

A Fanonian Gramsci? A Spatio-Historical Method for Dangerous Times

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1. Gramsci's relevance for counter-colonialism and anti-racism

Antonio Gramsci's work has long resonated with people struggling in and against colonial or neocolonial situations. Let me just offer two opening examples. One is the intellectual and personal meeting point between Gramsci and Peruvian Marxist José Carlos Mariátegui, who, in exile, covered the 1921 Livorno Congress and read Gramsci's *Ordine Nuovo* while in Italy (Selfa, 2015). Facilitated by the young Communist International networks, this connection continues to yield insights about indigenous Marxism as well as the prospect of anti-productivist and ecological conceptions of socialism (Haug, 2015, Löwy, 2008). A generation after Mariátegui, Asok Sen was inspired by Gramsci against the bureaucratic and economic politics he detected in the Indian Marxist-Leninisms of his lifetime. Sen's work proved important in the pre-history of the subaltern studies school of historiography (Chatterjee, 2016).

Gramsci's relevance for countercolonial and anti-imperialist political projects is indeed no secret. Various observers have pointed out that Gramsci is a property of Euro-America as little as he belongs to a supposedly self-contained club called Western Marxism. Just in the English-speaking world, intellectuals have explained why Gramsci is crucial for organizers, critics and researchers of matters colonial, imperial and racist. They have pointed out that various aspects of Gramsci's work lend themselves to anti-racist or countercolonial appropriations (Hall, 1980, 1996; Kiernan, 1995; Ahmad, 1996; Bannerji, 2001a). While some are attracted to key themes in Gramsci (his discussion of the peasantry, inter-regional unevenness, city-country relationships, imperialism and colonialism, racism against Southerners in Northern and Central Italy, the difficulty of national unification in Italy's semi-peripheral context), others are drawn to the sensibilities and methodological procedures that are embedded in the form of his work, particularly the Prison Notebooks. Most prominent among the latter group have been Stuart Hall, Edward Said, Himani Bannerji, and Timothy Brennan.

Of course, among those committed to mobilizing Gramsci for anti or postcolonial purposes, there is no consensus about the character of Gramsci's marxism and the proper ways of making Gramsci live in different contexts. In this paper, I build on earlier work by myself and Gill Hart to draw your attention to a particular line of distinction between Gramsci readers: the difference between anti-historicist appropriations of Gramsci and Gramsci's particular, geographically nuanced historicist approach to the

philosophy of praxis – his spatial historicism. The latter approach makes it possible for us to establish links between Gramsci and Frantz Fanon's own, decisively countercolonial critical historicism (as Ato Sekyi-Otu has called it) - and mobilize both against civilizational conceptions of politics and world order. Before we get there, however, it makes sense to set the stage with a few opening comments about the relationship between Gramsci's work and post-colonial debates.

2. Which subaltern Gramsci? Postcolonialism and the philological turn

In their introduction to the collection *The Postcolonial Gramsci* (2012), Neelam Srivastava and Baidik Bhattacharya, illustrate Gramsci's relevance for post/colonial concerns with respect to three examples from Gramsci's work: his treatment of Gandhi's independence struggle as a paradigmatic combination of war of movement and war of position; his repeated habit of linking racism and colonialism in Italy itself to colonialism and imperialism more broadly speaking; and, finally, his normative and historical critique of arguments for an Italian civilizing missions as both uncivil (an unacceptable rationalization of slavery and colonialism) and pathetic (a symbolically grandiose compensation for the comparative weakness of Italy's bourgeoisie). To frame the volume, Srivastava and Bhattacharya suggest that Gramsci has been brought to postcolonial life through two main strands of engagement: Edward Said's attempt to provide an inventory of Orientalist discourses and the subaltern school of Indian historiography from Guha's critique of the India's post-independent bourgeoisie to Spivak feminist re-reading of the problematic of subalternity.

The introduction and the selection of *The Postcolonial Gramsci* (which includes writers as diverse as Partha Chatterjee, Walter Dignolo, and Robert Young) are distinctly uninterested in the need to differentiate between more or less plausible de- and recontextualizations of Gramsci. In fact, the editors position themselves against the current philological turn of Gramsci studies as represented by the English language translator of the Prison Notebooks Joseph Buttigieg. They mistakenly characterize the latter as someone in search of a singular, narrowly Marxist, 'true' Gramsci (2012, 1-2). In his review of *The Postcolonial Gramsci*, Marcus Green, another exponent of said philological turn thus points out that '... Gramsci's influence in the field of postcolonial studies can hardly be overstated. References to his writings appear throughout subaltern and postcolonial studies literatures. However, despite the numerous references, it is doubtful if his writings are seriously read or understood within the field.' (2013, 90-101)... The postcolonial image of Gramsci appears to be one drawn from a selective interpretation of his works and political activity' (ibid., 99).

The most well known source for 'Southern' readings of Gramsci in the English-speaking world is indeed the Indian school of subaltern studies. Before undergoing a number of mutations, the school's research in the late 1970s and 1980s left us with an impressive body of work centred on South Asian social history. An index to this work and subsequent developments is provided by the Gramscian term that helped name the school: subalternity. However, as Green underlines, subaltern scholars were often wrong to suggest that Gramsci's term is a code word for the proletariat, a way of hiding

an otherwise orthodox conception of class relations from the prison censors. Gramsci's texts reveal in fact more than what subaltern studies scholars have said about his use of the term. This is also true for Gayatri Spivak, whose (shifting) conception of subalternity sometimes comes very close to Gramsci's, as in the interview that concludes *The Postcolonial Gramsci* (2012). There, she argues that subalternity is not radical alterity, but the position of 'not having achieved state'.¹ This position varies in extent and form depending on the context (but includes everyone except colonial administrators in British India, according to Spivak). For her, like Gramsci, the problem of subalternity demands a democratic communist response, one where intellectuals function as disciples of the subaltern in the latter's quest to abolish themselves as such.

Without engaging her comparative point, Green broadly agrees with Spivak. But, against interpretive claims by subaltern scholars, including Spivak's view that Gramsci's subaltern is "mono-gendered" (cited in Green, 2011, 396), he insists on the complexity of Gramsci's term. He summarizes his survey of the Notebooks as follows:

'Gramsci never reduces subalternity to a single relation, but rather conceives subalternity as an intersectionality of the variations of race, class, gender, culture, religion, nationalism and colonialism functioning within an ensemble of socio-political and economic relations. Gramsci's analysis considers the composition of dominant political power within the state, civil society, and hegemony, as well as the conditions in which subaltern groups organize institutions to represent themselves. The Gramscian notion of 'subalternity' implies that subaltern groups are subordinated to the power, will, influence, leadership, and direction of a dominant group or a 'single combination' of dominant groups. However, subaltern groups do not necessarily lack political power by definition. Rather, in Gramsci's conception, subalternity is constituted through exclusion, domination, and marginality in their various forms, and a subaltern group's level of subordination is relative to its level of political organization, autonomy, and influence upon dominant groups and dominant 'institutions'. The racial, spatial, class, religious, and gendered differences among subaltern groups require separate analyses of the modalities of subordination and the construction of power in specific contexts, which is to say that specificity of subalternity is relative to the social, political, economic, and cultural conditions subordinate social groups confront in specific social formations' (2011, 400).

Gramsci is indeed clear that the social groups being so subordinated are multiple, and that their modalities of subordination also vary historically and geographically. He also emphasizes that subalternity is not a form of being, a status or attribute. It is a result of complex and multi-dimensional relations of subordination, many of which culminate in

¹ Spivak, who is widely credited with having brought philosophically deconstructive and feminist concerns into Subaltern Studies distances herself from this period, albeit cryptically. As she said recently, "the subaltern according to Gramsci's classic definition, are classes that have not achieved the state. So it is very hard, as Gramsci says, to write about the subaltern. This is not a space of absolute heterogeneity. I may have implied this in 1982, but time has run on. I have written a lot more. I used to believe in a certain kind of 'post'. But in reality that was before I realised I was a post-colonial. Things change, and especially people like me, learning from their mistakes, say different things as they move on (2014, 9-10).

the denial of historical agency to the social groups so subordinated. As Gramsci says on the *history of the subaltern classes* in Notebook 3:

“The historical unity of the ruling classes is found in the state, and their history is essentially the history of states and of groups of states. This unity must be concrete, hence it is the outcome of the relations between the state and ‘civil society’. For the subaltern classes, the unification does not occur; their history is intertwined with the history of ‘civil society’; it is a disjointed segment of that history” (Q3 §90, 1996, 91)

Subalternity is a denial of historicity, indeed, historical autonomy (Q3 §18, 1996, 24-5). This denial is at once socio-economic, organizational, cultural and linguistic. It is built on a qualitative distinction between the (always incomplete) capacity of the ruling class to unify through the form of the extended state and the relegation of subaltern groups to various stages of spontaneity, disorganization, fragmentation and pacified dependency (see also Q25 §2, 1971, 54-55; Q3 §48, 1996, 48-52; Green and Ives, 2009).

While class relations, modern and precapitalist were central to Gramsci's treatment, he was not at all unconcerned about racism, colonialism, and gender relations. Indeed, the problem of subalternity Gramsci develops to an important degree from his critique of Lorianism, a racist and pro-imperialist current represented by economist and Socialist Achille Loria. Scattered throughout the Notebooks, Gramsci's critique targeted not only the normative claims by Lorianists: their support of Italy's imperial adventures and their treatment of Southern Italians as racially inferior (a conception which also had North American echoes (Moe, 2010)). His critique was also methodological and conjunctural (Green, n.d.; Buttigieg, 1992, 43-56). He zeroed in on the positivist assumptions in Loria's (and Cesare Lombroso's) racialist assertions, which he thought corroborated anti-Marxist prejudices while also expressing a widespread and careless naturalism in various European intellectual circles (Q1, §25; Q3, §223). He took Lorians to task for replicating bourgeois habits of naturalizing the passivity and historical invisibility of the subaltern by treating Southern resistance as irrational and abnormal:

“This was the cultural custom of the time: instead of studying the origins of a collective movement and the reasons why it was widespread, why it was collective, one isolated the protagonist and limited oneself to producing his pathological biography...To a social elite, the components of subaltern groups always have something barbaric or pathological about them” (Q25, §1, cited in Buttigieg, 1992, 48)

Lacking an understanding of subaltern groups, the Lorians were no different than bourgeois intellectuals like Giacomo Barzellotti, who also commented on Southern unrest (Q3, §12, 18-20). They thus contributed to the inability of the bourgeoisie to expand its capacity to rule and build a organic national culture (Green, n.d., 123-4). As we will see, Gramsci's methodological critique of Lorianism allows us to engage the culturalist abstractions in contemporary European racism.

3. Gramsci's spatial historicism

The significance of Green's critique of *The Postcolonial Gramsci* goes beyond the specific question of the subaltern. Indeed, the philological turn in Gramsci scholarship has done more than insist on the need to read Gramsci carefully. Significantly informed by Italian debates about language in the 1980s, notably the contributions by Franco Lo Piparo, Fabio Frosini, Lucia Borghese, Maurizio Lichtner, Rocco Lacorte, and Tullo de Mauro, this turn has insisted on the intricate links between Gramsci's conception of philology and his conception of Marxism as a philosophy of praxis (Buttigieg, 1990, 1994; Thomas, 2009; Haug, 2000, 2001; Ives, 2004; Ives and Lacorte, 2010), thereby taking up arguments made earlier by others, including Stuart Hall (1996) and Joseph Femia (1981). Green's critique thus brings to our attention a deeper theoretical disagreement about the nature of Gramsci's conception of Marxist method. We can understand this disagreement by contrasting, briefly, developments in the second phase of subaltern studies to Gramsci's spatial historicist method (see Kipfer, 2013).

As indicated, Gramsci played an important intellectual role in the India of the 1970s, an intellectual conjuncture shaped by Maoism and debates about Gandhi's legacy. These forces, combined with British marxist historiography, notably E.P. Thompson, led to the formation of subaltern studies. In this context, Gramsci provided analytical tools for a 'historiography from below' that would pay appropriate attention to rural life and peasant agency (Guha 1982) and the failure of India's independence movements to develop national liberation to a moment beyond 'passive revolution' (Chatterjee 1986; Kaviraj 1988). Key to these Gramsci-inflected analyses was the comparative insight that in colonies, the reach of hegemony remained weak to such an extent as to limit the capacity of nationalist independence movements to make inroads into the 'autonomous' worlds of subaltern forces (Guha 1982, 1983; Arnold 2000).

Textual interpretation aside, subaltern studies scholars thus made a crucial point: let's investigate the difference colonial situations make to modalities of subordination. As we will see, Fanon, too, made such a point. However, the emphasis subaltern scholars placed on the autonomy of subaltern groups from other aspects of the Indian social formation ultimately took them a considerable distance away from Gramsci's relational conception of hegemony as a boundary-crossing, dialectical transformation of social forces. Far from a simple reflection on the comparative differences between Italy and India (as qualitative as these are), the argument about peasant autonomy took on a life of its own in Guha's detection of a 'structural split' between elite and subaltern political domains (1997) and Chatterjee's distinction between 'inner/spiritual' and 'outer/material' sides of nationalism (1993). The ultimate move came from Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000), who treated the peasant-subaltern as a counterpoint to the elite realm of colonial, Western, rationalist modernity. In Chakrabarty, Gramsci is displaced by a round-about anti-historicism, within which "the 'peasant' acts ... as a shorthand for all the seemingly nonmodern, rural, nonsecular relationships and life practices...The peasant stands for all that is not bourgeois (in a European sense) in Indian capitalism and modernity" (2000, 11). Here, the peasant gets lost in a grand philosophical confrontation between

Marx and Heidegger, reason and experience, analysis and understanding, West and East, History I and History II, science and spirituality/religion.

The variegated promises of the subaltern studies project notwithstanding, it thus eventually ushered, in the 1990s and 2000s, in a number of dualist formulations. The latest of these is Chatterjee's influential re-conceptualization of civil and political society (2008), which is deeply problematic, not the least because it operates with schematic conceptions of subaltern struggle and is rooted in an untenably categorical distinction between Western and Eastern forms of bourgeois (non-)rule (Hart, 2015). The most sweeping of these dualist conceptions remains Chakrabarty's, however. His argument about peasant autonomy is part of an indictment of historicism *per se* as a prime marker of 'Europe'. Rankean empiricism, hermeneutic relativism, speculative Hegelian dialectics, modernisation theory, and Marxian theories of uneven development are all complicit with linear conceptions of time. They all represent 'transition narratives', within which the non-West cannot move beyond a state of immaturity ('not-yet'). In response, Chakrabarty proposes to complement a capitalo- and Euro-centric 'History I' with a conception of time (History II) that grants 'spirits and gods' a status independent of secular temporality (Gopal 2004, pp. 156-9). For him, such a maneuver is essential if 'Europe' is to be 'provincialised' and lose its privilege of ignorance of the rest of the world. As former subaltern studies scholar Sumit Sarkar and long-standing Marxist feminist theorist of Indian and Canadian politics Himani Bannerji have pointed out, such an anti-historicist approach to the problematic of the subaltern is at odds with Gramsci's relational, differentiated view of subaltern groups (Sarkar 2000; Bannerji 2001b, 43).

Chakrabarty's wide anti-historicist net is guaranteed to catch that fish called Gramsci. But Gramsci reveals that historicism is of little use as a catch-all term. After all, his historicism is of a very specific kind, not to be conflated with Ranke's or Hegel's. In its 'absolute secularism', Gramsci does not, in the first instance, allow 'spirits and gods' to escape the complex temporalities of human history (Said, 2000, 128-131). Second, Gramsci's deep scepticism of notions of progress anchored in evolutionary conceptions of history did not detract him from a commitment to appropriate time with a sense of temporal direction: communist emancipation. The possibility of such appropriation is given by the basic assumption that history is vulnerable to change and intervention: transience (Morera, 1990). Third, Gramsci was not interested in philology for the sake of detecting how 'history really was' (Ranke). His 'absolute' historicism was not so absolute as to be relativist (Morton, 2007). Fourth, Gramsci's conception of time was multiple, not singular or linear. He was interested not in teleological lines of flight but in the relationship between multiple rhythms, event-like, conjunctural and longer-term. Finally, Gramsci did not treat space and geography as counterpoints to time and history. He saw relations between city and country, regions and nations as mediations in dynamics of change and continuity (Kipfer, 1996, 2013; Jessop, 2006; Morton, 2007).

Gramsci's was, in short a spatial historicism. Rather than opposing time, history and diachrony to space, geography and synchrony, Gramsci analysed historical situations as a confluence of multiple, spatially mediated temporal rhythms. Gramsci's peculiar historicism was directed against aspatial and ahistorical conceptions of alike. It wanted

to grasp the temporal and the “geographical conditions of social processes” (Morera 1990, p. 89). To be clear, in Gramsci, the close affinity between history and geography emerged from ‘philology’, a method - a mode of writing and reasoning - which prioritised the analysis of concrete moments and situations in arriving at theoretical and political conclusions (Buttigieg 1990, 1994; Santucci 2010; Femia 1981, Hall 1996). Gramsci’s unwavering emphasis on geographical unevenness was linked to his insistence on historical specificity by his stubborn habit of working out concepts through the concrete and his concomitant refusal to deduce conclusions from premature assumptions about general trends or large structures. It is in this painstaking, open-ended method of developing potentially universal notions and horizons by working through the concrete that time and space were linked in Gramsci. In fact, to emphasise that spatial differentiation and temporal nuance were both at the heart of Gramsci’s historicism is another way of underlining his self-reflexive, anti-dogmatic, and ultimately political conception of marxism as philosophy of praxis (Buttigieg 1990, 1994; Haug 2000-1).

4. Which civilization?

The broader Marxist tradition is full of arguments about the need to replace the status quo with a whole new ‘civilization’: new modes of life. Typically, this argument defends an integral conception of revolutionary change against those who reduce radical ‘political’ and ‘economic’ transformation to only two aspects: the seizure of state power and the nationalization of the means of production. To reorganize social needs, transform gendered divisions of labour, break with productivism or produce a multi-polar world order no longer centred on Euro-America, political revolution and collective forms of economic control must be embedded in projects to develop whole ‘new civilizations.’ Civilizations here can mean new material cultures (in the eyes of Michael Löwy; 2011, 101) or new, genuinely universal, post-bourgeois forms of humanism (in the famous formulation by Aimé Césaire, 1955, 54). In all these cases, ‘civilizational’ change is cultural in materially situated way: it is always related to transforming everyday modes of life and can only take place through fields of action that are socially differentiated.

As Stuart Hall reminds us, Gramsci’s variegated but ambitious conception of political change also yields a sort of ‘civilizational’ perspective. As he said in “Gramsci and Us”

‘Gramsci understands that politics is a much expanded field; that, especially in societies of our kind, the sites on which power is constituted will enormously varied. We are living through the proliferation of the sites of power and antagonism in modern society. The transition to this new phase is decisive for Gramsci. It puts directly on the political agenda the questions of moral and intellectual leadership, the educative and formative role of the state, the ‘trenches and fortifications’ of civil society, the crucial issue of the consent of the masses and the creation of a new type or level of ‘civilization’, a new culture. It draws the decisive line between the formula of ‘Permanent Revolution’ and the formula of ‘civil hegemony’. It is the cutting-edge between the ‘war of movement’ and the ‘war of position’: the point where Gramsci’s world meets ours.’ (1988, 168)

For Gramsci, politics is “not a dependent sphere”, it is “contingent, fundamentally open-ended” (ibid.). This is why it is both decisive and expansive. It constitutes a practice of transformation touching on all aspects of life. In its quest to develop popular good sense from within common sense, emancipatory politics cannot take for granted existing social identities and forms of struggle; it must affect everyday mentalities, even facilitate the formation of new personae. It goes without saying that such a conception of ‘civilizational’ change can only be spatio-temporally complex: Gramsci’s spatial historicism assumed that political intervention is key. To develop universalizing projects cannot be an application of set, a priori principles; it must intervene in the concrete, transforming the multiple spaces and temporalities of historic blocs.

If Gramsci’s conception of change is civilizational because of its comprehensive yet highly situational notion of political change, the notions of civilization that inform political debate today are neither integral nor differentiated. Today’s ‘clashes of civilization’ operate with narrowly culturalist yet fully reified conceptions of civilization. They pigeonhole the world into supposedly self-contained mentalities or cultural formations (East and West, Christianity and Islam) that are each reducible to a few catchwords and images (in the case of Islam: pieces of women’s clothing, the architectural form of the minaret, the interplay of servility and recalcitrance, ‘good’ and ‘bad’ Muslim) (Mamdani, 2004). Racist in a classically cultural sense (Fanon, 1956), these civilizational signs are read as markers if not of historical stasis, then of transhistorical continuity. So reduced, ‘civilizations’ are then given a decisive role in interpreting social identities and geopolitical faultlines. In all cases, civilizations are identified in isolation from the modes of life that shape imperial capitalism in the modern world. Indeed, civilizational politics in today’s world order has risen in inverse proportion to the degree to which the unequal relations underpinning material cultures are politicized. Whether promoted by dictators, fascists, liberals, populists or jihadists, ideologies of civilizational clash advance a pervasive homogenization of the socio-political field.

Nominally critical milieus have not been immune to the pitfalls of reified civilizational politics. The fetish of ‘East’ or ‘West’ as time-less, dematerialized, and self-contained entities can be found in numerous places, including in some arguments against Eurocentrism (Lazarus, 2002). For example, Chakrabarty’s manoeuvre of staging a contest between civilizational figures comes close to achieving the opposite of his eminently crucial goal: provincializing Europe (Cooper 2005, p. 31). It re-creates a superhuman, neatly homogenized figure of “Europe” (which is claimed to be in possession of such goodies as reason, progress, democracy and secularism) while identifying the “other” (India, the non-West) with the now revalorized opposite qualities: gods and spirits. Investing Europe with all the attributes of a generic “historicism” leaves intact the parameters of Orientalist-modernizing conceptions of “Europe” as the motor of development (ibid. p. 140; Gidwani 2008, pp. 227-9). In turn, identifying “gods and spirits” with non-European civilizations runs a triple risk. It hides the complexities of time and temporality in non-European contexts, which, contrary to colonial-modernizing and nationalist claims, are not free from secularizing historiography and both linear and cyclical forms of historical (self-) consciousness (Thapar 2000; Goswami 2004; Lacoste 1998, pp. 213-39). It absolves Europe of its own (quintessentially modern) demons,

spirits and mystifications. And, it obscures the manifold cross-civilizational linkages that made it possible for the “Europe” or the “Occident” to imagine itself, wrongly, as the result of a self-sufficient historical process (Coronil 1997, pp. 13-14).

Exponents of the philological turn have reminded us that Gramsci did not use the terms East and West to signal an ontological divide between Europe and the rest. He wanted to illuminate the strictly historical – and always relative – differences in state and civil society in the Soviet Union and Western Europe, and develop integrative strategies on the basis of these differences alongside differences within West Europe itself (Thomas, 2009, chapter 6; Hart, 2015). Indeed, Gramsci’s spatial historicism provides us with a method of engaging Eurocentrism radically opposed to Chakravarty’s. His critique of Italy’s imperial ambitions, civilizing missions, and racialized regional inequalities never came at the expense of analysing the extended state and the forces that run through it. As a matter of fact, Gramsci approached these matters as a way to sharpen his sense of the contradictions within and across historic blocs. What we get from him is not theory building on the pivot of abstract civilizational divides (or Weber’s ideal types, tradition and modernity, for that matter (Bannerji, 2011)). What we do get from him is the twin imperative of historicization and spatialization, of deciphering the meaning of common sense (‘civilizational’ or otherwise) within the broader, multi-dimensional relations of force. Expanding from Gramsci, one can say that his approach warns against magnifying ‘Europe’ or the ‘West’ for purposes of emulation or critique – instead of cutting “Europe” to size by analyzing the contingencies, external dependencies, and forms of unevenness that have made Europe possible - and that shape the contradictory relations of force traversing it today. Working through these spatio-historical lines of contradiction, one might be able to develop the meaning of a new ‘civilization’, as-yet-unknown modes of life and personae beyond imperial capitalism.

5. A Fanonian Gramsci?²

So strikingly similar are Gramsci’s and Fanon’s idioms and programs – to say nothing of their supportive concepts – that I am tempted to call Gramsci a precocious Fanonist. A Fanonist reading of Gramsci would indeed locate the historical conditions of possibility of the “popular-national” as project of the modern prince in his portrait of the arrested development of the Italian bourgeoisie, the poverty of what he calls (again prefiguring Fanon) its “national consciousness”, its twin cultural vices of cosmopolitanism and narcissism, its historical inability to summon the oppressed of the countryside onto the stage of national regeneration. Disqualified by these class incapacities, the Italian bourgeoisie must forfeit its archetypal historical vocation to the modern prince, the Communist party. The theoretical supports of this political vision are to be found in Gramsci’s Aesopian and symptomatic renaming of Marxism as a philosophy of praxis, his accentuation of what the first thesis on Feuerbach called the “active side”, in a word his activist materialism; but also in that Left-Burkean refusal of mathematical rationalism in sociopolitical discourse, that critique of

² I am building on arguments in Kipfer 2004, 2007, 2011, Hart 2008, 2013; Kipfer and Hart, 2013.

scholastic “Byzantinism” which made him privilege local reality over global abstraction. Activistic materialism and national experience: these were the materials of Gramsci’s vision. (118-119)

A Gramscian approach to questions of racism, neo-colonialism and civilization can benefit from insights in Frantz Fanon’s own particular historicism. This suggestion may appear implausible still in 2016, for various reasons. Those who remember earlier rounds of Fanon’s reception history may still see in Fanon Gramsci’s anti-thesis: the Third-Worldist counterpoint to Gramsci’s supposed Western Marxism. Those who are accustomed to reading Fanon through the postcolonialist lenses that have imposed themselves since the 1990s may feel as embarrassed as Homi Bhabha and Achille Mbembe are about Fanon’s irrepressible enthusiasm for a universalizing politics of liberation. As we know above all from Ato Sekyi-Otu, these two forms of interpretative common sense (which also shaped my initial perception of Fanon) do not hold up to closer scrutiny. His unparalleled reading of Fanon’s work is not so much Gramscian as it leaves us with a provocative image of Gramsci as a “precocious Fanonist” (1996, 118).

Like Gramsci, Fanon’s “critical historicism” assumes the fundamentally transient character of life and history; this transience is what makes possible a “consciousness of the possibility of freedom” (Sekyi-Otu, 2011, 48). In Fanon, as in Gramsci, this possibility is given in a second, critically modernist and secular assumption about the human capacity to appropriate time and space, and thus to liberate modernity from the strictures of colonialism and underdevelopment (1996, 181). In fact, Fanon’s ‘normative Gramscianism’ is of a new humanist kind, as is Gramsci’s. Called ‘partisan-universal’ by Sekyi-Otu, this new humanism does not throw the baby (universalism) out with the bathwater (the liberal-bourgeois and colonial humanisms for whom human freedom arrives with the ‘civilizing’ missions of empire and private property). It takes to heart the weight of Euro-American imperial history on the colonized while also refusing to accept as perennial the psychosomatic prisons that delimit horizons and deform subjective potentials in a racist, colonial world. Parallel to Gramsci’s critique of economic-corporate interests (ibid., 130), Fanon refuses to extrapolate from the Manichean colonial world; his vision of liberation is characterized by an “irrepressible openness to the universal:” the possibility of human freedom in a truly post-colonial and post-racial world (ibid., 16).

Like Gramsci’s, Fanon’s critical historicist notion of emancipation refuses to engage in ‘scholastic abstraction’, be it linear-teleological or mechanically determinist. As Sekyi-Otu has it, for Fanon, the ‘immediate knowledge’ of colonial subjects relates to universal liberation through a ‘dialectic of experience’, not an objective dialectic. As he says,

...the conceptual supports of Fanon’s vision of the national, the social and the revolutionary as cognate terms of a new political practice, have an elective affinity with Gramsci’s philosophy of praxis and its political implications. Fanon, too, refuses to incarcerate our understanding of class relations, class capacities, and revolutionary agency in what he disparagingly calls “un raisonnement”, deductive reasoning (DT 116, WE, 175). More precisely his resuscitation of the

native drama of the social world would not trade the constricted standpoint of immediate knowledge for an “objective dialectic” pledged to allegorical denotations of social practices and processes in what are, after all, singular circumstances.... It is this Gramscian refusal of “scholastic abstraction” which would prevent the discourse of the social from delivering on its promise of divulging seamless truths, and of bestowing unambiguous proper names upon its objects and targets.... (1996, 119)

Within the dialectical narrative of experience that is the *Wretched of the Earth*, contingent political intervention is decisive (ibid.,5), as it is in Gramsci’s own open-ended ‘politicism’ (1996, 29-30). It is this insight which helps us understand why Fanon refused as false alternatives the options typically on offer to leaders in his conjuncture of anticolonial struggle: the modernization project of neo-colonialism and the culturalist invocation of precolonial history. For him, a dynamic national culture can only emerge through the liberation struggle itself. Given the artificial character of class relations in the colonies, political leadership, organization and transformative intellectual practice in this struggle is more vital even than in Gramsci’s semi-peripheral Italy (ibid. 124-5, 180).

We can now see more clearly how Gramsci’s spatial historicism in a sense anticipated Fanon’s. There are qualitative distinctions between Gramsci’s Italy and Fanon’s colonial worlds, but for both the project of universal – human and communist – emancipation must be developed *through* the relations of force in particular historico-geographical situations. While Gramsci placed Italy in comparative context in part through the Communist International, Fanon’s comparative understanding of national liberation was informed by the French empire and the transcontinental and Black Atlantic networks that took him from Martinique to West Africa via France and Algeria. In this transnational context, Fanon’s analysis in the *Wretched of the Earth* made it clear that colonial situations must lead one to ‘stretch’ Marxist political analysis: colonial rule lacked the mediations to be more than minimally hegemonic (1996, 86). False decolonization – inorganic rule of a particular kind - thus was an obvious outcome of independence, a particular form of passive revolution that lent itself to all sorts of national-bourgeois Bonapartisms. To avoid such a falsely decolonial future, the political moment of transformation was even more decisive than it was in Italy’s semi-peripheral situation. National liberation had to be a specific national-popular project (1996, 148-9), one built on a political dynamic of alliance formation that could change instead of reproduce inherited colonial space-time. To be clear: challenging the immediate knowledge of the colonized – the given social identities of the subaltern - also meant transforming colonial spatial divides, city and country included.

More so even than Gramsci, Fanon saw the national scale as a crucial nodal point in a universalizing, multi-scalar but eventually global conception of liberation. Successful and genuine national liberation was to be the basis for a radical reorganization of world order – and a profound re-calibration of world history to the benefit of non-European peoples. Fanon even saw the reorganization of planetary time-space as the condition for the liberation of ‘Europe’ from its own imperial past. Herein one can detect Fanon’s ‘civilizational’ claim, one that transposes Gramsci’s ambitious conception of

emancipatory politics onto a transcontinental plane. Like Gramsci's still Europe-centred perspective, Fanon's vision fundamentally defies today's appeals to civilizational clash. For him, cultural-ideological constellations ('Europe', 'native culture') are neither the starting nor the end points of political engagement. Because they are never disarticulated from the objective and subjective layers of imperial world order (the brutalities of (neo-)colonialism included), these formations are not coherent enough to act as motors of history. They cannot function as substitutes for politics: the struggle to transform social forces in historically and geographically concrete situations. For Fanon, as for Gramsci, the deductive reasoning of civilizational culturalism will not do.

6. Gramsci and Fanon in dangerous times

Gramsci's and Fanon's spatially inflected historicisms run counter to the reified civilizational fantasies that inform today's world. Indeed, their approaches allow us to understand more clearly how these fantasies are produced through states and conservative populist projects today. Gramsci's and Fanon's analyses of passive revolutions (Bonpartist or fascist regimes in Europe, certain post-independent regimes in post-colonies) make us treat these projects not as expressions of civilizational ontologies but as conjunctural responses to political crises that articulate longer-term and comparatively distinct state-society relations. They emerge from crises of representation or organic crises of rule. These result from challenges from below or tensions among ruling circles magnified by economic crises, war, or imperial intervention. In a general sense, one can thus see the rise of right-wing populism in the late 1970s and 1980s as responses to the impasse of the postwar imperial world order (Fordist capitalism, post-independence development projects, state socialist stasis) and the various challenges emanating from the "long 1968". While populism has become a self-reproducing technology of rule since then, the current resurgence of right populism from India to Hungary also arises from the inability of existing regimes - or the left - to organize credible responses to today's economic, geopolitical and ecological crises.

The promise of a Gramscio-Fanonian reading of current political conjunctures does not just lie in its refusal of the abstractions produced in the name of 'French culture', 'European civilization', *Hindutva*, or neo-Ottoman aspirations. They also lie in a critique of analyses that reduce current conjunctures to neoliberalism and its contradictions but do not pay proper attention to the longer-term historical rhythms that are recast in current conjunctures. Instead, one needs to give proper due to the colonial and anti-colonial traditions of rule and struggle that inform current populist projects in former colonies. In the Indian context, Himani Bannerji focuses our attention on the ways in which the current BJP government recasts the neoliberalization of India with a profoundly racialized project of rule built upon decades of 'grassroots' organizing and sub-national experimentation as well as ideological currents dating back to the last decades of British India (2011, 2014). In her work, Gill Hart (2013) shows that studies of Jacob Zuma's populism and the populist challenge posed by Julius Malema's Economic Freedom Fighters must understand how both grapple not only with the contradictions of neoliberalism but also with the failure of the ANC's national project for post-apartheid South Africa ('rainbow nation') to deal with the deeper fractures of racial capitalism.

In old (but not defunct) imperial centres, a Fanonian Gramsci will not be content until we take seriously the imbrication of neoliberalism with neo-imperial realities. In France and Britain, the sequence of neoliberalism and neoconservatism initiated by Thatcherism and LePenism is, as we know, impossible to understand without reference to the contradictions and anxieties of late imperialism. Both projects mobilized these through the politics of militarism, security and migration. In the contemporary U.S.A., much ink has been spilled about the meaning of Donald Trump. Although Trump's significance is as yet uncertain, a Fanon-Gramsci lineage would want us to hypothesize not only about the resonance Trump's isolationist musings may have among the white working class fractions impacted by the material effects and socio-cultural insecurities of 'free trade' neoliberalism 2.0 - austerity mode (Frank, 2016). It would also want us to understand the meaning of that very 'whiteness' to which Trump's proudly racist and misogynist authoritarianism appeals (Bouie, 2016). How? By situating Trump in the transformations of U.S. imperial capitalism and the specific contradictions of the Obama Presidency brought to our attention by struggles against state racism, including Black Lives Matter.³

Of course, Fanon's and Gramsci's shared 'politician' respect for matters of organization, leadership and strategy reminds us that the excavation of a Gramscian-Fanonian lineage faces formidable political obstacles. This is most obviously the case in the imperial core, where those committed to Gramsci's and Fanon's respective revolutionary *and* majoritarian projects of emancipation have long faced situations where radicalism is neither revolutionary nor majoritarian – and histories of struggle have had a habit of pitting Social Democratic, Euro-Communist, or left-pluralist neo-Gramscians against a minoritarian range of neo-Leninist, neo-Trotskyists, neo-Maoist, and, yes, neo-Fanonist radicals.⁴ In this context, working towards a Gramscian Fanonism – or a Fanonian Gramscianism – with political traction appears to be a Sisyphean task. But even in these lands, one can find inspiration for such an endeavour in debates on organization as well as the strategic relationship of autonomy and alliance that have raged in milieus as varied as indigenous radicalism (Coulthard, 2014) and the far left, anti-capitalist (Bensaïd, 2011) or decolonial (Khiari, 2006).

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³ Thanks to Gill Hart for alerting me to Frank's article.

⁴ Stuart Hall's own attempt to produce a synthesis of British left and diasporic anti-imperial politics on the terrain of left Labour politics is indicative of this problem.

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Résumé

Quel Gramsci post-colonial? Une méthode historico-spatiale pour un monde dangereux

L'importance d'Antonio Gramsci pour les analyses du colonialisme, de l'impérialisme et du racisme n'est pas un secret. En fait, 'le tournant philologique' qui domine les recherches sur Gramsci dans le monde anglophone depuis quelque temps nous a aidé à comprendre le traitement de ces questions dans l'œuvre même de Gramsci. Bien que limités, les écrits de Gramsci nous fournissent plus de ressources pour ces analyses que certain-e-s étudiant-e-s de Gramsci nous ont fait penser jusqu'à présent. En fait, on peut distinguer entre deux façons de traduire Gramsci dans notre monde néo- ou postcolonial. La première, celle qui ressort de la deuxième génération de *Subaltern Studies* finit par transporter Gramsci dans un anti-historisme philosophique sur la base d'une ontologie de civilisation. La deuxième, influencée par le tournant philologique essaie de suivre la méthode historiste particulière de Gramsci. Celle-ci on peut nommer historisme spatial étant donné la sensibilité aussi bien géographique que historique que nous offre l'œuvre de Gramsci. Pour approfondir une lecture post-coloniale *marxiste* de Gramsci, je discute la possibilité de lier l'historisme critique de Frantz Fanon avec ce que Ato Sekyi-Otu appelle le 'fanonisme précoce' de Gramsci. Fanon et Gramsci partagent une approche théorique et méthodologique multi-temporelle et multi-géographique qui réfute les ontologies culturalistes de ceux et celles qui pensent le monde en termes de 'conflits de civilisation', pour ou contre 'l'Europe'. Cette approche nous aide aussi à comprendre les stratégies populistes et néofascistes qui continuent de produire un sens commun culturaliste du monde.