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*Gramsci and Althusser: the theorists of topography?*

1. *The Crisis of Marxism*

During 1977-78, Althusser declared the crisis of Marxism and undertook criticism of the PCF, which, according to Anderson, represents “the most violent oppositional charter within a party in the post-war period of Western Communism”<sup>1</sup>. In the process, Althusser identified two major theoretical gaps in Marxism: the theorization of political organization (party) and of the labor movement. The lack of such theories was, for Althusser, detrimental to the fusion of theory and practice. What was peculiar to this identification of the crisis of Marxism was that Althusser associated it with an idealist aspect of Marx himself. The contradictions in Marxism, for Althusser, lay not merely in the political or practical errors of Marxist movements, but were rooted in theoretical defects/contradictions in Marxism: the crisis of Marxism “does not take place outside of the theoretical sphere”<sup>2</sup>. Considering his earlier position, this identification of defects within Marxism was not without an impact on Althusser’s own theoretical achievement. Whereas Althusser had insisted that *Capital* broke with Hegelian idealist elements almost completely, now he discovered traces of idealism in it – Marx tended to “put the state in virtually direct relation with the property relation”, and “hence [...] with the productive relations characteristic of a given mode of production”<sup>3</sup>. So, Althusser in his earlier work is not free from his later criticism of the idealist aspect of Marxism and the PCF. However, Althusser’s later formulation of the materialism of topography provides, if not an answer, at least a theoretical tool to rethink the problem of the state and labor movement by concretizing his formulation of ideology. So, this paper focuses on a tension with regard to the theory of political organization and ideology in Althusser’s work and attempts to reconstruct Althusser’s oeuvre, i.e. his reinterpretation of historical materialism, in terms of the materialism of topography.

Generally accepting Althusser’s verdict on the crisis of Marxism, we can find an unusual exception to it: Gramsci. The peculiarity of Gramsci’s interpretation and elaboration of Marxism can only be accounted for against the political/theoretical background of the crisis of Marxism. Gramsci was one of the first to recognize that the crisis of Marxism was not just political but theoretical: the crisis was also rooted in Marx’s own problematic. He was also the rare exception to recognize the turning point of the crisis of Marxism in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century – the emergence of fascism: he noticed an opening for populist demagogy under the influence of the mass media earlier than the Frankfurt theorists. In a nutshell, what binds Althusser and Gramsci together is the crisis of Marxism, and then we can ask whether Gramsci provides a clue to resolve what Althusser identifies as the fundamental lacks in Marxism. Althusser’s anti-teleology is

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<sup>1</sup> P. Anderson, *Argument within English Marxism*, London, New Left Books, 1980, p. 113.

<sup>2</sup> L. Althusser, *The Crisis of Marxism*, “Marxism Today”, July 1978, pp. 215-221: 216.

<sup>3</sup> L. Althusser, *Philosophy of the Encounter. Later Writings 1978-1987*, trans. by G. M. Goshgarian, London, Verso, 2006, p. 97.

fundamentally antithetical to Gramsci's historicism<sup>4</sup>, but Gramsci's hegemony, as Buci-Glucksmann points out, proposes the dynamics of the superstructure by "put[ting] the state in the first line of a society's processes of organization and reorganization"<sup>5</sup>. This, in many aspects, coincides with Althusser's concept of the ideological state apparatuses. So, if we have the courage to assume a partial point of view rather than pursuing a theoretical consistency of Gramsci's work, as Frosini suggests<sup>6</sup>, we could probably find in Gramsci what Althusser wants for Marxism particularly (in terms of political organization). From this perspective, we will compare Althusser's theory with Gramsci's focusing on their formulations of the state and the conception of topography; here Gramsci's concept of the integral state is crucial for grasping the dialectical meaning of hegemony in that it addresses and shifts the meaning of hegemony in terms of apparatus.

## 2. *The Integral State*

If not as much as Althusser's, Gramsci undergoes significant theoretical shifts in his theoretical trajectory. In particular, the meaning of hegemony changes in its relation to the state. Gramsci's first formulation of hegemony involves the mutual exclusivity of the state and civil society: hegemony pertains to civil society and coercion to the State<sup>7</sup>. As is well known, the first distinction was adopted to account for the differential political structure of East and West, and in particular confirmed the preponderance of civil society over the State in the West.

What is problematic with this formulation is that it disregards the fact that the state plays a central role in the formation and maintenance of ideological consent/hegemony even in the West. The imperialist expansion of the European nation states in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries required an internal ideological coherence within the nation state. Or it can be said that bourgeoisies in the European nations actively exploited the state apparatuses to form ideological consent and displace conflicts from their national boundaries to the international terrain, without which it is hard to understand the appearance of Nazism and European fascism, and the theme of the national popular will. Even in the 1920s and 1930s, which mark a turning point in the crisis of Marxism, the role of the state does not so much shrink or diminish as intensify in the formation of national consent, as is indicated by Braudel's famous formulation

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<sup>4</sup> See A. Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, London, Lawrence & Wishart, 1971, p. 445. As Callinicos explains, the real, for Gramsci, is a "historical goal, to be attained as the creation of a communist society" (A. Callinicos, *Althusser's Marxism*, London, Pluto, 1976, p. 24). Gramsci presupposes a practical unity of the conception of the world and history. In particular, he is insistent upon cultural unity ("a unified cultural system"). See also L. Althusser, E. Balibar, *Reading Capital*, transl. by B. Brewster, London, Verso, 1997, pp. 130-132.

<sup>5</sup> Ch. Buci-Glucksmann, *Gramsci and the State*, transl. by D. Fernbach, London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1980, p. 61.

<sup>6</sup> F. Frosini, "Beyond the Crisis of Marxism: Gramsci's Contested Legacy", in J. Bidet, S. Kouvelakis (eds.), *Critical Companion to Contemporary Marxism*, Brill, Leiden 2008, p. 673.

<sup>7</sup> A. Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, cit., p. 170.

that “capitalism only triumphs when it becomes identified with the state, when it is the state”<sup>8</sup>.

Another problem is related to the question of historical transition. Gramsci’s first model of hegemony implies that “the power of capital essentially or exclusively takes the form of cultural hegemony in the West”<sup>9</sup>. According to Anderson, it contains an element of reformism in that it means that a socialist revolution can take place without the seizure and transformation of state power. So, Anderson argues that, though Gramsci himself did not draw a reformist conclusion from it, it would not be entirely arbitrary interpretation if we read Gramsci’s formulation into reformism<sup>10</sup>. Setting aside the problem of reformism, what is at issue with Gramsci’s first formulation of hegemony is that it assumes an exclusive relationship between consent and domination, and thereby fails to grasp an important nature of capitalism: civil society is not separable from the state but rather its domain is intersected by the state.

The distinction between East and West based upon the hegemony/domination distribution causes a problem in understanding the East as well. The active intervention of the state, which Gramsci associates with domination, is not an exceptional phenomenon in the West, nor simply applicable to the analysis of the East. Gramsci infers the specificity of East from the fact that the state is powerful in the east, but this entails a problem when we attempt to apply it to analyze the Asian societies, e.g., China. It is generally said that China has had strong state apparatuses, but the ground of civil society has been relatively weak: “in Russia [in the East], the State was everything, civil society was primordial and gelatinous”<sup>11</sup>. But the state apparatuses in China have been based upon very strong ideological backgrounds since early times as indicated by Confucianism. So, Gramsci’s early distinction of West and East based upon the dichotomy of consent/domination fails to give a proper understanding of the state both in East/West, or at least is too narrow to generalize the Eastern societies<sup>12</sup>.

|               |            |
|---------------|------------|
| Hegemony      | Domination |
| Consent       | Coercion   |
| Civil society | State      |

Gramsci’s later reformulation of hegemony shows that he was aware of the inadequacy of his first model particularly in understanding the role of the state for securing ideological consent in civil society. So, his second formulation of hegemony reconceptualizes the relationship between the state and civil society: hegemony is redefined to combine coercion and consent and redistributed between the state and civil

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<sup>8</sup> F. Braudel, *Afterthoughts on Material Civilization and Capitalism*, Baltimore, MD, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977, pp. 64-65.

<sup>9</sup> P. Anderson, *The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci*, “New Left Review”, 1977, n. 100, pp. 5-78: 41.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 46. According to Laclau and Mouffe, Gramsci shares Bernstein’s “revisionism” but not his “gradualism”. E. Laclau, Ch. Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy. Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, London, Verso, 1985, p. 71.

<sup>11</sup> A. Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, cit., p. 238.

<sup>12</sup> P. Anderson, *The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci*, cit., p. 22.

society<sup>13</sup>. With this theoretical rearrangement, which locates hegemony both in the state and civil society, the state appears as form of apparatus. In this formulation, the distinction between civil society and political society is maintained, but hegemony not just works on civil society but intersects both civil society and the state<sup>14</sup>. This was not Gramsci's final version of hegemony, however. In the third version of hegemony, the scope of the state becomes extensive to include political society and civil society: "integral state". The state no longer appears as "an external and dispensable surface", but subsumes civil society within it: "hegemony protected by the armour of coercion"<sup>15</sup>. So, as Anderson explains, hegemony is firmly situated within the state – no longer confined to civil society.<sup>16</sup> The distinction between civil and political society is now effectively displaced into the problematic of the state .

The state 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<sup>17</sup>.

The state encompasses political society and civil society and coercion and consent become coextensive with the state<sup>18</sup>. As Buci-Glucksmann points out, we can read the expansion of the state concept in this model. Perry Anderson regards this theoretical shift as a retreat in that it "undermines any attempt to define the specificity of bourgeois democracy in the West" (inadequate for distinguishing between the normal bourgeois parliamentary regime and forms such as the Fascist state)<sup>19</sup>. Despite Anderson's criticism, the concept of the integral state has a theoretical meaning in that it concretizes hegemony in terms of state apparatus. With the introduction of the integral state, the "distinction between state and civil society itself is canceled"<sup>20</sup>. In addition, even though its original aim may not be properly fulfilled, it produces a much wider theoretical effect. The last model of hegemony posits a general mechanism which goes beyond the European bourgeois states by "involv[ing] an incorporation of hegemony and its apparatus into the state"<sup>21</sup>, which allows one to think of superstructural phenomena depending upon the differential combination of consent and coercion. On this point, Thomas writes:

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 31, A. Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, cit., pp. 261, 160. See also p. 239.

<sup>14</sup> A. Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, cit., p. 263

<sup>15</sup> Ch. Buci-Glucksmann, *Gramsci and the State*, cit., p. 91; A. Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, cit., p. 263.

<sup>16</sup> P. Anderson, *The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci*, cit., p. 23.

<sup>17</sup> A. Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, cit., p. 244. Or it can be said that he meaning of hegemony "extends to cover the structures of the state". See Ch. Buci-Glucksmann, *Gramsci and the State*, cit., p. 93.

<sup>18</sup> P. Anderson, *The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci*, cit., p. 13.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 36: "For once the position is adopted that all ideological and political superstructures – including the family, reformist trade unions and parties, and private media – are by definition State apparatuses, in strict logic it becomes impossible and unnecessary to distinguish between bourgeois democracies and fascism".

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 34.

<sup>21</sup> Ch. Buci-Glucksmann, *Gramsci and the State*, cit., 70.

Co-ordination of social forces in civil society occurs predominantly by what appear to be consensual means; but insofar as the space of the “private” can only be established juridically, it presupposes the prior intervention of the political power of the state<sup>22</sup>.

With the introduction of the “integral state”, consent and coercion, base and superstructure, domination and hegemony do not appear as independent entities, but as dialectical articulation within a larger unitary apparatus<sup>23</sup>, which can be seen as an attempt to think the superstructure in terms of its own internal logic or mechanism. So Peter Thomas writes:

Whereas Marx and Engels’ tract has often been read [...] with an eye to its focus upon the bourgeoisie’s revolutionizing of the mode of production, Gramsci places the accent upon the *Manifesto’s* complementary political thesis that these transformations have been accompanied, in a complex relation of dialectical interaction, by an accompanying revolutionizing of the nature of the political and its concrete institutional forms<sup>24</sup>.

It is possible to detect (from Gramsci’s formulation of the state) the dynamics of political institutions which operates independently of the causality of the mode of production. Thus regarded, Gramsci’s concept of hegemonic apparatus marks a break in the Marxist theory of the state since it provides a reference with which to think of what Althusser identifies as the fundamental gap in Marxism, and it is the concept of the integral state as an apparatus that realizes this dynamic. On this point, Buci-Glucksmann writes:

The expansion of the state concept, by incorporating into it the hegemonic apparatuses, also presupposes the expansion of the state apparatus. This double dialectical process permits a differentiated approach to the class/state relationship on the basis of the mediations class/society and state/society. These mediations, linkages and footholds form the concrete dialectics of the relationship between base and superstructure<sup>25</sup>.

The reconstruction of the relationship of hegemony and the state by the concept of the integral state gives some degree of autonomy to the state, but this is not to say that the state is the political itself (the autonomy of the state). The introduction of apparatus does not equate the state with politics, but inscribes another regulating mechanism (mediated by state apparatuses) between the political and its conditions as Marx does with the problematic of the mode of production – this implies the apparatuses are not reducible to the materialization and condensation of class relation conditioned by the mode of production. Moreover, the concept of the state as apparatus, as Buci-Glucksmann stresses, is particularly important and inevitable in accounting for a dialectical link between the state and the Marxist problematic of the withering away of

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<sup>22</sup> P. D. Thomas, *The Gramscian Moment. Philosophy, Hegemony and Marxism*, Leiden, Brill, 2009, p. 192.

<sup>23</sup> Ch. Buci-Glucksmann, *Gramsci and the State*, cit., p. 49.

<sup>24</sup> P. D. Thomas, *The Gramscian Moment*, cit., p. 143.

<sup>25</sup> Ch. Buci-Glucksmann, *Gramsci and the State*, cit., pp. 105-106.

the state<sup>26</sup>: without the materiality of institutions denoted by hegemonic apparatuses, it is practically impossible to account for its withering away unless it turns to a teleological notion of history or the autonomy of subject in history.

Gramsci's rearrangement of the relations between civil society and political society in general can be seen as an attempt to redefine the definition of the political by finding a general mechanism governing the working of the state. If this is the case, the shift from the second model of hegemony to the third model is understandable in terms of the internal logic of Gramsci's theory against Anderson's primary objection to it. In his formulation of civil society and political society, Gramsci does not relate civil society directly to the terrain of economy, i.e., the mode of production, but rather regards it as one aspect of the superstructural level. So, the "political" as mediated by the state (as state apparatuses) seems to consist of the two aspects, political society and civil society. This distinction, which conceives of political society and civil society as if they are two attributes of the state apparatus, has a theoretical advantage in that it manages to remove the dichotomy of coercion/consent, civil society/state. But the meaning of "political" as in political society is not clear compared to the meaning of the political in general. For instance, according to Anderson's interpretation, Gramsci's second model intends the state by political society and state apparatus by the state<sup>27</sup>. If this is the case, what is the specificity of political society compared with that of civil society (the domain of the political designated by civil society)? The meanings of political society, civil society, hegemony, and the state remain unclear in the second model. Or the issue of the level of analysis/abstraction arises with regard to the distinction between civil society and political society. This can be made clear by comparing it with Althusser's concept of ideological state apparatuses. Althusser's theorization of ideological apparatuses serves to clarify what remains latent but underdeveloped in Gramsci's formulation. Althusser's concept of the state apparatuses comes closer to Gramsci's concepts of hegemonic apparatuses and the integral state in that it addresses the state in terms of apparatus as well: the materiality of institutions. However, what distinguishes Althusser's concept of apparatus from Gramsci is that Althusser categorizes the state apparatuses by how they function. Althusser's state apparatuses work in two ways (not defined by the terrain): the ideological state apparatuses function by ideology, while the repressive ideological state apparatuses function by violence<sup>28</sup>. So, two different modes (or attributes in the Spinozist sense) of the state apparatus define (or more precisely, mediate) the 'political', which is designed to account for a mechanism of the state (or superstructure) not as a simple reflection of the economic formation, i.e., the materiality/causality denoted by the problematic of the mode of production, and to avoid the conflation of the political and the state or an improper distinction between civil and political: civil society is already political society. To wit, Althusser's theorization of ideology, based upon the materiality of ideology, deals with two different modes of defining the political, instead of dividing "private/civil" and "public": "ideological" is more important than the "state" in

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 67.

<sup>27</sup> P. Anderson, *The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci*, cit., p. 10.

<sup>28</sup> *Lenin and Philosophy and other essays*, trans. by B. Brewster, New York, Monthly Review Press, 1971, pp. 144-145.

Althusser's conception of the ideological state apparatuses (in that it accounts for the intrinsic dynamic of the apparatuses), and the "state" denotes the superstructural domain/mechanism existing/operating independently of the problematic of the mode of production.

Gramsci's second model of hegemony and its relation to the state

|   |               |        |                                   |
|---|---------------|--------|-----------------------------------|
| The "political" designated by superstructural level | Civil society | →      | Hegemony                          |
|   | State         | ↗<br>→ | Coercion + Hegemony <sup>29</sup> |

Gramsci's third model of hegemony and its relations to the state

|   |                                       |   |          |
|---|---------------------------------------|---|----------|
| The "political" designated by superstructural level | State as an apparatus (Integralstate) | → | Consent  |
|   |                                       |   | Coercion |

3. *Hegemony and Ideology*

Gramsci's concept of the integral state cancels off the distinction between state and civil society and subsumes hegemony and coercion as its internal functions, and thereby comes closer to Althusser's formulation of the state apparatuses. For Gramsci, the concept of the integral state is initially an attempt to delineate the specific efficacy of the bourgeois state as both a social and a political relation, but it can be seen as a general concept to account for the general mechanism of superstructure. In this formulation of the integral state, which is the complex system of the dictatorship + hegemony<sup>30</sup>, the concept of civil society as a distinct entity disappears, and thus hegemony appears as the function of the state. But hegemony is not equated with the state itself insofar as the state includes not merely the governmental apparatus, but also the "private" apparatus of hegemony or civil society<sup>31</sup>. This implies that Gramsci's later formulation (of the integral state) clarifies what remains unclear or underdeveloped rather than resulting in blurring of the boundaries of the state and civil society: the introduction of the concept of the integral state, which posits the state as an apparatus, paves the way to think of the political designated by the singular mechanism of the superstructure without the confusion of the political and the state.

Until now we have attempted to read Gramsci as a theorist of the integral state following the interpretations of Buci-Glucksmann and Thomas. In their interpretations,

<sup>29</sup> With regard to the second model, Anderson points out that hegemony and coercion are unevenly distributed between the state and civil society – "There is always a structural asymmetry in the distribution of the consensual and coercive functions of this power. Ideology [hegemony] is shared between civil society and the State: violence pertains to the State alone. In other words, the State enters twice over into any equation between the two". P. Anderson, *The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci*, cit., p. 32.

<sup>30</sup> A. Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, cit., p. 239.

<sup>31</sup> "By the State should be understood not merely the governmental apparatus, but also the "private" apparatus of hegemony or civil society" (ibid., p. 261).

Gramsci is not a theorist of hegemony but of the integral state, which grasps hegemony in terms of the state apparatus. From this perspective, Thomas's interpretation points out that Gramsci does not so much "expand" the concept of the state, as rebels against its instrumental limitation by neo-Kantianism and return to its originally "expansive" formulations in Hegel and Marx<sup>32</sup>. Frosini also points out that Gramsci's formulation of the integral state breaks with the instrumental conception of the state to the extent that it addresses it in terms of apparatus<sup>33</sup>. However, here we need to ask if we can really find in Gramsci a strict sense of the material mechanism (materiality) of hegemony. Laclau and Mouffe read the materiality of ideology from Gramsci:

[in Gramsci], ideology is not identified with a "system of ideas" or with "false consciousness" of social agents; it is instead an organic and relational whole, embodied in institutions and apparatuses, which welds together a historical bloc around a number of basic articulatory principles. This precludes the possibility of a "superstructuralist" reading of the ideological. In fact, through the concept of historical bloc and of ideology as organic cement, a new totalizing category takes us beyond the old base/superstructure distinction<sup>34</sup>.

Here Laclau and Mouffe attribute the materiality of ideology to Gramsci, but it should be noted that Gramsci's hegemonic apparatuses are not the same as ideological apparatuses. As mentioned above, it is possible to find the materiality of institutions in Gramsci, but not that of ideology. What matters here is to find the mechanism of how consent is achieved. What remains constant through Gramsci's theoretical modifications of hegemony is the concept of hegemony as consent. Whether it is related to the state or civil society, the core of Gramsci's theory of hegemony lies in thinking how consent is made or reached through hegemonic apparatuses. However, the notion of consent is not easily compatible with that of apparatus; consent is in fact a result or objective, not the mechanism itself. Or the idea of consent, in a sense, designates the terrain but presupposes its effect in advance. So, one may ask whether the concept of consent sits well with that of apparatus or ideology.

To the extent that the theory of hegemony is based upon the idea of consent, it leads to an instrumentalist understanding of the state, and, at more fundamental level, would surreptitiously revive the old notion of an autonomous subject (of history). The notion of consent entails problems in that it presupposes the existence of subject before the process. On the one hand, it implies the prior existence of economic classes who attempt to persuade the opposite class to maintain its domination. If this is the case, it revives economism in a paradoxical way. On the other, it remains to denote the effectivity of superstructure, i.e., hegemonic apparatuses, but does not account for how it contributes to the formation of class consciousness insofar as it restricts itself to the conscious act of consent. In this sense, the concept of hegemony replaces its dynamics with the concept of consent. So Althusser writes:

[Gramsci's] term is "hegemonic apparatus". This leaves a question hanging in midair: what

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<sup>32</sup> P. D. Thomas, *The Gramscian Moment*, cit., p. 139.

<sup>33</sup> F. Frosini, "Beyond the Crisis of Marxism: Gramsci's Contested Legacy", cit., p. 668.

<sup>34</sup> E. Laclau, Ch. Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, cit., p. 67.

produces, in Gramsci's apparatuses, Gramsci's hegemony-effect? Gramsci, in sum, defines his apparatuses in terms of their effect or result, *hegemony* [...] He has civil society, which [...] comprises the whole set of "hegemonic apparatuses"; we do not know that what they run on<sup>35</sup>.

In order to make Gramsci's theory of hegemony meaningful, it is necessary to account for how consent is made through hegemonic apparatuses rather than regarding it as given. Probably we can ask whether Gramsci's strategic view of how alternative organization will appear within capitalism forces him to relate hegemony to the conception of consent and thus bypass its intrinsic mechanism (the opposite case can be found in Althusser's theory of ideology; its main focus is to find the mechanism of the formation of the subject, and thereby it invites the criticism of functionalism). On the difference between Althusser's ideology and Gramsci's hegemony, Montag explains that the former "contain[s ideology] within an apparatus, fully material and external to the mind of the individual, not only rendered the idea of consent meaningless but made visible the way in which the very notion of consent is inextricably bound up with the forms of subjection characteristic of capitalist societies"<sup>36</sup>. Montag also adds an important point that it is not possible to detach civil society from the act of violence, and thus rejects the dualism inherent in Gramsci's theory of hegemony (differently put, economic exploitation can be also violent though it is not mediated by violence – 'structural violence'):

If we take seriously Althusser's statement that "we think with our bodies", then we can no longer understand the distinction between violence and ideology as a distinction between the external and the internal, between the domination exercised on bodies and the domination exercised on minds<sup>37</sup>.

Montag's analysis shows that though these two great theorists share the conception of the materiality of institutions, they draw upon the totally different mechanisms. Thus understood, Althusser's concept of ideological state apparatus clarifies what remains underdeveloped in Gramsci's theory of hegemonic apparatus in that the former adds an inner mechanism to the latter: the mechanism of interpellation. This is not to say that Althusser is greater than Gramsci, but, as Balibar points out, the former's coming a generation later and in a different political and cultural conjunctures allows him to gain a more lucid philosophical aspect of the questions of the state and hegemony (or ideology)<sup>38</sup>. Althusser's theory of ideology is more lucid in thinking the materiality of ideology than Gramsci's, but has some theoretical weaknesses as well; particularly it privileges a specific model of subjectivation, which Balibar and Butler calls the model of inner voice<sup>39</sup>. Here we are not going to analyze in details how Althusser theorizes the mechanism of ideological formation, but show how his later concept of topography displaces the traditional distinction of base and superstructure, and reveals a

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<sup>35</sup> L. Althusser, *Philosophy of the Encounter. Later Writings 1978-1987*, cit., pp. 138-140.

<sup>36</sup> W. Montag, *Althusser and his Contemporaries*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2013, p. 145.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 158.

<sup>38</sup> E. Balibar, "Structural Causality, Overdetermination, and Antagonism", in *Postmodern Materialism and the Future of Marxist Theory*, Wesleyan University Press, p. 111.

<sup>39</sup> J. Butler, *Excitable Speech*, London, Routledge, 1997, p. 32.

theoretical tension in his own formulation of ideology and historical materialism. The reformulation of historical materialism based upon the concept of (and the materialism of) topography plays a central role in Althusser's self-criticism, and interestingly it is Gramsci who first paid attention to it as an inner mechanism of hegemony: "the level of ideologies that men become conscious of conflicts in the world of economy"<sup>40</sup>. So it is worth comparing how it is defined in them. This comparison will reveal Althusser's limitation and provide a reference point in reformulating the idea of overdetermination.

#### 4. *Topography: Ideology and Communication*

In order to properly understand the formulation of ideology in Althusser's work, it is necessary to focus on Althusser's work in 1976-77, which is characterized by his formulation of topography. Many commentators regard the work from this period as a voluntarist reinterpretation of historical materialism or a destructive retreat, but in my view these works are important in accounting for and realizing Althusser's concept of ideology and thus in concretizing the conception of overdetermination.

Althusser always considers that theory is an intervention in conjuncture, but the effects should be sought in its power of objective analysis (this created a fission between him and his Maoist pupils in May 1968, e.g. Rancière). However, in his later formulation of rupture, he stresses its political effect. In short, the works from 1976-77 prioritize conjectural intervention of theory and its effect over the objective analysis of theory. In *Transformation of Philosophy* (1976) and *Marxism Today* (1977), for instance, Althusser derived a different conception of topography from Marx's Preface to the 1859 *Contribution* in order to explain the reality and conditions of the formation/function of theory. Althusser argued that "ideas can become active only in and through ideological forms"<sup>41</sup>: Althusser comes closer to Gramsci when he mentions that theory becomes active when it becomes an ideology, and it seems to mark a serious break with his earlier formulation of epistemological rupture. As is well known, the epistemological rupture implies that sciences are formed by breaking with ideologies. In *For Marx*, Althusser writes that science can no more be ranged within the category superstructure than can language in response to Gramsci – "also science is a superstructure"<sup>42</sup>. As Frosini mentions, Gramsci is outlined as:

the theory-practice of hegemony, in the sense that it is theoretically aware of the hegemonic character of every ideological reality. Consequently, it inserts itself in the ideological relation as a partial point of view, as a political force that works actively in the criticism of the dominant hegemony<sup>43</sup>.

Gramsci also writes: "it should be recalled that the economy is only mainspring of history in the last instance [...] this statement is to be related directly to the passage in

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<sup>40</sup> A. Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, cit., p. 162.

<sup>41</sup> L. Althusser, *Philosophy of the Encounter. Later Writings 1978-1987*, cit., p. 48.

<sup>42</sup> L. Althusser, E. Balibar, *Reading Capital*, cit., p. 133.

<sup>43</sup> F. Frosini, "Beyond the Crisis of Marxism: Gramsci's Contested Legacy", cit., p. 677.

the preface to the *Critique of Political Economy* which says that it is on the level of ideologies that men become conscious of conflicts in the world of the economy”<sup>44</sup>. Here it seems that Gramsci comes closer to Althusser by admitting to the thesis of the determination in the last instance by the economy, and Althusser’s reformulation of topography drifts even further away from the orthodoxy of Marxism and even from his earlier formulation of historical materialism when he argues that “ideas can become active only in and through ideological forms”. As mentioned, many theorists read destructive and fragmentary elements in Althusser’s reformulation of topography; it is especially accused of voluntarism. But in my view, this is the moment Althusser gets further away from Gramsci, and the conceptualization of topography allows us Althusser concretize his formulation of ideology.

Althusser’s topography thesis should be located in the context of the materiality of ideology and ideas. Roughly speaking, if a discourse or theory is to produce effects in reality, it needs to materialize itself. In this context, topography denotes conditions under which theories become effective, rather than implying that they are the same as ideologies. In point of fact, by “ideological forms” Althusser did not mean ideological propaganda, moral inculcation, scientific education or religious rituals, but combined them with the problems of organization in Marxism, i.e. in terms of an apparatus. That is to say, the conceptualization of topography does not simply reduce theory to political intervention, but takes into account the relation of theory and reality as a condition of its scientificity. Here it is worth mentioning a recent development in modern physics very briefly, in order to compare it with Althusser’s idea of topography and clarify the theoretical implication of this concept.

Modern physics takes into account the observation conditions as intrinsic condition of its validity. Quantum mechanics considers that observation conditions are inherent to scientific knowledge. As mentioned above, the position and the momentum of a particle cannot simultaneously be calculated with precision in quantum mechanics, but only one value can be precisely determined at a time: the measurement error of the position of a moving particle under experimental conditions can only be made to approach zero provided one accepts a measurement error of  $\infty$  in its momentum, and vice versa. This appears to weaken or alter conventional scientific standards of measurement. According to Cohen-Tannoudji, this does not so much deny the objectivity of reality or scientific causality as recognize the conditions of observation that are intrinsic to the phenomena they attempt to explain.

in physics today, we can no longer pretend to ignore the observation conditions [...] we can no longer pretend to describe reality itself directly; physicists describe [...] a *phenomenon* as an element or a moment of reality placed under observation conditions that are as well defined as possible. This carefully considered and expressed position does not in any way deny the existence of a reality independent of observations<sup>45</sup>.

According to Cohen-Tannoudji, this does not so much deny the objectivity of

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<sup>44</sup> A. Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, cit., p. 162

<sup>45</sup> G. Cohen-Tannoudji, *Universal Constants in Physics*, New York, McGraw-Hill, 1992, p. 63.

reality or scientific causality as recognize the conditions of observation are intrinsic to the phenomena they attempt to explain. In other words, observation is not independent of its objects it attempts to explain, but affects its result even in the field of natural sciences. So, the relationship between observation and its objects should be taken into account for to properly explain them.

The same could apply to historical materialism or socio-economic theory in general. As stock forecasting somehow makes the real movements of stock prices deviating from it, theoretical activities of social sciences affect the way people react. We can address Althusser's concept of topography from this perspective: the relationship between theory and its conditions and effects is constitutive of its theoretical validity. With "topography", Althusser addressed theories or ideas not in terms of "principles of explanation of the given whole", but "in terms of their possible effect in the ideological, and therefore political class struggle"<sup>46</sup>. So, theory forms a double relation to the social structure; basically, theory plays the role of explaining society, but, at the same time, it creates effects on it insofar as it is a component part of the society that it attempts to explain, which in turn constitutes (and proves) its theoretical validity. Accordingly, the measure of Marx's materialism "is less the materialist content of his theory than the acute, practical consciousness of the conditions, forms and limits within which these ideas can become active". Based on this idea of "the double inscription/positions of ideas (theories) in the topography"<sup>47</sup>, Althusser argued that "ideas can become active only in and through ideological forms"<sup>48</sup>. In short, a revolutionary theory does not suffice to explain reality, but must become an ideology, or ideological form (apparatus) so as to act on consciousness. This does not imply that ideologies and the sciences are the same, but denotes specificity of historical materialism: its scientificity is not given but proved by the mass actions. Then the relation between theory and object (in this case mass movements) is intrinsic to its validity.

We can also attempt to translate the conception of topography in terms of communication. What is at issue here is that Althusser's idea of topography presupposes that it is not just the content of theory but how people receive and understand the theory is constitutive of its validity. Though Althusser did not directly formulate the idea of communication, his formulation of ideology implies a communicative relationship between historical materialism and mass movements. More precisely, Althusser's theory of ideology explains the formation of the subject or imaginary not as direct reflection(deformation) of the real, but in relation to the representation of the real. In other words, ideology, for Althusser, "represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence [...] it is not their real conditions of existence, their real world, that 'men' 'represents to themselves' in ideology, but above all it is their relation to those conditions of existence which is represented to them there. It is this relation which is at the center of every ideology, i.e., imaginary distortion of the

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<sup>46</sup> L. Althusser, *Philosophy of the Encounter. Later Writings 1978-1987*, cit., p. 48.

<sup>47</sup> L. Althusser, *Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists*, ed. by G. Elliot, London, Verso, 1990, p. 276; L. Althusser, *Philosophy of the Encounter. Later Writings 1978-1987*, cit., p. 48.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48, see also pp. 46-54

ideological representation of the real world”<sup>49</sup>. This implies that ideology, for Althusser, operates mainly in the symbolic and that subjectivity is the function of the dual determination of the real and the symbolic: insofar as Althusser’s conceptualization of ideology based upon the symbolic (the materiality of ideology which revolves around the materiality of signifiers and institutions), it contains within itself the idea of communication<sup>50</sup>, not in a Habermasian sense but in terms of the materiality of signifiers and institutions.

Thus regarded, we can say that, though Althusser and Gramsci use the same terminology, their understanding is quite different. Althusser’s conception of topography remains within the matrix of structuralism, whether it is in the form of ideology or communication, in that it regards the subject as an effect. Yet Gramsci still presupposes the autonomy of the subject: there is an unmediated relationship between politics and subject in Gramsci’s formulation of hegemony, and politics runs exclusively on the autonomy of the subject. Gramsci’s hegemony apparently has the potential to think the materiality of ideology, and his interest on language can be located within the materiality of signifiers, but when he links the theory of hegemony to “consent”, it surreptitiously revives the idea of the autonomy of the subject. On the other hand, subjectivity, for Althusser, is the effect of the symbolic: Althusser’s theory of ideology presupposes the materiality of ideology based upon the materiality of signifiers. Here it is worth mentioning in passing Balibar’s reading of Spinoza. Differently from Deleuze’s vitalist interpretation of Spinoza, Balibar grasps Spinoza’s theory as the theory of communication: Spinoza explains individuality in terms of the function of communication. So, Spinoza, according to Balibar, posits the communication structure of society as a universal constant/constraint of society/history. So what Balibar attempts to do is to generalize Marxism<sup>51</sup>, which means extending the boundary of Marxism by articulating the framework of the mode of production with another universal frameworks (this implies the multiplicity of universal structure, not random interventions of arbitrary factors), e.g., the mode of communication (Spinoza)<sup>52</sup>. To the extent that Althusser’s conception of topography contains the elements of communication, we can apply Balibar’s idea of communication to clarify what remains latent in it (then, we can also find a continuity between later Althusser and Balibar).

## 5. *A Last Classical Marxist?*

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<sup>49</sup> L. Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, cit., pp. 162-164.

<sup>50</sup> See K.D. Kang *Debates on Structuralist Marxism*, Seoul, Seo-Guang Sa, 2014, ch. 4.

<sup>51</sup> See E. Balibar, *Masses, Classes, Ideas*, transl. by J. Swenson, New York, Routledge, 1994, “Preface”

<sup>52</sup> According to Balibar, “material processes are themselves (over- and under-) determined by the processes of the imaginary, which have their own very effective materiality [...] the imaginary [is] the ‘infrastructure of the infrastructure’ itself” (E. Balibar, *Politics and the Other Scene*, trans. by Ch. Jones, J. Swenson and Ch. Turner, London, Verso, 2002, p. XIII). Yves Duroux explains that, for Balibar, the mode of subjectivation constitutes the second base (conditions) of politics (Y. Duroux, *Inactuel Marx: remarques sur le noeud politique*, “Critique”, 53, 1997, n. 601-602, pp. 522-536: 528).

If we admit the theoretical effectivity of Althusser's formulation of topography, it installs a significant theoretical tension in Althusser's project, closely related to his concept of ideology. In other words, the formulation of the materiality of ideology based on this new understanding of topography leads us to confront an important theoretical tension in Althusser's oeuvre. Althusser's theory implies that Marx's critique of political economy is a kind of politics. The truth of politics, for Marx, lies in the materiality of economic processes, i.e. the contradictions of exploitation. Of course, there is no doubt that Althusser was fundamentally a Marxist philosopher in the sense of understanding the mode of production as a cause of politics. However, Althusser's theory of ideology implies that Marx's critique of economy is not sufficient enough to constitute the theory of politics, and that (the critique of) ideology is a general element of politics. Using structuralist terms, the subject is determined by the mode of production and by the ideological formation. So, Althusser did not move directly towards the notion of the autonomy of politics in order to fill in the theoretical gap of political theory, but attempted to account for it by adding ideology as another "motor cause" (or two other scenes in Balibar's terms) of politics.

instead of *adding* a theory of superstructure [ideology] to the existing theory of the "structure", aim[ed] at *transforming* the concept of structure itself by showing that its process of "production" and "reproduction" *originally* depends on unconscious ideological conditions. As a consequence, the social formation is no longer representable in dualistic terms – a thesis that logically should lead us to abandon the image of the superstructure<sup>53</sup>.

So, the criticism of ideology constitutes, for Althusser, politics together with the criticism of economy. The causality of ideology based upon the materiality of ideology allows us to reinterpret Althusser's oeuvre through the concept of overdetermination. In a sense, Althusser's works of 1976-78, possibly even his whole oeuvre, are based on the thesis of the materiality of ideology and ideas, which does not seem to sit well with his fundamental thesis of materialism: determination in the last instance by the economy. If ideology has its own materiality and contributes to change in the structure, this does not seem to be easily compatible with the thesis of determination in the last instance by the economy (in fact, the thesis of determination in the last instance by the economy does not move in harmony with his anti-teleological account of history and with his theoretical formulation of overdetermination insofar as it conceives of the economy as the ultimate cause of historical development). That is, a theoretical tension between overdetermination and determination in the last instance cuts across Althusser's work, and the contradictory relation between these two terms remained in the margins starting in the early sixties: "the lonely hour of the last instance never comes". Now the later formulation of topography, which posits the causality/materiality of ideology, brings this tension to the fore, and going beyond Althusser, we can reconstruct Althusser's project of recasting historical materialism with the concept of overdetermination. In other words, Althusser's entire oeuvre proposes, if implicitly, the dual determination of

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<sup>53</sup> E. Balibar, "Non-contemporaneity of Althusser", in E. Ann Kaplan, M. Sprinker (eds.), *The Althusserian Legacy*, London, Verso, 1993, p. 8.

the mode of production and ideology.

We can interpret this situation from two opposite perspectives. Firstly, Althusser simply might not be aware of this theoretical tension. If this is the case, what he was doing resists what he was saying. In other words, Althusser actually deconstructed the thesis of determination in the last instance by the economy, but did not recognize its implication. Secondly, Althusser might fully recognize the implication of his work, but strategically refrained from announcing it. In fact, it is not difficult to read the strategy of “theoretical detour” in Althusser’s work. If the latter is the case, we can read how conjunctures affect the theory itself from this internal tension in Althusser’s theoretical position: self-censorship or strategy of theoretical detour as Spinoza did with the notion of God.

Whatever the case is, what we can find in Althusser’s theory is a shift from classical Marxism to a broad reconfiguration of Marxism (historical materialism) which proposes another motor cause of society. Though sticking to the idea of the determination in the last instance by the economy, he actually deconstructs Marxism, and extends its scope. As regards Althusser’s project in general, Gregory Elliott writes that Althusser’s Marxism gives momentum to facilitate the development of postmodernism and post-structuralism, which undermines the theoretical effectivity of Marxism by attacking the determination in the last instance by the economy; according to Elliott, Althusser’s work also facilitates the eclipse of Althusserian project as well. In my view, it is not fair to ascribe the eclipse of Marxism to Althusser (in that Althusser also has positive elements to develop it). Rather, it would be more reasonable to find causes for the decline of Marxism (as a theory) in the decline of the working class movements, and in the efficient counterattack of the capitalist, as is well indicated by the emergence of neo-liberalism. In order to properly assess the theoretical/political influence of post-theories, and its influence on and by Althusser’s theory, more careful studies need to be followed. But, one thing to note is that the eclipse of Marxism, under the influence of neo-liberalism and post-modernism, produces a positive conjunctural effect on Marxism in a paradoxical way. When Althusser proposed “overdetermination” as a truly Marxist concept, it was criticized as pluralism. Now with the eclipse of orthodox Marxism, and of the Stalinist parties (e.g. PCF), the idea of overdetermination is relatively free from the criticism of pluralism. In addition, escaping from the theoretical and political influence of post-theories, we can say that overall changes within conjunctures allow us to rethink the meaning of overdetermination. Isn’t Lenin’s idea of “concrete analysis of concrete situations” fundamentally pluralistic? Are the sciences in general pluralist? Two points are worth mentioning. First of all, the re-conceptualization of topography allows, as mentioned above, us to readdress the problematic of ideology by proposing the possibility to read it into the conception of the mode of communication. At least it has the potential to concretize the problematic of ideology by accounting for the relationship between the masses and historical materialism. Secondly, it also forces us to think the meaning of overdetermination by proposing another universal mechanisms which concretize the problematic of overdetermination. On this point, Balibar writes:

The class struggle can and must be understood as a determining structure affecting all social practices, without however being the only one. Or, to put it more clearly, it is precisely to the extent that it affects all practices that it necessarily interferes with the universality of other structures. Universality here is not synonymous with unicity, any more than overdetermination is the same as indeterminacy<sup>54</sup>.

From a similar perspective, it is possible to see, as Yoon suggests, class exploitation as a “universal constant”, which in some sense coincides with Bhaskar’s formulation of generative mechanism<sup>55</sup>. According to Yoon, in the same way that universal constants in physics such as G (Newton’s constant), k (Boltzmann’s constant), c (Einstein’s constant – the speed of light), and h (Planck’s constant) express, delimit and explain universal elements of the world, and condition (the formulation of) the universal laws in physics, class exploitation is a universal aspect of society, and conditions the development of it. That is, class exploitation is a universal and constant constraint of society, and thus acts as a necessary condition of the development of society, while not being the only one. So we can ask whether overdetermination distinguishes itself from pluralism by insisting the multiplicity of universal constants: overdetermination presupposes the coexistence and constant functioning of universal elements, not random determination of arbitrary elements. More broadly, we need to explore what can be the Marxist concept of historical causality once again, and along with Althusser, we can test “overdetermination” as a demarcation line (or at least as reference point) between materialism and idealism<sup>56</sup> (economy as an universal constraint, not as the final cause).

#### 6. *Italian Connection: search for an alternative to the party apparatus*

The concept of topography, insofar as it denotes the theoretical necessity to deal with the independent mechanism of the superstructure, whether it is related to Gramsci’s hegemonic apparatus(integral state) or Althusser’s ideological state apparatus, raises, in the end, the question of how Marxist ideas can be materialized in concrete forms. There is no doubt that a new form of political organization or apparatus will appear as a result of complex economic, cultural, and political interactions, and history seems to prove the poverty of our imagination at this point. In some sense, Althusser’s criticism of the PCF serves as a negative index to designate the difficulty of maintaining and renewing the vitality of communist movement. However, we still need to ask where we should find a clue to make a new start. Althusser’s criticism of the PCF, and Gramsci’s theory of the state can be a good reference point to think about it.

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<sup>54</sup> E. Balibar, I. Wallerstein, *Race Nation Class: Ambiguous Identities*, trans. (of E. Balibar) by Ch. Turner, London, Verso, 1991, p. 181.

<sup>55</sup> S. Yoon *Outlines of Generalized Marxism*, Seoul, Gong-Gam, 2006, pp. 163-175; A. Collier, *Scientific Realism and Socialist Thought*, Brighton, Harvester, 1988, pp. 66-70; R. Bhaskar, *A Realist Theory of Science*, London, Verso, 1975.

<sup>56</sup> K. D. Kang, *Debates on Structuralist Marxism*, cit., 229-246.

Although nominally loyal to the international communist movement and a long-standing member of its French organization, the PCF, Althusser's thinking had long been at odds with communist orthodoxy. The PCF could not simply ignore Althusser's theoretical strategy of a "return to Marx", but sought to live with it and with him. Consequently, an uneasy but essentially peaceful relationship between them was maintained for a long time. However, the 22nd Congress of the PCF brought this contradictory relation to an end. It was at this Congress that the PCF renounced the dictatorship of the proletariat. Althusser denounced the party's abandonment of it reminding the party that "the 'abandonment' of a theoretical concept [...] cannot be the object of a political decision"<sup>57</sup>. The tone and content of criticism became more fierce and aggressive in *What Must Change in the Party*. The PCF leadership, according to Althusser, reproduced the parliamentary and military aspects of the party in its structure and mode of functioning; the party had come to depend on the electoral system which produced the hierarchy of officials; rank-and-file militants were enclosed in upward-moving traffic, which filtered the rank-and-file contribution, and had no contacts with militants from other cells; everything was done from above, and, consequently, rank-and-file members were alienated from the party's decision making process. For Althusser, the same problem can be seen in Party's relationship to the masses. The masses must be at the core of a revolutionary party's political practices, and thus its relationship to the masses is the central political relationship. Nonetheless, the PCF leadership had a "deep-rooted, tenacious and inveterate distrust of the masses"<sup>58</sup>, and viewed them as the object of manipulation to win political power. The overall result was that the PCF's political line and functions separated the masses from the party; "the Party appears as a fortress".

Althusser here flags some important points in thinking the alter-apparatus of a communist movement, if not providing a direct answer to the question of concrete forms. So taking some distance from Althusser, we can try to reconstruct a platform on which to build up a new path for communist movements, and in order to answer it, we need to ask: how can we interpret Althusser's belated criticism of the PCF in relation to the history of the communist movements? To the extent that Althusser's criticism was not just towards its leadership, but also towards its structure and functions, we can regard it as a fundamental criticism towards the existing party form as a revolutionary organization. More precisely, it can be seen as a criticism toward the vanguard party as a revolutionary form of political organization. This is not to say that the Leninist conception of the vanguard party is historically wrong or meaningless, but to say that the vanguard form is no longer valid as an effective alternative in communist movements. If this is the case, we can produce a positive effect from Althusser's critique in thinking alternative form of politics. In short, Althusser's criticism of the communist party reminds us of an underground current in the history of the modern communist movement: council communism. Apparently, Althusser was not a council communist and he did not mention it as an alternative. So, at a first glimpse, it seems arbitrary to relate Althusser's criticism to council communism, but, in addition to the fact that

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<sup>57</sup> L. Althusser, *On the Twenty-Second Congress of the French Communist Party*, "New Left Review", 1977, n.104, pp.3-22: 10..

<sup>58</sup> L. Althusser, *What Must Change in the Party*, "New Left Review", 1978, n.109, pp.19-45: 43.

Althusser stressed workers' active participation in the political organization, looking at the conjuncture in which Althusser was engaged with regard to the crisis of Marxism would provide the possibility to link Althusser to the tradition of council communism. In the late 1970s, Althusser showed more interest in the internal problems of the PCI (or more accurately the left faction within the PCI), and put some hope on it. It was mainly because the rift between Althusser and the PCF got deepened, and their relationship would soon move past the point of no return due to his criticism of the party. But it can be conjectured that the encounter between Althusser and the left faction within the PCI was not accidental or arbitrary considering they shared some theoretical background.

As mentioned above, confronted by the general depression in the international and domestic communist movements in the mid 1970s, Althusser declared the crisis of Marxism in a conference at Venice (1977) organized by *Il Manifesto* (a far-Left group expelled by the PCI in 1969) under the title *Power & Opposition in post-revolutionary societies*, and there was a follow-up interview with Rossana Rossanda<sup>59</sup>, in which Althusser also pointed out that Marxism was a limited theory. His comments about the problems of political organization and the PCI's political strategies (e.g., on the Bobbio debate and the debate between Amato-Ingrao-de Giovanni) in the conference presentation and in the interview provoked responses from the theorists in the PCI. In his presentation on the crisis of Marxism, and in the interview with Rossanda, Althusser exhibited an interest in Bruno Trentin's<sup>60</sup> and Pietro Ingrao's<sup>61</sup> theoretical and political ideas. Both addressed organizational questions, i.e., the relations between party and trade unions, from the perspective of the workers' council<sup>62</sup>. At the Venice conference, Trentin raised the problem of hierarchy between the parties and trade unions. According to him, the current crisis of the communist movements was closely involved with the authoritative subordination of the trade unions by the parties: in 1972, Trentin attempted to reform the CGIL classifying council unions one of the main protagonists of "Hot Autumn".

So, what was crucial in the communist movements was to restore the role of trade unions as "autonomous and conflictive organizations"<sup>63</sup>. That is to say, trade unions needed to reunify economics and politics in the factories and workshops "while remaining 'partial' and not crystallizing into totalizing institutions"<sup>64</sup> in the construction of a collective synthesis. Trentin's criticism of the relationship between party and trade union corresponded to Althusser's position on the same question in that both viewed

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<sup>59</sup> L. Althusser, *Entretien*, "Dialectiques", 1978, n. 23, pp. 5-12.

<sup>60</sup> L. Althusser, *The Crisis of Marxism*, cit., p. 216.

<sup>61</sup> L. Althusser, *Entretien*, cit., pp. 10-11.

<sup>62</sup> On Council Communism, see Marcel van der Linden, *On Council Communism*, "Historical Materialism", 12, 2004, n. 4, pp. 27-50; the Dutch Group of International Communists (GIK), *The Origins of the Movement for Workers' Councils in Germany*, <http://libcom.org/library/origins-movement-workers-councils>, 1994; P. Rachleff, *Marxism and Council Communism: The Foundation for Revolutionary Theory for Modern Society*, Brooklyn, Revisionist Press, 1976; P. Bourrinet, *La Gauche communiste germano-hollandaise: Des origines à 1968*, <http://www.left-dsl.nl>, 1999.

<sup>63</sup> B. Trentin, "Only Conflictive Democracy Can Guarantee Liberty, East and West", in L. Althusser *et al.*, *Power & Opposition in Post-Revolutionary Societies*, London, Ink Links, London, 1979, pp. 196-206.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 205

the democratic relations (within the party) between leadership and membership, and between the party and the other mass organizations such as labor unions as a crucial issue in revitalizing the communist movements. For instance, in *On the Twenty-Second Congress of the French Communist Party*, Althusser emphasized a necessity to overcome hierarchical relations between the party and workers while retaining the problematic of the dictatorship of the proletariat (in so doing, Althusser brought to the fore a core problem in the problematic of the dictatorship of the proletariat, i.e. the dilemma of “democratic centralism” and the “right to form factions”). So, we can translate Althusser’s criticism through the prism of council communism, though Althusser did not refer to council communism.

Yet, it should be noted that the differences between them were also obvious. The criticism of Althusser from the PCI was generally targeted on his objection to the idea of the use of the state as a tool of transition. From Althusser’s side, the Ingrao-Left’s attempt to articulate the mass movements with the state was seen putting too much emphasis on the role of the state. In short, Althusser was opposed to the notion of “a party of government” (‘democratization and revolutionization of the state from within’), and defended the notion of a revolutionary party outside the state. Althusser’s central argument was to criticize the idea of Eurocommunism, even though he did not object to the “possibility of a peaceful transition to socialism”<sup>65</sup>. That is to say, Althusser had a skeptical view about the idea of ‘democratizing and revolutionizing the state from within’.

This last point forces us to see a weak point in Althusser’s understanding of the state, and from this we can attempt to hazard an answer as regards the problem of alternative apparatus, which opens a theoretical space in which Gramsci becomes meaningful. Agreeing with Althusser’s objection against the notion of “a party of government”, we can ask if it is possible to think a revolution outside the state. On this point, Balibar writes that “the existence of a social movement “outside the State” is a contradiction in terms”, which drove him to part company with Althusser<sup>66</sup>(Balibar might say that there is no insurrectional politics, i.e. revolution, without a constitutional politics or revolution becomes universal in the form of domination – an articulation of the insurrectional politics and the constitutional politics)<sup>67</sup>. In a sense, Althusser’s conception of overdetermination (and his notion of structure) does not sit well with a social/communist movement outside the state in that it implies that reproduction and transition are not separable, but rather the different sides of the same process: in particular, the notion of underdetermination implies, according to Althusser, “a threshold of determination which, if it is not crossed, causes revolutions to miscarry, revolutionary movements to stagnate or disappear, and imperialism to rot while still developing, etc.”<sup>68</sup>This idea of underdetermination implies that the moment of the current conjuncture is nothing other than the moment of determination whether or not it crosses a revolutionary threshold, and that the structure is the succession of

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<sup>65</sup> L. Althusser, *On the Twenty-Second Congress of the French Communist Party*, cit., p. 13.

<sup>66</sup> E. Balibar, *The Infinite Contradiction*, “Yale French Studies”, 1995, n. 88, pp. 142-164: 157.

<sup>67</sup> E. Balibar, *Masses, Classes, Ideas*, cit., p. 51.

<sup>68</sup> L. Althusser, *Essays in Self-Criticism*, translated by G. Lock, London, New Left Books, 1976, p. 187.

continuous conjunctural determinations. So, Balibar comments that “two reciprocal points of view of overdetermination and underdetermination”, for Althusser, “come into play at the same time”<sup>69</sup>. As such, the concept of overdetermination is not opposite to the Gramscian notion of “war of position”, but has some theoretical space in it to account for or subsume it. Or Gramsci’s notion of revolution as a long worldwide process which requires a protracted labor of capturing fortresses and earthworks and constructing a historic bloc of various classes can be reinterpreted from the perspective of overdetermination/underdetermination.

Then we can place Gramsci’s concept of hegemony in Althusser’s framework – the question of how we are going to articulate Althusser’s critique of the PCF with Gramsci’s idea of a social change within capitalism (without falling into the trap of “apparatus of government or party of government”). Or we can ask where to find an alternative form of political organization, one not based upon the party apparatus or vanguard party. In this framework, Althusser’s criticism of the PCF from the perspective of council communism confronts Gramsci’s theory of political organization in two different sides: Bolshevism (vanguard party) and (the left-wing) Euro-communism (the Ingrao-Left). It was well known that not just the Russian Revolution (Revolution against Karl Marx’s *Capital*) but the factory council in Turin in 1920 had a significant impact on Gramsci’s development of the theory of hegemony. The Italian factory occupation in Turin, which was one of the first instances of a factory being seized by workers, gave rise for the first time to the idea that the workers could make the revolution not by bringing production to a halt (the general strike) but rather by taking charge of it themselves<sup>70</sup>, and Gramsci, as Buci-Glucksmann points out, regards the structure of councils as “essentially an attempt to create the elements of a dual power, to construct, starting from the masses, the foundations for a seizure of power that would shatter the existing state”<sup>71</sup>. According to Buci-Glucksmann, Gramsci’s councilism is an important factor to distinguish Gramsci from Bordiga, whom he once shared criticism against the strategy of class alliance (the “United Front”) with<sup>72</sup>.

Then was Gramsci a council communist? In this respect, Gramsci was a controversial figure who reflects conflicts between Bolshevism and council communism. Though inspired by the factory council in Turin, Gramsci, under the influence of the Russian leadership, downplayed the spontaneism of workers’ council against “voluntary associations” of the union and the party, and highlighted the party’s leading role in the formation of class consciousness and the education of the masses. Gramsci’s position was generally in line with Lenin’s idea of the vanguard party. For Lenin, the hegemony of the proletariat was “unthinkable without the leading function of the vanguard party, in Soviet Russian conditions, and practically identical with the leadership of the Bolshevik Party”<sup>73</sup>, and Gramsci’s formulation of hegemony largely coincided with the

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<sup>69</sup> E. Balibar, “Structural Causality, Overdetermination, and Antagonism”, cit., p. 115.

<sup>70</sup> V. Wallis, “Workers’ Control and Revolution”, in *Ours to Master and to Own: Workers’ Control from the Commune to the Present*, ed. by D. Azzellini and I. Ness, Chicago, Haymarket, 2011, pp. 10-31.

<sup>71</sup> Ch. Buci-Glucksmann, *Gramsci and the State*, cit., p. 165.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 180.

Leninist conception of hegemony and the party. Some theorists<sup>74</sup> including Anderson and Buci-Glucksmann make this point clear: “the transition from war of movement to war of position was certainly by no means limited to a mere geographical distinction”<sup>75</sup>, and Anderson finds the roots of Gramsci’s theory of hegemony in the Bolshevik experience rather than in the experience of the factory councils. Gramsci gradually recognized the limits of council communism broadly in support of the idea of vanguard party. For Gramsci, the strategy of factory councils is related to the imperialist phase of the historical evolution of the bourgeois class where industrial power is divorced from the factory and concentrated in a trust, a monopoly, a bank, the State bureaucracy<sup>76</sup>, but seems unrealistic as form of alternative organization in the west<sup>77</sup>; it fails to exercise its meaning, entrenched by strong and stable hegemonic apparatuses. On this point, Althusser comments:

What present itself, in Gramsci, as a “theory of the state” [...] [is] more closely akin to a *political examination of the “nature” of the “composition” or internal arrangement [dispositive] of the states of the day, undertaken with a view to defining a political strategy for the workers’ movement* after all hope that the schema of 1917 would be repeated had faded, and after these states had been marked by the transformation inflicted on them by the development of imperialism<sup>78</sup>.

If Gramsci’s core with regard to the theory of communist organization is the vanguard party rather than council communism, Gramsci is not free from Althusser’s criticism of the PCF (as is Althusser himself), though his formulation of hegemony casts some light on the implication of overdetermination. As mentioned above, this is not simply to say that his political practice is historically wrong, but to ask if his theory can be a practical index to find a breakthrough in the current conjuncture. Or we can ask at a more fundamental level if Gramsci’s concept of hegemony, which presupposes a gradual process of revolution, particularly in relation to the developed form of capitalism, may not be intrinsically compatible with the vanguard party in opposition to his own understanding of the party and revolution<sup>79</sup>. So, my last working hypothesis here is to reinterpret Gramsci’s theory of hegemony/state (and Althusser’s criticism of the PCF) through the prism of social movement. Communist movements in the 21st century, unlike the early 20th century, may have to take the form of social movements rather than the vanguard party, and it may better realize what is latent in Gramsci’s theory. If the vanguard party does not fit the bill as a revolutionary organization, and, at the same time, if the communist movement should go beyond “a party of government”, communism as a social movement comes into view as a realistic alternative. Yet the discussion of council communism and social movement unionism is not to idealize them as the

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<sup>74</sup> See also F. Rosengarten, *The Revolutionary Marxism of Antonio Gramsci*, Leiden, Brill, 2014, ch. 1.

<sup>75</sup> Ch. Buci-Glucksmann, *Gramsci and the State*, cit., p. 187.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., p. 138.

<sup>77</sup> It should be also noted that Gramsci shared left-opposition with Bordiga, who refused to accept class alliance with social-democrats, but in the end broke with him.

<sup>78</sup> L. Althusser, *Philosophy of the Encounter. Later Writings 1978-1987*, cit., p. 141.

<sup>79</sup> According to Laclau and Mouffe, “if in Leninism there was a militarization of politics, in Gramsci there is a demilitarization of war” (E. Laclau, Ch. Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, cit., p. 70).

contemporary form of communism, but to stress the necessity to reconstitute Marxist theory based upon existing references in the conjunctures. In the current conjuncture in which the Marxist movement remains marginal for some reasons, it would be helpful to reread the Marxist theory based upon the really existing movement instead of simply applying it to the conjunctures. Yet this is more than just saying that we need to find empirical evidence of viable communism; on a theoretical level, some form of SMU, .e.g. Waterman's idea of SMU, has some affinity with Althusser's theory in general, and also provides some point with which to reinterpret Gramsci. Instead of conclusion, therefore, I would like to propose some points of contact between Althusser and SMU, and Gramsci and SMU for more future discussion.

## 7. *Council Communism, Social Movement and Althusser*

Firstly, SMU addresses communism/communist movement in terms of social movement and thus poses the masses as subject of this movement. The concept of social movement unionism corresponds to some degree to Althusser's conception of overdetermination in the sense that it allows for a multiplicity of contradictions. For instance, Peter Waterman's social movement unionism grasps the problem of labor and production (workers' control) as a core problem and at the same time attempts to get over the early form of factory councils by arguing for the necessity to articulate with other movements closely related to other universal constraints of society and history such as sexual differences and natural environment. So, it broadly accepts a multiplicity of contradictions of global space, subjects and movements.

Secondly, rather than rejecting a mechanistic distinction of reform within capitalism and transformation beyond capitalism, it insists on the interrelation of 1) a radical transformation of capitalism in the sense of imaginable global communities and 2) the immediate necessity of civilizing a capitalist world order that threatens not so much that order itself as the existence of the human species<sup>80</sup>. This somewhat resonates with Gramsci's idea of changes within capitalism or the state. Or it may be possible to reinterpret Gramsci's war of position/passive revolution with this concept rather than with the vanguard party (relating hegemony to social movement). Without falling into the trap of reformism, this articulates the long term goals of communism with short-term strategies of transforming capitalism.

Thirdly, Waterman's social movement unionism discloses and clarifies what remains underdeveloped in Althusser's theory of ideology. Though Althusser's theory of ideology/topography implies the effectivity of ideology, i.e., ideological state apparatuses, based upon the materiality of the symbolic, Althusser does not properly recognize the effectivity of ideology from a practical point of view. He has a tendency to disregard the strategic necessity to work on the elaboration of the symbolic. For Althusser, liberty and equality are just bourgeois ideology which serves to conceal the contradiction of

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<sup>80</sup> P. Waterman, *Globalization, Social Movements and the New Internationalisms*, London, Continuum, 2001, p. 2.

exploitation of the capitalist mode of production. However, if the formation of ideology or subjectivity is grounded on the dual determination of the mode of production and the ideological structure, i.e., the mode of subjectivation, it implies that it is necessary to act on the symbolic as well as contradiction in the real. That is to say, it is necessary to approach the class struggle not just in terms of the Real (in Lacanian terms) but also of the symbolic<sup>81</sup> in the sense that ideology is an integral part of society and thus a communist revolution does not simply abolish class exploitation but demands the constitution of a new political system based upon a new form of the imaginary: “ideology [...] is indispensable in any society if men are to be formed, transformed and equipped to respond to the demands of their conditions of existence [...] it is in it and by it that it transforms men’s ‘consciousness’, that is, their attitudes and behaviours so as to raise them to the level of their tasks and the conditions of their existence”<sup>82</sup>. In other words, to the extent that ideology as the system of representation is not a mere reflection of reality but rather operates as its own mechanism, it is essential to think of an alternative ideological form in a revolutionary movement. This means that those symbols or notions are not just words hiding contradictions such as class exploitation, but can serve for the class struggle of the proletariat. It is Waterman who recognizes and develops the strategic value of symbolic struggle, and we can use his idea to clarify what remains latent in Althusser’s theory of ideology.<sup>83</sup> Waterman writes:

The contradiction between the propertylessness of the “great mass of humanity” and an “existing world of wealth and culture” has been increasing since Marx’s time. However [...] we are witness to process of mass proletarianization (deprivation of means of production) without creation of a majority of proletariat [...] We are cognizant of a continuing or even increasing coincidence of propertylessness with female or minority (ethnic, religious) status. So this truly international contradiction has been accompanied not with a growing homogenization of the propertyless but a continuing heterogenization that is repeatedly restructured [...] I propose a radical solution [...] we should here take “proletariat” as a metaphor for all the alienated, all those denied their past right, their future potential<sup>84</sup>.

Waterman’s proposition of communism as social movement, which locates communist movement both in the terrain of the real and of the symbolic, argues that the formation of global universal identity is a key factor in constituting and renewing communism in the new era, and this largely corresponds to what Althusser’s reformulation of historical causality based upon the concepts of overdetermination and ideology/topography. In Gramsci’s terms, it is a necessary part of revolutionary movement to form hegemony by working on the symbolic level.

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<sup>81</sup> S. Yoon, *Outlines of Generalized Marxism*, cit., pp. 296-306.

<sup>82</sup> L. Althusser, *For Marx*, trans. by B. Brewster, New York, Vintage Books, 1970, p. 235.

<sup>83</sup> This view raises a question against Žižek, who grasps the ‘class struggle’ in the Lacanian sense (class struggle as an impossible). Žižek’s conceptualization of class antagonism as a case of the Lacanian real disregards the symbolic aspect of class antagonism (the materiality of ideology) by locating it in the real.

<sup>84</sup> P. Waterman, *Globalization, Social Movements and the New Internationalisms*, cit., pp. 32-33.

8. *The Imaginary Tradition of Council Communism*

To sum up, Althusser's concept of topography raises two fundamental questions with regard to the theory of political organization: the necessity to find an internal mechanism of the political organization including the state, which Althusser himself tried to do with the concept of ideological state apparatus, and the necessity to reread the history of communist movement through the materiality of institutions. In this sense, we could probably try to constitute the history of council communism. Factory councils in the early 20th century are not the same as social unions in the contemporary world. Trentin's attempt to reconstruct the labor union as the center of communist movement within capitalism is not the direct heir of council communism nor does it have a direct relationship with Waterman's idea of communism as social movement. However, in the sense that they pursue communism in the form of council and mass movement, they provide a reference to rethink communist movements in a different way from the form of vanguard party. So, it is possible to construct the imaginary tradition of council communism which runs through factory/council communism via Trentin's renewal of labor unionism to social movement unionism in response to Althusser's critique of the PCF. This hypothesis, though it may have some imaginary elements, can serve as an index to rethink a new form for communist movements.