Perry Anderson “The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci” (excerpt)  
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The Key Asymmetry

Keeping for the moment to the terms of the Prison Notebooks, it has been seen that the key distribution, which eludes each of Gramsci’s successive versions, although they miss it from different directions, is an asymmetry between civil society and the State in the West: coercion is located in the one, consent is located in both. This ‘topological’ answer, however, itself poses a further and deeper problem. Beyond their distribution, what is the inter-relation or connection between consent and coercion in the structure of bourgeois class power in metropolitan capitalism? The workings of bourgeois democracy appear to justify the idea that advanced capitalism fundamentally rests on the consent of the working class to it. In fact, acceptance of this conception is the cornerstone of the strategy of the ‘parliamentary road to socialism’, along which progress can be measured by the conversion of the proletariat to the prospect of socialism, until an arithmetical majority is achieved, whereupon the rule of the parliamentary system makes the enactment of socialism painlessly possible. The idea that the power of capital essentially or exclusively takes the form of cultural hegemony in the West is in effect a classical tenet of reformism. This is the involuntary temptation that lurks in some of Gramsci’s notes. Is it truly banished by his alternative assertion that the hegemony of the Western bourgeoisie is a combination of consent and coercion? There is no doubt that this is an improvement, but the relationship between the two terms cannot be grasped by their mere conjunction or addition. Yet within Gramsci’s framework everything depends on an accurate calibration of precisely this relation. How should it be conceived, theoretically?

No adequate answer to the question can be presented here. For a scientific solution of it is only possible through historical enquiry. No philological commentary, or theoretical fiat, can settle the difficult problems of bourgeois class power in the West. A directly substantive and comparative investigation of the actual political systems of the major imperialist countries in the twentieth century can alone establish the real structures of the rule of capital. Historical materialism permits of no other procedure. This essay naturally cannot even broach it. All that can be attempted here is to advance certain critical suggestions within the textual limits of Gramsci’s discourse. Their verification necessarily remains subject to the ordinary disciplines of scientific study.

The Nature of Bourgeois Class Rule

To formulate a preliminary response, we can turn to a phrase of Gramsci himself. In the first notebook he composed in prison, he referred in passing to ‘forms of mixed struggle’ that were ‘fundamentally military and preponderantly political’ in character----noting at the same time that ‘every political struggle always has a military substratum’. The paradoxical juxtaposition and distinction of ‘fundamental’ and ‘preponderant’ to describe the relationship between two forms of struggle, provides a formula that can be adapted for a more adequate account of the dispositions of bourgeois class power in advanced capitalism. The Althusserian tradition was later to codify the same duality with its distinction between ‘determinant’ and ‘dominant’ --- taken not from Gramsci, but from Marx. In analyzing the contemporary social formations of the West, we can substitute ‘coercion’ or ‘repression’ for Gramsci’s ‘military
struggle’---as the mode of class rule enforced by violence; ‘culture’ or ‘ideology’ for his ‘political struggle’---as the mode of class rule secured by consent. It is then possible to capture something like the real nature of the relationship between the two variables by which Gramsci was haunted.

If we revert to Gramsci’s original problematic, the normal structure of capitalist political power in bourgeois-democratic states is in effect simultaneously and indivisibly dominated by culture and determined by coercion. To deny the ‘preponderant’ or dominant role of culture in the contemporary bourgeois power system is to liquidate the most salient immediate difference between Western parliamentarism and Russian absolutism, and to reduce the former to a myth. The fact is that this cultural domination is embodied in certain irrefutably concrete institutions: regular elections, civic freedoms, rights of assembly—all of which exist in the West and none of which directly threaten the class power of capital. The day-to-day system of bourgeois rule is thus based on the consent of the masses, in the form of the ideological belief that they exercise self-government in the representative State. At the same time, however, to forget the ‘fundamental’ or determinant role of violence within the power structure of contemporary capitalism in the final instance is to regress to reformism, in the illusion that an electoral majority can legislate socialism peacefully from a parliament.

An analogy may serve to illuminate the relationship in question provided its limits (those of any analogy) are kept in mind. A monetary system in the capitalist mode of production is constituted from two distinct media of exchange: paper and gold. It is not a summation of these two forms, for the value of fiduciary issue which circulates every day and thus maintains the system under normal conditions is dependent on the quantum of metal in the bank reserves at any given moment, despite the fact that this metal is completely absent from the system as a medium of exchange. Only the paper, not the gold, appears within circulation, yet the paper is in the final instance determined by the gold, without which it would cease to be currency. Crisis conditions, moreover, will necessarily trigger a sudden reversion of the total system to the metal which always lies invisibly behind it: a collapse of credit infallibly produces a rush to gold.

In the political system, a similar structural relationship between ideology and repression, consent and coercion, prevails. The normal conditions of ideological subordination of the masses----the day-to-day routines of a parliamentary democracy----are themselves constituted by a silent, absent force which gives them their currency: the monopoly of legitimate violence by the State. Deprived of this, the system of cultural control would be instantly fragile, since the limits of possible actions against it would disappear. With it, it is immensely powerful----so powerful that it can, paradoxically, do ‘without’ it: in effect, violence may normally scarcely appear within the bounds of the system at all.

In the most tranquil democracies today, the army may remain invisible in its barracks, the police appear uncontentious on its beat. The analogy holds too in another respect. Just as gold as a material substratum of paper is itself a convention that needs acceptance as a medium of exchange, so repression as a guarantor of ideology itself depends on the assent of those who are trained to exercise it. Given this critical proviso, however, the ‘fundamental’ resort of bourgeois class power, beneath the ‘preponderant’ cusp of culture in a parliamentary system, remains coercion.

For historically, and this is the most essential point of all, the development of any revolutionary crisis necessarily displaces the dominance within the bourgeois power structure from ideology to violence. Coercion becomes both determinant and dominant in the supreme crisis, and the army inevitably occupies the front of the stage in any class struggle against the
prospect of a real inauguration of socialism. Capitalist power can in this sense be regarded as a
topological system with a ‘mobile’ center: in any crisis, an objective redeployment occurs, and
capital re-concentrates from its representative into its repressive apparatuses. The fact that the
subjectivity of leading cadres of these apparatuses in Western countries today may remain
innocent of any such scenario, is not proof of their constitutional neutrality, but merely of the
remoteness of the prospect to them. In fact, any revolutionary crisis within an advanced
capitalist country must inevitably produce a reversion to the ultimate determinant of the power
system: force. This is a law of capitalism, which it cannot violate, on pain of death. It is the rule
of the end-game situation.