead produced “a speculative history” that ratified the status quo.²⁴

Alongside this moment of negative critique, Gramsci also proposed a positive alternative conception of the history of the “long Nineteenth century.” It is here that we arrive at the concept of passive revolution, one of Gramsci’s central political concepts, closely tied to that of the famed “war of position” or “maneuver.”²⁵ He develops this concept in relation to his reading of the base/superstructure metaphor of the 1859 “Preface” to the *Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy*, as what he calls its “necessary critical corol-

20 Gramsci, Q 4, 3.

21 Benedetto Croce, *History as the Story of Liberty* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1962 [1938]). See also *Theory and History of Historiography* (London: George G. Harrap & Co., 1921 [1917]), a work that Gramsci read and criticized closely in prison.

22 Benedetto Croce, *A History of Italy 1871-1915* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1963 [1927]); Benedetto Croce, *A History of Europe in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1934 [1932]).

23 Gramsci, Q 8, 39.

24 *Ibid.*, Q 8, 240. The speculative character of Croce’s thought in general, in fact, is one the elements Gramsci most thoroughly criticizes, as contradicting his claims to realism and historical concretion. For the fullest discussion of this theme in English, see M.A. Finocchiaro, *Gramsci and the History of Dialectical Thought* (Cambridge, MA.: Cambridge University Press, 1988). Additionally, this study contains one of the most succinct overviews of Croce’s thought available.

25 Gramsci, Q 15, 11.

lary.”²⁶ As with all of Gramsci’s most important and distinctive concepts, it undergoes significant transformations and precisions throughout the *Prison Notebooks*. In the early phases of his research, Gramsci appropriated this concept from Vincenzo Cuoco, the historian of the failed Neapolitan revolution of 1799.²⁷ He transformed it, in the first instance, in order to provide an analysis of the distinctive features of the Italian *Risorgimento*.²⁸ In this context, the term passive revolution was used to describe the “historical fact of the absence of popular initiative in the development of Italian history,”²⁹ in particular, the role of the moderates in the *Risorgimento* in actively preventing popular initiative in an organized political form. With this phrase Gramsci aimed to highlight the lack of the radical-popular “Jacobin moment” that had distinguished the experience of the French revolution. The formation of the modern Italian nation state, according to Gramsci, had been a “revolution without revolution,” or in other terms, a “royal conquest” and not “popular movement.” It was a transformation of political forms undertaken by elites, garbed in the rhetoric of previous revolutionary movements, but without the extensive involvement of subaltern classes that had led to the placing in question of social and economic relations in earlier transformations.

However, it soon became clear to Gramsci that the concept could have a more general significance as a criterion of historical research into periods and countries that had been similarly lacking in an impetus to modernity from below.³⁰ Thus, in a second extension of the concept, Gramsci used it to describe the *Sonderweg* to modernity taken by other European nation states with experiences similar to those of Italy. Foremost among these was the formation of Bismarckian Germany, similarly characterized by transformations of the political forms of a society that nevertheless failed to place in question their economic contents. Here Gramsci’s concept has undergone expansion by means of the identification of substantial similarities between the class-content of these different national experiences, despite their apparent differences. Passive revolution, as in the first instance, continues to refer to a specific historical event or ensemble of events.

In yet a third moment, Gramsci asked whether the concept of passive revolution might have a more general validity, as descriptive of an entire historical period in Europe as a whole: roughly, a period he characterized as the Restoration that followed upon the exhaustion of the energies that had driven the French Revolution, beginning in 1848 with the defeat of the Europe-wide

26 Ibid., Q 15, 62.

27 Vincenzo Cuoco, *Saggio storico sulla rivoluzione di Napoli*, critical edition by A. De Francesco (Bari: Lacaita, 1998 [1799]), 325-6.

28 Gramsci, Q 1, 44.

29 Ibid., Q 8, 25.

30 Ibid., Q 4, 57.

MODERNITY AS “PASSIVE REVOLUTION”: GRAMSCI AND THE
FUNDAMENTAL CONCEPTS OF HISTORICAL MATERIALISM

workers' revolts, but intensifying after the defeat of the Paris commune, and extending to his own day in the form of Fascism. In this version, passive revolution comes to signify the pacifying and incorporating nature assumed by bourgeois hegemony in the epoch of imperialism, particularly in its western European heartlands, but with determinant effects upon the colonial periphery. As Domenico Losurdo has argued:

Beginning with the defeat of the workers and popular classes in June 1848 and further with that of 1871, a phase of passive revolution begins, identifiable neither with the counterrevolution nor, even less, with the political and ideological fall of the dominant class. The category of passive revolution is a category used in the *Prison Notebooks* in order to denote the persistent capacity of initiative of the bourgeoisie which succeeds, even in the historical phase in which it has ceased to be a properly revolutionary class, to produce sociopolitical transformations, sometimes of significance, conserving securely in its own hands power, initiative and hegemony, and leaving the working classes in their condition of subalternity.³¹

Revolution here refers to the capacity of the ruling class still to deliver substantive and real historical gains, producing real social transformations that could be comprehended, formally at least, as progressive; passive continues to denote the attempt to produce these transformations without the extensive involvement of subaltern classes as classes, but by means of molecular absorption of their leading elements into an already established hegemonic project. However, passive revolution, as a concept, no longer refers primarily to a particular recognizable event. Rather, in this final usage, passive revolution has taken on a more general significance, as a logic of (a certain type) of modernization. In a certain sense, the concept has almost become synonymous with modernity, which is now viewed as a melancholy tale in which the mass of humanity is reduced to mere spectators of a history that progresses without its involvement.³²

31 Domenico Losurdo, *Antonio Gramsci: dal liberalismo al “comunismo critico”* (Rome: Gamberetti, 1997), 155.

32 Gramsci, Q 15.9. Despite such an expansion of reference (from limited event, to nation state, to Europe as a whole), Gramsci nevertheless insists on gradations and differentiations that prevent the degeneration of this concept into a *passe partout* of the type arguably present in Adorno's and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* or even Lukács's *Destruction of Reason*. He distinguished between at least two phases of passive revolution on a European scale (not to mention its reverberations in the colonial periphery). In its early phases, the passive revolution proceeded as a cautious, defensive measure, molecularly absorbing leading figures of the subaltern classes and oppositional social movements into a consolidating state apparatus and its representative organs in civil society. Confidence slowly returning to the ruling class and the new institutions hardening into durable forms, entire organizations were subsequently integrated. See Gramsci Q 8, 36.

Why could a concept originally derived from a rather limited national experience — the year 1799 in Naples, in Cuoco’s original formulation, a decade or so in Gramsci’s analysis of the *Risorgimento* — be adequate to comprehend European-wide processes, for an entire epoch? Has Gramsci’s expansion of this concept led him to promote merely a mirror image of precisely the type of abstract, metaphysical, grand narrative to which he had objected so strongly in Croce? The only difference would be that, rather than a utopian narrative of the onward march of progress and freedom, Gramsci’s writing presents a dystopian vision of modernity as continual degeneration.

Gramsci’s response to these doubts, which he himself expressed in later phases of his research, was to return to the concepts of the 1859 “Preface.” He argued, paraphrasing key phrases from Marx’s text, that “the concept of passive revolution needs to be rigorously deduced from two fundamental principles of political science: first, that no social formation disappears until the productive forces that have been developed in it find a way to make an ulterior progressive movement; and second, that society doesn’t pose itself tasks for the solution of which there are not already the necessary conditions.”³³ Such theses, taken on their own, would seem to suggest a particular understanding of the historical fact of passive revolution: the capitalist mode of production that had not yet been superannated by reaching its own limits — the objective conditions for the emergence of an alternative mode of production, such as socialism — would then appear to be unripe for change. Yet, immediately following these lines, Gramsci insisted. “One must understand that these principles first need to be developed critically in all of their significance and cleansed of any residue of mechanism and fatalism.”³⁴

As he went on to argue, nothing had been pre-determined in the adoption of the passive revolution as a hegemonic strategy of a now moribund bourgeoisie, striving to maintain the historical block, the fusion of economic structure and ideological superstructure it had forged in its previously revolutionary phase. There were indeed objective conditions, common to all the European capitalist societies, that had led to its emergence at around the same time: namely, the threat of militant working class movements demanding that the continual revolutionizing of the mode of production and the new forms of collective social life in modernity — in the labour process, in urbanization, and so forth — were extended to include substantial equality at the level of the economic structure of the society. However, passive revolution had not been necessitated by this economic structure or inscribed in modernity as its telos. Rather, its successful imposition had involved conscious, political choices: on the one hand, the choice of the ruling classes to develop strategies to disaggre-

33 Ibid., Q 15, 17.

34 Ibid.

MODERNITY AS “PASSIVE REVOLUTION”: GRAMSCI AND THE
FUNDAMENTAL CONCEPTS OF HISTORICAL MATERIALISM

gate those working classes and confine them to an economic-corporative level within the existing society; on the other, the political choices of the subaltern classes that had resulted in a failure to elaborate their own hegemonic apparatuses capable of resisting the absorptive logic of the passive revolution. In other words, the working classes — for different reasons in different countries, but with the same result — had not been able to socialize the ideological forms that corresponded to their own experiences of the conflicts within the economic structure of bourgeois society, and thus lay the foundations for transforming it. They had remained subaltern to the superstructural elements of the existing historical block, unable to find “a way to make an ulterior progressive movement.” Modernity had indeed become a “history of (bourgeois) freedom.”³⁵

Therefore, rather than emphasising structure — to use more recent terminology — Gramsci’s alternative history from below ultimately places the accent upon agency, or, more precisely, it analyses the formation of determining structures through the activity of determinate social actors. How could the rigorous deduction of the concept of passive revolution from “two fundamental principles of political science” that have often been read in a deterministic way have resulted in such a seemingly voluntaristic valorisation? Marx’s precise formulations read as follows:

No social order is ever destroyed before all the productive forces for which it is sufficient have been developed, and new superior relations of production never replace older ones before the material conditions for their existence have matured within the framework of the old society. Mankind thus inevitably sets itself only such tasks as it is able to solve, since closer examination will always show that the problem itself arises only when the material conditions for its solution are already present or at least in the course of formation.³⁶

As we have seen, Gramsci reproduces these lines almost verbatim, before adding that these perspectives first need “to be developed critically in all of their significance and cleansed of any residue of mechanism and fatalism,”³⁷ if

35 It was in this perspective, finally, that Gramsci was able to explain Croce’s historiography not only as tendential and partisan, but also, crucially, as an *effect* of the passive revolution. For Croce “history of freedom” in fact merely provided a speculative description of the existing state of affairs, without being able to reveal its determining mechanisms. Viewed from a perspective that excluded the moments of struggle in which the economic and political structures were forged and modified, the history of (European) modernity did indeed seem to be one of tranquil development and pacific integration (Gramsci, Q 10, 1, n.9). Only the re-introduction of the political moment would allow a genuinely historical narrative to *explain*, rather than merely *describe*, the causes of this development and integration.

36 MECW, vol. 29, 261-2.

37 Gramsci, Q 15, 17.

they are to be made adequate for the deduction of the concept of passive revolution. Why does Gramsci feel the need to make this addition, and on what basis does he claim that this represents a critical development of Marx's propositions?

Here Gramsci is implicitly referring to one of the other texts by Marx that he translated alongside the "Preface," namely, the *Theses on Feuerbach*.³⁸ Specifically, he is referring to the break enacted in these notes with both idealism and previous versions of materialism by means of an emphasis upon "the significance of 'revolutionary', of 'practical-critical', activity,"³⁹ and Marx's proposition that "the coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-change [*Selbstveränderung*] can be conceived and rationally understood only as *revolutionary practice*."⁴⁰

In other words, Gramsci is here appropriating the orientation towards praxis, and therefore towards the active role of human agency, in one of Marx's texts and using it in order to read the orientation towards social determinations, or structures, in another, which then permits him to appropriate this latter text and integrate it with his independently developed new concept of passive revolution. This is not a case of one Marx opposed to an other Marx (youthful humanist versus mature economist, as both Althusser and Thompson proposed, in different ways); rather, it is a question of reading the "Preface" as itself an instance of revolutionary practice, that is, not a question of theory, but a practical question,⁴¹ specific analyses undertaken in a determinate period as a contribution to the workers' movement's comprehension of the structural challenges it faced. Gramsci was thus able to give due weight to two constitutive dimensions of the Marxist tradition that are not always easily articulated: on the one hand, the critique of political economy, or those elements that tend towards a science of the capitalist mode of production; and on the other hand, a political theory of the working class movement, or what Gramsci famously described as the philosophy of praxis' status as a "conception of the world." The former describes the conditions confronted by the latter, but ultimately, Gramsci insists, it is only the latter that can *explain and justify* the former, in both theoretical and practical forms.

It was in this perspective, finally, that Gramsci was able to judge Croce's historiography not only as tendential and partisan, but also, crucially, as an *effect* of the passive revolution, or, rather, an active contribution to it. For Croce

38 Giuseppe Cospito provides a sophisticated analysis of Gramsci's integration of themes from both of Marx's texts, with particular emphasis upon the significance of this operation for his formulation of the base/superstructure metaphor as a "unity in distinction." See Giuseppe Cospito, "Struttura-superstruttura" in Liguori and Frosini, *Le parole di Gramsci*, 227-46.

39 MECW first thesis, 5, 3.

40 Ibid., third thesis.

41 Ibid, second thesis.

MODERNITY AS “PASSIVE REVOLUTION”: GRAMSCI AND THE
FUNDAMENTAL CONCEPTS OF HISTORICAL MATERIALISM

“history of freedom” in fact merely provided a speculative description of the existing state of affairs, without being able to reveal its determining mechanisms. Viewed from a perspective that excluded the moments of struggle in which the economic and political structures were forged and modified, the history of (European) modernity did indeed seem to be one of tranquil development and pacific integration.⁴² Because Croce had posited the idea of liberty as the telos of modern history, events that contradicted it, such as Fascism, could only be explained as, strictly speaking, irrational and unhistorical. For Gramsci, on the other hand, Fascism, as one of the extreme forms of the passive revolution, its actual form in his time,⁴³ was entirely comprehensible, as one of the historical possibilities that arose on the basis of a given economic structure of society, within determinant relations of forces between classes. Equally comprehensible for Gramsci, of course, even from his Fascist jail cell, remained the possibility of a revolution of a very different type. Acknowledging this, however, depended upon the re-introduction of the political moment, both theoretically and practically, that would allow a genuinely historical narrative to *explain*, rather merely *describe*, both the causes and effects of this development and integration.

The full development of Gramsci’s concept of passive revolution thus provides an example of the capacity of the Marxist tradition for both productive engagement with non-Marxist thought and critical self-renewal. Both moments are integrated in Gramsci’s dialectical analysis. Initially appropriating the concept of passive revolution from outside the Marxist tradition, he then deployed it for the study of concrete historical case studies, testing and modifying it in accordance with the findings of his research; in a third moment, he measured his new concept against theoretical criteria of the critique of political economy that were foundational for the materialist conception of history; and in a final move, he supplemented these criteria with another equally foundational concept of praxis, as their “necessary critical corollary,”⁴⁴ or as a lens that allowed them to be read in a new and politically enabling way. Marx’s texts and, therefore, the Marxist tradition that derives from them are thus subjected to an act of immanent critique. Perhaps more importantly, by returning to the concept of praxis as the self-critique of Marxism itself, Gramsci proposes a conception of Marxism that is neither an attempted synthesis of competing doctrines nor one theory ranged alongside others. Rather, Gramsci’s vision of Marxism insists upon its constitution as a political moment capable of explaining the historical emergence of all ideologies, including itself. It is precisely in that sense, in terms of making the possibilities for social and political transformation that are

42 Gramsci, Q 10, 1, n 9.

43 See *ibid.*, Q 8, 236.

44 *Ibid.*, Q 15, 62.

immanent to existing forms of thought comprehensible, that a historical materialist interdisciplinary research programme still has a contribution to make today.

* * *

PETER THOMAS has studied at the University of Queensland, die freie Universität Berlin, L'Università Federico II di Napoli. He is currently based at the Universiteit van Amsterdam and is a member of the editorial board of the journal *Historical Materialism: Research in Critical Marxist Theory*.

PETER THOMAS a étudié à l'Université de Queensland, à l'Université libre de Berlin et à l'Université Federico II de Naples. Il travaille présentement à l'Université d'Amsterdam et est membre du comité éditorial de la revue *Historical Materialism: Research in Critical Marxist Theory*.