Outline and explain Antonio Gramsci's theoretical project with regards to his revision of Marxist ideas.

Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) is revered as one of the key contributors to the Marxist tradition in the 20th century, along with thinkers as diverse as Louis Althusser, Georg Lukacs and Vladimir Lenin. His contribution entailed a revision of predominant interpretations of Marx's writings during his time, in order to address the flurry of criticisms leveled at Marxist theory (both from within and outside the Marxist tradition). More specifically, Gramsci's ideas can be described as truly *political* and *revolutionary*. He sought to formulate a variant of Marxism that would make sense of existing power relations and the political currents within Italian society; at the same time, he advocated a distinct (and extensive) course of action for his country's socialist movements.

This essay will attempt to survey Gramsci's ideas by presenting the key tenets of his theoretical project against the backdrop of the Marxist tradition. Two main trends should be identified here. *Firstly*, Gramsci fundamentally rejects interpretations of Marx which trade on a crude materialism (and economism) – to this end, he accords a greater role to the "superstructure" and emphasizes the importance of culture, civil society, political practice, and social action. *Secondly*, Gramsci consistently resists mechanistic (or deterministic) readings of Marx's theory of history; instead he stresses the logic of *contingency* in place of a logic of *necessity* with regards to social change – this is evidenced in his prescriptions for political (and revolutionary) practice. While examining these two discernable aspects of Gramsci's thought, concepts such as "civil society", "common sense", "hegemony", the "historical bloc", and "wars of maneuver/position" will be explored in greater detail.

Subsequently, this essay will take a broader view of Gramsci's theoretical position, specifically that of his philosophy of praxis. In particular, he attempted to outline the relationships between political action, history, and philosophy (or philosophies). In view of this, it will be argued that Gramsci's consistent focus on the ideational aspects of social life (especially throughout his elaboration of the Marxian "superstructure") should not be interpreted as an exclusion of its material factors. It

is more feasible to view his theoretical project as one that brings together *both* the material and ideational dimensions, rather than reduce social existence to either of those poles. At the same time, this essay will suggest that these perspectives on materialism and idealism found in Gramsci's work are related to meta-theoretical debates involving the post-structuralist (or discursive) "turn" (or what some might term "Post-Marxism") vis-a-vis the Marxist tradition.

Finally, this essay will, albeit briefly, suggest that Gramsci's theoretical work(s) must be situated against the historical backdrop of the international communist movement, the Italian socio-political situation, as well as his personal circumstances at the point of writing. In doing so, this essay recognizes the fundamental difficulties one inevitably comes up against while trying to interpret Gramsci's writings - especially with regards to the reception of his theoretical views in the context of the English-speaking world.

Gramsci's rejection of crude materialism (or economism) in Marxism

Before examining Gramsci's work, it is important to recognize interpretations of Marx's writings that gave rise to an emphasis on material and economic forces as the foundations for social formations. These "readings" are premised on Marx's (1977 [1859]) framework of base (or structure) and superstructure, and his purported "materialism", as expressed in his *Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*:

> In the social production of their life, men enter into […] relations of production which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces. The sum total of these relations of production constitute the economic structure [or *base*] of society, the real foundation, on which rises a legal and political *superstructure* and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness [emphasis mine]. The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life-process in general.

Taking this often-cited passage as their starting point, advocates of "economism" were especially influential in positing an "interpretation of Marxism which holds that political developments are the expression of economic developments" and held that "the line of causation [proceeded] from the economy to politics which tends to be deprived of any autonomy of its own" (Hall 1991:14).

In stark contrast, Gramsci attempted to rehabilitate and adequately theorize the role of the "superstructure", immediately coming into conflict with Marxist thinkers that emphasized the primacy of the material "base". For him,

> the claim, presented as an essential postulate of historical [dialectical] materialism, that every fluctuation of politics and ideology can be presented as an immediate expression of the structure, must be contested in theory as infantilism, and combated in practice […] (Gramsci 1971:407)

More importantly, he is keenly "aware of the complexity of the relations between structure and superstructure, and was always opposed to simplistic deterministic interpretations" (Bobbio 1979:33). According to Gramsci (1958 [1918]),

> Between the premise (economic structure) and the consequence (political organization), relations are *by no means simple and direct*: and it is not only by economic facts that the history of a people can be documented. It is a complex and confusing task to unravel its causes and in order to do so, a deep and widely diffused study of all *spiritual and practical activities* is needed [emphasis mine].

Therefore, what Gramsci sought to achieve was to develop a coherent account to explicate and explain a structure-superstructure dialectic, departing from the dominant underpinnings of materialism and "economism" present in accounts of classical Marxism. It is evident that he could not envision a simple one-way causal relationship which proceeded directly from structure to superstructure.

In line with questioning crudely materialist accounts of Marxism, Gramsci was also clearly interested in emphasizing the role of ideas and social practice. According to Mouffe (1979:185), Gramsci's work "rebels against all […] conceptions which reduce [ideas] to mere appearances with no efficacy". As such, theorists such as Jones

(2006:33) have regarded Gramsci as the "theorist of the superstructures" - indeed, Jones argues that Gramsci has:

> [inverted] the base-superstructure relationship by arguing that civil society, rather than the economy, is the motor of history, for this is where the meanings and values that can sustain or transform society are created.
> (Jones 2006:33)

However, it is important to issue a preliminary caution that this reading of Gramsci should *not* automatically lead to the conclusion that he subscribed to a purely *idealist* conception of history and social change. It will be argued in a later part of this essay, that interpretations of Gramsci which reduce him to mere idealism have been mistaken: even though he *emphasized* the role of the superstructure, Gramsci certainly did *not* reject the important role of material (and economic) factors while constructing his social and political theory.

As mentioned in the above paragraph, Gramsci articulated the concept of *civil society* in order to demonstrate the importance of superstructural elements for historical change. On the whole, this is related to another concept - that of *common sense* - and fits into a larger mosaic regarding Gramsci's views on culture and the circulation of ideas. As such, this essay shall now examine these aspects of Gramsci's theoretical work.

Gramsci on "civil society" and "common sense"

For Gramsci, civil society is taken to include "a vast range of institutions", ranging from "political organizations" to "the church, the school system [...] the media and the family" (Jones 2006:32). It is suggested that in Gramsci's conception, civil society (and its institutions) is often viewed as a "private realm" of "everyday life", and "it is precisely in this private realm that ruling values seem most natural and therefore unchangeable" (Jones 2006:32).

Broadly speaking, these institutions are responsible for sustaining existing world-views (or "philosophies" and "ideologies") that allow for the dominance of a particular sociopolitical formation (for example, capitalism). Robinson (2005:472) explains that:

> Theory and ideology are [...] central to understanding social phenomena. Every philosophy gives rise to its own ethic, and each ethic *motivates adherents to construct a particular social formation* which expresses it [...] philosophies embedded in *common-sense* render the masses subordinate to the influence of ruling classes [...] [emphasis mine]

It seems clear enough that *common sense* can be seen as "the prevailing and often implicit 'conception of the world' of a social or regional group" (Liguori 2009:122). Hence, in Gramsci's (1971) own words, "common sense" refers to "the philosophy of the non-philosophers" which is in "conformity with the social and cultural position of those masses whose philosophy it is".

Therefore, on the whole, the picture that emerges is one that emphasizes a strong degree of interrelatedness between the concepts of *common sense* and *civil society* (Jones 2006:32). Civil-societal institutions are responsible for maintaining a prevailing common sense that allows for coherence within existing society (among various factions of society) and the predominance of a ruling class of elites. In this process, a *historical bloc* - an "economic structure and its ratifying superstructure and ideologies" - is formed, because there is a "'structuration' of a social formation that permits it to endure as that which it is, or to maintain the established state of affairs" (Thomas 2006:68).

These concepts of "civil society" and "common sense" are best illustrated by examining Gramsci's study of educational institutions and language policy in Italy. For him, the way in which Italian educational policy was revised in 1923 to exclude the teaching of standard Italian grammar through the school system, was a clear indication of how the ruling class was systematically reproducing inequalities in society by excluding dialect-speaking groups from "the national culture with its systems of academic and bureaucratic preferment" (Jones 2006:35). Hence, this example successfully demonstrates that "[sociopolitical] projects attempt to occupy

consciousness and everyday life through the functioning of a civil society created in their service" (Jones 2006:39). Additionally, in this instance, the "common sense" involved concerns certain notions regarding the prestige of the national language vis-a-vis the Italian dialects - suggested by the association of the national language exclusively with the select ruling class (Jones 2006:35). As such, Gramsci's illustration points to common sense being "the world view that a social stratum receives [...] passively [...] [and] the most widespread and often implicit ideology within a social group" (Liguori 2009:124).

On the whole, Gramsci's idea of civil society and common sense adhere to his general rejection of materialist-reductionist accounts of Marxism. By focusing on these concepts, the importance of human values and meaning creation (and reproduction) are brought to the forefront, and the Marxian "superstructure" is rehabilitated - instead of being just an offshoot of economic/material forces. Additionally, Gramsci emphasizes "'common notions' of collective and self-evident ways of perceiving reality" and "the meaning of these notions is inseparable from the social practices to which they are so intimately linked" (Nun 1986:217). As such, Gramsci's work also points to a complex myriad of material and ideational forces involved in the process of social and political change, brought together in actual *practice* instead of existing in isolation of one another; again, this is definitely not a materialist-reductionist account of social formation.

More importantly though, Gramsci's view of civil society and common sense constitute the foundation of his theory of social and political action. Indeed, the point of "common sense" as an analytical concept was essentially linked to Gramsci's attempt at "understanding [...] subaltern consciousness in hegemony processes" (Patnaik 1988:2). Gramsci is concerned with positing a counter-hegemonic process to the "bourgeois social order" which has, in his opinion, crippled the progress of Marxism (Patnaik 1988:2). Fundamentally, Gramsci's purpose was to "bring people out of their condition of subalternity", therefore, to this end, he "emphatically underscores the inadequacy of *existing* common sense [author's emphasis]" (Liguori 2009:128).

Understood generally, his political project consists of "the production of a 'new philosophy' that overcomes existing common sense and becomes a mass ideology - that is, a *new* common sense': for Gramsci, "common sense cannot be eliminated [because] it is part of what is at stake in the struggle for hegemony" (Liguori 2009:130). As such, it is especially important to examine how Gramsci builds on his conception of "common sense", extending it into a detailed theory of political action revolving around the idea of "hegemony".

Gramsci's political prescriptions: "Hegemony" and revolutionary practice

As explained in the previous section of this essay, it is important to acknowledge the implication of Gramsci's views on common sense and civil society, namely that:

> The 'ruling class' is more than just the producers of wealth and power; it reproduces itself through the institutions and through the attitudes and behavior of individuals and social groups.
> (Landy 1986:55)

As such, as Bates (1975:351) puts it, "the basic premise of [Gramsci's] theory of hegemony is [...] that man is not ruled by force alone, but also by ideas". He goes on to explain in greater detail that:

> The concept of hegemony is really a very simple one. It means political leadership based on the consent of the led, a consent which is secured by the diffusion and popularization of the world view of the ruling class.
> (Bates 1975:352)

How then, does the idea of hegemony feature in a broader theory of social and political formation(s)? Certainly, Gramsci's interest in various aspects of political practice was fuelled by a detailed reading of Niccolo Machiavelli's work; influenced by him, Gramsci grounded his Marxism in "a theory of political power" emphasizing "the necessity of conscious study, analysis, planning, and timeliness in the gaining of power" (Landy 1986:52). As such, he relates the idea of "hegemony" to the ability of

bourgeois ruling class to maintain their position of political dominance. For Gramsci, the "exercise of power" (or leadership) of a dominant class over "subordinate classes" is made possible by "a combination of coercion [or force] and persuasion [or consent]" (Simon 1991:24). Gramsci's concern is specifically with the latter - the idea of consent - and the *organization of consent* is equated with "hegemony" (Simon 1991:24).

On the whole, Gramsci's development of "hegemony" explains the presence of a ruling class of bourgeoise (and how it forms a significant basis of political power for this dominant class), but it also raises certain questions; for instance, how do socialist movements eventually overcome the existing hegemonic formation? More importantly, to achieve this socialist outcome, the concern expressed is: what would be an appropriate revolutionary strategy to pursue?

In formulating a distinct theory of revolutionary practice, Gramsci draws a distinction between the "two polar strategies" of a *war of position* and a *war of maneuver* (Hawley 1980:590). He fundamentally explains that,

> in the most advanced [capitalist] states [...] civil society has become a very complex structure, one which is *resistant* to the catastrophic 'incursions' of the immediate economic elements (crises, depressions, etc). The superstructures of civil society are like the trench-systems of modern warfare. [...] at the moment of their advance and attack the assailants would find themselves *confronted by a line of defense which was still effective*. [emphasis mine]
> (Gramsci 1971:235)

In other words, since,

> the dominant [ruling class] ideology in modern capitalist society is highly institutionalized and widely internalized[,] [Gramsci believes] that a concentration on frontal attack, or direct assault against the bourgeois state ('war of movement' or '*war of maneuver*') can result only in disappointment and defeat. [emphasis mine]
> (Femia 1981:51)

As such, in view of the deeply entrenched capitalist system, and its existing hegemonic formation, Gramsci stresses the importance of a *war of position*. For him, given these circumstances, revolutionary forces must wage a battle of ideas on the "cultural front" (Femia 1981:52). This entailed a strategy of

> steady penetration and subversion of the complex and multiple mechanisms of ideological diffusion [...] conquer[ing] one after another all the agencies of civil society (e.g. the schools, the universities, the publishing houses, the mass media, the trade unions) [...] Attention must therefore be directed to the inner redoubt of civil society [...] in short, to the creation of a *proletarian counter-hegemony*.
> (Femia 1981:52)

Clearly then, Gramsci is suggesting that revolutionary forces have to establish an alternative hegemony vis-a-vis the prevailing arrangements of civil society and its institutions. More specifically, he emphasizes the importance of an organized counter-hegemonic effort through and with the leadership of the intellectuals. In short, he "theorized and demanded the integral politicization of the intellectual role" (Pellicani 1981:48). Essentially, according to Bates (1975:360), the Gramscian idea of revolution is expressed in "an ideological struggle led by the intellectual 'officers' of competing social classes". Subsequently, it is the passing of "traditional intellectuals (those of a decadent ruling class) into the proletarian camp [...] [which can be] seen as a victory for the proletarian intellectuals" (Bates 1975:360).

Equally important is Gramsci's theorizing of the socialist party's function and its purpose in the pursuit of counter-hegemony. For him, the "education and training of leadership is a major function of the party", and this can be achieved through the teaching of classical Marxist ideological texts and its related philosophy in "political schools", "study groups" or even party-sponsored "'general education' schools" (Aronowitz 2009:13). On the whole, these activities are geared towards the development of intellectuals to lead the struggle for power against the dominant class. The party must aim to recruit a group of what Gramsci calls "organic intellectuals" - those who have "sprung from the ranks of the workers and other subaltern social formations" - in order to "attain or retain economic, political and

ideological power" (Aronowitz 2009:13). In fact, the "traditional intellectuals" (as mentioned above) who are assimilated to the proletarian side, were previously the organic intellectuals *of the former capitalist/dominant class* (Simon 1991:106).

Additionally, Gramsci saw revolutionary strategy as involving some degree of cooperation and compromise between various subaltern groups. On the whole, he was convinced that

> The proletariat can become the leading and dominant class to the extent that it succeeds in creating a *system of alliances* which allows it to mobilize the majority of the population against capitalism and the bourgeois state. [emphasis mine]
> (Gramsci 1978)

This meant that the proletariat had to combine its own interests with those of the other subaltern classes. Gramsci explained that the working class should seek to

> go beyond sectional [...] *economic-corporate* struggles, and be prepared to make compromises, in order to become the national representative of a broad bloc of social forces.
> (Simon 1991:26)

Hence, in this respect, Gramsci's revolutionary strategy involves a struggle between more than just the dominant class and the proletariat: his vision also emphasized the complex balancing of interests among the subaltern classes (the proletariat included). However, even though he recognized the advantages of winning the landless agricultural laborers, peasants, and certain sections of the middle-class to the revolution, Gramsci never abandoned the belief that "the working class [was] the decisive revolutionary force" (Harman 1977). All in all, there appears, in Gramsci's work, a more nuanced understanding regarding the dynamics of socialist political strategy - above and beyond the mere recognition of only two (the dominant and oppressed) classes.

Upon examining Gramsci's prescriptions concerning socialist political practice, it is possible to identify his rejection of all "teleological" or deterministic forms of Marxism. As aptly as Haug (2001:78) puts it,

> [Gramsci's] reinterpretation of historical materialism [...] wipes out its fatalistic evolutionisms, objectivisms, and the false guarantees of a philosophy of history, which have residually afflicted Marxian thinking and which grew like mildew on the official Marxisms.

In considering all of Gramsci's concepts, as this essay has done (above), the social and political vision that emerges is one of contingency, rather than necessity. Instead of suggesting that capitalism *will* be overthrown eventually, or that the working class *will* be able to seize power, Gramsci's contribution was rather to posit *strategies* involving *practical social and political action* for the proletariat and the communist party. As such, his concepts of civil society (and its institutions), common sense, hegemony, etc, present a detailed and complex conceptual *understanding* of the nature of class struggle and political practice, rather than a set of historical laws and unchanging constants that will inevitably unravel over time. This explains his constant emphasis on political struggle - it is only through this that socialist movements can come to power. Instead of suggesting any *predetermined outcome* of national revolutions, Gramsci highlighted the importance of political *practice*. All in all, Landy (1986:67) explains that

> [Gramsci was] merely augmenting what was central to his political and cultural theory; namely, that no change will come about without the existing conditions for change and that these existing conditions *do not occur spontaneously* but must be actively produced, are, in fact, being produced, and *need to be identified and acted upon*. [emphasis mine]

Up to this point, this essay has established that: (1) Gramsci rejects a crudely materialist interpretations of Marxism – he accords a greater role to the "superstructure" and develops a sociological (and political) vision involving culture and civil society. At the same time, (2) Gramsci also resists mechanistic (or deterministic) readings of Marx's theory of history; instead he stresses the logic of *contingency* in place of a logic of *necessity*. As such, this essay shall now turn to an examination of the broader philosophical and theoretical position expressed in Gramsci's work.

Gramsci's philosophy of praxis: Bridging materialism and idealism

It is especially important to examine Gramsci's work from a broader perspective to understand his theoretical underpinnings as well as his overarching philosophical position. Consistent with his elaboration of the superstructural elements in social formations, he sought to theorize the role of ideas (and philosophies) and their relationship to politics. According to Frosini (2008:675), Gramsci regarded philosophy as "that specific 'power' capable of awakening consciousness and thus producing revolutionary action". In fact, he goes on to explain that the Gramscian project involves "a reformulation of the status of philosophy in line with the unity of theory and practice" (Frosini 2008:676). This suggests that Gramsci fundamentally recognized the dialectical relationship between philosophy and political action - and this is articulated in his broader "philosophy of praxis" As Gramsci (1971) puts it in the *Prison Notebooks*, "the philosophy of the praxis conceives the reality of the human relations of knowledge as an element of political 'hegemony'". In this sense, Gramsci was clearly determined to emphasize the uses (and possibly, abuses) of philosophies in the quest for political power.

At the same time, Gramsci was keen to highlight some degree of historicism in explaining the role of philosophies in society. In particular, he suggests that his philosophy of praxis is essentially "absolute historicism, the absolute secularization and earthliness of thought [...]" (Gramsci 1971:465). As Salamini's (1974:371) explains, this points to

> [Gramsci's belief] that every theoretical system has validity within the limits of a specific historical context, therefore it is bound to be superseded and deprived of the significance in the succeeding historical context. In sum, whatever the rationality of a theory it cannot claim absolute validity; ideas are continuously submitted to the test of emerging new sociohistorical conditions.

Therefore, Gramsci clearly recognizes that there are no "transcendent" philosophies which can claim to occupy a vantage point outside of history. As such, he fundamentally agrees with Marx and Engels' (1987 [1845]) writings in *The German Ideology* that "the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas: i.e. the

class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force". On the whole, Gramsci, like Marx and Engels, acknowledges that "the historical process is praxis, pure practical activity, [therefore] ideas do not exist by themselves but are concretized in objective social conditions" (Salamini 1974:365).

Gramsci's emphasis on the historical (and political) "grounded-ness" of ideas is evident in his critique of positivist strands on Marxism (and other sociological theories in general). He essentially problematizes the objective, statistical laws of science which claim to be ahistorical and apolitical. Gramsci (1971:244) explains that

> The problem of what "science" itself is has to be posed. Is not science itself "political activity" and political thought, in as much as it transforms men, and makes them different from what they were before? [...] And does the concept of science as "creation" not then mean that it too is "politics"? Everything depends on seeing whether the creation involved is "arbitrary", or whether it is rational-i.e. "useful" to men [...]

This suggests that the positivist endeavor for knowledge is, in fact, the establishment of a "system of rationality which benefits the entire civil society" which serves to maintain the ruling class' political hegemony (Salamini 1975:75). Therefore, these aspects positivism would also conflict with Gramsci's resistance against any "presumption of a first, absolute knowledge [which suggests] absolute antihistoricism" (Haug 2001:73). Indeed, Gramsci believed that one should not admit "the existence of an extrahistorical 'objectivity' conditioning human activity, but not being conditioned by it" (Salamini 1975:73). In short, Gramsci's accusation against positivist paradigms is simply that they cannot claim to operate outside of political formations and the general trajectory of history - knowledge, in itself, exists amidst broader socio-political forces at any point in the historical development of class society.

In fact, for Gramsci, Marxism itself must be seen as being "*within history* [and as] *a theory of history*, itself a transitory phase in the history of the development of human thought [author's emphasis]" (Salamini 1974:371). On one hand, Marxism is a

"historical product of a realm of necessity", it is initially unable to envision a "world of freedom" (Salamini 1974:372). As explained by Gramsci (1957:69) himself,

> We can observe how the determinist, fatalist mechanist element has been an immediate ideological 'aroma' of Marxism, a form of religion and of stimulation (but like a drug necessitated and historically justified by the 'subordinate' character of certain social strata)

One could add that through the elaboration of Marxism by particular groups of working-class intellectuals, eventually, "the futility of mechanical determinism" and "the naive philosophy of the masses [which is] a cause of passivity, [and] of imbecilic self-sufficiency" is refuted; subsequently, Marxism is developed into "a reflexive and coherent philosophy" (Gramsci 1957:70). On the other hand, Marxism is itself also essentially *a theory of history*, and contains a "well-known thesis that historical development will at a certain point be characterized by the passage from the reign of necessity to the reign of freedom" (Gramsci 1971:404). The picture that emerges in Gramsci's overall "philosophy of praxis" suggests that Marxism should be viewed as

> [...] a philosophy that has been liberated (or is attempting to liberate itself) from any unilateral and fanatical ideological elements; it is consciousness full of contradictions, in which the philosopher himself, understood both individually and as an entire social group, not only grasps the contradictions, but *posits himself as an element of the contradiction* and elevates this element to a principle of knowledge and therefore of action [...] If, therefore, it is demonstrated that contradictions will disappear, it is also demonstrated implicitly that *the philosophy of praxis will disappear, or be superseded.*
> (Gramsci 1971:404)

This means that Marxism, as a philosophy, entails the reflexive questioning of itself - simply put, it "contains in itself the principle of its disappearance" (Salamini 1974:372). Clearly, for Gramsci, this is the trajectory of history that Marxism has envisioned, and it is inextricably included within its own theorizing. Therefore, on the whole, Gramsci systematically demonstrates that Marxism is simultaneously *both* the *product* of history as well as a *theory* of history.

Through the detailed analysis of Gramsci's philosophy of praxis above, it is clear that it is precisely about the "the concrete historicisation of philosophy and its identification with history" (Gramsci 1971:436). To sum up, his philosophy of praxis is concerned with how all ideas (including Marxism) are located within history, within given socio-political formations. It is also about problematizing and calling into question the objectivity of all philosophies by (1) tracing their historical situatedness and (2) reflecting on how they might be serving ideological purposes.

More importantly, these Gramscian perspectives are significant, especially with regards to broader issues concerning materialism and idealism that continue to be debated among contemporary Marxist theoreticians. Gramsci's own position on materialism and idealism is certainly clear enough. His philosophy of praxis, in essence, attempts to straddle between the two poles of materialism and idealism. As suggested in the paragraph above, Gramsci simultaneously emphasizes the efficacy of ideas *and* locates them within the broader historical and material formations of social relations and political activity. Hence, even though it has been explained earlier in this essay that Gramsci has been regarded as the "theorist of the superstructures" in rehabilitating the importance of ideational factors in sociopolitical change within his own work, this does *not* suggest that Gramsci concurs with a *solely* idealist reading of Marxist theory.

In a sense then, Gramsci's theoretical position is incompatible with certain idealist/ discursive conceptions of Marxism, which have been strongly influenced by the post-structuralist movement in the social sciences. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's (1985) work, best expressed in their book *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, has emphasized the primacy of "discourse" in a theory of "post-Marxism". For them, the assertion is that *all* social realities exist *only within* certain discursive (and conceptual) frameworks. While they do not deny the existence of an extra-discursive reality, this is *not* what they are concerned with. Rather, they seek to understand how social relations (e.g. class relationships) make sense within any given discourse (e.g. a theory of Marxism), and how they would be otherwise understood in the context of other (different) kinds of discourses. Even though

these views capture the necessarily language-mediated (or discourse-mediated) nature of social reality, it is important to remember that this is *not* what Gramsci prescribes in his own Marxist theory.

Even though Gramsci alludes to the existence of competing "philosophies" and "hegemonies" (which basically suggest the efficacy of ideas in socio-political transformations), he does not, at any point in time, *reduce* all historical development to ideas. In fact, for Gramsci, ideas are influential insofar as they are resonant with given socio-political formations - for example, the ruling-class ideas which sustain a particular "common sense" can only exist precisely because there is a essential material (and economic) relationship between the ruling-class and the subaltern classes. Clearly, notwithstanding his efforts to elaborate the ideational dimensions of social life, Gramsci fundamentally adheres to Marx and Engels' original framework and posits a dialectical relationship between the Marxian base *and* the superstructure. In this sense, Gramsci faithfully acknowledges the material *and* the ideational dimensions of social reality and *does not* endorse any form of reductionism. Indeed, the incompatibility between Laclau and Mouffe's position, on one hand, and Gramsci's views, on the other, culminate in the former's accusation that Gramsci's conception is "ultimately incoherent" and suffers from "the dualism of classical Marxism" as well as "the unicity of the unifying principle, and its necessary class character" (Laclau and Mouffe 1985:65).

Some scholars, in fact, have fervently resisted Laclau and Mouffe's post-Marxist discourse-reductionist theoretical account. According to Norman Geras' (1987) influential article entitled "Post-Marxism?" in the *New Left Review*, Laclau and Mouffe's emphasis on discourse appears to be more *anti*-Marxism than *post*-Marxism. In particular, Geras (1987:67) criticizes them for removing the pre-discursive foundations of society and sliding into "a bottomless, relativist gloom, in which opposed discourses or paradigms are left with no common reference point, uselessly trading blows". For him, this kind of idealism (or indeterminacy) critically undermines the objective material realities and relationships central to any theory of Marxism. He argues that if Laclau and Mouffe's project no longer base their analysis

on the privileged position of the working class, and instead, place "other democratic antagonisms [...] on an equal footing with proletarian ones", then they (Laclau and Mouffe) have essentially departed from an important tenet of socialism - that "*material structures and determinants* shape and limit what political practice can 'construct' [emphasis mine]" (Geras 1987:81). In this sense, Geras would certainly disagree with Laclau and Mouffe's criticisms of Gramsci's marxist project: instead, he issues a stern warning against their departure from materialism into the realm of discourse. On the whole, Gramsci's work remains relevant in understanding the materialism/idealism issue. By formulating a theory that *includes* (but is not limited to) the material "base" of Marxism, Gramsci's account steers clear of those criticisms that Geras directs at "discourse-reductionism". It is reasonable to claim that Gramsci's writings certainly do offer a specific solution geared towards articulating the relationship between both the material and ideational dimensions of social life. As such, his theoretical formulation should be taken seriously by present-day social theorists seeking to understand and/or overcome this dualism.

Conclusion: The limits and uses of Gramscian scholarship

While Gramsci should be applauded for his contributions towards the Marxist tradition, it is important to highlight the difficulties often encountered in attempts to understand and interpret his work. In particular, his mature writings, arguably the "acme of his thought" (see Gupta 1988:1620) were compiled from a collection of notebooks written during his imprisonment by the Italian Fascist regime from 1926 till his eventual death in prison in 1937. This points to the sheer difficulty of bringing together the different fragments of his writings, ranging from short paragraphs to longer essays, that made their way out of his prison cell. At the same time, Gramsci was writing under intensely unfavorable conditions, suffering from "excruciating physical deterioration and mental anguish" and constantly under surveillance from the watchful police guards (Buttigieg 1986:2). Clearly, under these circumstances, it was difficult for Gramsci to engage in any systematic (and organized) theoretical treatise, especially since his correspondence with both the Italian Communist Party

as well as his relatives ran into heavy scrutiny and a fair amount of imposed limitations by the authorities. It might even be suggested that Gramsci had deliberately written in disparate chunks in order to conceal his revolutionary project (and political theorizing) from his jailers. Therefore, with regards to modern attempts to reconstruct Gramsci's work, it is not surprising that Frosini (2008:664) argues that there have been consistently changing interpretations and a "remarkable incomprehension of the specific theoretical problem" in Gramsci's writings.

At the same time, while Gramsci's work has been well-received in the English-speaking world, the process of translation and interpretation has been tedious and difficult. According to Adamson (1979:40), the English editions of Gramsci's writings were often distorted through selective and partial readings that concentrated exclusively on a certain period of his work "without sufficiently exploring connections to the larger whole". In particular, Adamson explains that scholars have disagreed on how Gramsci's project generally relates to other Marxist thinkers, for example, Lenin: while some have identified the former's theoretical break with the latter, others are more determined to emphasize the "continuity in Gramsci, thereby underplaying the shifts in judgment he made on revolution in Italy, political organization, and his political allegiances" (Adamson 1979:40). Again, it is clear that there are severe obstacles in the process of trying to understand Gramsci's intentions, orientations and attempting to disambiguate his originality from the interpretive slants which might have affected the reception of his work among the English-speaking community.

However, notwithstanding the issues mentioned above, this essay has attempted to distill a number of important strands within Gramsci's work that have been influenced by (and have, in turn, influenced) the broader Marxist theoretical tradition. At the same time, the sheer amount of books and journal articles in English that deal with many different aspects (or concepts) of Gramsci's writings should be acknowledged as a sign of both a *sustained interest* as well as a *consistent effort* in understanding (and debating) Gramsci's originality and the legacy of his sociopolitical thought. In conclusion, one would do well to remember that Gramsci's

work is "never fixed but always in the process of becoming itself in a movement that englobes and transcends the past without repudiating it" (Adamson 1979:40). Ultimately, it is clear that the debate over Gramsci's writings is far from over - indeed, the task of historical (and sociopolitical) contextualization is one which continues to preoccupy present-day scholars, especially those interested in tracing the trajectory and development of Marxist thought.

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