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Gramsci's Political Sociology: *Subaltern Struggles, Passive Revolution, and the Dynamics of Political Leadership in the Risorgimento*

In political theory, the Gramscian concept of *subalternity* holds particular significance, offering a lens through which to analyze the dynamics of power within a society. The concept of the subaltern was initially introduced by the Italian Marxist political activist Antonio Gramsci in his article "Notes on Italian History," which later became part of his renowned work, the Prison Notebooks, written between 1929 and 1935. These social groups that are marginalized, oppressed, and often excluded from the dominant power structures in society. These groups can include peasants, indigenous populations, women, and other marginalized communities.¹ Thus, in this paper, I will explore Antonio Gramsci's perspectives on Italian History, with a focus on the Risorgimento and the associated social groups. Additionally, I'll briefly discuss "The Problem of Political Leadership in the Formation and Development of the Nation and the Modern State in Italy," aiming to articulate and share insights on Gramsci's observations.

In the "Notes on Italian History," the consolidation of power in the formation of the modern Italian state involved certain forces aligning and uniting against specific conflicts, often with the assistance of particular auxiliaries or allies.² To establish themselves as a state, these forces needed to either subordinate or eliminate previous power structures while simultaneously securing the active or passive approval of other influential entities. The phases of these innovatory forces, progressing from subaltern groups to hegemonic and dominant entities, can be delineated in distinct

¹ Gramsci, Antonio. 1971. Selections from the Prison Notebooks. pp.

² Ibid., 202

phases: first, attaining independence in relation to the (vis-à-vis) opposition they seek to defeat, and second, garnering support from groups that actively or passively assist them.³ And the latter one was historically necessary before they could unite in the form of state.

Moreover, it is observed that the advancement of these social groups is characterized by fragmentation and episodic progress. This suggests that the historical narrative of these groups is not a continuous or seamless unfolding; instead, it is punctuated by interruptions, gaps, and irregularities, possibly influenced by the actions or interventions of the ruling groups. Moreover, the exploration of the history of subaltern groups necessitates an effective monographic approach. Nevertheless, gathering a substantial volume of material poses considerable challenges, including factors such as the scarcity of historical documentation related to marginalized groups, the deliberate suppression of their voices in official records, and the general neglect of their experiences in mainstream historical narratives.

In my previous paper, I briefly outlined the Risorgimento and its characteristics and emphasized the crucial role that the Jacobins played during this period in Italy. However, Gramsci's analysis of the Risorgimento underscores the absence of a Jacobin-like movement in the Italian unification process. According to him, unlike the transformative and revolutionary character of the French Revolution led by the Jacobins, the Risorgimento took a more conservative and gradualist path.⁴ This approach, he argued, allowed the ruling elite to consolidate power without fundamentally altering societal structures. When we say that it followed a more conservative and gradualist path, we are essentially describing what Gramsci termed a "passive revolution." Gramsci used this term to denote a transformation of social and political structures that transpires without substantial active engagement or revolutionary actions by the masses. It essentially signifies a revolution without significant participation from the masses, characterized by a "molecular" social

³ Ibid., 204

⁴ Ibid., 213

transformation—a subtle and gradual process. The term suggests a change that unfolds incrementally, not necessarily marked by immediate or visible upheaval, but rather evolving gradually over time.⁵

To illustrate the aforementioned concepts, we will briefly examine the challenges posed by the Issue of Political Leadership in the Establishment and Evolution of the Italian Nation and Modern State. The fundamental problem with the Risorgimento's political dynamics is that different factions' leaders are not all the same. Representing a rather homogeneous social group, the Moderates demonstrated steady leadership while traveling in an organically progressive path. On the other hand, the Action Party had no particular historical class allegiance, and the Moderates' interests ultimately determined its leadership changes. To put it simply, the Moderates historically directed the Action Party, supporting the claim that Victor Emmanuel II had a major say in how the party was run. Since the Action Party was essentially governed "indirectly" by people like Cavour and the King, this influence went beyond personal ties.

However, the intellectuals of the historically (and concretely) progressive class, in the given conditions, exercise such a power of attraction that, in the last analysis, they end up by subjugating the intellectuals of the other social groups; they thereby create a system of solidarity between all the intellectuals, with bonds of a psychological nature (vanity, etc.) and often of a caste character (technico-juridical, corporate, etc.). This phenomenon manifests itself "spontaneously" in the historical periods in which the given social group is really progressive.

This dynamic mirrors Gramsci's model regarding intellectuals during the Risorgimento. The Moderates that I have mentioned, acknowledged as the "organic intellectuals" of Italy's emerging ruling class, wielded an inherent or what is worded "spontaneous" power of attraction over various intellectual factions, notably influencing the Mazzinian Party of Action. I believe that in a sense, these achievements of the Moderates contributed to the not that I can say failure but

⁵ Ibid., 195

rather the shortcomings of the Risorgimento. The red flag was already there when their goal was to "dominate" instead of "lead," and when they pursued their interests rather than their people's interests to dominate. Put differently, their desire was for a new force—represented by Piedmont and the Monarchy—to take on the role of national arbiter. This led to a "passive revolution," (which I emphasized earlier) indicating that the movement was not spearheaded by a specific social class but rather by the state, resulting in the establishment of a dictatorship lacking in hegemony.

The Moderates were uncomfortable and unfamiliar with their new subjects since they represented a monarchical state that had invaded the peninsula like an outside force. They were especially concerned about the possible intervention of an unidentified factor in the Risorgimento and took precautions against uncontrollably fervent public fervor. With its charismatic leader Garibaldi and a sincere desire for substantial land reform among the peasantry, the Action Party offered a chance to mobilize the masses in building a single nation-state.

As the Action Party lacked the Jacobin-like movement for commanding the masses, Gramsci still did acknowledge their crucial role in establishing hegemony. Gramsci did not propose that the Actionists could have assumed control of the new state. Instead, he argued that a Jacobin interlude could have actively involved the masses in shaping Italian history, leading to a significant transformation. Regrettably, again, the Party of Action lacked this crucial Jacobin quality—the "inflexible will to become the leading party." Even in the face of potential "failure," such a movement could have broadened democratic opportunities, fostered a shared experience between the North and South, and laid the groundwork for a legacy of widespread political participation.

In the end, the Moderates' conservative vision for government overthrew the Actionists because they were unable to offer a convincing and broadly accepted alternative. As a result, the Moderates came to monopolize power. The confusing feature of the post-Risorgimento State known as *trasformismo*—a term Italians developed to emphasize the contradiction that despite

many changes in governments, the essential dynamics remained largely unchanged. Shortly mean, transformism merely serves as the parliamentary representation of the gradual co-optation of the Action Party by the Moderates. It signifies that, instead of being assimilated into the sphere of the new state, the popular masses were, bit by bit, deprived of effective leadership.