

Gramsci Cannot Speak: Presentations and Interpretations of Gramsci's Concept of the Subaltern

Marcus Green

Gramsci's concept of the subaltern, like many of his other concepts, is often referred to and appropriated by others but rarely defined or systematically analyzed within Gramsci's own work. In fact, Gramsci's conception of the subaltern is often misunderstood and misappropriated. The main reason for such misunderstanding is that many English-reading scholars and critics of Gramsci's work have relied heavily or exclusively on Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Smith's *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (Gramsci 1971). The *Selections* include only a few of Gramsci's notes on the subaltern and, because the notes appear in a section with some of Gramsci's notes on the Italian Risorgimento and fall under the title of "Notes on Italian History," it appears that Gramsci's interest in the subaltern, as a concept, is related to his investigation of the Risorgimento, while in fact Gramsci's interest in the subaltern is a part of his overarching inquiry into Italian history, politics, culture, and the relation between state and civil society. From the notes included in the *Selections*, it is not apparent or even suggested that Gramsci wrote many notes on the subaltern or that he devoted an entire notebook to the concept.

Gramsci's notion of subaltern social groups does not immediately appear in the prison notebooks as a clearly defined concept; Gramsci develops the concept over a period of time. In his first notebook (1929–30), Gramsci uses the term "subaltern" in the literal sense, referring to noncommissioned military troops who are subordinate to the authority of lieutenants, colonels, and generals (Notebook 1, §48, §54).¹ In

later notes, he uses the term figuratively, in nonmilitary instances, in regard to positions of subordination or lower status. For instance, toward the end of Notebook 1, Gramsci states that the “[Church] is no longer an ideological world power but only a subaltern force” (§139). In Notebook 4, Gramsci makes an interesting entry regarding the issue of how to study Marx’s unfinished works and notes edited by Engels after Marx’s death. Gramsci does not question Engels’s “absolute personal loyalty” to Marx, but raises the issue that Engels is “lacking in theoretical skills (or at least occupies a subaltern position in relation to Marx)” (Notebook 4, §1). It is in this figurative or metaphorical sense that Gramsci uses the term “subaltern” when referring to subordinate social groups or classes. In Notebook 3, §14, Gramsci first uses the term “subaltern” with regard to social class. He writes, “Subaltern classes are subject to the initiatives of the dominant class, even when they rebel; they are in a state of anxious defense.” It is in this sense that subaltern groups are subordinate to a ruling group’s policies and initiatives.

Between 1929 and 1930, Gramsci wrote several notes referring to subaltern groups in his notebooks that contained miscellaneous notes. In 1934 he began Notebook 25, which was a “special,” thematic notebook devoted exclusively to the subaltern, entitled “On the Margins of History (The History of Subaltern Social Groups).” In this Notebook, he began to copy, regroup, rewrite, and expand the notes from his earlier notebooks.² In Notebook 25, Gramsci identifies slaves, peasants, religious groups, women, different races, and the proletariat as subaltern social groups (Gramsci 1975, 3:2279–94).³ His historical focus includes ancient Rome, the medieval communes, and the modern state as well as a discussion of the bourgeoisie as a subaltern group that transformed its sociopolitical position after the Risorgimento. Many of the notes that comprise the sixteen pages of the Notebook are extensive, while others provide short memoranda and bibliographic references to work that Gramsci most likely planned to read or re-read in the process of his research. Because Gramsci took the

1. To be consistent with the standard reference practice that is being adopted in relation to the critical editions of Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks* (1975, 1992, 1996), I provide the notebook number and note number (§) in my references. However, since only notebooks 1 through 5 of Joseph A. Buttigieg’s critical English edition of Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks* (1992, 1996) have been published thus far, I provide the notebook number, note number (§), date, and page number to all other English translations of Gramsci’s notebooks.

2. As of this date, only four of the eight notes in Notebook 25 have been translated into English from the original Italian: §1 (1995, 50–5), §2 and §5 (1971, 52–5), and §7 (1991, 238–41). However, all the notes from Notebooks 1 and 3, which Gramsci wrote between 1929 and 1930, have been published in the first two volumes of Joseph A. Buttigieg’s critical English translation of the notebooks (1992, 1996), *Prison Notebooks*, vols. 1 and 2. Buttigieg, following Valentino Gerratana’s critical Italian edition (Gramsci 1975), refers to the earlier notes as “A texts,” and their revisions, which appear in the later notebooks, as “C texts” (Buttigieg 1992, xv, 366). Therefore, in some citations of Notebook 25, I make reference to the original and earlier “A texts” as they appear in Buttigieg’s translation and provide other references where appropriate. I should point out, however, that Gramsci made a number of revisions when he copied these notes to Notebook 25. Therefore, there are some differences between the earlier and later notes that comprise Notebook 25.

3. Also see Gramsci (1996), Notebook 3, §12, §18, §90, §98, §99. For Gramsci’s view on women, see “The Sexual Question” (1992, 170–1; 1971, 294–7) and his review of Ibsen’s “A Doll’s House” (1991, 70–3).

time to organize and rewrite the notes in a separate notebook, one can assume that his thoughts and ideas on the subaltern were developing, that he planned to expand his work, and that he was interested in producing an actual history of subaltern groups.

In an investigation of Gramsci's concept of the subaltern, as with most of Gramsci's writings, one must recognize the fact that Gramsci was unable to finish his inquiry. Due to his incarceration, Gramsci did not have access to the books and historical records he required, and when he was able to proceed with the materials that were available to him, he was under surveillance and in poor health. In this sense, Gramsci produced his work in a subaltern or subordinate position; he was subject to the prison authorities and the Fascist government and could not work freely. Therefore, one should keep in mind that Gramsci's notes on the subaltern, as with all his prison notes, are exactly that: they are notes. They are fragmentary, unfinished, and cryptic, but they nonetheless contain great insights. Nevertheless, even though Gramsci did not write his last word on the subaltern, he left a substantial amount of writing that can provide one with a partial understanding of the concept as he viewed it. But since the notes are not complete, one should attempt to understand Gramsci's concept of the subaltern within the totality of the prison notebooks and general trajectory of his thought.

Gramsci's interest in the subaltern was threefold. From his notes, it is clear that he was interested in producing a methodology of subaltern historiography, a history of the subaltern classes, and a political strategy of transformation based upon the historical development and existence of the subaltern. This threefold approach creates a nexus where a variety of Gramsci's concepts converge. History, politics, literary criticism, and cultural practices are all under consideration in his analysis of subaltern history. In his notes, Gramsci is interested in how the subaltern came into being, what sociopolitical relations caused their formation, what political power they hold, how they are represented in history and literature, and how they can transform their consciousness and, in turn, their lived conditions. In this sense, the concept of the subaltern interrelates with Gramsci's other concepts, thoughts, and strategies of radical sociopolitical transformation. In order for one to understand how Gramsci understood the subaltern, one must understand how the subaltern relates to Gramsci's thought as a whole. In fact, isolating Gramsci's notion of the subaltern as a separate concept from the rest of his thought is a difficult, if not impossible, task. His analysis of the subaltern is interwoven with his political, social, intellectual, literary, cultural, philosophical, religious, and economic analyses.

Political Society + Civil Society = "Integral State"

Although Gramsci did not develop the concept of "subalternity" until he was in prison, his interest in the condition of subalternity is apparent in his pre-prison writings, especially in his final, yet unfinished, essay before his arrest, "Some Aspects of the Southern Question" (Gramsci 1977b, 441–62). In the "Southern Ques-

tion,” Gramsci’s analysis focuses on the social and class structures of the Italian South with regard to Southern intellectuals, specifically with the function intellectuals fulfill in perpetuating the interests of dominant social groups. When Gramsci conceived his project of study after his arrest, he thought of it as a continuation and elaboration of his thesis in the “Southern Question,” but extended to include practically all aspects of Italian society and history (Buttigieg 1995, 24–5). Through this extended investigation, while in prison, Gramsci expanded his analysis of intellectuals and redefined his conceptions of state and civil society, which he viewed as an unified “integral state.” Through Gramsci’s analysis of the integral state, many key concepts begin to emerge in his prison notebooks, including “hegemony” and “subalternity.” In many ways, Gramsci’s definition and understanding of “subalternity” is directly linked with his conceptions of hegemony and state and civil society (or integral state).

In the essay “Some Aspects of the Southern Question,” Gramsci describes the South as a “great agrarian bloc,” “of extreme social disintegration” that is divided into social layers: “the great amorphous, disintegrated mass of the peasantry; the intellectuals of the petty and medium rural bourgeoisie; and the big landowners and great intellectuals” (Gramsci 1977b, 454). Gramsci contends that the “Southern peasants are in perpetual ferment, but . . . incapable of giving a centralized expression to their aspirations and needs” because they are politically linked to the big landowners through the mediation of intellectuals (1977b, 454, 456). In Gramsci’s view, this has occurred because the great Southern intellectuals, such as Giustino Fortunato and Benedetto Croce, who represent European high culture and universal views, disassociate themselves from the cultural roots of the South and the interests of the masses. Because the great intellectuals have such a tremendous influence, middle-ranking intellectuals, who are connected to the rural bourgeoisie, find support for their reactionary views and antipathies toward the peasantry, which in turn support the status quo. For instance, Gramsci attributes the calming down of the radical tendencies of the South to the influence of Fortunato and Croce. Because of their influence, Fortunato and Croce were able to ensure that the approach to the Southern question “did not go beyond certain limits [and] did not become revolutionary” by steering Southern intellectuals away from rebellion toward “a middle way of classical serenity of thought and action” (Gramsci 1977b, 459–60). “In this sense,” Gramsci writes, “Benedetto Croce has fulfilled an extremely important ‘national’ function. He has detached the radical intellectuals of the South from the peasant masses, forcing them to take part in national and European culture; and through this culture, he has secured their absorption by the national bourgeoisie and hence by the agrarian bloc” (Gramsci 1977b, 460).

The significance of Gramsci’s analysis in “Some Aspects of the Southern Question” is that he becomes aware of the integral function that intellectuals perform in political leadership: they provide a noncoercive element of consent in political domination that the state cannot fulfil on its own. That is, intellectuals provide a noncoercive reinforcement of the state and the power and authority of dominant groups. This

discovery moves Gramsci away from his limited and instrumentalist conception of the state that he held prior to writing “Some Aspects of the Southern Question.” In his previous writings, Gramsci typically views the state as the “protagonist of history,” as the realm in which ruling or dominant social groups maintain their power and compel society to conform to their conception of the world and way of life through legitimized, coercive power and leadership (Gramsci 1977a, 73–4).⁴ In “Some Aspects of the Southern Question,” Gramsci moves away from the view that power is concentrated in the state and the view that the goal of revolutionary struggle is to capture state power. This change in focus provides Gramsci with the basis to expand his concept of the “state” and to develop his notion of “hegemony,” which he undertakes in his prison writings.

In several of his prison letters to his sister-in-law, Tatiana Schucht, Gramsci described the work in his notebooks and the topics he planned to study. In a 19 March 1927 letter, he tells Tatiana that he would like to begin a study that is *fur ewig* (forever) that would include “a study of Italian intellectuals, their origins, their groupings in accordance with cultural currents, and their various ways of thinking, etc.” This study, Gramsci notes, would include an expanded development of his thesis in “Some Aspects of the Southern Question” (Gramsci 1994b, 82–5).⁵ In early February 1929, Gramsci began his first notebook with a list of sixteen main topics that included, among other things, a study of the development of the Italian bourgeoisie, the formation of Italian intellectuals, and the “southern question.” A little over two years later, Gramsci wrote to Tatiana describing the progress of his study, which now included an expanded notion of the “state,” which he refers to as an “integral state”: the notion that the state constitutes both political society and civil society. This expanded notion of the state provides an explanation for the role of intellectuals in the political process and their relationship to the dominant group’s political position of power. As Gramsci explains to Tatiana:

The research I have done on intellectuals is very broad At any rate, I greatly amplify the idea of what intellectual is and do not confine myself to the current notion that refers only to the preeminent intellectuals. My study also leads to certain definitions of the concept of State that is usually understood as political society (or dictatorship, or coercive apparatus meant to mold the popular mass into accordance with a type of production and economy at a given moment) and not as a balance between the political Society and civil Society (or hegemony of a social group over the entire national society, exercised through the so-called private organizations, such as the Church, the unions, the schools, etc.); and it is within the civil society that the intellectuals operate (Ben. Croce, for example, is a sort of lay pope and he is a very effective instrument of hegemony even if from time to time he comes into conflict with this or that government, etc.). (Gramsci 1994c, 67)

4. Also see Gramsci (1977a, 39–40; 1994a, 56).

5. Gramsci worked on the draft of “Some Aspects of the Southern Question” between September and November 1926. He was arrested on 8 November 1926. After nearly six months from when he started writing the draft, he wanted to expand the focus of the essay.

Gramsci goes on to say that this conception of intellectuals explains one reason for the fall of the medieval Communes. The government, as an economic class, was “unable to create its own category of intellectuals and thus exercise hegemony and not simply dictatorship.” The Communes, in this sense, were “syndicalist” and not integral because the government, although in power, lacked hegemony within civil society (67).

For Gramsci, the state, in its expanded integral meaning, consists of both political society and civil society. Political society, in this instance, comprises the elements of the limited notion of the state or the idea of a juridical-administrative state: government, the military, the police, the judiciary, and so on. Political society in many ways represents Gramsci’s notion of the “state” in his earlier, pre-prison writings. Civil society, on the other hand, constitutes the voluntary organizations within society, “that is the ensemble of organisms commonly called ‘private,’” such as trade unions, churches, cultural clubs, newspapers, publishers, political parties, and the like (Notebook 12, §1; 1971, 12). Gramsci’s conception of civil society is distinct from both Hegel’s and Marx’s conceptions in that civil society for them designates the sphere of economic relations, whereas Gramsci views the economic structure as the underlying form of both political and civil society (Notebook 10 II, §15; 1995, 167).⁶ In metaphorical terms, economic relations are structural and political, and civil society is superstructural but, in Gramsci’s view, the superstructure is determined by both economic and political forces (Notebook 13, §17; 1971, 177–85; also see Morera 1990, 150–60). Moreover, Gramsci insists that political society and civil society are not two separate spheres: they comprise an organic unity, for they are both elements of modern society. In reality, Gramsci writes, “the distinction [between political society and civil society] is purely methodological and not organic; in concrete historical life, political society and civil society are a single entity” (Notebook 4, §38). That is because, in concrete life, political society and civil society are both existent; the public and governmental institutions of political society exist alongside private organizations of civil society. They are two aspects of one social organization and, as we will see below, the state in many ways controls the development and organization of civil society. Thus, in broad sociohistorical analysis, political society and civil society constitute an organic unity.

According to Gramsci’s analysis, the state, even in its expanded integral meaning, still remains an instrument of class domination. However, domination, in this sense, is not pure juridical or political domination, as in the case of the limited notion of the state. In modern society, pure political domination is a necessary requirement for ruling social groups to maintain power, but it is not sufficient. Ruling groups that control political society, according to Gramsci, must also exercise a degree of hegemony in civil society in order for subaltern groups to consent to their own sub-

6. Also see Morera (1990, 180) and Simon (1991, 71–2). It is worth noting that Marx’s conception of civil society appears in his early works, such as “On the Jewish Question” and *German Ideology*, but he later replaces the term “civil society” for “relations of production.” Marx explains this in the preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (Marx 1978, 3–6).

ordinate position and to the authority of the ruling groups. Civil society, in this regard, is the sphere of the integral state where ruling or dominant social groups manufacture, organize, and maintain consent by promoting their hegemony—that is, their ideology, philosophy, ways of life, and so forth. In this sense, civil society is not entirely a domain of free expression or organization, as in the liberal conception. In fact, Gramsci's conception is quite distinct from the liberal conception. In liberal ideology, civil society is viewed as a nongovernmental realm of freedom whereas, for Gramsci, civil society is a realm of hegemony (Buttigieg 1995). It contains the cultural elements of conformity, in which a dominant group's values and ideology become the predominant values throughout society. Ultimately, in Gramsci's view, civil society is just as political as political society. Civil society, he writes, "operates without 'sanctions' or compulsory 'obligations,' but nevertheless exerts a collective pressure and obtains objective results in the form of an evolution of customs, ways of thinking and acting, morality, etc." (Notebook 13, §7; 1971, 242–3).

In many ways civil and political society have a reciprocal relationship. They support and reinforce each other. The hegemony within civil society supports the leading group's authority over political society, and the juridical apparatuses of political society protect the dominant group's hegemony within civil society through coercive measures. The coercive apparatuses of political society, such as the law, courts, and police, can discipline those groups who do not consent, either passively or actively, to the ruling group's power and hegemony (Notebook 12, §1; 1971, 12–3). Law is basically a coercive instrument to direct civil society, "to create a social conformism which is useful to the ruling group's line of development" (Notebook 6, §84; 1971, 195). Gramsci understood the reciprocal relationship between political and civil society through his own personal political experience. His imprisonment by Mussolini's Fascist government illustrates the extreme measures a ruling group will undertake in the attempt to protect its authority and hegemony within civil society, by using the coercive apparatus of the state to physically stop leaders and intellectuals from counterhegemonic struggles. A ruling group can declare a counter-group's party, press, and rights of association and assembly illegal, as the Fascists did to the Communists (see Gramsci 1977b, 285–92; 1994a, 230–3). In this sense, the integral state is not only political society + civil society but also "dictatorship + hegemony" (Notebook 6, § 117; 1971, 239) or, as Gramsci explains, "it should be remarked that the general notion of state includes elements which need to be referred back to the notion of civil society (in the sense that one might say that state = political society + civil society, in other words hegemony protected by the armour of coercion)" (Notebook 6, §88; 1971, 262–3). In basic terms, hegemony is protected by coercion and coercion is protected by hegemony, and they both protect the dominant group's political and economic positions.

Gramsci's conception of the integral state is not inconsistent with regard to his earlier conception of the state. Rather, his notion of the integral state is an elaboration and extension of his earlier analysis. As he wrote in 1919, as quoted above, he viewed the state as the "protagonist of history" and the instrument of class struggle,

in which ruling social groups form a unity in an attempt to maintain their power and supremacy through the coercive “organs” of the state. Civil society, in its integral conception, accomplishes the same ends through the means of hegemony and consensus. In this sense, political power is not only force but force + consensus, the unity of political society and civil society. As Gramsci writes in Notebook 25 with regard to his study of subaltern groups: “The historical unity of the ruling classes is realised in the State, and their history is essentially the history of States and of groups of States. But it would be wrong to think that this unity is simply juridical and political (though such forms of unity do have their importance too, and not in a purely formal sense); the fundamental historical unity, concretely, results from the organic relations between State or political society and ‘civil society’” (Notebook 25, §5; 1971, 52).

Gramsci’s Method and Methodology of Subaltern Historiography

Like most of Gramsci’s other concepts and ideas, he analyzes the subaltern in their particular historical contexts. His method is somewhat similar to Machiavelli’s in the sense that he analyzes history in an attempt to find evidence of certain norms, tendencies, and patterns. As Joseph A. Buttigieg points out in his introduction to the *Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci incorporates particular events, pieces of information, and observations, throughout the notebooks, in order to support and formulate general conclusions and theories (Buttigieg 1992, 48). Gramsci states in Notebook 3 that it is the theoretician’s task to incorporate and account for new particular pieces of evidence in his or her theory and, if the evidence does not conform to the theory, the theoretician should alter the theory. The theoretician’s task, Gramsci explains, is “to ‘translate’ the elements of historical life into theoretical language, but not vice versa, making reality conform to an abstract scheme” because, as he points out, “Reality will never conform to an abstract scheme” (Notebook 3, §48). The type of “theoretical language” Gramsci has in mind is founded upon “historically determined” categories that are formulated from concrete historical developments and account for actual social practice rather than “arbitrary,” “pure,” or “abstract” schemes that are completely separated from historical reality (Notebook 10 II, §32; 1995, 171–3). In this sense, Gramsci has a nondogmatic and open-ended methodological approach, in which he attempts to support his theoretical concepts and general conclusions with particular facts and elements that correspond to “real historical development” (Notebook 9, §63; 1971, 200–1).

Gramsci approaches the study of the subaltern in a similar way, attempting to understand the subaltern as a historically determined category that exists within particular historical, economic, political, social, and cultural contexts. He attempts to understand the process, development, and lineage of the subaltern; how they came into existence, how some survived at the margins, and how others succeeded in their ascent from a subordinate social position to a dominant one. In short, he wants to understand how the conditions and relations of the past influence the present and future development of the subaltern’s lived experience.

Many of these notions come across in Gramsci's notes on the subaltern when he refers to "integral history." His idea of integral history is interwoven into his method of historical analysis. In Gramsci's view, the "integral historian" is not just a historian who documents historical developments in some sort of positivistic manner but is one who understands the socioeconomic, political, and cultural implications of such developments—how particular historical events relate to broader sociopolitical contexts. It is the goal of the integral historian to analyze particular events in order to conceptualize the processes of historical development and understand the way in which the processes relate to peoples' lived experiences. As Esteve Morera points out, Gramsci's theory of integral history grasps "the totality and complexity of the historical process, from the tendencies of the economic structure to the forms of popular culture that shape . . . the consciousness of the masses" (Morera 1990, 61).

On the first page of his notebooks, Gramsci listed sixteen main topics that he planned to address in his notebooks. The first topic he listed was a "Theory of history and of historiography" (Notebook 1). Gramsci's development of methodological criteria for studying the subaltern can be viewed as a contribution to the fulfillment of this proposed plan. In Notebook 3, §90, Gramsci lays out his "Methodological Criteria" for the historical research of the subaltern in six steps or phases, each step indicating an area in which the integral historian should study the subaltern. According to his methodology, he contends that it is necessary to study the following:

1. the objective formation of the subaltern class through the developments and changes that took place in the economic sphere; the extent of their diffusion; and their descent from other classes that preceded them;
2. their passive or active adherence to the dominant political formations; that is, their efforts to influence the programs of these formations with demands of their own;
3. the birth of new parties of the ruling class to maintain control of the subaltern classes;
4. the formations of the subaltern classes themselves, formations of a limited and partial character;
5. the political formations that assert the autonomy of the subaltern classes, but within the old framework;
6. the political formations that assert complete autonomy, etc.⁷

This is not a complete, ahistorical, or essentialist methodology since Gramsci contends that these phases of study could be more detailed with intermediate phases and combinations of phases, and he states: "The historian must record, and discover the causes of, the line of development towards integral autonomy, starting from the most

7. In this earlier A text form of the note, quoted from Notebook 3, §90, Gramsci uses the words "subaltern classes." When Gramsci rewrote the note in Notebook 25, the special notebook on subaltern groups, he uses the terms "subaltern classes" and "subaltern groups" interchangeably. Therefore, although the terms are different, they do not represent a difference in meaning for Gramsci. Compare this A text with the C text as it appears in Notebook 25, §5 (Gramsci 1971, 52).

primitive phases" (Notebook 25, §5; 1971, 52). From this statement one can deduce that these six phases do not just represent the methodology of the subaltern or integral historian, but also represent the phases in which a subaltern group develops, from a "primitive" position of subordination to a position of autonomy. That is, the phases represent the sequential process in which a subaltern group develops and grows into a dominant social group or, in other instances, is stopped in its ascent to power by dominant social groups or political forces.

In order to illustrate this point, I shall paraphrase each step as if it were a stage in development. First, there is a change in the economic sphere, such as a change in property relations, which alters the organization of society, relegating a social group to a subordinate social position. Second, the subaltern group either adheres (passively or actively) to the new dominant political formations or the group attempts to influence the new formations with its own demands. Third, the dominant social group creates new parties or government programs to maintain control of the subaltern groups. Fourth, the subaltern group realizes that the new social formations, parties, and institutions do not account for its needs so it forms its own organizations, such as trade unions. Fifth, the subaltern group organizes a political formation that represents its concerns, expresses its autonomy and its will to participate in the established political framework. An example in this instance would be a political party working within the established political framework. Sixth, the subaltern group realizes its interests will not be met within the current sociopolitical system so it organizes its own social and political formation that will eventually replace the existing one. An example in this instance would be a revolutionary party that attempts to transform the state and its correlating social relations.

In this notion, subalternity exists in degrees or levels of development: some groups maintain higher levels of political consciousness and organization than others, and some groups exercise more autonomy and initiative than others. This notion also implies that groups that are undeveloped or unorganized socially or politically are harder to research in historical records than groups that have organized political parties or other institutions that represent their views. A group of unorganized peasant farmers could perhaps represent an example in this instance, in which the farmers are not conscious, individually or collectively, of their position within the prevailing social relations. This group of farmers would tend to be more difficult to trace than, let us say, a trade union or political party organized by urban proletarians, because the farmers would be less likely to leave evidence documenting their activity or have their activity documented by others. This example, which is somewhat consistent with the situations in Italy that Gramsci addressed, illustrates that subaltern groups are not equivalent, that they are differentiated by their level of political organization.

There are a number of instances in the *Prison Notebooks* where Gramsci's terminology reflects the idea of subalternity in degree. For example, in Notebook 14 in his discussion of Alessandro Manzoni's novel *The Betrothed*, Gramsci states that the subaltern "'have no history': [that is to say] there are no traces of their history in the historical documents of the past" (Notebook 14, §39; 1991, 294). If this statement per-

tains to all subaltern groups, then Gramsci's methodology for subaltern history would be meaningless for it would be impossible, or nearly impossible at the very least, to study the subaltern for there would be no evidence of their existence. However, this is not an inconsistency on Gramsci's part for, in his discussion of spontaneity and conscious leadership in Notebook 3, §48, he writes: "One may say that the element of spontaneity is . . . characteristic of the 'history of subaltern classes' and, especially, of the most marginal and peripheral elements of these classes, who have not attained a consciousness of the class per se and who consequently do not even suspect that their history might possibly have any importance or that it might be of any value to leave documentary evidence of it." From this note, it becomes clear that there are "marginal" or "peripheral" elements of the subaltern that are not developed, meaning that they have not achieved political consciousness of their position or attempted to organize politically. Because of this, these groups do not leave evidence of their activities in historical records, which makes the groups difficult to "trace." One could say that groups with these characteristics fall into the first phase of subaltern development.

In the same note, Gramsci provides another example of the degree in variation of subaltern development, with an example that corresponds to the sixth phase of development. He writes: "The 'spontaneous' movements of the broadest popular strata make it possible for the most advanced subaltern class to come to power." The distinction of the words "marginal" and "peripheral" in the former quotation and the word "advanced" in this later quotation point to the subtlety with which Gramsci identified variations in subaltern development. Some groups lack consciousness and political organization and thus leave no traces of their development, while others have "advanced" to the point where they have the ability to come to power.⁸

Finally, in a more obvious instance prior to the previous note, in Notebook 3, §14, Gramsci writes, "The history of subaltern classes is necessarily fragmented and episodic; in the activity of these classes there is a tendency toward unification, albeit in provisional stages, but this is the least conspicuous aspect, and it manifests itself only when victory is secured." In this instance Gramsci explicitly states that unification—hence the movement toward victory—occur in "provisional stages." What this illustrates is that at the time when Gramsci wrote notes 14 and 48 he recognized that the subaltern develop in degrees or levels of variation, and it was not until note 90 that he established his six-point "methodological criteria," which correspond to the various levels of development. From this one can conclude that subaltern groups have phases of development, and that they can be studied in a historical approach according to these phases.

Tracing the Subaltern: Ideology, Intellectuals, and Representation

At the end of the note "History of the Subaltern Classes: Methodological Criteria," Gramsci discusses the difficulty in producing subaltern history and the diffi-

8. The idea that subaltern groups develop in various degrees or levels is very similar to Gramsci's discussion of the development of political forces in "various moments or levels" (see Gramsci 1971, 180–1).

culty in tracing the “fragmented and episodic” elements of subaltern development. As he explains in Notebook 25, §2, “Every trace of independent initiative on the part of subaltern groups should . . . be of incalculable value for the integral historian. Consequently, this kind of history can only be dealt with monographically, and each monograph requires an immense quantity of material which is often hard to collect” (1971, 55). In a number of his notes on the subaltern, Gramsci merely cites the bibliographic information from books and articles which he most likely thought contained “traces” of subaltern activity.⁹ In other, more substantial notes, Gramsci not only cites but paraphrases and details the information in books and articles that contained evidence of subaltern historical development. In some instances, Gramsci may not agree with a particular author’s views but utilizes the author’s work for its evidence of subaltern activity.

For instance, in Notebook 3, §16, Gramsci describes the development of the medieval commune. In doing this he refers to an article by Ettore Ciccotti (trans. “Elements of ‘truth’ and ‘certainty’ in the historical tradition”). The significance of Ciccotti’s article for Gramsci is that it provides an historical case study of how a subaltern group can become a dominant group. In the thirteenth century, the common people in the communes of Siena and Bologna gained enough political power to overcome the power of the nobility. The phases in which the people gained power and eventually created their communes is consistent with Gramsci’s six phases of development. In this particular instance, however, what gave the common people the opportunity to gain power and liberate themselves was directly related to the fact that the majority of them held arms. Due to the wars among the communes during the period, most of the common people possessed arms. Through their activity in the military forces, the common people became aware of their strength, consolidated their ranks, unified, created councils, and appointed officers (the fourth phase of development). Through this concentration and organization of power, the common people held most of the power in the military, and the purpose of the military, which was originally intended to protect the commune from external forces, began to grow and include the protection of the people from the nobles. Eventually the people entered the fifth phase of development, in which they demanded emancipation and participation in the major public offices, and “[they] formed themselves into a real political party.” When the authorities failed to meet the people’s desired reforms, the people entered the sixth phase of development, seceding from the commune completely.

When the people failed to obtain desired reforms from the commune authorities, they seceded, with the support of prominent individuals from the commune, and after forming an independent assembly they began to create their own magistracies similar to the general systems of the commune, to award jurisdiction to the captain of the people, and to make decisions on their own authority, and giving rise . . . to a whole legislative authority . . . The people succeeded, at first in practice and later formally, in forcing the inclusion into the general statutes of the commune of provisions that previously

9. See for example, Notebook 1, §95; Notebook 4, §95; Notebook 6, §132, §158.

applied only internally to those registered as “People.” The people, then, came to dominate the commune, overwhelming the previous ruling class. (Notebook 3, §16)

From Gramsci’s perspective, this is an example of how a subaltern group that was subordinated to a dominant group gained power and eventually became the new dominant group. This note also illustrates Gramsci’s desire and ability to trace the subaltern in various texts or “monographs.” Although Gramsci does not agree with all aspects of Ciccotti’s work,¹⁰ he does insist that Ciccotti’s references to the development of the popular class in the communes merit “special attention and separate treatment” (Notebook 3, §16).

In Notebook 3, §12, which later became the first note in the “special” thematic notebook on the subaltern, Gramsci refers to an article by Domenico Bulferetti, in which Bulferetti discusses a number of different books on David Lazzaretti and his political movement. What interests Gramsci in this note is not only Lazzaretti’s political movement but how the movement is interpreted and represented by Italian intellectuals. Lazzaretti (1834–78) was a commoner in the southeastern corner of Tuscany. He worked with his father as a carter and volunteered in the national army in 1860. In 1868 he experienced religious visions and underwent a spiritual conversion. His visions revealed to him that he was a descendant of a French king and that a prophet would liberate the people from the despotism and misery of their conditions. His religious-political visions attracted many supporters, who were mostly peasants, and he established a number of congregations and communist colonies. Eventually Lazzaretti convinced himself and his supporters that he was the messiah of a new moral and civil order and that he was going to establish a republic of God that included land and crop redistribution. However, on the day Lazzaretti ceremoniously came to present himself to thousands of his supports as the messiah and to proclaim his establishment, he was shot and killed by military police (Hobsbawm 1965, 65–73).¹¹

Lazzaretti and his movement represent an attempt by a subaltern group to establish a new state and conception of the world based upon various religious, political, and economic principles. The case of Lazzaretti also represents an instance in which a subaltern group was politically organized and historically traceable, yet failed in its political ascent due to the power of the state. The point that interests Gramsci, however, is the way in which Lazzaretti and his movement are portrayed and represented by Italian intellectuals. Cesare Lombroso, who was known for his view that criminality was biologically determined and whom Gramsci often described as a “positivist,” viewed Lazzaretti as a psychologically abnormal “madman,” not as a member of a marginalized group. Giacomo Barzellotti, on the other hand, viewed Lazzaretti’s movement as purely religious and not political. In Gramsci’s view, Barzellotti did

10. For example, Gramsci (Notebook 3, §15) refers to Ciccotti’s historical materialism as “very superficial” and a “very positivistic sociology.”

11. Hobsbawm (1965) provides details of the socioeconomic conditions for the region of Lazzaretti’s movement.

not consider the socioeconomic, political, or historical conditions Lazzaretti and his movement confronted. Gramsci sees both Lombroso and Barzellotti as contributing to a broader custom of the time in which Italian intellectuals tended to neglect the historical origins of an event and provide “narrow, individual, pathologic, etc. explanations of single explosive incidents,” such as finding “the protagonist to be a madman” (Notebook 3, §12).

Gramsci’s critical analysis of the authors who wrote on Lazzaretti further illustrates the difficulty in tracing the subaltern for, even when traces of the subaltern exist in the historical records, the interpretations and representations of the subaltern may be misinformed or ideologically influenced. This creates an additional obstacle in tracing and producing a subaltern history for the integral historian since he or she has to critically engage and analyze the evidence of the past. However, this is a circumstance Gramsci was very well aware of and actually addressed in a number of his writings regarding literary criticism.

Gramsci’s analysis of intellectuals and his interest in constructing a subaltern history are related to his analysis of popular literature, especially with the development of the historical novel and its representations of subaltern activity. For instance, Gramsci focused on the work of Alessandro Manzoni (1785–1873), especially with regard to how Manzoni’s conceptions of the world and history influenced his descriptions of common people in his novels. Like Gramsci, Manzoni was interested in creating a portrait of the common people, which Manzoni referred to as “humble classes,” meaning peasants, artisans, servants, villagers, and so on—in Gramscian terms, the subaltern classes. What interests Gramsci in Manzoni’s work is the way in which Manzoni presents the common people. Gramsci describes Manzoni as having an “aristocratic” and Catholic disposition because of his “jocular sympathy” and “caste attitude” toward the common people. Gramsci points out that in Manzoni’s historical novel *The Betrothed*, “there is not one common person who is not teased or laughed at . . . They are depicted as wretched and narrow people without an inner life. Only the nobles have an inner life.” Although Manzoni positions common people as the principal characters in his novel, he portrays them as not having an “inner life” or “deep moral personality.” In this regard, Gramsci sees Manzoni’s work as comparable to Shakespeare’s in the sense that Shakespeare “sides with the upper classes” and presents the common people in a “scornful or repugnant manner” (Notebook 23, §51; 1991, 289–91).

Gramsci was not displeased with Manzoni’s interest in and focus on “the humble”; rather, he was interested in the greater significance of how and why Manzoni portrayed the common people the way he did. For Gramsci, portraying the people as humble and the nobles as enlightened was symptomatic of Italian intellectuals, as exemplified in the cases of Lombroso and Barzellotti. Unlike Dostoyevsky, for instance, Italian intellectuals did not see themselves as having a mission toward the people or believe that the people must be freed from their “humble” positions. Rather, in Gramsci’s view, Italian intellectuals traditionally separated themselves from the people in a superior and paternalistic manner. “It is like the relationship between two

ances, one considered superior and the other inferior, like the relationship between adult and child in the old schools or, worse still, like that of a ‘society for the protection of animals.’” It was in this sense that Gramsci was concerned with how literary representations of the subaltern reinforced the subaltern’s subordinated positions (Notebook 21, §3; 1991, 293–4).

Although Gramsci is engaged in a form of literary criticism, his focus is not art *per se*. Rather, he is engaged in cultural, political, and social criticism, in a critique of social life. He is attempting to destroy certain beliefs and attitudes towards the world and life that are presented as truth but are in fact “narrow and impoverished” (Notebook 23, §51; 1991, 291). The significance of Gramsci’s focus on literature that depicts the subaltern in passive, humble, or subordinated positions is to show that such work actually reinforces the positions of the subaltern and contributes to their further subordination. The dissemination of such views contributes to the consciousness and common sense of the masses to an extent that they do not question such views and accept them as facts rather than opinions. This is an aspect of research that the integral historian has to take into account in his or her research of the subaltern. Texts or “monographs” depict the subaltern in a variety of ways, and the historian has to understand the implications of these depictions for they will influence the historian’s own opinions. In this sense, the subaltern or integral historian has to analyze not only the historical events of the subaltern but also the historical processes in which the subaltern are perceived, presented, and depicted in literary and historical documents. In historical or literary documents, the subaltern may be presented as humble, passive, or ignorant, but their actual lived experiences may prove the contrary. Hence, the integral historian has to analyze critically the way in which intellectuals represent the conditions and aspirations of the subaltern (Notebook 25, §7; 1991, 238–41).

Following Gramsci’s analyses, several conclusions can be drawn regarding his interpretation of subaltern groups and their activity. First, it is clear Gramsci believed that it was possible to produce a history of subaltern classes, even if it was an arduous task. Second, he argued that subaltern groups develop in various degrees or phases that correspond to levels of political organization, which the historian has to take into consideration. Third, subaltern groups are faced with an ensemble of political, social, cultural, and economic relations that produce marginalization and prevent group autonomy. Fourth, although subaltern groups face many difficulties, they have the ability to transform their subordinate social positions. In fact, the transformation of the subaltern’s subordinate social position was Gramsci’s ultimate goal and, through his analyses, he formulated a political strategy for such a transformation.

Recent Interpretations and Appropriations of the “Subaltern”

Within the last twenty years, subaltern studies has become a very popular enterprise. Books and articles claiming to be inspired by Gramsci have been published on

the activity and history of subaltern groups in India, South America, and Ireland. The current popularity of subaltern analysis stems mostly from Ranajit Guha's Subaltern Studies collective and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's famous article, "Can the Subaltern Speak," which is not only a critique of the method and focus of Subaltern Studies but also a critique of the notion of Europe as a Subject and political representation in the work of Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze. Both Guha and Spivak refer to Gramsci's conception of subaltern social groups, but their references and representations of the concept are limited in scope due to the fact that they rely heavily on the presentation of the notes included in the *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*.

In the preface to *Subaltern Studies I*, Ranajit Guha states that the aim of the collective is "to promote a systematic and informed discussion of subaltern themes in the field of South Asian studies, and thus help rectify the elitist bias characteristic of much research and academic work in this particular area" (Guha 1982, vii–viii). In other words, the point of the collective is to challenge elitist historiography and to illuminate aspects of subaltern history as they relate to class, caste, age, gender, and so forth. Guha states that he hopes that "the range of contributions to this series may even remotely match the six-point project envisaged by Antonio Gramsci in his 'Notes on Italian History'" (vii–viii). Although this project is appreciated, it is not clear how Gramsci's six-point project is to be used: if Guha views Gramsci's six points purely as methodological criteria, or if he believes that subaltern groups develop in varying degrees that correspond to the six points. With the exception of a short quotation, Gramsci's concept of subaltern groups is not defined or discussed further. In fact, in contrast to Gramsci's definition, Guha defines subaltern groups as "the people" or "nonelite." In Weberian fashion, he categorizes the elite into three ideal categories: dominant foreign groups, dominant indigenous groups, and regional and local groups that act on the behalf of the other two groups. "It is the task of research," Guha writes, "to investigate, identify and measure the *specific* nature and degree of the *deviation* of these elements from the ideal and situate it historically" (8).

In her critique of Guha's approach to rewriting Indian colonial history from a subaltern perspective, Spivak contends that the idea of defining the subaltern "as a difference from the elite" and attempting to "investigate, identify, and measure the specific" is "essentialist and taxonomic" (Spivak 1988, 284–85). The major problem with such a project is that it requires one not only to know the consciousness and position of the subaltern but also to represent that consciousness. This problem is illustrated in the fact that the subalternists rely on British, nationalist, and colonialist records to research and validate their work. In Spivak's view the subaltern leave little or no traces of their existence within elite, colonial documents and, if the subaltern are represented at all, they are represented as the Other within dominant, elite ideology. It is in this sense that the subaltern cannot speak, according to Spivak, because representations of the subaltern are embedded within the dominant discourse.

Related to Spivak's understanding of Gramsci's conception of the subaltern is the issue of representation that she raises with regard to the work of Foucault and Deleuze. Following Marx's definition of class as a descriptive and transformative concept in

The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte (where Marx points out that class is an economic condition that can be transformed through organized political representation), Spivak points out that there are two types or senses of representation: “representation as ‘speaking for,’ as in politics, and representation as ‘re-presentation,’ as in art or philosophy” (1988, 275–7). In German, these two different senses are distinguished by two different words: *Vertretung* refers to political representation and *Darstellung* refers to aesthetic representation or the concept of staging as representation (278). Spivak contends that Foucault and Deleuze confuse these distinct types of representation with the notion of a unified European Subject, while in Marx the distinction is apparent with regard to the concept of class, for Marx recognizes that class is a condition but that classes are not unified (276, 279). According to Spivak, one should realize the distinction between the double sense of representation in an attempt to avoid subjective essentialism and to understand that macrological representations (*Darstellung*) affect political representations (*Vertretung*). She writes that

the relationship between global capitalism (exploitation in economics) and nation-state alliances (domination in geopolitics) is so macrological that it cannot account for the micrological texture of power. To move toward such an accounting one must move toward theories of ideology—of subject formations that micrologically and often erratically operate the interests that congeal the macrologies. Such theories cannot afford to overlook the categories of representation in its two senses. They must note how the staging of the world in representation—its scene of writing, its *Darstellung*—dis-simulates the choice of and need for “heroes,” paternal proxies, agents of power—*Vertretung*.

My view is that radical practice should attend to this double session of representations rather than reintroduce the individual subject through totalizing concepts power and desire. (Spivak 1988, 279)

Following her discussion of representation, Spivak moves on to discuss the nature of the subaltern. She makes one short comment on Gramsci’s conception of subaltern classes.

Antonio’s Gramsci’s work on the “subaltern classes” extends the class-position/class-consciousness argument isolated in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*. Perhaps because Gramsci criticizes the vanguardistic position of the Leninist intellectual, he is concerned with the intellectual’s role in the subaltern’s cultural and political movement into hegemony. This movement must be made to determine the production of history as narrative (of truth). In texts such as “The Southern Question,” Gramsci considers the movement of historical-political economy in Italy within what can be seen as an allegory of reading taken from or prefiguring an international division of labor. Yet an account of the phased development of the subaltern is thrown out of joint when his cultural macrology is operated, however remotely, by the epistemic interference with legal and disciplinary definitions accompanying the imperialist project. (283)

In this instance, it appears that Spivak is only considering Gramsci’s notion of the subaltern with regard to the proletariat and peasants. Gramsci does not use the term “subaltern” in his essay “Some Aspects of the Southern Question,” but he does fol-

low Marx's "class-position/class-consciousness argument" from *The Eighteenth Brumaire* in that Gramsci states: "The proletariat can become the leading [*dirigente*] and the dominant class to the extent that it succeeds in creating a system of class alliances which allows it to mobilize the majority of the working population against capitalism and the bourgeois State" (Gramsci 1977b, 443).¹² However, it is not clear how Gramsci's "account of the phased development of the subaltern is thrown out of joint when his cultural macrology is operated," as Spivak claims. She may think that Gramsci's focus on the subaltern is too macrological because he situates the subaltern within an ensemble of social relations: relations of production, "legal and disciplinary" functions of the state, and relations of hegemony within civil society. At any rate, it seems clear that Spivak does not agree with Gramsci's notion of phased development. The reason for this is that she defines the subaltern differently than both Gramsci and Guha. For her, the subaltern are not merely the nonelite; they are "the paradigmatic victims" of the international division of labor—namely, "the women of the urban sub-proletariat and of unorganized peasant labour" (Spivak 1985). For Spivak, the subaltern are not just the oppressed; the subaltern are those people that are so displaced they lack political organization and representation. It is in this sense that she contends that the proletariat is not a subaltern group because it is organized in most instances (Spivak 1990b, 90–1; 1992, 45–6). This conception is quite distinct from Gramsci's conception in that it lacks specificity. For Gramsci, disorganization is an element of subalternity but not the determining element, since a subaltern group can exercise some level of political organization without any level of hegemony and therefore still be subject to the activity of dominant groups (Notebook 25, §2; 1971, 55). In Gramsci's conception, organization alone will not resolve group marginalization; only the transformation of the relations of subordination will resolve group marginalization.

In two of Spivak's interviews (1992, 2000), she insists that Gramsci used the term "subaltern" in his prison notebooks out of the necessity to censor himself from using the word "proletariat." In a 1992 interview, she states:

Now, the word "subaltern" as one knows is the description of a military thing. One knows that Gramsci used it because Gramsci was obliged to censor himself in prison. One also knows that the word changed in its use when Gramsci presciently began to be able to see what we today call north-south problems, sitting in prison in Italy, because he was talking on southern Italy, just class-formation questions were not going to solve anything. And so then the word "subaltern" became packed with meaning. (Spivak 1992, 45)

I do not question that Gramsci had the issue of the Southern question in mind when he was writing in prison and thinking of subaltern groups but, as I have tried to show above, Gramsci used the word "subaltern" literally and figuratively in many

12. For Gramsci (1977b, 443, 460–2), the proletariat has the potential to lead a "system of class alliances," which includes peasants. But such an alliance of subaltern groups requires a mass of Left intellectuals that is capable of expressing the aspirations and needs of the alliance, and he sees these intellectuals developing within the proletariat.

instances.¹³ I question the notion that the term is a euphemism for “proletariat” or anything else, and I also question that Gramsci changed his use of the word just in relation to “class formation” in Southern Italy, since Gramsci uses the term in many other historical contexts.

However, Spivak’s analysis of subaltern representation by others is definitely consistent with Gramsci’s approach, for the subaltern historian has to always question an author’s interpretations, motivations, and ideological and political bias in writing a text and representing marginalized groups. In contrast, Spivak’s definition and political understanding of the subaltern are at odds with Gramsci’s conception. For Spivak, as stated above, the subaltern are unorganized and do not often speak, meaning that they do not represent themselves politically or textually. For her, representation and organization are key to subalternity and once they are achieved the subaltern cease to be subaltern. In an interview, she states:

I don’t think that I declare myself to be allied to the subaltern. The subaltern is all that is not elite, but the trouble with those kinds of names is that if you have any kind of political interest you name it in the hope that the name will disappear. That’s what class consciousness is in the interest of: the class disappearing. What politically we want to see is that the name would not be possible. So what I’m interested in is seeing ourselves as namers of the subaltern. If the subaltern can speak then, thank God, the subaltern is not a subaltern any more. (Spivak 1990a, 158)

In this sense, if the subaltern are organized and represent themselves, they are no longer subaltern. But does this mean that they have somehow transformed themselves into dominant groups within society? Does it mean that the subaltern have transformed the social and political relations of subordination that caused their marginalization? In Spivak’s earlier works it would be difficult to find answers to these questions, but in her most recent book she writes, “When a line of communication is established between a member of subaltern groups and the circuits of citizenship or institutionality, the subaltern has been instituted into the long road to hegemony” (1999, 310). In Gramscian terms, establishing “a line of communication” and being “instituted into the long road to hegemony” require political struggle. Subaltern groups have to become conscious of their social position, organize, and struggle to transform their social positions, since organization and representation alone will not transform the relations of subordination. Although these aspects of subaltern activity may not signify the idea of phased development for Spivak, they do for Gramsci.

Gramsci’s Revolutionary Project for Subaltern Liberation

As I stated above, Gramsci’s interest in the subaltern is threefold: he is interested in creating a methodology of subaltern historical analysis, an actual history of subal-

13. For instance, see Notebook 1, §48, §57, §139; Notebook 3, §14, §18, §48, §90, §117; Notebook 4, §1, §38, §49, §53, §59, §66, §95.

tern social groups, and from these two projects he is interested in formulating a revolutionary and practical political strategy that will liberate subaltern groups from their subordinated existence. In this sense, Gramsci is consistent with the doctrines of historical materialism, for it is historical analysis that informs theory and theory that informs practice. For Gramsci, there is not merely a unity of theory and practice but a unity of historical analysis, theory, and practice or, as he says, a “philosophy of praxis.” For Gramsci, one studies history in all its various facets with the purpose of informing historical political analysis and formulating revolutionary political strategy (Notebook 11, §27; 1971, 465). As he explained in his *L’Ordine Nuovo* article entitled “The Party School,” “in our ranks one studies in order to improve, to sharpen the fighting ability of individual members and of the organization as a whole, to better understand the positions of our enemy as well as our own so that we are better able to adapt our day-to-day action to these positions. Study of culture, for us, [is] nothing other than theoretical knowledge of our immediate and ultimate goals, and of the manner in which we can succeed to translate them into deeds” (Gramsci, as quoted by Buttigieg 1992, 20).

Gramsci viewed socio-historical-cultural analyses as partial ends in themselves (for instance, with the purpose of writing books), but ultimately Gramsci utilized his analyses for the purpose of informing practical political activity, to justify particular actions, initiatives, and tactics (Notebook 13, §17; 1971, 185). Essentially the task of the integral historian or subaltern intellectual is to contribute to the form and development of concrete political strategies founded upon sociohistorical analysis. For Gramsci, a self-aware and historically informed conscious leadership combined with the spontaneous political activity of the people is the “real political action” of subaltern groups (Notebook 3, §48).

From Gramsci’s historical analysis, he concluded that the liberation of subaltern groups necessarily requires a transformation of the state and its oppressive social relations, since subaltern groups can only cease being “subaltern” once they have transformed the relations of subordination that cause their marginalization. In Gramsci’s view, “Subaltern groups are always subject to the activity of ruling groups, even when they rebel and rise up: only ‘permanent’ victory breaks their subordination” (Notebook 25, §2; 1971, 55). “Permanent victory,” in this sense, is the transformation of the oppressive state and the formation of a new “ethical State.” “[T]he State,” in his analysis, “is the entire complex of practical and theoretical activities with which the ruling class not only justifies and maintains its dominance, but manages to win the active consent of those over whom it rules” (Notebook 15, §10; 1971, 244). Dominant social groups, in this sense, maintain control of the state through a hegemonic hold over civil society, and they maintain their hegemony over civil society through the promotion of their ideology, cultural values, social practices, morality, ways of thinking, religion, customs, and so on—as seen in the work of Croce, Lombroso, Barzellotti, and Manzoni, for instance. “[T]he supremacy of a social group,” Gramsci writes, “manifests itself in two ways, as ‘domination’ and as ‘intellectual and moral leadership’” (Notebook 19, §24; 1971, 57). If a social group can successfully pro-

mote its values as the dominant values of society, it then can obtain the power and legitimacy to dominate other social groups. For example, if the dominant social groups are bourgeois, Catholic, male, a particular race, and have an aristocratic disposition, and if the dominant social groups are the organizers and founders of the current state, then the prevailing social relations will represent those dominant groups' values and norms, which they portray as "neutral" and "universal" and the subordinate social groups accept as "truth" and "common sense."

For Gramsci, the development of a new state based upon egalitarian social relations can be achieved through a broad alliance of subaltern social groups, who have the capacity to win the struggle for hegemony. Because subaltern groups exist in varying degrees of political organization, more organized groups have to become intellectual and moral leaders and attempt to create a subaltern class alliance that would be capable of presenting a new set of cultural values, social relations, and a new conception of the state.¹⁴ Therefore, prior to creating a new state, subaltern groups first have to become a counterhegemonic force capable of challenging dominant cultural values and winning control over civil society. Gramsci compares the superstructures of civil society to "a powerful system of fortresses and earths" that protect the state and economic structure from falling or being attacked (Notebook 7, §16; 1971, 235, 238). Therefore, Gramsci insists that subaltern groups engage in a "war of position" in which the subaltern promote a new set of social values as a counterforce to the dominant group's values in an attempt to take control of and promote a new conception of civil society. The war of position, in this sense, is the struggle for hegemony, and the struggle for hegemony requires subaltern groups to construct a socio-cultural force of their own that is capable of uniting the masses in a common political struggle (Notebook 10, §44; 1971, 349). If subaltern groups are successful in this struggle, they have the potential to become the next dominant social groups and found a new state.

As illustrated in the fifth and sixth phases of subaltern development and in previous historical examples, a subaltern war of position is not merely an ideological struggle but also a practical political struggle in which the subaltern organize political formations that represent their views, promote their conception of the world, and assert subaltern autonomy and political power. For Gramsci, a subaltern political party is the practical political organization that can provide intellectual and moral leadership for the subaltern and act as the embryo that will develop into a state. The subaltern, as a party, can work within the established political formations (fifth phase), obtaining positions as the personnel of the state, the government, and other institutions, while other members continue to promote a counterhegemony (Notebook 3, §119). Once the hegemonic struggle is won, the "war of movement" or sixth phase of development begins, in which the members of the party who are the personnel of the old state become the personnel and leaders of the new state. In other words, if the

14. In his essay "Some Aspects of the Southern Question" (1977b, 443, 460–62), Gramsci contends that the proletariat has the capacity to be a leader in creating a "system of class alliances."

subaltern are going to promote a new hegemony and attempt to create a new state, they have to become a governing body and political and intellectual leaders within the old society before winning power, which requires “infinite masses of people” (Notebook 6, §138; 1971, 238–9).

In this strategy, therefore, subaltern social groups do not merely seek legal protections from the state to overcome their subordination; they become the cultural leaders of society, organize a political party, become the *new* dominant social groups, and eventually *become* the state (Notebook 25, §5; 1971, 52). The state Gramsci has in mind is the formation of an “ethical State,” a state that can transform the oppressive state and transform the relations of subordination that created and perpetuated group marginalization. “[T]he social group that poses the end of the State and its own end as the target to be achieved can create an ethical State—i.e. one which tends to put an end to the internal divisions of the ruled, etc., and to create a technically and morally unitary social organism” (Notebook 9, §179; 1971, 259). Ideally, what Gramsci has in mind is a postsubaltern state, a democratic state that disallows the domination of one group by another.

In short, according to Gramsci’s analysis, subaltern social groups have to look beyond their current subordinated identities, situations, and conditions; they have to historicize and conceptualize the relations that cause their subordination and attempt to transform the relations and systems of power that created and maintain the relations. Such a project requires a revolutionary transformation of the state and society; a hegemonic transformation that includes a coalition of all subaltern social groups with a common political aim, which is the creation of a state and society that is founded upon the principles of equality and democracy, free from subordination and exploitation in all spheres of life.

Ultimately, Gramsci’s study and conception of the subaltern are transformative. Gramsci is undoubtedly interested in a historical, political, social, and cultural transformation that will produce human liberation, and he sees this transformation occurring from below, meaning that subaltern groups, who are subordinated and do not hold any sociopolitical power, will attempt to overcome their subordination through a broad struggle that will affect every aspect of society and, in turn, their social being. Because political power rests within the state but is reinforced within social and cultural practices, Gramsci views the struggle for subaltern transformation occurring in a hegemonic fashion, in which a new conception of society is not only presented in politics but throughout the superstructural realms of ideology, culture, philosophy, literature, and so on. Thus, in Gramsci’s analysis, he attempts to capture the totality of subaltern existence. He is interested in the integral relationship between their economic, political, and social positions; the stages of their development in history; their significance in cultural forms; how they are represented in literature; and so forth. Gramsci’s study of the subaltern reveals not only the difficulties involved in subaltern analysis but also the many factors that contribute to group marginalization and the elements which prevent groups from overcoming their marginalization. Gramsci’s concept of the subaltern creates not only a new terrain of struggle but also a method-

ological criterion for formulating such a struggle founded upon the integral analysis of the economic, historical, cultural, and ideological roots of everyday life.

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