

# **Observations on Certain Aspects of the Structure of Political Parties in Periods of Organic Crisis - From Hegemony, Relations of Force, Historical Bloc (12)**

Saturday 1 July 2017, by [GRAMSCI Antonio](#) (Date first published: 1934).

(To be connected to the notes on situations and relations of force [1]) At a certain point in their historical lives, social groups become detached from their traditional parties. In other words, the traditional parties in that particular organizational form, with the particular men who constitute, represent, and lead them, are no longer recognized by their class (or fraction of a class) as its expression. When such crises occur, the immediate situation becomes delicate and dangerous, because the field is open for violent solutions, for the activities of unknown forces, represented by charismatic 'men of destiny'.

These situations of conflict between 'represented and representatives' reverberate out from the terrain of the parties (the party organizations properly speaking, the parliamentary-electoral field, newspaper organization) throughout the state organism, reinforcing the relative power of the bureaucracy (civil and military), of high finance, of the Church, and generally of all bodies relatively independent of the fluctuations of public opinion. How are they created in the first place? In every country the process is different, although the content is the same. And the content is the crisis of the ruling class's hegemony, which occurs either because the ruling class has failed in some major political undertaking for which it has requested, or forcibly extracted, the consent of the broad masses (war, for example), or because huge masses (especially of peasants and petty-bourgeois intellectuals) have passed suddenly from a state of political passivity to a certain activity, and put forward demands which taken together, albeit not organically formulated, add up to a revolution. A 'crisis of authority' is spoken of: this is precisely the crisis of hegemony, or crisis of the state as a whole.

The crisis creates situations which are dangerous in the short run, since the various strata of the population are not all capable of orienting themselves equally swiftly, or of reorganizing with the same rhythm. The traditional ruling class, which has numerous trained cadres, changes men and programmes and, with greater speed than is achieved by the subordinate classes, reabsorbs the control that was slipping from its grasp. Perhaps it may make sacrifices, and expose itself to an uncertain future by demagogic promises; but it retains power, reinforces it for the time being, and uses it to crush its adversary and disperse his leading cadres, who cannot be very numerous or highly trained. The passage of the troops of many different parties under the banner of a single party, which better represents and resumes the needs of the entire class, is an organic and normal phenomenon, even if its rhythm is very swift - indeed almost like lightning in comparison with periods of calm. It represents the fusion of an entire social class under a single leadership, which alone is held to be capable of solving an overriding problem of its existence and of fending off a mortal danger. When the crisis does not find this organic solution, but that of the charismatic leader, it means that a static equilibrium exists (whose factors may be disparate, but in which the decisive one is the immaturity of the progressive forces); it means that no group, neither the conservatives

nor the progressives, has the strength for victory, and that even the conservative group needs a master (see *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*).

This order of phenomena is connected to one of the most important questions concerning the political party – namely the party's capacity to react against force of habit, against the tendency to become mummified and anachronistic. Parties come into existence, and constitute themselves as organizations, in order to influence the situation at moments which are historically vital for their class; but they are not always capable of adapting themselves to new tasks and to new epochs, nor of evolving *pari passu* with the overall relations of force (and hence the relative position of their class) in the country in question, or in the international field. In analysing the development of parties, it is necessary to distinguish: their social group; their mass membership; their bureaucracy and general staff. The bureaucracy is the most dangerously hidebound and conservative force; if it ends up by constituting a compact body, which stands on its own and feels itself independent of the mass of members, the party ends up by becoming anachronistic and at moments of acute crisis it is voided of its social content and left as though suspended in mid-air. One can see what has happened to a number of German parties as a result of the expansion of Hitlerism. French parties are a rich field for such research: they are all mummified and anachronistic historico-political documents of the various phases of past French history, whose outdated terminology they continue to repeat; their crisis could become even more catastrophic than that of the German parties.

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One point which should be added to the note on economism, as an example of the so-called intransigence theories, is the rigid aversion on principle to what are termed compromises – and the derivative of this, which can be termed 'fears of dangers'. It is clear that this aversion on principle to compromise is closely linked to economism. For the conception upon which the aversion is based can only be the iron conviction that there exist objective laws of historical development similar in kind to natural laws, together with a belief in a predetermined teleology like that of a religion: since favourable conditions are inevitably going to appear, and since these, in a rather mysterious way, will bring about palingenetic events, it is evident that any deliberate initiative tending to predispose and plan these conditions is not only useless but even harmful. Side by side with these fatalistic beliefs however, there exists the tendency 'thereafter' to rely blindly and indiscriminately on the regulatory properties of armed conflict. Yet this too is not entirely without its logic and its consistency, since it goes with a belief that the intervention of will is useful for destruction but not for reconstruction (already under way in the very moment of destruction). Destruction is conceived of mechanically, not as destruction/reconstruction. In such modes of thinking, no account is taken of the 'time' factor, nor in the last analysis even of 'economics'. For there is no understanding of the fact that mass ideological factors always lag behind mass economic phenomena, and that therefore, at certain moments, the automatic thrust due to the economic factor is slowed down, obstructed or even momentarily broken by traditional ideological elements – hence that there must be a conscious, planned struggle to ensure that the exigencies of the economic position of the masses, which may conflict with the traditional leadership's policies, are understood. An appropriate political initiative is always necessary to liberate the economic thrust from the dead weight of traditional policies – i.e. to change the political direction of certain forces which have to be absorbed if a new, homogeneous politico-economic historical bloc, without internal contradictions, is to be successfully formed. And, since two 'similar' forces can only be welded into a new organism either through a series of compromises or by force of arms, either by binding them to each other as allies or by forcibly subordinating one to the other, the question is whether one has the necessary force, and whether it is 'productive' to use it. If the union of two forces is necessary in order to defeat a third, a recourse to arms and coercion (even supposing that these are available) can be nothing more than a methodological hypothesis; the only concrete possibility is compromise. Force can be employed

against enemies, but not against a part of one's own side which one wishes rapidly to assimilate, and whose 'good will' and enthusiasm one needs.

## **Antonio Gramsci**

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### VI Hegemony, Relations of Force, Historical Bloc

- 1 Structure and Superstructure [i]
  - 2 Structure and Superstructure [ii]
  - 3 Structure and Superstructures [iii]
  - 4 [The Concept of 'Historical Bloc']
  - 5 [Ethico-Political History]
  - 6 [Ethico-Political History and Hegemony]
  - 7 [Political Ideologies]
  - 8 Ideologies
  - 9 Validity of Ideologies
  - 10 Analysis of Situations: Relations of Force
  - 11 Some Theoretical and Practical Aspects of 'Economism' [& in The Modern Prince]
  - 12 Observations on Certain Aspects of the Structure of Political Parties in Periods of Organic Crisis
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## **P.S.**

\* From Antonio Gramsci Reader: VI Hegemony, Relations of Force, Historical Bloc. "12 Observations on Certain Aspects of the Structure of Political Parties in Periods of Organic Crisis":

[http://marxism.halkcephesi.net/Antonio%20Gramsci/prison\\_notebooks/reader/q13-23.htm](http://marxism.halkcephesi.net/Antonio%20Gramsci/prison_notebooks/reader/q13-23.htm)

SPN, 210-11; 167-8 (Q13§23), 1932-34

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## **Footnotes**

[1] ESSF (article 41431), [Analysis of Situations: Relations of Force - From Hegemony, Relations of Force, Historical Bloc \(10\)](#).