Gramsci on Economism,
Critical Political Economy,
*il mercato determinato*,
Americanism and Fordism

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Outline

• Marx on historical materialism
• Marx on base and superstructure
• The Italian context
• Gramsci’s anti-economism
• Economics as a science
• Gramsci on il mercato determinato
• Gramsci on the historical bloc
• Americanism and Fordism
• The world market and crisis
• Conclusions
Marx on Historical Materialism

- Marx is said to have synthesized German philosophy, French politics, and English economics (inter alia)
- Adam Smith and David Ricardo on the labour theory of value (initially a defence of the capitalist class against land-owners, later a problem for capital against labour)
- Marx’s value theory of labour: commodity form (and money) and its generalization to labour-power, then studies effects of treating labour power as if it were a commodity (valorization, alienation, class struggle, ....)
- Specificity of capitalist mode of production (wage-labour, rational organization of production, competition, etc)
Quotes from 1859 Preface

• In the social production of their life, men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production that correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces.

• The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness.

• The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness.
• At a certain stage in their development, the material productive forces of society come in conflict with the existing relations of production ... [hence also] with the property relations [their legal expression]. ... From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters.

• Then begins an epoch of social revolution. With the change of the economic foundation the entire immense superstructure is more or less rapidly transformed.

• [Distinguish] between the material transformation of the economic conditions of production and the legal, political, religious, aesthetic or philosophic — in short, ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out.

• No social order ever perishes before all the productive forces for which there is room in it have developed; new, higher relations of production never appear before the material conditions of their existence have matured (key quote for Gramsci)
The Italian Context

• *De te fabula narratur* (Marx, Preface to Capital I)

• English industrial development (manufacturing and machinofacture) indicate future lines of development of other countries (including for Marx’s German readers)

• Gramsci’s ideas influenced by Bolshevik Revolution but firmly rooted in Italian past and present as well as trends in Europe, the USA, and the wider international system

• Italy had a late, unevenly developing economy as well as fragmented national state: industrial north, commercial city-states, Rome and Vatican questions, *Mezzogiorno*, migration from South to North and from Italy to USA
Broader Context of *PN*

- Defeat of Italian factory council movement in 1920
- Bolshevik Revolution 1917 and problems of socialist construction in Soviet Union (NEP, Stalinism)
- Crisis of the liberal state in Italy and the rise of fascism
- Factional and strategic problems of PCI and Comintern
- Economic crisis of 1929-32 and its political impact in USA, Europe, and elsewhere (e.g., Latin America)
- Role of fascist state and corporativism in ‘modernization’ of Italy under the hegemony of the old ruling classes
- Competitive threat to old Europe posed by dynamic of American Fordism and growing world market integration
Gramsci’s Anti-Economism

• Economism as a political position
  – Russian ‘Economists’ in late 19C (industrialize, democratize first)
  – Revolutionary syndicalism focused on production sites
  – Laissez-faire free traders (best policy is no state intervention)
  – Bordiga’s ‘intransigents’ in PCI: focus on economic class struggle
  – Catastrophists – just wait until the final economic collapse

• Economics as a scientific and/or ideological position
  – Classical political economy (before turn to vulgar pol. econ.)
  – Critical (Marxist) political economy (from viewpoint of workers)
  – Pure economics (neo-classical economics, homo economicus, abstract pretence of transhistorical, universal economic theory)
Philosophy of Praxis - I

• Gramsci’s anti-economism means rejecting economism in theory and practice (strategy): but must avoid other one-sided approaches too, e.g., politicism and/or culturalism

• ‘In economics the unitary centre [sc. of analysis] is value, alias the relation between the worker and the industrial productive forces. ... In philosophy [it is] praxis, that is, the relationship between human will (superstructure) and economic structure. In politics [it is] the relationship between State and civil society, that is, the intervention of the State (centralized will) to educate the educator, the social environment in general' (Gramsci 1971: 402-3).
Philosophy of Praxis - II

• To avoid economism, politicism, and culturalism, Gramsci sought to critique and reconstruct the conceptual triplet of economics, state, and civil society and study their links

• He rejected an economicist approach to economic inquiry and showed its links to politics and civil society

• He defined state and state power very broadly (*lo stato integrale*) and explored scope for autonomy of politics

• He was explicitly concerned with the intellectual and moral dimensions of economic as well as political life

• He studied how political and intellectual forces shaped and guided the economy in its broad, integral sense
Gramsci rejected both the economistic and culturalist temptations equally:

- ‘in the first case there is an overestimation of mechanical causes, in the second the voluntaristic and individual element’ (1971: 178).

‘Pure economics abstracts from the given force of the whole of a class organized in the state, of a [capitalist] class which had its trade union in parliament, while the wage earners could not coalesce and bring to bear the force given by the collectivity to each single individual’ (1995: 427)

In short, pure economics focuses on micro-level, individual actors, not how bourgeoisie gets organized in in politics as well as economics; nor how workers tend to be disorganized
Il mercato determinato

- Gramsci uses Ricardo’s concept of *determined market* to show historical specificity of economic forms, institutions, and dynamics of a particular form of economic organization. It was
  - ‘equivalent to [a] determined relation of social forces in a determined structure of the productive apparatus, this relation being guaranteed (i.e. rendered permanent) by a determined political, moral and juridical superstructure’ (1971: 410).

- Describes ‘the determinate social form, of the whole as opposed to the part, of the whole which determines – to a determinate extent – that automatism [quasi-spontaneous development] and ensemble of uniformities and regularities that economic science attempts to describe with the greatest exactness, precision and completeness’ (1995: 171).
More on Determined Market

• ‘While pure economics adopts the notion of determinate market for pedantic [and modelling] purposes and regards it as an arbitrary abstraction oriented to the dispositions of a transhistorical biological man, critical economics regards determinate market as the product of a real process of abstraction that is historically grounded in the operation of a capitalist economy’ (1995: 127).

• Conditions for the determinate market in capitalism are historically specific – not derived from homo economicus

• Study DM as ensemble of concrete economic activities of a given social form, with its own laws, defined via abstraction from empirical details but still historically specific
What shapes the Determined Market?

- *Mercato determinato* (whether capitalist mode of production or specific economic regime) does not emerge spontaneously from the operation of market forces (cf. Polanyi’s claim that laissez-faire was planned).

- Economic regularities depend on entrepreneurs’ ability to organize 'the general system of relationships external to the business itself' (Gramsci 1971: 6).

- Intellectuals also have key role here. Economic laws are secured only insofar as one or more strata of intellectuals give the dominant class a certain homogeneity and an awareness of its function in social and political as well as economic fields (Gramsci 1971: 410-14).
Laws of Tendency

- Laws of a determinate market are doubly tendential: (1) as tendencies with counter-tendencies, they may not be realized; and (2) they exist only insofar as social relations that generate them are reproduced through social action.
- ‘Since any law in political economy can only be tendential, given that it is obtained by isolating a certain number of elements and thus by neglecting the counteracting forces, one should perhaps distinguish a greater or lesser degree of tendentiality and, while the adjective ‘tendential’ [as applied to laws of motion] is usually understood to be obvious, one must insist on it when the tendential nature assumes organic importance’ (1995: 429)
Historical Bloc - I

- This concept used to solve problem of reciprocal relation between material 'base' (for Gramsci, economic ‘structure’) and its politico-ideological 'superstructure'. It reflects 'the necessary reciprocity’ between them (1971: 366)

- He asks how 'the complex, contradictory and discordant ensemble of the superstructures is the reflection of the ensemble of the social relations of production

- In part this reciprocity emerges via structural coupling, co-evolution of interdependent structural and superstructural ensembles but a key role also falls to government and to state in its wider sense of ‘political society + civil society’
Historical Bloc - II

• The ethico-political (and role of state and intellectuals) not only helps to co-constitute economic structures but also provides them with their rationale and legitimacy.

• Analyzing the historical bloc in this way can show how 'material forces are the content and ideologies are the form, though this distinction between form and content has purely didactic value' (Gramsci 1971: 377).

• Key role for values, norms, vision, discourses, linguistic forms, popular beliefs, etc., as well as for new forms of property, new legal forms, etc., in rise and consolidation of new productive forces and new relations of production
Americanism and Fordism - I

• Americanism + Fordism: key themes with own notebook – political and ideological as well as economic orders

• Americanism, or the ‘American system of manufacturing’, is mass production of standardized goods using dedicated machinery, semi-skilled labour, and moving assembly line

• Fordism is rooted in factory system but goes beyond it: norms of consumption as well as production, new modes of disciplining labour (machine-pacing, high wages linked to productivity and profits), new forms of working class household and domesticity, new role for state, increased role of mass media, advertising, hire purchase, etc.
Americanism and Fordism - II

• Americanism is a phenomenon that is at the same time American (the new order of capitalism sighted in the US), European (need of imitation, or on the contrary, wave of panic), and global (American hegemony, imperialism) (Baratta 2004: 20; cf. Gramsci 1971: 317).

• Gramsci studied Americanism/Fordism in terms of their originality (incl. roots in ‘greenfield’ US), its competitive threat to old Europe, issues facing European economies in developing Fordism, given the legacies of feudalism, Ancien Regime, old classes forces, old state forms, etc.

• Hence key role of new class alliances, role of crises, and, in some cases, fascist state, to develop Fordism in Europe
The World Market

• Marx (and Engels) emphasized the world market as the presupposition and posit of capital accumulation: there at the beginning and the result of capitalist expansion

• In late 19C and 20C, imperialism is more important, as context of economic and military conflicts and as cause of crises and revolutions (e.g., post-WW1)

• Gramsci analyses world market as a horizon of economic and political action and framework in which economic crises unfold but also focuses on specific international, national, regional, and local economies and potential future developments (e.g., rise of China is discussed)
Whoever wants to give one sole definition of these events, or what is the same thing, find a single cause or origin, must be rebutted. We are addressing a process that shows itself in many ways, and in which causes and effects become intertwined and mutually entangled. To simplify means to misrepresent and falsify. ...
When did the crisis begin? This question is bound up with the first since we are dealing with a process and not an event ... There is no starting date as such – simply the date of certain of the more striking 'manifestations' that have erroneously and tendentiously become identified with the crisis.

... Autumn 1929, with the Wall Street crash, is the beginning of the crisis for some people [especially] for those who wish to seek its origin and cause in 'Americanism'.

The whole post-war period is one of crisis, linked to efforts to obviate it that, from time to time, have had some success here or there. For some, the war itself is a manifestation of the crisis, even its first manifestation; it was in fact the political and organizational reply of those responsible for the crisis.

This shows it is hard in real terms to separate the economic crisis from the political and ideological ones, etc (Q15, §5)
Conclusions

• Anti-economism in politics
• Critique of pure economics as a science
• Economy as sphere of social relations, not just technology
• The historical specificity of capitalism (value)
• Mutual relations of economic base and superstructure: hence, economics, state, civil society (historical bloc)
• The ethico-political dimension of economic regimes (Americanism and Fordism)
• Economics as the mainspring of history in the last analysis but always in its specific historical context
• Implications for political strategy