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**The Gramscian Turn:
Readings from Brazil, Argentina, and Bolivia**

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The current debate on the reconstitution of the left in Latin America since the close of the twentieth century demands, and has indeed provoked, a return to the discursive legacy of the preceding decades of struggle and defeat. The present article is intended as a contribution to this genealogical work of rereading, focussing on a symptomatic component of that legacy, on the work of a number of influential intellectuals at the vanguard of what has been called the Gramscian turn, a defining mark of which is an effort to reconcile a socialist project with the institutional structures of liberal democracy. The problematization of emerging forms of democratic organization is no doubt a task of global dimensions, but it carries a particular weight, and entails particular difficulties, in the context of Latin American societies marked by decades of military dictatorship, where a strategic alliance between the socialist left and liberal-democratic center-left was arguably indispensable. It is within this field of shifting conceptual and practical alliances—which emerged in the 1970s and 1980s and still conditions a contemporary discourse that nonetheless contends with a different set of tasks—that I examine here a series of inscriptions of

Gramsci's thought. I read these texts from a position of cautious solidarity: I share their conviction of the need to retrieve a concept of democracy from the logic of liberalism, but am wary of the temptation to do this by locating a hypostatized subject of democracy within the existing order of social relations.

I start with a critique of Carlos Nelson Coutinho, who translated Gramsci into Portuguese in the 1960s and has played an important part in the dissemination and critical discussion of Gramsci's texts in Brazil; I turn then to Juan Carlos Portantiero, who wrote the first and probably still the most significant major book-length study of Gramsci's thought and its utility for Latin America (*Los usos de Gramsci*, 1971), and to José Aricó, who collaborated in the first Spanish translations of the prison notebooks and published the journal *Pasado y Presente* and eponymous book series, both with a strong Gramscian orientation. I conclude with a more detailed analysis of Bolivian sociologist and philosopher René Zavaleta Mercado's critical reading of Gramscian categories in relation to his thinking of democracy in his later work. I argue that in Coutinho, and in a more subtle way in Portantiero and Aricó, there is a tendency to deploy conceptual tools drawn from Gramsci's texts to posit in different ways an existing collective popular democratic subject with emancipatory potential, rather than articulating the necessity of constructing new forms of subjecthood. In his reterritorialization of Gramscian categories, Coutinho substantially alters the concepts of society and the state and, as a result, that of revolutionary practice and objectives, which become synonymous with democratic pluralism; Aricó and Portantiero stress the superstructural determination of the base as the specific difference of Latin American social processes, and starting from this premise Portantiero ultimately seeks to redeem the political agency of a class forged through the historical experience of populist mobilization. Zavaleta's use of Gramsci is diagnostic rather than validating: he derives from Gramsci's expansion of the state a concept of democracy as a powerful instrument of bourgeois dictatorship.

The background of dictatorship and transition to democracy must be understood within a longer history that has conditioned both the immediate political context and the intellectual inheritance of the texts in

question. The first generation of Latin American Gramscians (most notably those associated with *Pasado y Presente*) came of age during the Cuban Revolution and the period of polarization in its aftermath that Régis Debray sums up with his observation that “revolution revolutionizes the counter-revolution” (21).¹ This mechanism through which socialist revolutionary struggle strengthens the military and ideological backlash from the right supported by the United States necessitated a new political strategy, but also a new theoretical discourse, and the Gramscian war of position became a recurring trope in the intellectual production of the left. The succession of military coups beginning in the 1960s was diagnosed as the expression of a *crisis of hegemony*.² A vocabulary and conceptual matrix derived from or associated with Gramsci’s texts became commonplace not only in the academy but in the public discourse more broadly.³ Within this wide range of interpretations and instrumentalizations, the dominant strain of reception in Latin America echoes Togliatti’s presentation of Gramsci’s writings and the PCI’s shift toward social democracy. Most of the texts considered here bear a relation to this trend. Each responds to and participates in a shift in the discourse of Latin American Marxist intellectuals—conditioned by an international crisis of the left and, at the

¹The foremost theorist and advocate of armed struggle modeled on the Cuban guerrilla experience, even as he upholds Cuba’s status as the “vanguard detachment of the Latin American Revolution” (13), Debray recognizes that it is a paradoxical vanguard: “From the Rio Grande to the Falkland Islands, the Cuban Revolution has, to a large extent, *transformed the conditions of transformation of Latin America*. [...] Cuba condemned to failure any mechanical attempt to repeat the experience of the Sierra Maestra, with an equally rapid tempo of action, with the same alliances and the same tactics” (21).

²José Nun, writing at the same time as Debray, advances this argument in “América Latina: la crisis hegemónica y el golpe militar” (1966), arguing that while there is a common-sense assumption of *golpismo* as an indicator of economic underdevelopment, it is correlated instead with an underdeveloped state-society relation. Norbert Lechner, taking as his premise this correlation between militarism and hegemonic crisis, extends the argument from successful coups to revolutionary armed struggle focused on the seizure of the state. This mode of struggle reflects that of the existing state, he argues, and a new regime established through armed struggle can only reproduce the same hierarchical power structures: “La experiencia del Estado como una fuerza de ocupación encuentra su simple inversión instrumental en la organización del partido como ejército de liberación. [...] La ruptura se reduce a un cambio de mando” (418).

³Raúl Burgos (“The Gramscian Intervention in the Theoretical and Political Production of the Latin American Left,” *Latin American Perspectives*, Vol. 29, No. 1.) provides an overview of the disparate uses of a Gramscian vocabulary in the discourse of political actors in Latin America, from Sandinista guerrilla leaders to the Communist Party of Argentina, to the PT in Brazil.

national level, by the eclipsing of the traditional class antagonist by the fiercer, or at least more immediate, opponent of authoritarianism. This is shift toward a theoretical marriage of socialism and democracy that simultaneously borrows from and competes with the cultural and formal principles of liberalism, a signifier that has historically served both its exponents and critics to identify democracy with capitalism. Their authors (with the exception of Zavaleta) left or (in Aricó's and Portantiero's case) were expelled from the communist parties in their respective countries. Coutinho, along with other leading intellectuals of the Brazilian left, joined the Workers' Party (PT), which has held the presidency since 2003; Aricó and Portantiero founded the Club de Cultura Socialista, and were denounced by the orthodox communist left as "renegades, deserters, or traitors to their roots" for supporting social democrat Raúl Alfonsín as the first elected, civilian president following the years of military dictatorship (Burgos 2004, 385). Speaking from a position of defeat, they seek to found a new discourse that renegotiates old allegiances without renouncing them. The strategy of armed insurrection had failed, and was held to have led to the years of military repression by the reconstituted democratic opposition as well as by the military regimes themselves. A new strategy was in order, and Gramsci's theoretical arsenal seemed apposite to the task.

1. Civil society against the state

In 1979, midway between the beginning of the "opening" of the military regime in Brazil and de-escalation of repressive measures initiated in 1974 and the formal transition to civilian government in 1985, Coutinho published his most influential essay, "A democracia como valor universal." Marco Aurélio Nogueira describes the impact of this text on the Brazilian left:

O ensaio de Coutinho funcionou como um verdadeiro divisor de águas no marxismo brasileiro. Gerou polêmicas até então inimagináveis, polarizou a esquerda, fez com que viessem à superfície o doutrinário e a resitência à mudança dos militantes comunistas, impulsionou realinhamentos teóricos fundamentais e, sobretudo, ajudou a consolidar, entre muitos revolucionários, uma cultura política democrática e uma visão moderna do socialismo. Isso sem falar dos efeitos renovadores que teve sobre o próprio

liberalismo brasileiro. (137)

While Nogueira frames this intervention in terms of a “polarization” of Brazilian Marxism, he also (and more pertinently) emphasizes its unifying function as the consolidation of “a democratic political culture and a modern vision of socialism.” It signals, in its resonance not only among socialist intellectuals but also within Brazilian liberalism, a recognition of common interests and values that unite the socialist left and the liberal-democratic center-left in their opposition to authoritarianism. Those who held fast to a militant position, a “golpismo de esquerda” (37) that had already failed in practice, were now exposed as theoretically obsolete, unmodern. With “A democracia como valor universal,” Coutinho introduces a deployment of Gramsci’s conceptual toolkit in defense of democratic process as an end in itself that he will take up in many of the texts that I examine in what follows, explicitly situating his reading within a lineage that comes through Togliatti (60).

Note 16 of notebook 7, on the war of maneuver and the war of position, is cited with astounding frequency in Latin Americanist scholarship on Gramsci, and Coutinho centers his argument for Gramsci’s utility for Brazilian socialist theory and practice around this fragment (as will Zavaleta, and Portantiero also cites it).⁴ The original passage reads:

In Oriente lo Stato era tutto, la società civile era primordiale e gelatinosa; nell’Occidente tra Stato e società civile c’era un giusto rapporto e nel tremolio dello Stato si scorgeva subito una robusta struttura della società civile. Lo Stato era solo una trincea avanzata, dietro cui stava una robusta catena di fortezze e di casematte; più o meno, da Stato a Stato, si capisce, ma questo appunto domandava un’accurata ricognizione di carattere nazionale.⁵

Coutinho offers different translations of this passage in different texts. In “As categorias de Gramsci e a realidade brasileira,” he renders “un giusto rapporto” literally as “uma justa relação”; on at least two other occasions,

⁴ For a discussion of the frequent misuse and decontextualized readings of this passage, see Joseph A. Buttigieg’s “Gramsci on Civil Society” (*boundary 2*, Vol. 22, No. 3, pp. 1-32).

⁵ “In the East the State was everything, civil society was primordial and gelatinous; in the West, there was a proper relation between State and civil society, and when the state tottered, a sturdy structure of civil society was immediately revealed. The State was just a forward trench; behind it stood a succession of sturdy fortresses and emplacements” (2007: 169).

however, the same phrase is translated “uma relação equilibrada entre Estado e sociedade civil” (1985: 66; 2000: 88, 172), implying a balance, or, potentially, a tension, between two opposing forces, rather than an organic articulation.

In discussing Gramsci’s expansion of the concept of the state, Coutinho posits a dual nature of this “integral state,” and the relative autonomy of civil society within this binary structure. He outlines this theory by taking as his point of departure Norberto Bobbio’s identification of Gramsci’s designation of civil society as superstructural (against Marx, for whom it constitutes the structural social relations of the economy) (1985: 60; 1989: 73). However, he distinguishes his reading from Bobbio’s by arguing that from this transformation or repositioning of the concept of civil society it does not follow, as Bobbio claims, that the superstructure becomes a determining element and no longer a mere expression of the structural base. This claim requires a complex edifice of argumentation, of equivalences and oppositions that can be summarized as follows: (1) the superstructure is of a binary nature and is identical to the integral state, that is, political society (or the state in the narrow sense, or dictatorship, or coercion) plus civil society (the field of hegemony, or *consenso*⁶). (2) The relative autonomy of these two spheres is determined in two ways: first, through a rigorous distinction between coercion and hegemony,⁷ and second, through the existence of separate material structures corresponding to each sphere. These come to occupy the position of the material base, namely, the institutions of government, the police, and the military, and those of civil society (roughly corresponding to Althusser’s repressive state apparatuses and ideological state apparatuses, though conceptualized differently). Coutinho privileges this “ontological,”

⁶ Consensus or consent. In Coutinho—as is conventional in Spanish and Portuguese translations of Gramsci’s concept—the Italian term is shifted toward the sense of consensus (Pt. *consenso*), implying a more active form of agreement than mere consent. This is perhaps the most obvious translation, but it is worth noting that a word closer to the English *consent*—*consentimento*—is also available in Portuguese. By contrast, both concepts are covered by the Italian *consenso*.

⁷ For a critique of this distinction, see Carlos Pereyra’s “Gramsci: Estado y sociedad civil.” *Revista Autodeterminación*, No. 1 (1986), 5-19.

“material independence” of the institutions of civil society in his explication of Gramsci’s theory of the state—“é essa independência material (...) que funda ontologicamente a sociedade civil como uma esfera própria, dotada de legalidade própria” (1989: 77). This perhaps allows Coutinho to claim fidelity to a certain materialist orthodoxy, but in doing so he rewrites the notions of base and superstructure, reducing this relation to a mere distinction between the material and immaterial in a quite literal sense. Base and superstructure are no longer categories of any theoretical value, since the real relation (or opposition) here is between civil society and the state, first claimed to jointly constitute the superstructure but then found to each contain its own base. The result is a concept of civil society that is neither determinant of the state (as in Marx) nor closely articulated with it (as in Gramsci), but it has a binary structure—internally divided into material base and ideological superstructure—parallel to that of the state.

This idea of parallel structures emerges once more in an essay that traces the concept of dual power from Marx, through Engels, Lenin, and Trotsky, and concludes by suggesting that this genealogy constitutes the historical roots of Gramsci’s concept of the war of position, refined by his Eurocommunist successors: Togliatti, Poulantzas, Vacca. Coutinho argues that the seeds of the transcendence of Marx’s “explosive revolution” are already present in Engels, in his introduction to the 1895 edition of *The Class Struggles in France*. Here Engels offers a revision of Marx’s definition of the state as the executive committee of the ruling class, proposing a new concept of a contractual state that includes a plurality of interests. The subsequent Leninist and Trotskyist theories of dual power as a transitional phase that must end in the destruction of one by the other are rejected, and a version of Engels’ theory of the “contractual” state reemerges for Coutinho in Gramsci and his heirs. Through this linear genealogical construction, Coutinho rejects the original content of the concept of dual power, and yet borrows the name to give new meaning to the Gramscian concept of the integral state (49). Both concepts are transformed in the process: dual power becomes a balance of forces rather than a parallel operation of two opposing powers, and the integral state assumes a binary (or pluralistic) structure in terms of interests or

ideological content and not merely in terms of means (coercion and hegemony). The “integral” state, here and elsewhere in Coutinho, through a series of semantic associations, comes to connote the inclusion of a multiplicity of political subjects, rather than merely the integration of state and non-state organs, grafting Gramsci’s text onto a contemporary discourse of democratic pluralism and social inclusion.

Coutinho returns to the application of these concepts to Brazil, and to the passage on Western versus Eastern states and the war of position as opposed to the war of maneuver in “As categorias de Gramsci e a realidade brasileira” (1989). He argues that the Brazilian state, founded on the exploitation of slave labor, has historically been of the Eastern type, basing this argument on an evaluation of the relative strength or weakness of society vis-à-vis the state: “Contudo, o que torna possível afirmar a predominância de pontos de semelhança com o modelo ‘oriental’ é o fato de que não só a sociedade civil era até pouco tempo ‘primitiva e gelatinosa’, mas também de que o Estado—ao contrário das mencionadas sociedades liberais—foi sempre bastante forte.” During the latter half of the twentieth century, however, Coutinho claims that Brazilian society embarked upon a process of Westernization during which civil society gained a certain degree of “autonomy.”⁸ Westernization here is equated with organized, grassroots struggle against the ruling class rather than the hegemonic integration of civil society into the social order defended and represented by the state.

There is in this reading a conflation of Gramsci’s East/West dichotomy and a state/society opposition that resonates with a global trend of anti-statism in processes of democratization.⁹ However, it has also been a central theme of Brazilian social thought at least since Gilberto Freyre’s

⁸ This progression is placed in a relation of antagonism with respect to the military regime established with the coup of 1964, which is constructed above all as a reactionary attack on this growing autonomy, albeit one that ultimately fails: “a tendência à ‘ocidentalização’ da sociedade brasileira continuou a predominar, reforçando-se ainda mais no período 1955-1964. Essa tendência foi obviamente freada pelo golpe de Estado de 1964 que (...) buscou por todos os meios quebrar os organismos autônomos da sociedade civil. (...) Todavia, apesar de tudo, a sociedade civil—embora por vezes duramente reprimida—sempre conservou uma margem de autonomia real” (123).

⁹ Outlined, for example, in Cohen and Arato, and in Lincoln Secco in reference to Brazil specifically.

notorious defense of “social democracy”—used interchangeably with “racial democracy”—as obviating the need for a “merely political democracy” at the level of the state (Freyre 18). Gramsci’s (far from unequivocal) phrase “*primordiale e gelatinosa*,” an attribute that Coutinho applies to Brazilian society until the second half of the twentieth century, refers not to an absence and not even primarily to a weakness or deficiency (though certainly these are implied to some extent), but to a lack of structural organization, of articulation with state institutions. More to the point, in the first sentence of the passage he cites from the notebooks, Coutinho reads “*Lo stato era tutto*” as affirming a degree of presence, of strength, of power. Certainly the *immediacy* of state power often appears as heightened presence, and the association of Gramsci’s characterization of Tsarist Russia with colonial and early republican Brazil—in which a landed oligarchy ruled over a population of slaves and poor laborers with little mediation of bourgeois institutions of civil society—is not entirely unfounded. But a more precise interpretation of Gramsci’s characterization of the first clause in this opposition—“*lo Stato era tutto, la società civile era primordiale e gelatinosa*”—would be not that the state is everything because it is strong, expansive, omnipresent, occupying the space left empty by an unformed civil society, but that it is everything in the sense of being *all there is*: since it cannot enlist the support of civil society and therefore does *not* occupy this space, it lacks the necessary connection to the organs of civil society to reinforce its power.

This reversal with regard to Gramsci’s use of these categories serves to shift the terms of the discourse toward pluralism and grassroots democratic mobilization, rehabilitating a Marxist tradition (at least nominally) that has in recent decades been charged with obsolescence. By integrating it into a broader discourse of the Latin American left, and specifically of the Brazilian PT, Coutinho notes that it constitutes a coalition of appreciable ideological heterogeneity. This gesture is necessarily bidirectional: a Marxist identity is preserved in the inhospitable climate of globalized capitalism following the collapse of “real socialism,” and a discourse and practice compatible with (and perhaps indistinguishable from) that of the liberal democratic left is given radical overtones.

According to Coutinho's reading, in the Eastern model the state permeates the social fabric, thus foreclosing the possibility of organized opposition. By contrast, in the Western model, civil society enjoys a degree of autonomy that enables it to contest the dominant ideology of the state, limiting the reach of its institutions. What for Gramsci is merely the terrain on which the war of position is waged, for Coutinho is something like conquered territory from the outset. "Civil society" is equated here with "the masses" and with political agency "from below," and thus is conceived as necessarily bearing a democratic content. A concept of civil society as a *space*, or *structure*, slips continually into the form of a *subject*,¹⁰ and the war of position—a war waged *within* the structures of civil society for the radical transformation of the state (conceived in its expanded form)—is simplified into a war *between* society and the state.

2. *From civil society to pueblo*

If Coutinho implicitly abandons the logic of base and superstructure while still claiming adherence to a materialist position, Aricó and Portantiero both take as their explicit point of departure in writing Gramsci into Latin American socialist theory the transcendence of this logic. Each stresses in different ways the effectiveness of the superstructural moment, no longer a mere expression or reflection of the socio-economic structure. The productivity of the state is as inseparable, in

¹⁰ Jean Cohen and Andrew Arato propose a revision or development of Gramsci's theory in a vein very similar to Coutinho's reading, though without attributing their innovations to Gramsci himself, whom they consider to have been confined by a "functionalist reduction of civil society" (152). The idea of civil society, and more specifically that of liberal democratic political culture, as a good in itself, they note, emerged in the discourse of anti-authoritarian social and political actors in the transitions to democracy in Latin America and Eastern Europe, and is a defining trait of post-Marxism, and possibly post-Gramscianism (71). Coutinho seems to exemplify what Cohen and Arato identify as a desirable transformation of Gramsci's concepts. Yet he almost always chooses to present himself as a faithful apostle, arguing the case for Gramsci's timeliness and appositeness to Brazilian social conditions, and seeking to distance himself from declared advocates of liberalism. Cohen and Arato, on the other hand, while uncommonly rigorous in their analysis, read Gramsci from a position that seeks to deliberately distinguish itself from Marxism and rehabilitate for the left substantive and formal elements of liberal or "bourgeois" political culture.

short, from the productivity of culture, of the intellectuals, of the ethico-political moment.

In Aricó's *Marx y América Latina*, this anti-economistic perspective informs an argument against the conventional wisdom that attributes Marx's inattention to Latin America simply to the Eurocentric historical moment. The Eurocentrism thesis follows from an orthodox construction of the Marxist canon in which certain texts—those that question the universality of a historical process in which the development of capitalism is a necessary precondition for socialist revolution, and even propose an inversion of the model in which revolutionary mobilization spreads from the center to the periphery—are excluded as apocryphal, designated as “circumstantial,” and devoid of theoretical significance (58; 76). If we cannot accept this reductive explanation, Aricó suggests, we must take a closer look at Marx's marginalization of Latin America in order to deduce its cause. Aricó does this by examining a rare text in which Marx does indeed discuss Latin American politics, but does so in a way entirely inconsistent with his own theory and method (120). In a text on Simón Bolívar, Aricó claims, Marx fails to offer any materialist or structural basis or, for that matter, any theoretical basis at all, for his criticism of the figure that embodies the emergence of the independent Latin American nations. Marx thus writes off the continent as untheorizable. Aricó concludes that this theoretical blind spot is the result of Marx's overzealous reaction to Hegel's philosophy of the state as subject of history, which prevents him from recognizing the capacity of the state to act upon or “produce” civil society, inverting the logic of social base and political superstructure (128).

For Aricó the relative strength of this capacity constitutes the singularity of Latin American societies, and leads him to propose a revision of classical Marxist theory that resonates with Gramsci's thought. It is therefore not so much Gramsci that facilitates a reading of Latin America, but the other way around: Latin America demands a Gramscian rewriting of Marx. In *La cola del diablo*, Aricó describes the affinity of Gramsci's historical context with his own in terms of

el implícito reconocimiento por parte de Gramsci de dos rasgos que caracterizaron el proceso de constitución de nuestros estados nacionales: una autonomía considerable de la esfera ideológico y

una evidente incapacidad de autoconstitución de la sociedad. Colocados en este plano de análisis, los grandes temas de la revolución pasiva, del bonopartismo y de la relación intelectuales-masa, que constituyen lo propio de la indagación gramsciana, tienen para nosotros una concreta resonancia empírica. (1988: 96)

Gramsci's empirical situation allowed him to arrive at an understanding of the historical productivity of superstructural elements lacking in Marx, and in turn serves as a model of theoretical production from and on the basis of Latin American societies.

The Gramscian turn in Argentina, with a strong regionalist overtone, entailed a reconstruction of the origins of Latin American Marxism in its own image. Aricó characterizes one of the canonical founders of the Latin American Marxist tradition, José Carlos Mariátegui, as Gramscian not by influence,¹¹ but as a result of the commonalities in the social problems they confronted—those of a “peripheral” formation largely constituted by non-proletarian (peasant) masses. The concrete problems that Aricó identifies in the conflict that arose between Mariátegui and the European Marxist institutional authorities of the period—the early years of the Third International—also resonate strongly with the experience of the Southern Cone at the time. In his introduction to the anthology *Mariátegui y los orígenes del marxismo latinoamericano*, Aricó writes:

La condena del populismo encubría en realidad la negación de toda posibilidad subversiva y revolucionaria de movimientos ideológicos y políticos de las masas populares que no fueran dirigidos directamente por los comunistas. (...) Al establecer una relación de discontinuidad entre el movimiento comunista y los movimientos sociales que precedieron la constitución de aquella formación política, contribuyeron a romper los lazos ideológicos, políticos y culturales que los vinculaban con las realidades nacionales y que les podían permitir convertirse en una expresión originaria de ellas, antes que ser la expresión de una doctrina “externa” y por tanto “impuesta” a las formaciones nacionales siempre históricamente concretas. (xxxviii)

Mariátegui comes to represent a precedent for the articulation of socialism and populism, understood as the predominant mode of mobilization of the Argentine masses. At the same time he serves as a justificatory example of

¹¹ Mariátegui was just three years younger than Gramsci and does not refer to him directly in his texts, although he studied in Italy from 1919-1922 and it is therefore likely that he was familiar with Gramsci's articles in *L'Ordine Nuovo*.

a heterodoxy, a process of autonomization from the European tradition. This departure is validated by an alternative source within the same European tradition: thought that is at once inside and outside the metropolitan origin and center, and thus confers a certain legitimacy even as it authorizes a divergence from the institutions that claim the legacy of this origin. Gramsci here lends a certain prestige to the figure of Mariátegui and by extension an entire Latin American tradition. This equivalence, in turn, justifies Gramsci's appropriation for the development of a new theoretical practice from Latin America given the bankruptcy of the traditional models. Aricó writes of the Comintern's censure of Mariátegui, "En primer lugar, condujeron a excluir por principio toda búsqueda original basada en el estado social del país y no a partir de doctrinas sectarias" (xxxix), and he emphasizes in Mariátegui "la acuciante necesidad de hacer emerger el socialismo de la propia realidad, de convertir al marxismo en la expresión propia y originaria de la acción teórica y práctica de las clases subalternas por conquistar su autonomía histórica" (lii). The new guiding theoretical principle would be the subordination of theory to the local empirical reality, clearly a proposition of sufficient generality to allow its development in a number of directions.

Portantiero's reading of Gramsci resonates strongly with Aricó's account in the passage cited above, emphasizing in particular Gramsci's interest in Bonapartist, or populist configurations. The Argentine left has, since the boom in academic Marxism in the 1960s, found itself in a double bind in relation to the most formative experience of the working class: Peronism. In 1970, Juan Carlos Portantiero and Miguel Murmis published *Estudios sobre los orígenes del peronismo*, a volume that brings together two essays on the conditions and early gestation of the Peronist hegemonic configuration, arguing against both those who attribute to the subaltern classes an absolute ingenuity and heteronomy (the majority within the academy) and those who uncritically extol the radical potential of the popular masses as emerging political subject. The previous literature on the subject, according to Murmis' and Portantiero's overview, is invariably premised on the claim that the Argentine working class at the time of the emergence of populism was internally divided into "old" and "new" sectors:

the old workers, mostly with immigrant backgrounds, resemble the classic European model of a proletariat with a history of organization and consciousness of their structural position; the new workers, which represent the dominant element quantitatively and qualitatively in the populist movement and exhibit a state of ideological vacancy. For Peronism's critics, this vacancy translates into a docility and manipulability, a predisposition to a purely emotive mode of interpellation by the state. For its apologists, it represents a kind of natural purity and potential for revolutionary innovation. Murmis and Portantiero argue that this premise is both theoretically and empirically flawed. They present evidence of a high degree of autonomous syndicalist organization based on the European ("old") model in the early stages of Peronism, and argue that the new hegemonic configuration is constituted through an alliance of classes rather than simply through the subordination and manipulation of the workers. This alliance may have been the best strategic option at the time, and resulted in an objective amelioration of the conditions of existence of the working class. And yet, it failed in the long term to transform the social relations of production.

This double critique constitutes a response to what I have called the 'double bind' of the Peronist legacy: the challenge of articulating a constructive analysis of the dominant mode of popular political subject formation that neither posits a pre-given, self-cognizant mass subject nor forecloses the possibility of autonomy. Portantiero takes up this task again in his work on Gramsci, proposing that his theorization of the construction of hegemony is particularly pertinent not, as Coutinho would have it, in the West proper, but in the peripheral West where one form or another of "populism" has been the dominant form of articulation of the national and the popular. This subcategory of peripheral capitalist Western states, in which Gramsci classifies Italy, Spain, Portugal, and Poland, seems apposite to his object of study, and allows him to think of a relation between the *masses* and the state outside of the model of organized civil society, deemed proper to advanced or central Western states, and a mode of collective agency of subaltern classes that does not constitute an industrial proletariat (124).

The structures of mediation between society and the state that Portantiero identifies as proper to peripheral countries and exemplified in the populist movements that emerged in the 1930s continued to organize the primary force of resistance against and constitutive the enemy of the Argentine dictatorship. In *Los usos de Gramsci*, his main interlocutors are once again the critics of populism who adhere to the standard claim that in Peronism and parallel movements throughout the continent (*varguismo*, *cardenismo*) the “people” are passive and infantilized, deceived and manipulated by cunning elites.¹² But in the texts written with Murmis, the refutation of this claim maintains one of its central premises—that only a class with a history of syndicalist organization can possess any degree of autonomy and that consciousness must be preceded by proletarianization on the classic, European model. They aim to demonstrate that the Peronist workers did in fact draw on such a history and that the unions maintained a high level of autonomous participation in the early stages of the regime. For Portantiero and Murmis, this syndicalism is what distinguishes Peronism from other instances of “populism,” and leads the authors to question the suitability of this designation. In *Los usos de Gramsci*, this emphasis on syndicalism is absent, and Portantiero’s reexamination of the category of “populism,” which he now unhesitatingly applies to the Argentine experience, is articulated as a critique of the assumption that political subjecthood is produced necessarily and exclusively by economic conditions. In practice this refers to those conditions that accompanied the development of class struggle in Europe, precluding the development of popular consciousness beyond the dominant capitalist countries.¹³

Portantiero maintains the Marxian schema of civil society as base

¹² Cf. Q13 §18: “Alcuni aspetti teorici e pratici dell’ ‘economismo’.” Portantiero’s argument largely anticipates Ernesto Laclau’s. Portantiero, unlike Laclau however, does not posit populism as constitutive of the political as such, but maintains its specificity to “peripheral” societies.

¹³ “La historia de la emergencia de las clases populares no puede ser asimilada con el desarrollo de grupos económicos que gradualmente se van constituyendo socialmente hasta lograr coronar esa presencia en el campo de la política como fuerzas autónomas. Su constitución como sujeto social está moldeada por la ideología y por la política desde un comienzo: cuando aparecen en la escena lo hacen de la mano de grandes movimientos populares y su emergencia coincide con desequilibrios profundos en toda la sociedad, con crisis del estado” (128).

and state as superstructure to critique a deterministic “socio-centrism” rather than the Gramscian model in which civil society is subsumed under the superstructure.¹⁴ Consequently, the critique of the base-superstructure model corresponds to a critique of the state/society opposition:

Si la propuesta gramsciana puede significar un avance, lo es—sobre todo y en principio—por las *impasses* que el sustancialismo dualista de las esferas “separadas” y “preexistentes” plantea para el desarrollo de una teoría de la política, tal como el caso del marxismo estructuralista francés lo ha demostrado patéticamente, algo más de una década atrás. (1988: 108)

In this way he turns to a more familiar polemical discourse against the canonical Marx but also, and more immediately, against a certain reading of Althusserian determinism. Portantiero shares this position with Coutinho and mobilizes it against a new dichotomy, which is ultimately reified in Coutinho.

Portantiero agrees with Aricó about locating Gramsci’s utility for the Latin American left in the notion of the historical productivity of superstructural elements. Yet while Aricó saw the capacity for self-constitution of such a subject as limited to Latin America, Portantiero stresses the emergence of a popular collective political subject despite the predominance of the state in the formulation of hegemonic national projects. Via Gramsci, Coutinho seeks to redeem a plurality of extra-state social actors loosely articulated in terms of interests or ideological orientation but unified through a concept of civil society that posits an intrinsic value in such an articulation. The identification of socialism and democracy is thus achieved through the positing of a pluralistic popular subject with the power to resist and, to an extent, determine the operations of the state. In Aricó and Portantiero, the popular subject of democracy is constituted not against but *through* the superstructural apparatus of the state (or the vanguard organization as emergent state), tending toward an

¹⁴ “En realidad—y esto lo planteó claramente Gramsci—, la distinción entre sociedad civil y sociedad política (o entre “base” como *dato* y “superestructura” como *reflejo*) jamás fue orgánica, sino meramente analítica: la ideología y la práctica burguesas tendían a imaginar esa disociación, pero la penetración de lo político-estatal en lo económico-social siempre había existido, aunque en el estado liberal restringido ello resultaba menos visible empíricamente.” (1988: 108)

vindication of the agency of a class that came into political existence through populist mobilization. What I am interested in highlighting here as a symptomatic commonality despite the important differences in the texts that make up this necessarily limited but representative corpus is the impulse to locate a stable democratic subject in the particular historical modes of organization proper to the region. It is a critique meant to dismiss neither the value nor the singularity of its textual objects, but to signal a broader discursive tendency that perhaps obstructs the work of the continuous reconstitution that democratic thinking requires.

3. The Masses as Epistemic Object of Democracy

Zavaleta credits Gramsci with the central concept of the “social optimum” in his later work—the degree of coordination between the state and civil society, “the relational quality of a society” (*Lo nacional-popular* 104)—which he derives from Gramsci’s military metaphor in which the state is but a “forward trench” of a superstructural field constituted by the institutions of civil society. My discussion of the “social optimum” in Zavaleta follows two related considerations that recur in several of his texts: the first is his critique or qualification of the dichotomy of Eastern and Western states that frames Gramsci’s presentation of the state-society relation in notebook 7 §16. The second is what Zavaleta calls the epistemological (*gnoseológico*) function of this relation, which is the operation of liberal democracy.

In “El Estado en América Latina,” Zavaleta argues against both instrumentalist and structuralist theories of the state, that the state must be understood as an autonomous, volitional subject. Autonomous by definition, according to a usage of the term which properly designates a modern form, its precapitalist counterpart is merely a fraction of “civil society” (which he does not restrict to any historical period, but here seems to use to designate the social in a broad sense) that has not yet constructed itself as a general class and is separate from any particular social group. It is volitional in that as a *synthesis* (as Lenin claimed) of civil society, the state is not a mere product or reflection, but a selective and deliberate construction out of the elements of the larger superstructure, which is then

projected back onto society. The superstructural social text—which is not ontologically separable from the economic structure, but merely distinguished from it as a methodological necessity for social-scientific analysis—on the other hand, necessarily lacks this unified or unifying volitional center, and gathers heterogeneous and conflicting elements, contingent products of a particular history. This imbrication of inherited and emerging forms is similar to Raymond Williams’ model, but diverges from because temporal heterogeneity is not organized into a predetermined, progressive sequence. Elements extraneous to the capitalist order are not mere residues on their way out but integral and active components that combine with new historical forms to produce unforeseeable results. The articulation of the state and civil society—neither mechanistically determined nor directly governed by a seamless dominant superstructural organization—is therefore a complex and crucial factor in the analysis of a given social order and the elaboration of a strategy for its transformation. It is here that Zavaleta turns to Gramsci. In reference to the passage in notebook 7 §16, he underscores the value of Gramsci’s theoretical construction of this relation, but questions the explicit spatial distribution and implicit temporal ordering of the types of states determined by it.

That the terms *oriente* and *occidente* are inadequate labels for a generalizable taxonomy of state forms by the 1980s should go without saying, and here Zavaleta skips the deliberation as to where to place which Latin American states according to this schema that is almost ubiquitous in Latin Americanist discussions of Gramsci.¹⁵ Rather than problematizing the category of *oriente*, Zavaleta focusses on the descriptor *gelatinosa*, specifically in its connection to the *primordial* or the *primitive* (*primordiale*; *primitiva*, rather than *primordial*, in the Spanish translation that Zavaleta cites, as in Coutinho’s Portuguese). In addition to Gramsci’s term *gelatinous* in reference to a civil society that lacks the institutional organization applicable to precapitalist (and, therefore, prenatal and

¹⁵In *Lo nacional-popular*, he writes, “Se ha dicho que acá Gramsci utiliza el término Oriente en un sentido metafórico, lo cual, en todo caso, sería una metáfora con nombre y apellido. En realidad es un exceso culturalista suponer que el capitalismo ocurre en Europa porque es occidental” (51).

prestatist, in the strictest sense in Zavaleta's—and Gramsci's—conception of the state), Zavaleta adds one that applies exclusively and necessarily to capitalist societies.¹⁶ In this sense, the gelatinous is not opposed to the articulated, structured organs of “Western” civil society, but rather to the ossified constitutive moment of traditional societies, that is, with peripheral, dependent capitalist states.

This is not a simple inversion of terms, nor would it constitute, even if it were, any kind of challenge to an orientalist discourse, in which the representation of traditional societies as fixed, ossified, is perhaps even more familiar than that of a primordial or “primitive” disorder. Rather, Zavaleta's qualification constitutes an extrication of Gramsci's conceptual innovation from a linear world-historical teleology that happens to be Eurocentric. This move is consistent with the spirit of Gramsci's own rigorous historicism and anti-dogmatism, a methodological principle that is inevitably applied imperfectly (an inevitability to which Zavaleta, incidentally, is no more immune). There is no more a necessary historical progression from fixity to fluidity and mobility than, as Gramsci's language implies, from primordial chaos to order. Rather, a contingent incidence of historical conditions may give rise to an intersubjectivity capable of self-organization. From the critique of the ordering of categories that define this “optimum” a modification of the concept itself necessarily follows. That concept can no longer be thought of as something attained once and for all, or even progressively approximated, as the ultimate expression or destiny of capitalist development: “Es verdad que ésta, la del óptimo, es una metáfora, que la realidad no produce más que aproximaciones hacia ella. En cualquier forma, incluso si existe, no existe para siempre y es algo que se obtiene y se pierde” (*Lo nacional-popular* 52).

In *Lo nacional-popular*, Zavaleta argues that precapitalist or “backward” societies should be considered more rather than less complex

¹⁶ “Hay formas de lo gelatinoso. Gelatinosa, por ejemplo, es una sociedad incapaz de producir opinión pública, y lo es sin duda aquella en que no se dan las condiciones para producir formas racional-comprobables del poder. El capitalismo organizado produce sin excepción formas modernas de sociedad gelatinosa. En el caso de ciertos países como Perú y Bolivia, el verdadero problema no está en la gelatinosidad de lo social, sino en su osificación: la sociedad sigue sometida a la profundidad de su momento constitutivo” (348).

than capitalist ones.¹⁷ As with the category of the “gelatinous,” this move implies a redefinition of what is meant by complexity (namely, heterogeneity, even *disarticulation* rather than articulation that produces a certain totalization and homogenization). It also indicates that an opposition based on the notion of the complex organizational structure of capitalist societies tends to erroneously presuppose an undifferentiated, homogeneous social mass as the negation of organizational complexity that precedes the capitalist nation-state.

This qualification leads Zavaleta to theorize the bidirectional mechanism through which this relation (between the volitional unity of the state and the heterogeneity or mobility of the social base) is established in terms of *legibility*:

Es claro con todo que, por lo mismo que el Estado debe adaptarse en el capitalismo a una base perpetuamente móvil, debe también actuar por medio de métodos de lectura de la sociedad o métodos de conocimiento social como la democracia política considerada en esta acepción. El *sistema de trincheras* no es así sino el conjunto de mediaciones, estructuras y soportes mediante los cuales existe la sociedad civil ante el Estado y el Estado político ante la sociedad civil, o sea aquella fase intermedia sin la cual la voluntad consciente de la política o irresistibilidad (el Estado) y la sociedad (o sea el espacio de ofrecimiento de las circunstancias a la voluntad política o el de recibimiento de ella) no se pueden conocer una a la otra. (*Lo nacional-popular* 49–50)

Societies are ‘legible’ insofar as they have been simplified by industrialization. This legibility, in turn, facilitates the hegemonic organization of civil society by the state. The instrument through which this mechanism operates is called representative democracy. Democracy in this sense is not a concession obtained through passive revolution—as Coutinho

¹⁷ “Se puede sin duda considerar como algo inmediatamente falso el que se piense en una sociedad capitalista como algo más complejo, de hecho, que una sociedad precapitalista. Es cierto que el capitalismo multiplica el tiempo social, pero no lo es menos que torna homogénea (estandarizada) a la sociedad. Al fin y al cabo, las clases nacionales, la propia nación, las grandes unidades sociales relativamente uniformes son propias del capitalismo y, en este sentido, cualquier sociedad atrasada es más abigarrada y compleja que una sociedad capitalista” (*Lo nacional-popular* 50). This opposition is complicated here through the proximity of the concepts of heterogeneity and mobility, and more explicitly in Zavaleta’s “Las masas en noviembre.” For more on this, see my introduction to *The National-Popular in Bolivia*, forthcoming with Seagull Books.

would claim (1987: 106–107)—nor a collective subjectivity constructed thanks to the dialectical constitution of the people and the state as construed in the populist tradition. It is, rather, a barometer, a “method of reading” used to maintain an “optimum” that maximizes the efficacy of the state in the broad sense. Zavaleta develops this epistemological concept of democracy in “Cuatro conceptos de la democracia,” where he argues that representative democracy performs the same function as the “quantitative techniques” of the social sciences, but far more powerfully.¹⁸

The concept of democracy opposed to this “gnoseological” function in the service of bourgeois dictatorship is, in the simplest terms, the self-determination of the masses. The problem that remains is: what is meant by this and how it is to be achieved?¹⁹ It’s obvious that we cannot dispense with representative democracy, and Zavaleta makes this point explicitly (“Cuatro conceptos” 127). Our task is to combat the self-perfecting mechanisms of the capitalist state from within a liberal democratic society.

I conclude by offering two different moments in Zavaleta’s thinking in which he grapples with this question.

The opening paragraph of “Cuatro conceptos” is repeated in the beginning of the second chapter of *Lo nacional-popular*, but its sense is

¹⁸ “Las técnicas cuantitativas pueden revelar las modificaciones del modo de producción, pero sólo en el rango de la prognosis, como verosimilitudes medias o, en todo caso, como certeza ex post. La política, en cambio, o sea la democracia, que aquí tiene un significado idéntico en absoluto, retiene de inmediato las palpitaciones de los sitios de la sociedad; los mediadores convierten esas contracciones en materia estatal. Para decirlo de otra manera, la democracia oye el ruido del corpus social.

Está claro a dónde llegamos en este tercer sentido o índole de lo democrático o, al menos, a dónde queríamos llegar. Aquí la democracia se insinúa como un acto del Estado. Entonces la conciencia del Estado civil, en esta fase gnoseológica, es sólo el objeto de la democracia, pero el sujeto democrático (es un decir) es la clase dominante, o sea su personificación en el Estado racional, que es el burócrata. La democracia funciona por consiguiente como una astucia de la dictadura; es el momento no democrático de la democracia. Sólo un ciego puede no ver esta valencia del concepto.” (132)

¹⁹ It should be noted that Zavaleta proposes partial answers to these questions: (1) self-knowledge is a condition and an aspect of self-determination, and (2) knowledge in “illegible” or “unquantifiable” societies is produced through the new forms of intersubjectivity that arise in moments of general crisis (see “Las masas en noviembre”). This knowledge-in-crisis, however, is not—and cannot be—constructed as a positive concept opposed to the epistemic regime of capitalism, and should not be taken as an “alternative” that obviates the need to work through the problem totalization.

altered by what follows. (“Cuatro conceptos” (1981) was probably written first, as *Lo-nacional popular* was unfinished at the time of Zavaleta’s death in 1983, but we can’t be sure of this.) Here are the two passages:

En el desconcierto absoluto o malestar cósmico que produce la multiplicación de los objetos del mundo, los hombres están solos en medio de las cosas que se amplían sin cesar. ¿No es verdad acaso que esto es ya la soledad de la época, la falacia general de su identidad y, en fin, lo que podemos llamar la segunda pérdida del yo?

El conjunto de estos acontecimientos ontológicos desemboca en la cuestión de la democracia, que es la medida de la presencia del hombre, como una entidad activa frente a la vida, en una época cuya señal de esencia es su totalización. (“Cuatro conceptos” 121)

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La época es cuantiosa y es como si huyera de nosotros, como si significara siempre algo distinto de sí misma, perdida en el número enorme de sus acontecimientos invisibles. No obstante, a pesar de estar abrumando a los hombres de continuo, tiene una suerte de flanco de fracaso en medio de esta suerte de asedio infinito y consiste en que puede ser conocida. (*Lo nacional-popular* 75)

In “Cuatro conceptos,” there is a direct opposition between the subject of democracy that asserts itself as an “active entity” before the ontological fact of totalization. Throughout the essay this opposition is maintained: democratic practice entails a challenge to the mode of knowledge that measures, quantifies, and affirms the real. Indeed, it entails a resistance to this order itself. The possibility of rupture lies in the ineradicable heterogeneity of the social ground and the contingency of historical events. In *Lo nacional-popular*, this mode of knowledge—and the corresponding order of existence that produces it—is a pharmakon: at once the condition of our subjection and of our subject formation. In this case, the intellectual labor of the “social sciences” and of philosophical thought, from which Zavaleta’s own texts cannot be rigorously separated, is both complicit with the logic of totalization and necessary for its critique. The question as to whether or not another mode of knowledge is possible is left open to us.

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