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Faith between reason and affect: thinking with Antonio Gramsci

Lukas Slothuus 

School of Social and Political Science, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, UK

ABSTRACT

This article argues that faith is a crucial concept for understanding the relationship between reason and affect. By allowing people to learn from religious faith for secular ends, it can help generate political action for emancipatory change. Antonio Gramsci's underexplored secular-political and materialist conception of faith provides an important contribution to such a project. By speaking to common sense and tradition, faith avoids imposing a wholly external set of normative and political principles, instead taking people as they are as the starting point for generating emancipatory change. It also allows us to imagine the construction of alternative institutions (the Church provides an interesting model for challenging existing state authority). Theorists should therefore pay attention not just to the rationalist logic of discursive justification but also to the complex processes of social, collectively held emotions and how these influence political action as forms of affect. The article provides a detailed reconstruction of Gramsci's conception of faith and analyzes the instruments it provides for bridging the gap between reason and affect.

KEYWORDS

Antonio Gramsci; faith; political affect; religion; reason; secularism; fatalism

1. Introduction

... in the masses *as such*, philosophy can only be experienced as a faith. (Gramsci 1971, 339)

Antonio Gramsci provides an important contribution to debates on reason and affect by theorizing a secular-political form of faith.¹ This can both actively engender emancipation and combat widespread fatalism about the impossibility of such emancipation. Beyond the familiar 'pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will', this article therefore suggests that thinking with Gramsci on the subject of *faith* offers important lessons for bridging the reason-affect divide, with faith functioning as a bridge between them. Despite a plethora of work on the relationship between faith and politics (Harris 1999; Smith 1991 and 1996; Semeraro 2016; Mahmood 2013; Wydra 2015), the literature on faith in Gramsci is highly limited (Ives 2004, 2009). Ives claims that 'faith (especially in the form of optimism of the will)' is vital for Gramsci' (Ives 2004, 9). Going further,

CONTACT Lukas Slothuus  lukas.slothuus@ed.ac.uk  School of Social and Political Science, University of Edinburgh, Chrystal Macmillan Building, 15a George Square, EH8 9LD Edinburgh, UK

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Pedro Cavalcanti and Paul Piccone claim that ‘all of his writings ... are always expressive of ... faith’ (1975, 3). Yet Walter Luiz Adamson correctly notes that the Gramsci scholarship is peculiarly thin on the significance of religion, including the transition from ‘traditional religion’ to ‘secular religion’, and that the question of religion has ‘received only spotty treatment in the scholarly literature on Gramsci, despite its enormity’ (2013, 470). This is particularly curious given how central a role religion plays for him. Forleza explains (2019, 1) this ‘neglect of Gramsci’s treatment of religion as a consequence of a particular bias or an underestimation of religion itself, as irrelevant’. As Gabriele De Rosa contends, ‘at the base of the communist party, Gramsci places a religious faith, albeit a secularised one’ (in Adamson 2013, 469).

In the current moment, there is a twin development of increasing appetite for radical social transformation, particularly among younger generations, and an increasing despair about the impossibility of imagining both the path to and the endpoint of such transformation. Thus, on issues such as climate transition, public ownership of major sections of the economy, establishing public banks, and revaluation of unpaid and underpaid care work, survey after survey show a desire for major changes to society (Younis 2019; Al Jazeera 2020; Stone 2020). Yet most social movements, popular uprisings, and anti-establishment electoral successes have not led to such changes, which spurs further despair about its possibility. There is therefore a problem of both a widespread fatalism of impossibility and a lack of faith in alternatives. Engendering such faith is crucial for theorizing the possibility of social transformation.

Concurrently, the embrace of political affect in the theoretical literature points to the increasing need for supplementing rationalist approaches to political action with a more nuanced appreciation of the generative power of a whole host of previously neglected or rejected affects, and how these operate at the interface of reasons and emotions. Using the register of ‘passions’, Cheryl Hall argues that these should not be dismissed from politics, as liberals would have it, but have generative effects. It is neither possible nor desirable, according to Hall, to purge passion from politics (Hall, 2002, 3–4) since it is vital for reproducing a democratic culture (Hall, 2005). When Michael Hardt claims that the ‘affective turn ... indicates novel possibilities for politics’, it is peculiar that nobody has turned to Gramsci, since faith understood in a Gramscian sense speaks to precisely the issues Hardt defines as pertaining to affects: ‘equally to the body and the mind’ and those which ‘involve both reason and the passions’ (Hardt in Clough, 2007, ix). Gramsci’s materialism offers a promising alternative to post-structuralist affect theory in the vein of Brian Massumi, who rejects thinking of affect in terms of faith: ‘Affect, for me, is not a matter of faith’ (Massumi 2015, 100). However, a Gramscian faith is not directed at the existence of affect in politics, but is itself an affect – one that bridges the affective and reasoned dimensions of political hope and despair.

Faith, on my reading, is an affect as opposed to an emotion or passion. These terms – emotion, passion, and affect – are not always used consistently or without disagreement on their meaning. This article understands emotions as individual states whereas affects are collectively held and with a close connection with motivating action. According to a Spinozan understanding of affects, their key characteristic is in linking body and mind as well as emotion and reason such that Cartesian dualism becomes untenable. Passion thus refers to those emotions that motivate *inaction* as opposed to action – in other words, passions are underdeveloped or otherwise limited affects. Contemporary theorists like

William Connolly take this in a political direction (Connolly 2011). Chantal Mouffe explains (2014) how passion is often delegitimised as apolitical precisely because it does not formulate a political demand or participate in political discourse. For this reason, I suggest we see faith as neither emotion nor passion but as an affect. From a Gramscian perspective, this conception of faith has the potential for motivating action, particularly in a political direction.

In the more specific literature on political affects, Gramsci can also offer novel insights. Amia Srinivasan argues that anger can fulfil multiple productive roles in politics (Srinivasan 2018). Similarly, Mouffe points to how desires and fantasies feed populism (Mouffe 2014). Joshua Dienstag challenges the notion that optimism is good and pessimism is bad, suggesting that pessimism can help dispel an unhelpful notion of progress and optimism that undergirds the status quo as the provider of piecemeal reform and interventionist foreign policy (Dienstag, 2006, 172–3). Lauren Berlant suggests likewise that optimism can be ‘cruel’ when it aids undesirable ends by insisting on an attachment to a problematic or unhelpful object (Berlant 2011). Gramscian faith helps further this literature by constructing a vision of opinion-formation and political action for social struggle that embraces the materialist dimension of human agency, understood in the sense that both reason and affect are grounded in concrete practices rooted in economic and cultural factors. Such faith is material because, as an affect, it links mental processes to the economic conditions that give rise to socially held beliefs, commitments, and even feelings.

Gramsci’s work grapples with the lessons offered by organized religion to the nascent communist movement in interwar Italy, and the centrality of culture and tradition in the rural parts of an Italy characterized by uneven and combined development. Both centre an idea of a grounded politics within a materialist conception of the world. By anchoring the way people feel and think in their concrete condition, a more materialist account of faith such as Gramsci’s offers a promising path for how contemporary politics can grapple with the affective dimension of the populist surge and the crisis of rationality as seen in the growing distrust of experts and science. Faith is instrumental as a non-religious form of social practice and social knowledge that grounds the desire for emancipation in a commitment unmoved by the difficulty of bringing it about. It is therefore closely related to affect since it is ultimately not grounded in fully worked-out reasons but in deeper affective life.

While Gramsci’s work on faith can illuminate contemporary debates, his thought cannot be transposed simplistically without qualification. Heeding Stuart Hall’s warning against oversimplifying the contemporary relevance of Gramsci, the article ‘is an attempt to “think aloud” about ... perplexing dilemmas ... in the light of – from the perspective of – Gramsci’s work’ (Hall 1987, 16). Adam David Morton (2003) and Peter D. Thomas (2011) emphasize the need to historicize Gramsci, a point Gramsci explains as a plea to ‘search for the leitmotif’ in a more overarching sense as opposed to picking out ‘loose aphorisms’ (Gramsci quoted in Santucci 2010, 32). Therefore, ‘we must “think” our problems in a Gramscian way’ rather than see him as a prophet of ahistorical truths (Hall 1987, 16) and his conception of faith must be stitched together rather than located in one particular place. By reading the question at hand *with* Gramsci, he can be employed strategically to help enrich wider debates.

This article first briefly explains the position of faith beyond religion in relation to Gramsci’s work. Second, the article carefully reconstructs a Gramscian account of faith

as a material and collective political affect that does not depend on religious belief. Third, faith is linked to the crucial problem of fatalism, showing how faith can help dispel fatalistic visions of politics. The final section of the article concludes with some remarks on the limits of Gramscian faith.

2. Faith beyond religion

Gramsci was fascinated by the organizational strength, unity, and purpose of the Catholic Church (Adamson 1987). In his view, active participation in and reproduction of ideology from below, rather than merely through the passive consent or coercion from above, contributed to the continued success of the Church. Although the key question dominating Gramsci's deliberations on religion concern how Marxists can overturn the power of the Church, a related question concerns how religion can be mimicked, in a sense, to provide a source of strength for the socialist movement. The parallels between the two are straightforward. Indeed, Gramsci considers Marxism to be a kind of religion, too, because it is a 'conception of the world that puts itself forward as an ethic' (1971, 326). He goes so far as to say that 'the Communist Party is the only institution that can seriously be compared with the religious communities of primitive Christianity' (1971, 326). The need for a core of doctrinal unity whilst appreciating diversity of opinion requires a core set of values and practices that can bring together the various strands of a movement or a party. Gramscian faith thus provides an affective register for achieving such political success, even for nonreligious forces. His memorable phrase 'the challenge of modernity is to live without illusions, without disillusionment' explains how a non-religious faith can serve as the guiding principle for such a political vision. This suggests that religion can provide valuable resources for a political and secular movement. Political activists and socialists have much to learn from the Church, even if their worldviews and interests are often dramatically counterposed (Rohlinger and Quadagno 2009).

The Catholic Church achieved internalization of its ideology and thus the establishment of a hegemonic position in Italian society despite not wielding formal or unilateral state power. This is related to the task of the socialist and communist movements, which do not hold state power but want, and need strategies for how, to appeal to the mass of people. While the Church exists in a mutually reinforcing relationship with the state and does not proclaim the need for a theocracy, i.e. state power, socialists proclaim the need for seizing control of the state in order to eventually dissolve it. The Church thus plays a major role in the civil society-dimension of the Gramscian 'integral state' (political society plus civil society) whereas socialists have a more antagonistic relationship to the existing, capitalist state and those who control it. It should come as no surprise, then, that the autonomist tradition in Marxism emerges in Italy – the country with the clearest example of strong relatively 'autonomous' or parallel institutions like the Catholic Church. For socialists, the task is, as Mouffe argues, 'not the *seizure* of state power but, as Gramsci puts it, one of "*becoming state*"' (Mouffe 2018, 31).

Faith can thus be separated from its religious or theological basis in a collective way. While Carol Ann Drogus suggests (1995) that religion is institutional and faith is a personal belief system, Pope Francis suggests that faith is intersubjective and solidaristic across diversity (2020). He emphasizes the importance of a faith-driven solidarity to

go beyond mere interdependence in times of coronavirus, arguing for ‘a *solidarity* guided by *faith*’ (2020), claiming that Christianity is ‘the *faith* of the community *united in diversity and in solidarity*’ (Pope Francis 2020) Following Francis and Gramsci, faith is the set of affects that motivate social practices to reproduce and reinforce socio-political action. This is closer to the liberationist church’s view of faith and a theology of liberation, which indeed is closely linked to a Gramscian conception by for instance Paulo Freire (2007). Faith is thus complimentary to reason, as Enrique Dussel points out: ‘What reason can never embrace – the mystery of the other as other – only faith can penetrate’ (Dussel 1985, 46).

For Gramsci, faith can be wrought free from its illusory character and drive forward political action. This also helps explain why a turn to faith is generative at this point in time, where hope has become the dominant concept through which to understand and encourage belief in the possibility of a better world. Because faith is hard to wrest free from its religious connotations, scholars tend to either reproduce the connection or unduly reject it in favour of a prism of hope. The literature on hope is vast, and in many ways promising. For example, Jonathan Lear’s account of radical hope emphasizes a hope for something that might not yet be possible to imagine or hope for – a hope beyond hope, for a material reality (2006, 103). In other words, it is a hope that does not worry about feasibility constraints, instead positing an altogether different world. This fits quite neatly with a Gramscian understanding of faith because it also involves a commitment to a radical remaking of the world. Yet Gramsci connects this in a much broader sense to social transformation and the social bases that ground it. By turning to faith, it is possible to emphasize the necessary affective component of hope. The reason for using the former term is to emphasize its religious roots and connections, which, as should become clear below, is a *generative* rather than *obstructive* feature, and a foundational feature of the space between reason and affect.

3. Gramscian faith

Although Gramsci never defines faith in one sentence, its meaning can be extracted and reconstructed from across his writings. In brief, Gramscian faith involves a conception of a world, including an attitude toward the future, as well as a corresponding norm of conduct that practices this attitude in a social context. This means faith is a form of praxis – the combination of a mental state (thought) and practical activity (action) – and that it exists in the concrete and often thorny reality of social relations. This makes faith a good example of a political affect. It also hints at the usefulness of faith for motivating political action, because it is not simply a mental state like how it might be colloquially conceived of in a more religious setting, but a practically lodged combination of an emotive state, reason, and the corresponding action of embodiment.

This builds on Benedetto Croce (1866–1952), the foremost Italian idealist philosopher, who sees faith as thought, chiefly in the form of a conception of the world that through criticism becomes stabilized or solidified into conviction (Frosini in Liguori and Voza, 2009, own translation). For Croce, religion is not only understood ‘in the material meaning of the followers of the various religions or restricted to the philosophical adversaries of religions’ but also ‘in that of every mental system, of every conception of reality which, transformed into faith, has become the foundation of action and at the same time

the light [*lume*] of moral life'. (Croce quoted in Liguori and Voza 2009, own translation). He therefore seeks to emphasize the idealist function of religious doctrine as a mental system bringing people to act once it attains the status of faith. Gramsci add the active dimension of social praxis to the Crocean understanding of faith by taking seriously the fundamentally social function of belief for the reproduction of religion and social stability. Faith thus plays an active role in the establishment and maintenance of hegemony. Importantly, however, it needs to be practiced and acted upon to gain that sort of stability – in short, Gramscian faith is political. While Croce expunges Marxism and the need for class struggle from the philosophy of religion, and thus offers little other than idealist philosophy as a social theory of emancipation (Finocchiaro 1979), most of Gramsci's writings on religion and faith in the *Prison Notebooks* are what A.B. Davidson calls the basis for the 'Crocean interpretation' – as opposed to the 'Leninist interpretation' rooted in the pre-prison writings (1972).

Gramsci derives the meaning of his secular-political faith from the corresponding meaning of religious faith. He refers to a secular form as being the 'unity of faith between a conception of the world and a corresponding norm of conduct' (Gramsci 1971, 326). This consists of two main components: a conception of the world and a norm of conduct. The first suggests that faith is a kind of *Weltanschauung*, whether implicit or explicit, that structures thought such that divergent interpretations of social life are brought together under the umbrella of a coherent set of beliefs about that world. Thus, it is clear why Gramsci would suggest that such a conception is akin to religion or ideology. He defines ideology as 'a conception of the world that is implicitly manifest in art, in law, in economic activity and in all manifestations of individual and collective life' (328). A crucial difference, then, is that whereas ideology in Adorno's sense of the term is a precondition for the continuation of a dominant social structure, secular faith is not 'necessary' in this sense – precisely because it is not necessarily status quo-abetting but can be counter-hegemonic. Faith need not be so all-encompassing, and by virtue of not having hegemonic control of the (re)production of culture and values, activist forms of secular-political faith can exist in a small collective alone, without the need for it to have taken hold more broadly in society.

The second element, a norm of conduct, links to the practical dimension of faith. On this view, faith is not just an activity of having or keeping faith but a relational structure and an ongoing attempt to establish principles that help discern the appropriate practical action in a given situation. Here it echoes William James's idea that while 'action seems to follow feeling, but really action and feeling go together' (1911, 45). In other words, it guides conduct, which implies not just the specific action taken but the manner in which this action is taken, suggesting the norm influences the mental state of the agent to produce specific outcomes. A philosophical conception of the world – implicit or explicit – becomes a faith once it 'has produced a form of practical activity or will' (328). Thus, faith is an affective dimension of a philosophy, one that directs activity rather than simply has an account of it.

3.1. Faith as material and collective

A materialist conception of faith is grounded in the realities of life for subaltern classes. This must consider the *social bases* of the metaphysical or ideational, and the extent of the

necessary connection between the two, suggesting that faith needs the material, and the material needs faith in order to take hold. Indeed, faith is not just an individual, monadic mental state and activity but a social and collective affect, established through – and establishing in turn – ‘mass movements’ (Gramsci 1971, 331). This faith should resemble the ‘doctrinal unity’ of organized religion, specifically Catholicism:

The strength of religions, and of the Catholic church in particular, has lain, and still lies, in the fact that they feel very strongly the need for the doctrinal unity of the whole mass of the faithful and strive to ensure that the higher intellectual stratum does not get separated from the lower. (328)

The unity of the higher and lower strata is therefore of paramount importance, ensuring the coherence of the class that seeks to effectuate radical social change, part of which involves ‘transforming the whole of civil society’ (328). The task is not simply to proselytize from intellectuals to the mass of people but to bring together the two.

Gramsci scorns the reductive economistic argument that reduces political activity to ‘a permanent state of raw emotion and of spasm’ (1971, 164). He emphasizes the necessity of practical political action to supplement revolutionary theory and discourse when scorning those who are ‘speaking grand revolutionary words while being incapable of taking a step along the road of revolution’ (Gramsci 1925b). Parroting the language of revolution without the requisite accompanying praxis is insufficient. A materialist account of affect combines the commitment to a politics anchored in the importance of how production, distribution, consumption, and accumulation are key features of the political, while simultaneously appreciating the crucial role affect plays in radical politics. As mentioned above, radical hope involves hoping for something beyond what can be clearly described or pictured (Lear 2006), which involves an affective dimension. Likewise, secular-political materialist faith involves an emotive relation to a future state of affairs beyond what can reasonably be justified or fully imagined in the here and now, and that is at ease with its inability to fully describe and account for this future state of affairs.

The materialist dimension of this can be used to develop a notion of faith as negotiating the complex interstice of reason and affect. Nancy Fraser argues that materialism is constituted by both the economic and the cultural (Fraser 1998). For faith to be materialist, then, does not simply mean that it is dependent on economic factors – which it is – but also that it negotiates the space between the economic and the cultural. Faith is anchored in the social practices of real people, whose practices in turn are inflected by structural factors. It can thus function as both an outlet and a source of the feelings and convictions of people, who do not necessarily have a fully worked-out conception of their conditions of life due to the endurance of ideological apparatuses or hegemonic rule. Although Gramsci warns against mechanistic and economistic understandings of social life, he nevertheless grounds both opinion-formation and belief systems in the material – understood as economic *and* cultural – conditions of the particular context. Since the material has a major impact on the formation and maintenance of power, faith is necessarily inflected by power, too. Dominant ideology will espouse particular forms of faith which strengthen and reproduce rather than challenge existing hegemony. A subaltern faith can challenge these, however.

3.2. From the material to the affective

Bolstering this idea, in his discussion of Marx's conception of historical development, Gramsci insists on supplementing a narrowly economic and 'quantifiable' element with an inseparable dimension of culture (1971, 413). Yet invocations of Gramsci often stop short of a further claim present in his thought on this point: that 'passions and feelings' are absolutely central to a theorization of culture, to the extent that they are 'overriding', meaning 'that they have the power to lead men on to action "at any price"' (413). Gramsci is cognizant of the power of such feelings, yet he does not elaborate fully in that particular passage on how they can play a role in motivating political action. He does posit, however, that they are both a product and a consequence of intellectual acts, which means they structure and are structured by the material and cultural conditions they relate to. This opens the door both for conscious intervention in order to change them as well as a richer understanding of a materialist politics that is better attuned to the salience of affects in shaping political action.

Gramsci thus develops an account of the relationship between knowing, understanding, and feeling, and how a subject passes through these in each direction (418). This is a materialist and affective conception of feeling, because it is rooted in the connection between productive forces, class, and affects as passions motivating political action. He suggests that while intellectuals might have knowledge in relation to a particular political situation, they do not always have an understanding of it (and by extension, its implications), and usually do not 'feel' it (418). The people, on the other hand, have a better 'feeling' of politics (418). He argues that pedantry is futile in shifting opinions and combating fatalism, just like unbridled passion:

The two extremes are therefore pedantry and philistinism on the one hand and blind passion and sectarianism on the other. Not that the pedant cannot be impassioned; far from it. Impassioned pedantry is every bit as ridiculous and dangerous as the wildest sectarianism and demagoguery. (418)

He thus dissolves the simplified hierarchy of rational argument as superior to affect and consequently establishes a place for a worldview rooted in a secular practical faith that is irreducible to rationalism and that challenges the fatalism of impossibility because even if options seem closed off, the belief in the mere possibility of change is resistant to counter-arguments. Intellectuals are wrong to believe that 'one can know without understanding and even more without feeling and being impassioned' (418). This poses problems for critique that is rooted solely in enlightenment reason because it does not speak to the heart. Thus, in order for critique to become what Frieder Vogelmann terms 'a practice of prefigurative emancipation', it must go beyond the force of the better argument into the realm of Robin Celikates' suggested 'social practice' (Vogelmann 2017; Celikates 2018). This means that, following Gramsci, any practice of critique must speak to the innermost convictions and passions of people, without treating common sense as ignorant, or laughable, but a valid basis for social agency (Vogelmann 2017). The failure to do this – to reckon with the equal status of reason and passion – is precisely one of the reasons for the failure of liberal establishment politics to maintain its hegemony in the past decade.

To this end, Gramsci even goes so far as to say that 'one cannot make politics-history without this passion, without this sentimental connection between intellectuals and

people-nation' (1971, 418). Faith, in its problematisation of pure reason, is instrumental in this process. The point is to channel such passion into knowledge and understanding, and thereby giving it a voice in politics. In contrast to Mouffe, for instance, Gramsci does not see affect merely as a phenomenon to be overcome or channelled into more productive directions, but a constitutive and generative feature of politics in itself to be embraced (Mouffe 2014, 149; Tambakaki 2014, 7). Only in this way can faith help overcome fatalism. Gramscian faith can therefore help understand the populist phenomenon that Mouffe theorizes since she only in brief terms discuss Gramsci's distinctions between feeling, knowing, and understanding explained above.

3.3. How to attain faith

The two main ways faith can be engendered is through the party form and through education. The party form is a key element in both the creation and object of faith: 'The party must continue to be the organ of communist education, the focus of the faith, the repository of doctrine, the supreme power' (Gramsci 1987, 66). An initial glance might give the impression that Gramsci is unduly wedded to a Leninist model of vanguard party politics, but such faith is not just faith *in* the party but faith espoused *through* the party, where the party is an organ rather than the entire body. At Gramsci's time, the Communist International was a broader vehicle for this. He speaks of how the 'passion' of revolutionary struggle can lead to doubt in 'the most sacred patrimony of a worker: faith in the International' if this struggle is in crisis (Gramsci 1987, 365). This means that during periods of defeat and loss, faith is challenged. Yet if political defeats can dissolve faith and foster fatalism instead, this implies that political victories can conversely dissolve fatalism and foster faith.

Another way is through incessant repetition and raising the awareness and intellectual level of the people (Gramsci 1971, 340). This can involve a coherent, ideally coordinated, and consistent set of messages. Yet in relation to faith, this should come from organic intellectuals who are relatable and speak the language of the subordinated mass of people. They will have to pursue this incessant repetition of arguments across a wide variety of mediums, accompanied by developing overarching strategies for how to develop sufficiently convincing repetition and dissemination (340). A crucial element of this is political education, a point that Gramsci spells out in quite some detail, and which in very similar ways subsequently became the cornerstone of Paulo Freire's Christian-inflected liberation pedagogy. James Abordo Ong's notion of 'organic social change', which is participatory and agent-centred notion of change from below, can help here (2017).

Gramsci's attention to feeling rather than simply knowledge helps clarify the relation between cognitive, intellectual viewpoints and passionate, affective states, developed in part by Crehan (2016). Although eloquent oratory and rhetoric from intellectuals can serve to momentarily move 'feelings and passions', Gramsci explains how it is through 'active participation in practical life' that long-term and rooted opinion-formation takes place (1971, 10). Speaking to the common sense of subalterns -and taking people as they are in order to help transform their attitudes - requires attention to what Gramsci takes as synonymous with common sense, namely 'traditional conceptions of the world' (197). Since tradition plays a key role in the kinds of views people have, 'an

appropriate political initiative is always necessary to liberate the economic thrust from the dead weight of traditional policies' (168). In other words, the politicization of beliefs is required in order to step beyond the traditionally held views and conceptions of the world or creating what in relation to faith is referred to as norms of conduct. Such political intervention, through a dialectical method, can transform mere conceptions of the world into corresponding norms of conduct, thereby creating a political praxis that political agents can act from and upon to dispel fatalistic resignation.

This form of active participation is superior to the 'abstract mathematical spirit' of persuasion of the type that only works through rational argument and ironclad logic (Gramsci 1971, 10; 201), in contrast to methods and devices such as Rawls' public reason and original position or Habermas' communicative action. Indeed, this follows from another critique brought against rationalism, which resonates with critiques of especially Habermas in recent decades: Ives (2004, 134–171) specifically shows how Gramsci and his concept of faith is useful in critiquing Habermasian communicative action. This critique is summarized in Karl Marx's dictum 'between equal rights force decides', applicable to a critique of discourse-theoretic and deliberative democratic approaches to politics (1992, 344). In his critique of fascist attacks on democracy, Gramsci develops a similar point to suggest that it is through the confluence with 'material power' and not just 'the effectiveness, and the expansive and persuasive capacity, of the opinions of a few individuals, the active minorities, the élites, the avant-gardes, etc.' that the opinions and wills of people are determined, not just the strength of rational argument alone (1971, 192).

To this end, Gramsci explains how reason without affect misses out on the basic motivations of real people:

The man of the people thinks that so many like-thinking people can't be wrong, not so radically, as the man he is arguing against would like him to believe; he thinks that, while he himself, admittedly, is not able to uphold and develop his arguments as well as the opponent, in his group there is someone who could do this and could certainly argue better than the particular man he has against him; and he remembers, indeed, hearing expounded, discursively, coherently, in a way that left him convinced, the reasons behind his *faith*. He has no concrete memory of the reasons and could not repeat them, but he knows that reasons exist, because he has heard them expounded, and was convinced by them. The fact of having once suddenly seen the light and been convinced is the permanent reason for his reasons persisting, even if the arguments in its favour cannot be readily produced. (339, my emphasis)

This explanation challenges the idea of reasons reigning supreme in the formation of people's conception of the world, suggesting instead that faith and by extension affect play a central role. Most ordinary people have deep 'aspirations and feelings' that go beyond mere argumentation and form the basis of a faith-based opinion-formation (88). Such feelings are 'spontaneous', according to Gramsci, because they are not the result of a systematic, fully-worked out conception of the world, but rather of common-sense everyday experience (198–9). They are also not simply the product of vanguard proselytization whereby intellectual elites instil beliefs into the minds of ignorant masses. Gramsci frequently speaks of 'instinct' to describe these feelings, in other words a set of convictions whose origin is hard to fully account for, and yet are deeply held and hard to change (14; 199). The spontaneity of such feelings and the way in which they coalesce in and into social movements should be embraced and inserted

into politics, according to Gramsci (199). Going further, philosophy should try to actively modify the kinds of feelings held by the many rather than simply receive and relay them in theoretical terms (346).

One way in which this happens is through a ‘crisis of authority’ (275). When the ruling class rules through domination and force rather than hegemony and consent, the subaltern will have departed from ‘traditional ideologies’, which stabilized the social structure and secured the superfluosity of using force and violence to rule over the population (276). The emergence of such a crisis occurs either if the ruling class has ‘failed in some major political undertaking’ or when ‘huge masses ... have passed suddenly from a state of political passivity to a certain activity, and put forward demands’ (210). This suggests that political action itself can generate further action – therefore the need to try, to act from the faith that social transformation is possible, and that the only way to figure out whether this is true is to act on it and see for oneself.

Because there will necessarily be a material gap in resources between elites and the people, reason and affect function differently for the two adversaries. Here, one of Gramsci’s most central and radical parts of his account of faith comes into play:

Imagine the intellectual position of the man of the people: he has formed his own opinions, convictions, criteria of discrimination, standards of conduct. Anyone with a superior intellectual formation with a point of view opposed to his can put forward arguments better than he and really tear him to pieces logically and so on. But should the man of the people change his opinions just because of this? Just because he cannot impose himself in a bout of argument? In that case he might find himself having to change every day, or every time he meets an ideological adversary who is his intellectual superior. (339)

This points to the importance of common sense, held by ordinary people not because of a set of carefully deliberated principles but because of habit(us), tradition, or implicit beliefs, and because of a certain secular faith in a certain conception of the world. Common sense is the ‘diffuse, uncoordinated features of a general form of thought common to a particular period and a particular popular environment’ (330). Gramsci goes on to describe it as ‘a conception which, even in the brain of one individual, is fragmentary, incoherent and inconsequential’ (419). This suggests that opinion-formation is not just a matter of the force of the better argument, but instead is lodged in a complex web of social relations and affects.

He further claims that tradition must be entered into a polemic with historical materialism, and all forms of mass philosophy must be conceived in polemical terms as a form of struggle between competing interests (Gramsci 1971, 345). In other words, the views and beliefs of ordinary people are located not just a web of social relations but in divergent material interests, whether cultural or economic, from the dominant class. Yet as described above, these are not consciously and coherently thought out. Therefore, ‘the starting point must always be that common sense which is the spontaneous philosophy of the multitude and which has to be made ideologically coherent’ (Gramsci 1971, 421). This implies that working from the actually-held beliefs rather than an idealized norm is more likely to lead to social transformation, as long as this is worked upon by concerted efforts to speak to people’s demands and desires. To this end, Gramsci then asks a further question:

On what elements, therefore, can his philosophy be founded? And in particular his philosophy in the form which has the greatest importance for his standards of conduct? The most important element is undoubtedly one whose character is determined not by *reason* but by *faith*. (339, own emphasis)

Crucially, then, he claims that *faith* plays an even more important role than *reason* in motivating people to act.

3.4. From one faith to another

While it is possible to attain faith, it is also possible to move from one kind of faith to another. For social transformation to be successful, it must ‘replace religion as a world-view and in so doing must be able to articulate faith’ (Ives 2004, 9). One faith thus replaces another; Gramsci does not suppose that it is possible to leave the vacuum of receding religion empty. Adamson rightfully claims that Gramsci ‘did not believe that we are destined somehow to move ‘beyond’ religion’ (2013, 471). It must be filled with another source of hope and belief. For Gramsci, the way to do this involves mimicking the successes of Protestantism, namely the development and pursuit of a vernacular faith, specific to the context in which it exists, as well as the Jesuits’ ability to connect the intellectual superstructure of religion with the social bases of ordinary life. Paying attention to local custom, national myths, traditions, and beliefs is essential for the success of emancipatory change. ‘Rational arguments’, as Ives rightly notes, ‘do not exist in a vacuum’ (Ives 2004, 121). This implies the need for proselytizers with whom the subordinate classes can identify – i.e. organic intellectuals speaking to the passions rather than traditional intellectuals.

In a recursive move, Gramsci then asks two questions: ‘faith in whom, or in what?’ (1971, 339). He answers: a ‘man of the people’ who is in ‘the social group to which he belongs, in so far as it in a diffuse way thinks as he does’ (339). Social group membership thus plays a major role in developing faith, because the commonalities in experience of the world as well as how to apprehend social facts are a central part of how group identity is brought about, and consequently how to think about social change, too. The mass of people can have faith ‘in themselves’, in fact, and ‘in their own destiny’, but only if the social conditions are right (Gramsci 1978, 57). Thus, ‘those peoples who had faith in themselves and their own destinies, and who faced up to the struggle with audacity, were the ones who saved themselves’ (57). There is therefore always an intellectual and practical struggle going on to obtain and solidify such faith.

Concurrently, however, Gramsci has thereby warned against both the desirability and feasibility of the imposition of values and beliefs from outside the social group or class with which one is concerned. This serves as a stark warning against the commitment by middle class activists to proselytizing the working class, as espoused in some vanguardist socialist tendencies such as Trotskyism (Gramsci 1971, 148). Any organized body must be careful to avoid the same risks as Eagleton’s ‘blind faith’ (2009), fatalism, and quietism, i.e. the kinds of faith that abandon the need for active participation and practical attempts to change existing conditions, settling instead for a passive and inertial attitude to political action. More specifically, Gramsci outlines faith in the strength and future of the class as important for avoiding fatalism because those seeking to take advantage of the moment and overturn the existing regime are faced with the defending,

hegemonic social group's belief in its own 'strength' and 'future' (235). Consciousness of one's own social group is therefore a key complement of faith.

4. Faith and fatalism

These points imply a radical shift in the strategies that should be employed to overcome for instance debilitating fatalism and activist fatigue, and they suggest that faith is not just affect but in-between reason and affect, drawing on both but irreducible to either. Fatalism is a key problematic to overcome because it leads to passivity, inertia, and defeatism. Maintaining the view that society can be radically changed for the better is at the core of any emancipatory project. With a widespread sense that radical change is needed and wanted but without any discernible sense that it is possible, fatalism now stands as one of the key problematics for critical theory and social movements alike. This can be combated through faith, which eschews rational calculation of likelihood of such emancipation in favour of a deep commitment to its realization, in spite of any monumental obstacles that stand in its way.

Such failure is likely to lead to passivity and fatalism. This suggests the importance of struggle and the practice of faith through political activity to dispel fatalism and activist fatigue. Crucially, in his pre-prison writings, Gramsci emphasizes (1925a) how this should be 'an ardent revolutionary faith' that combines thought and action. Yet if fatalism already reigns supreme in the minds of people, such faith will be the gradual working of successive minor victories within a collective struggle. Likewise, individual incidents can turn this fatalism into action if there is faith in the possibility of larger struggle. Gaining a sense of a turning tide is crucial, and it should therefore come as no surprise that the call to arms comes in the more Leninist phase of Gramsci's thought.

Faith can help overcome such fatalism. Like fatalism, passivity is also inflected by social class (Cospito in Liguori and Voza, 2009). Furthermore, religion can play a pacifying role and thus contribute to the passivity that characterizes fatalism. Counterintuitively, Giuseppe Cospito argues that for Gramsci, passivity is sometimes manifested in boldness, which likewise characterizes the brazen voluntarism of the fatalism of inevitability (2009). Gramsci thus presents a more complex picture of the relationship between these seemingly opposed concepts. One way to combat passivity is through struggle, in other words political action that can inspire those who feel pacified or fatalistic to counter their subordination (Gramsci 1971, 421). These struggles must be concrete, i.e. lodged in the experiences and lives of ordinary people, which implies speaking to feelings, culture, and traditions. They must also be grounded in an appeal to the existing values and principles of people, such that the action becomes a natural extension of the values rather than an external imposition. In other words, passivity can be combated with faith. Thus, for the kind of faith to be instantiated that can dispel fatalism and passivity, it is necessary to engage in political action that shows a way out of the paralysis fostered by lack of motivation, based around the methods of attaining faith outlined above.

For Gramsci, a further point in attaining a mass of faithful people is therefore to connect the disparate elements of the higher and lower intellectual strata – what some neo-Gramscians like Mouffe conceive of as left populism. This suggests that it is not enough to espouse moral philosophy, or to intervene in popular culture, but that it is

the connection of the two that facilitates the production of faith. Caricaturing a distinction that he finds fundamentally untenable, Gramsci explains how “The Roman church has always been the most vigorous in the struggle to prevent the ‘official’ formation of two religions, one for the ‘intellectuals’ and the other for the ‘simple souls’” (Gramsci 1971, 328). The Catholic church can thus serve as inspiration for a secular, revolutionary praxis that unifies the disparate sections of the subordinate classes, because it has understood the meaning and importance of faith for inspiring praxis. Indeed, Gramsci draws a parallel between what egalitarian religion and egalitarian Enlightenment philosophies have achieved, suggesting that their course and logic of action is broadly similar (328). This secular practical faith therefore challenges the neat separation and hierarchical relationship between reason and affect and speaks to the affective turn’s attempt to navigate the space between the two.

5. Conclusion

This article has argued that Gramsci develops a compelling vision of secular-political faith, which can help bridge the gap between reason and affect. In the present moment of affect frequently trumping reason in populist and centrist politics alike, there is simultaneously widespread difficulty about both imagining and effectuating forms of social transformation. Gramsci offers a novel take on how to get out of this fatalistic stalemate. From accelerating climate change to rising global inequalities, finding ways of solving this problem is both urgent and important. Beyond hegemony or ideology merely preventing subordinate peoples from recognizing their oppression, a further problem for political actors wanting radical change is to combat disaffection, despair, and the sense that action is futile because of a deterministic conception of historical development. Crucially, Gramsci sees such political change not simply as the product of adequate argumentation but of the pervasive role of the beliefs held by common people. Therefore, political affect, not just political reason, needs to take centre stage. This is what in Gramsci’s eyes makes faith so important. By learning from religious faith and its role in fostering an active, practical, and hopeful engagement with the world, political actors seeking emancipatory change can combat and even overcome political fatalism.

While it can certainly contribute to dispelling fatalism and activist fatigue, faith does not serve as a panacea for social movements and political actors. In both its religious and secular forms, faith must be filled-in normatively in a productive direction. Although faith can serve emancipatory functions, it can also be mobilized by status quo and reactionary forces for intransigent and polarizing ends (Mihai 2014, 35). Patrick Deneen’s conception of faith, for instance, forecloses emancipatory change (2005). Likewise, Daniel Steinmetz-Jenkins highlights (2020) the connection of evangelical politics and white nationalism in the US, pointing to the pernicious and supremacist dimensions of a gospel-based religious movement. Faith is therefore not unequivocally good or desirable. Bad forms of faith have pernicious effects – bolstering exclusionary, unjust, exploitative, and dominating political practices and orders.

The task is to find emancipatory forms of faith. As James Baldwin emphasizes, ‘I never have been in despair about the world. I’ve been enraged by it. I don’t think I’m in despair. I can’t afford despair’ (quoted in Holloway 2013, 135). The very act of placing faith in change might contribute to its possibility, and the least that can be done is to try.

Faith is crucial for sustaining the confidence in such political action. The issue with faith is not how it polarizes and antagonizes. Indeed, in a world that appears more and more divided, rather than gloss over such division, confronting it head on through the strong convictions and concerted actions of those at the receiving end might very well be the best hope there is for a better world. Jodi Dean's work on the solidaristic elements of comradeship echo many of the Gramscian points explicated above (Dean 2019) and can shed further light on how to overcome fatalism. Drawing out this connection between solidarity and faith requires further attention by political theorists, which is beyond the scope of this article. This article, then, is intended as a conversation-starter rather than a conversation-stopper.

Note

1. The very few and limited theoretical treatments of Gramsci's account of feeling and affect count (Levinson 2001; Gilbert 2015; Crowther and Villegas 2012). None of these consider faith in detail.

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Notes on contributor

Lukas Slothuus is a political theorist at the University of Edinburgh. His research focuses on emancipation and resistance, the relationship between reason and its 'other', as well as the role of intellectuals in social transformation.

ORCID

Lukas Slothuus  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6773-2244>

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