



UWS Academic Portal

Revisiting the Gramsci-Bukharin relationship

McNally, Mark

Published in:
History of European Ideas

DOI:
[10.1016/j.histeuroideas.2010.12.003](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.histeuroideas.2010.12.003)

Published: 01/09/2011

Document Version
Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication on the UWS Academic Portal](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

McNally, M. (2011). Revisiting the Gramsci-Bukharin relationship: Neglected symmetries. *History of European Ideas*, 37(3), 365-375. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.histeuroideas.2010.12.003>

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the UWS Academic Portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact pure@uws.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Revisiting the Gramsci-Bukharin Relationship: Neglected Symmetries

Mark McNally

Abstract

In this article I revisit the ideas of Antonio Gramsci and Nikolai Bukharin from a contextual perspective to argue for a revision in the way current scholarship on Gramsci interprets his thought as fundamentally at odds with that of Bukharin. I show in particular that if we resist the temptation to reduce Bukharin to the level of his 1921 book, *Historical Materialism*, and concentrate instead on his more sophisticated NEP writings of the mid-1920s a series of symmetries in the advanced thought of these two key thinkers of early twentieth century Marxism emerges that have been poorly recognised in the literature on Gramsci to date.

Keywords: Gramsci; Bukharin; NEP; United Front; Historic Bloc; Hegemony

Introduction: Bukharin and Gramscian Studies

It has long been an axiomatic principle among scholars of Antonio Gramsci to identify his Marxism as clearly distinct from that of the Second International, and indeed, the leading theorists of the Russian Revolution. In one way or another, the latter are frequently considered legatees of the economic determinism and class-reductionist dogmas of the former.¹ The work of Nikolai Ivanovich Bukharin has undoubtedly provided the most fertile ground for such argument, since it was not only in Bukharin's writings that the most trenchant economic determinism and class reductionism among the leading Russian Revolutionaries could be found - thus providing a persuasive link between Bolshevism and Second International Marxism - but also, it was Bukharin's work which Gramsci actually employed in his *Prison Notebooks* (1929-35) to mount a devastating critique of the Marxism of his day.² In this article I revisit the Gramsci-Bukharin relationship, exploring a number of neglected symmetries between the two thinkers' advanced thought which have been poorly recognised in the current literature as they were by Gramsci himself. While acknowledging the significant divergences between Gramsci and Bukharin's thought, I suggest that the similarities are nevertheless such that a serious revision is now required in the way that current Gramscian scholarship interprets the relationship between these two leading Marxists of the early twentieth century.

¹ E. Laclau and C. Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (London, 2001), 59.

² See, 'Quaderno 11,' in: A. Gramsci, *Quaderni del Carcere*, 5 vols. ed. V. Gerratana (Torino, 2007), Vol.2, 1363-509.

The most widespread interpretation of the relationship between Gramsci and Bukharin's work in the current literature is that Gramsci developed his political thought in through a rigorous critique of Bukharin's 'vulgar materialism' and 'deterministic,' 'mechanical,' 'sociological' Marxism.³ This insistence on a clear gulf between Gramsci and Bukharin has traditionally been supported from three different - though frequently overlapping - perspectives. Firstly, there has long been a tendency to treat the Gramsci-Bukharin relationship as solely revolving around the former's critique of Bukharin's 1921 text, *Historical Materialism: A System of Sociology*, in the *Quaderni*.⁴ As this article will demonstrate, such an approach fails to take account of the full ambit of Bukharin's very substantial writings, especially after 1921 when a significant transformation occurred in his thinking. Indeed, it follows Gramsci far too uncritically into an ahistorical, narrowly-focused and unfair assessment of Bukharin's Marxism. What I intend to show below is that if we resist this temptation of defining Bukharin's thought solely from what the Italian called the 'Saggio' and look beyond this text to Bukharin's more mature thought of the mid-1920s we will find that there is a lot more symmetry between the two thinkers ideas than is frequently assumed, or which Gramsci himself acknowledged.

³ See, for example, J. Femia, *Gramsci's Political Thought: Hegemony, Consciousness and the Revolutionary Process* (Oxford, 1981), 66-79; F. Frosini, *Gramsci e la Filosofia* (Roma, 2003), 103-22; S. Golding, *Gramsci's Democratic Theory* (Toronto, 1992), 51-4; P. Ives, *Language and Hegemony in Gramsci* (London, 2004), 86-7; J. Martin, *Gramsci's Political Analysis* (Basingstoke, 1998), 77-9; P. Thomas, *The Gramscian Moment: Philosophy, Hegemony and Marxism* (Leiden, 2009), 277-8, 298-301.

⁴ For Bukharin's original text see, N. Bukharin, *Historical Materialism: A System of Sociology* (London, 1926). The subtitle of the book in Russian, and indeed, in the French copy which Gramsci possessed in prison was 'A Popular Manual of Marxist Sociology.' This is why Gramsci consistently referred to it in prison as 'Il Saggio Popolare' ('The Popular Manual') or simply 'Il Saggio.' J.A. Buttigieg, 'Notes', in A. Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks, Vol I*, ed. J.A. Buttigieg (New York, 1991), 520.

The second major argument for proposing a radical break between Gramsci's political thought and Bukharin is the familiar one - again raised by Gramsci himself in the *Prison Notebooks*⁵ - of positing a fundamental disparity between the problems confronted by backward peasant Russia and the modern industrial West. From this perspective Gramsci's work is of course situated firmly within a tradition of 'Western Marxism' despite the seemingly anomalous phenomena of Italian fascism and the backwardness of the *mezzogiorno* in 1920s Italy.⁶ Once again I intend to contest this attempt to divorce Gramsci from the theorists of the Russian Revolution and Bukharin. This article will in fact demonstrate that Gramsci not only shared many of the same concerns as the leading Russian Marxists of his day, but moreover, it was those championed by Bukharin in Russia and at the Comintern in the aftermath of Lenin's death in 1924 - especially relating to the peasantry - that were right at the heart of Gramsci's most advanced ideas.

A third trend in the literature which has served to disassociate Gramsci's political thought from that of Bukharin - in much the same manner as the Western Marxist thesis - is the more recent development of a body of work that has interpreted Gramsci as a specifically *Italian* political thinker. Thus Gramsci is seen as a thinker primarily concerned with the problems of Italy in the early 1920s and 1930s: its chronically unstable liberal state; the uneven economic and cultural development between North and South; and the advent of fascism. These concerns, it is argued, give Gramsci's ideas a uniquely Italian character.⁷ Yet again the effect of such an approach has been to distinguish sharply between

⁵ Gramsci, *Quaderni del Carcere*, Vol. 2, 865-7.

⁶ P. Anderson, *Considerations on Western Marxism* (London, 1976).

⁷ R. Bellamy and D. Schecter, *Gramsci and the Italian State* (Manchester, 1993); M. Finnochiaro, *Gramsci and the History of Dialectical Thought* (New York, 1988); P. Piccone, *Italian Marxism* (Berkeley, 1983).

Gramsci's 'Italian' political thought and that of the Bolsheviks such as Bukharin who were, it is argued, confronted with a completely different set of problems and challenges in a very different political, economic and cultural context. While the intention here is not to make light of the considerable divergences between the national arenas in which Gramsci and Bukharin operated in the 1920s and early 1930s, I nevertheless maintain that the boundaries around the Italian state in this brand of contextualism have been too severely circumscribed. As the following will show, a more inclusive approach that recognises that context is both national and international allows us to explore more fully the overlaps between the kinds of shared political challenges that were identified by both Bukharin and Gramsci and ultimately contributed to the symmetries in their thought.⁸

What I hope to achieve then in the following is to bring about some cause for reflection and revision in the field of Gramscian studies concerning the relationship between Gramsci and Bukharin. In keeping with the above arguments and a contextualist approach to the history of political ideas,⁹ the first part of the article sets out to demonstrate Bukharin's part as the leading theorist of NEP Russia and the United Front Comintern in the mid-1920s in identifying a set of problems and concerns that were to be confronted by all communist parties and not simply that of the Soviet Union. It is argued that this Bukharinist interpretation of the tasks of 'Leninism' in the wake of the Bolshevik leader's death had a major influence on communist thinking both at home *and abroad* in this period, including the thought of Gramsci. This provides the vital

⁸ While this tendency to disassociate Gramsci from Bukharin is undoubtedly the dominant approach in the literature, Christine Buci-Glucksmann and Paolo Spriano have at least recognised some of the political and intellectual similarities in their writings as I will show below. C. Buci-Glucksmann, *Gramsci and the State* (London, 1980); P. Spriano, *Storia del Partito Comunista Italiano, 5 vols.* (Torino, 1967), *Vol.1.*

⁹ Q. Skinner, *Visions of Politics, 3 vols.* (Cambridge, 2002), *Vol.1.*

contextual background for an exploration in the second part of the article of the specific symmetries between the two thinkers' ideas as they attempted to confront these shared tasks.¹⁰ I conclude by suggesting, in the light of my arguments, that the relationship between Gramsci and Bukharin may well require further investigation if it is to be fully comprehended.

Part I

Recontextualising Gramsci: The Post- 'Saggio' Bukharin and the Tasks of Communism

Among the most important tasks facing the revolutionary movement in Russia and internationally in the early 1920s was the evident failure of communist parties to adjust and direct their revolutionary strategy in accordance with actually existing economic, political and ideological conditions. One major source of this error was the continuing dominance of a theoretical economism which placed an excessive faith in those writings of Marx, Engels and Lenin that suggested that the *economic* necessity inscribed in the historical process would inevitably bring the collapse of degenerate (imperialist) capitalism and a corresponding 'dictatorship of the proletariat.' While among some communists such 'economistic' thinking induced a form of passivism - waiting for History to run its inevitable course - for others it fed an *economically-informed* voluntarist tendency to assume that capitalism was degenerating and if only the party

¹⁰ My intention here is to focus on the symmetries between the ideas of the two thinkers since it is precisely these which have been overlooked, but this does not indicate that I regard their thought as identical as will become evident in the course of the article.

vanguard remained faithful to Marxist theory and particularly ‘the dictatorship of the proletariat’ it could bring the class struggle to a successful conclusion single-handedly.¹¹ In Russia itself this latter Messianic tendency of placing the future of humanity in the hands of the proletarian vanguard alone led to the disastrous voluntarist attempt to take ‘the direct road to socialism’ through what would later be christened ‘War Communism.’ This essentially involved exploiting the conditions brought about by the Civil War (1918-21) to create an unconditional ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ that was fetishized as the essence of Marxism. The revolutionary state thus took control of almost every aspect of the economic and social life of the country and waged the class struggle unrelentingly against all opposition, most notably requisitioning grain from the peasantry in the countryside under armed escort.¹² If in its early phase ‘War Communism’ could at least partly be attributed to the desperate situation *forced* on the regime by the Civil War and

¹¹ The origin of the passivist tendency can be traced to *The Communist Manifesto* in which Marx presented the impending crisis of the anarchic bourgeois economy as a *necessity* of the historical process. ‘Its fall and the victory of the proletariat’ were ‘equally inevitable.’ K. Marx, *The Communist Manifesto* (Harmondsworth, 1967), 93-4. Among the Third Internationalists it was Lenin who fuelled the economically-informed voluntarist strand in his most widely-read work, *The State and Revolution*, although it should not be confused with the *purely* voluntarist idea that political or ideological struggle were all that were required to bring about a successful revolution. In *The State and Revolution* Lenin in fact endorsed Engels’ *economistic* idea that the state in capitalist society was a *reflection* of the class antagonisms in the sphere of production which it managed in the interests of capital. ‘The development of production,’ he argued, has now reached a stage where ‘the existence of these classes has not only ceased to be a necessity, but is becoming a positive hindrance to production’ which ‘will fall as inevitably as they arose’ and ‘with them the state will inevitably fall.’ This *economistic* account of degenerate anarchic capitalism on the road to ruin formed the basis, however, of the even more dogmatic voluntarist assertion that there could be no question of the capitalist state ‘withering away’ or ‘evolving’ into a socialist state in these conditions. For it was only if the proletariat kept faith with Marxist theory and ‘the dictatorship of the proletariat’ that the transition from this age of anarchy in production and politics could be traversed to the stateless harmonious communist society of the future. V.I. Lenin, ‘The State and Revolution’ in: *Essential Works of Lenin*, ed. H.M. Christman (New York, 1987), 279-85.

¹² R.V. Daniels, *The Rise and Fall of Communism* (New Haven, 2007), 130.

the European blockade,¹³ the later ratcheting up of the policy in 1920 - when an attempt was made to abolish all markets and money itself - demonstrated just how deluded Lenin and the Bolsheviks had become by the notion that the future belonged to them alone and could indeed be mechanically cast into the economic stages of Marxist theory.¹⁴ As it turned out, 'War Communism' had in fact to be abandoned in 1921 after the Russian economy and political system almost collapsed in the face of famine in the countryside, shortages in the city and severe unrest among the peasantry.¹⁵

A similar taste for theoretical orthodoxy, solipsism and a complete lack of realism had comparably negative results in other European countries. On the one hand, delusions about the capacity of working class vanguards to close the gap with History by capturing the state encouraged ill-conceived revolutionary 'adventures' in Hungary (1919), Italy (1920) and Germany (1921 and 1923), while on the other, confidence about the degenerate nature of capitalism and the inevitable dawn of proletarian power led to the passivism and abstentionism which marked Amadeo Bordiga's leadership of the PCd'I (1921-23), opening the way for the triumph of fascism. There was thus a clear challenge facing the communist movement in the early 1920s both in Russia and internationally to abandon its taste for comforting teleological schemas and revolutionary adventurism, and to come to terms with the hard work of careful and meticulous analysis of the real balance of forces, in all their economic, political and ideological complexity, elaborating strategy accordingly.

¹³ E.H. Carr's well-known interpretation of the policy that has been hotly contested ever since. E.H. Carr, *The Bolshevik Revolution 1917-1923, Vol.2* (London, 1971), 245.

¹⁴ R. Conquest, *The Harvest of Sorrow: Soviet Collectivization and the Terror-Famine* (New York, 1986), 48-9.

¹⁵ C.E. Ziegler, *The History of Russia, 2nd edn.* (Santa Barbara, 2009), 70.

While it was Lenin who led the original charge on this front in his defence of the realism and pragmatism of NEP and United Front tactics in 1921 and 1922,¹⁶ this necessity for informing strategy with realistic and careful analysis of the contemporary conjuncture and the eschewal of theoretical fantasies became a central plank of the ‘post-*Saggio*’ Bukharin’s writings in the mid-1920s. This was particularly pertinent to his tussles with the Left Opposition in Russia (mainly Preobrazhensky, Trotsky and Piatokov) and the ‘Leftists’ in the Comintern, including Bordiga himself.¹⁷ As Stephen Cohen has demonstrated, although Bukharin had been a leading left-wing Bolshevik from 1918-21, by 1925 he had become ‘the key defender’ of ‘the prudent pragmatism of NEP.’¹⁸ For Bukharin NEP involved above all the rejection of excessive revolutionary heroism and idealism which he identified with Trotsky and the Left Opposition whose fetishization of the notion of ‘dictatorship’ led them to demand a renewed class offensive on the rural ‘petty-bourgeoisie.’¹⁹ Bukharin claimed the ultimate outcome of these calls for a new economic assault on the ‘Nepmen’ and ‘Kulaks’ in the interests of an industrial drive

¹⁶ At the Tenth Party Congress (1921) where NEP was adopted Lenin thus recognized the ‘whole series of mistakes’ committed under ‘War Communism’ due to ‘erroneous calculations’ and ‘mistakes in ... determining the balance of forces between our class and those classes in collaboration with which, and frequently in struggle against which, it had to decide the fate of the Republic’ (V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, 45 vols, ed. Y. Sdobnikov (London, 1965), Vol. 32, 173). In ‘The Tax in Kind’ he identified these errors with a failure ‘to study the concrete forms and stages of the transition that is taking place in our country’ and the Bolsheviks’ inability ‘to look ‘the “vulgar truth” squarely in the face, yielding too often to “exalting deception.”’ Lenin, ‘The Tax in Kind,’ in: *Collected Works*, Vol. 32, 335, 349.

¹⁷ Bukharin was allied with Stalin in defence of NEP against various oppositions of the Left from 1924 onwards until in 1928 Stalin embarked on a programme of forced collectivization and mass terror that would eventually cost Bukharin his life (1938) - a victim of the infamous show trials of the 1930s. See, in particular, S.F. Cohen, *Bukharin and the Bolshevik Revolution* (London, 1974); R.V. Daniels, *The Conscience of the Revolution: Communist Opposition in Soviet Russia* (Harvard, 1970); A. Ehrlich, *The Soviet Industrialization Debate, 1924-1928* (Cambridge, Mass., 1960); M. Haynes, *Nikolai Bukharin and the Transition from Capitalism to Socialism* (London, 1985); D. Gluckstein, *The Tragedy of Bukharin* (London, 1994); M. Lewin, *Political Undercurrents in Soviet Economic Debates* (London, 1975).

¹⁸ Cohen, *Bukharin and the Bolshevik Revolution*, 71, 129.

¹⁹ Cohen, *Bukharin and the Bolshevik Revolution*, 129-31.

would be to push the revolutionary state back towards ‘War Communism’ and the re-establishment of the regime of *chinovniki* exploiting the masses and especially the peasantry.²⁰ This taste for class warfare might well find justification in Marxist theory, Bukharin argued, but it would be totally impractical - ‘the height of stupidity’ - in conditions in which the Soviet State required the expansion of agriculture and the political good will of the peasants for its own economic development.²¹

At the Comintern Bukharin adopted a similar approach to left-wing communism of the international variety and its taste for theoretical dogmatics. When his influence came to its height in late 1925 he thus pursued a vigorous line of ensuring that strategy should now be orientated by a practical application of Marxist theory involving above all a ‘careful appraisal of the situation in the West’ where capitalism he argued had entered a period of ‘relative stabilization.’ This did not, however, mean that the Bukharinist Comintern ruled out completely ‘more intransigent policies’, but rather, that ‘the tactics appropriate for a given party and period’ were to be based ‘on a close analysis of existing conditions.’²² It was precisely this appreciation of the necessity for more pragmatic and

²⁰ Cohen, *Bukharin and the Bolshevik Revolution*, 144. It was of course an accurate prediction of precisely what did occur under Stalin when he took up the Left Opposition’s industrial programme with a new and fanatical zeal at the end of the 1920s.

²¹ N. Bukharin, ‘Concerning the New Economic Policy and our Tasks’ in: *Selected Writings on the State and the Transition to Socialism*, ed. R.B. Day (Nottingham, 1982), 198-9.

²² E. Weitz, ‘“Bukharinism” in the Comintern’ in: *Nikolai Ivanovich Bukharin: A Centenary Appraisal*, ed. N. Kovloz and E.D. Weitz (New York, 1990), 60-2. Weitz argues that Bukharin’s ‘tenure as head of the Comintern was a decisive period in the shaping of the international communist movement’ even if it remains ‘the least well-known aspect of his political career.’ While he is concerned as much with the late 1920s and Bukharin’s role in the emergence of the revolutionary offensive of the ‘Third Period’ and the condemnation of social democracy as ‘social fascism’ which Bukharin resisted in part, my focus here is on Bukharin’s leadership in the mid-1920s - particularly 1925 and 1926 during Gramsci’s leadership of the PCd’I - when the United Front and Bolshevization of the European parties remained the main strategies of the Comintern (Weitz, ‘“Bukharinism” in the Comintern,’ 59). It is important here to recognise, however, that Bukharin’s involvement with the Comintern did not begin in 1925. At the Fifth Congress in July 1924 it was Bukharin who was tasked with writing a new draft programme for the International movement to be

empirical thinking among communist movements that led Bukharin to turn his fire on Bordiga's brand of 'ultra-leftism' at the Sixth Plenum of the Enlarged Executive Committee in March 1926,²³ condemning at length the leading figure of the Italian opposition for his 'schematic and abstract' application of Marxist theory.²⁴

This lack of realistic analysis in the formation of strategy was closely related to the further, and much more important, problem of gaining *mass support* for the Revolution both in Russia (where an alienated peasantry was the main issue) and internationally (where the lack of support among unionised workers, but also, and increasingly, among the peasantry was seen as a central weakness too). The Russian Revolution had of course only succeeded in the first place thanks to the support of the masses and particularly the peasant masses in the Russian countryside who were drawn into the Revolution through Bolshevik promises of 'Peace, Land and Bread.'²⁵ But 'War Communism' - and especially its reliance on coercive bureaucratic 'command' structures such as the forcible requisitioning of grain - had succeeded in alienating millions of Russian peasants. This had led to a situation in March 1921 where the peasantry actually threatened to join forces with discontented sailors and soldiers at Kronstadt to overthrow the Bolshevik state, opening up the way for the re-establishment of a capitalist regime in Russia. In the

presented at the next Congress. As Cohen points out 'He and Zinoviev had co-managed the workings, policy, and doctrine of the Comintern since 1923' and even though 'Zinoviev lingered on formally as chairman until October 1926, his defeat in December 1925 soon made Bukharin the actual authority in the international organization' (Cohen, *Bukharin and the Bolshevik Revolution*, 216). For Bukharin's contested role in the emergence of the 'Third Period' see, T. Draper, 'The Strange Case of the Comintern,' *Survey*, 18, 3, (1972), 91-137; N. Kozlov and E. D. Weitz, 'Reflections on the Origins of the "Third Period": Bukharin, the Comintern, and the Political Economy of Weimar Germany,' *Journal of Contemporary History*, 24, 3 (1989), 387-410.

²³ *The Communist International 1919-1943: Documents*, 3 vols, ed. J.Degras (London, 1971), Vol.2, 287.

²⁴ It was this attack on Bordiga and its similarity with Gramsci's critique that led Paolo Spriano to wonder if there had not in fact been correspondence between the two men before the Sixth Plenum. Spriano, *Storia del Partito Comunista Italiano*, Vol. 2, 13-14.

²⁵ S. Fitzpatrick, *The Russian Revolution*, 3rd edn. (London, 2008), 56-7

international field, an excessive focus on establishing working class dictatorships and protecting revolutionary purity epitomized in the Comintern's Twenty-One Points for Admission (1920) - which spurned all external ideological influence of a 'social democratic' or 'petty-bourgeois' nature and the illusion of a 'parliamentary road to socialism'²⁶ - had undoubtedly contributed to the failure of those parties to attract widespread mass support. This was particularly evident in moments of major class confrontation such as those which occurred in Italy in 1919-20 (*Biennio Rosso*) and in Germany in 1921 and 1923 when the masses simply failed to rally to the revolutionary cause. In addition to ushering in a new pragmatism, the NEP and the United Front were thus principally devised to address this problem of the masses at home and abroad, drawing them decisively away from capitalist and social-democratic ideology and into ranks of the Revolution.

Lenin's defence of the NEP in the 'Tax in Kind' (1921) was the first major statement of this democratic deficit in Bolshevik tactics in the wake of 'War Communism.' Here he bluntly asserted that if the alienation of the peasant masses was not addressed quickly 'they will overthrow our workers' power as surely and as inevitably as the Revolution was overthrown by the Napoleons and the Cavaignacs.' This, he argued, can only be averted 'if we organize the poor, that is, the majority of the population or semi-proletarians, round the politically conscious proletarian vanguard.'²⁷ But while Lenin originated this necessity to address the support of the masses, there remained nonetheless a certain tension in his endorsement of mass politics and his early and continuing

²⁶'Conditions of Admission to the Communist International approved by the Second Comintern Congress,' in: *The Communist International 1919-1943: Documents, Vol 1*, 166-72.

²⁷ Lenin, 'The Tax in Kind,' 332.

pessimism about the capacity of ordinary workers to develop a revolutionary consciousness.²⁸ This was indeed compounded by his ambiguous declarations that the Revolution's greatest enemies and most present danger were the rural 'petty-bourgeoisie' in the countryside.²⁹ Bukharin, as his critics rightly emphasize,³⁰ took the most reformist reading of Lenin's NEP writings and declared it a fundamental principle of 'Leninism' after his death in 1924 that the Revolution would fail without winning and maintaining the support of both workers *and peasants*. This was a central plank of his platform against the Left Opposition in the mid-1920s where he returned again and again to the charge that their demands for fresh upheavals in the countryside would alienate the peasantry and leave the Soviet State once again without a *mass* social base.

While Bukharin's indictment of the Left Opposition in Russia for its negligence and under-estimation of the peasant masses has been well-charted in the literature to date,³¹ what is less well-known is his central role in exporting this key task of the NEP to the Comintern where it undoubtedly contributed to the development of the United Front strategy initiated at the Third Congress (1921) under the slogan 'To the Masses.' Once again Lenin had laid important groundwork here in his frequent denunciations of 'communist conceit' and 'infantile left-wing communism,' typified by an indifferent - if not disdainful - attitude to the masses.³² However, it was Bukharin in the mid-1920s

²⁸ N. Harding, *Leninism* (Basingstoke, 1996), 171-4.

²⁹ Lenin, 'Tax in Kind,' 359-61.

³⁰ See, for example, R.B. Day, 'Introduction: The New Leviathan' in: *Selected Writings on the State and the Transition to Socialism*, 1; Gluckstein, *The Tragedy of Bukharin*, 102-3.

³¹ Cohen, *Bukharin and the Bolshevik Revolution*, 160-213; Lewin, *Political Undercurrents*, 84-96; Haynes, *Nikolai Bukharin and the Transition from Capitalism to Socialism*, 71-96.

³² V.I. Lenin, 'Left-Wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder,' in: *Collected Works, Vol.31*, 18-118. Rounding on Terracini (PCd'I) and other 'Leftists' at the Third Congress Lenin proclaimed 'We must... win over to our side not only the majority of the working class, but also the majority of the working

under the slogan of Bolshevization who led the major push of bringing this aspect of NEP to the Comintern, especially regarding the peasantry. As early as the Fourth Congress (1922) - which Gramsci himself attended - Bukharin began to transform the meaning of NEP from its orthodox Bolshevik interpretation as a 'strategic retreat' in the face of peasant opposition to a universally applicable task of the transition period from capitalism to socialism.³³ By 1925 Bukharin had developed twenty-three theses on the peasantry and presented them to the Fifth Plenum in which it was categorically stated that 'the most important guide for the ruling proletarian party must be: to reach agreement with the peasantry' since 'the peasantry form the majority of the world's population'.³⁴

It soon became obvious to communists in Russia and internationally, however, that gaining the political compliance of the masses would be insufficient for revolutionary success, for what was required was in fact their full integration into the revolutionary cause. A whole new approach to *organizational work* was now needed that could no longer take the form of the kind of hierarchical 'bureaucratic' 'command' structure that characterised 'War Communism' and many of the early attempts of European communist parties to imitate the centralism of the 'vanguard' Leninist party. Bukharin was foremost among the leading Bolsheviks in the mid-1920s who recognised that this military-based structure would not ultimately achieve the necessary unity and mass cooperation that the Russian Revolution required to put its economic structure on a sound foundation, and indeed, which international communists needed to accomplish a successful revolution.

and exploited rural population. Have you prepared for this? Almost nowhere.' V.I. Lenin, 'Speech in Defence of the Tactics of the Communist International,' in: *Collected Works, Vol. 32*, 476-7.

³³ Cohen, *Bukharin and the Bolshevik Revolution*, 146.

³⁴ N. Bukharin, 'Extracts from the Theses of the Fifth ECCI Plenum on the Peasant Question,' in: *The Communist International 1919-1943: Documents*, 203.

This in fact could only be achieved by placing a new emphasis on *ideological* or *cultural* work among the masses and organizing the communist parties - both at home and abroad - to carry out 'a cultural revolution.'

Crucially, Bukharin championed this cause not only in Russia,³⁵ but also, in the Comintern where the programme of Bolshevization under his stewardship placed great weight on the necessity for parties to carry out cultural work among the masses. Ideological work among the peasantry was again emphasized as parties were advised to 'organize peasant unions, peasant committees etc.' and infiltrate and work with those that already existed with the aim of 'bringing them under their ideological influence' and getting them to affiliate to the International Peasant Council.³⁶ This necessity for an expansive organizational structure that was capable of fighting an ideological war among the masses of the workers and peasants was linked to the complementary objective of fostering popular initiative for the Revolution from below and avoiding an over-reliance on 'bureaucratic' and 'command-like' structures from above. This was to be the means of not only consolidating the NEP in Russia but also the United Front in European communist parties, as in both cases Bukharin saw that simple compliance would not be sufficient for success. Economic development and revolutionary success were in fact intimately related to this cultural-organizational task in Bukharin's thinking since the two required the kind of good will and active mass participation that only ideological commitment would bring.

³⁵ Bukharin's ideas on Cultural Revolution were influenced not only by Lenin but also by Taylorism (Americanism) and the organizational theory of Alexander Bogdanov. See, J. Biggart, 'Bukharin's Theory of Cultural Revolution' in: *The Ideas of Nikolai Bukharin*, ed. A. Kemp-Welch (Oxford, 1992), 131-58.

³⁶ Bukharin, 'Extracts from the Fifth ECCI Plenum on the Peasant Question,' 203-4.

Finally, in Russia and internationally, all of this organizational and ideological work among the masses was related to a wider political challenge and weakness that had been so painfully exposed by the failures of ‘War Communism’ and the abortive European ‘putsches’: the problem of directing the tempo of revolutionary advance correctly. This of course would be partially aided by proper analysis and weighing the relative strength of capitalist and proletarian forces. But it also involved the challenge of advancing socialism on a stable and solid basis which meant above all ensuring that all forward movements could depend on the active support of the masses (both workers and peasants). Firm revolutionary advance of this nature was in fact sharply contrasted with the failed ‘frontal assaults’ in Russia and in Europe that had ultimately ended in retreat and disillusionment. Bukharin once again played a key role in placing this task of adopting a correct revolutionary tempo and avoiding the perils inherent in rapid forward pushes right at the centre of Russian and international communism in the mid-1920s.

In his critique of ‘War Communism’ in 1921 Lenin had warned of ‘the danger of the revolution’s vanguard getting swiftly so far ahead that it would lose touch with the peasants’ and bring about ‘the collapse of the revolution’.³⁷ Bukharin, however, elevated this relatively peripheral admonition in Lenin’s work to the status of a strategic principle in the mid-1920s, using it to defend the slow but steady advance of NEP against Trotsky, Preobrazhensky and Piatakov who were by then demanding a major industrial offensive at the expense of the rural economy and especially ‘the Kulaks’ to safeguard the

³⁷ V.I. Lenin, ‘Ninth All-Russia Congress of Soviets,’ in: *Collected Works, Vol.33*, 160.

Revolution both economically and politically.³⁸ Bukharin in fact maintained that an offensive of this nature might well bring initial advances, but it would ultimately end in failure as the revolutionary rearguard detached itself from its advanced sections. Invoking the ghost of Lenin, he insisted that their erstwhile leader had already taught them that they would have ‘to move forward ...infinitely more slowly than we dreamed of doing, but in such a way that the entire mass will actually move forward with us.’ Indeed, he identified the call for a new class assault with Trotsky’s discredited and ‘impractical’ theory of ‘permanent revolution’ and his enduring tendency to foresee ‘nothing but disaster unless the world revolution arrived speedily.’³⁹

By the mid-1920s this element of Bukharin’s thinking on the necessity for a slower and more realistic tempo in the revolutionary struggle under NEP had also found its way into the Comintern’s United Front doctrine where the emphasis on the ‘relative stabilization of capitalism’ provided fertile soil for its development under the slogan of ‘Bolshevization.’ Bolshevization sought above all to orientate communist parties to avoid both ‘right’ and ‘ultra-left’ deviations and to steer a steady revolutionary course in accordance with prevailing conditions. The ‘Theses on Bolshevization of Communist Parties’ presented by Zinoviev to the Fifth Enlarged Plenum of the ECCI in April 1925 thus stated ‘A Bolshevik is not one who joins the party at the height of the revolutionary flood, but one who knows how to go on for years, if necessary for decades, even when

³⁸ For Trotsky’s calls for a new industrial offensive and his wider critique of NEP under Bukharin’s theoretical hegemony in the Party see, L. Trotsky, *The Challenge of the Left Opposition, 1923-1925* (New York, 1975); Preobrazhensky’s equally influential criticism of Bukharin’s NEP policy and his alternative of funding an industrial drive on the back of ‘primitive accumulation’ can be found in his major work of the period. E. Preobrazhensky, *The New Economics* (Oxford, 1965); For Piatakov’s critique see, Cohen, *Bukharin and the Bolshevik Revolution*, 130, 156.

³⁹ N. Bukharin, ‘A New Revelation Concerning the Soviet Economy or How to Destroy the Worker-Peasant Bloc,’ in: *Selected Writings on the State and the Transition to Socialism*, 152-3.

the tide is ebbing and revolutionary development slows down.⁴⁰ Indeed, by the mid-1920s the Bukharinist Comintern was adopting its sister parties to a longer game in conditions in which capitalism was continuing to stabilize, and particularly, ensuring that the wasteful, demoralising and ultimately unsustainable ‘frontal assaults’ of the early 1920s would not be repeated.

These four key problems and challenges highlighted and defended by Bukharin - the necessity for realistic analysis to replace the illusions of theoretical economism; the need to develop communist parties into mass movements; the requirement to organise communist movements to fight an ideological or cultural war among the worker and peasant masses; and the necessity to adopt the tempo of revolutionary movement to a steadier surer pace that was capable of maintaining mass support - form a crucial context for the development of Gramsci’s thought in the *Quaderni*. There can be no doubt, moreover, that Gramsci’s contacts with Revolutionary Russia and the Comintern in the early and mid-1920s had provided him with a clear understanding of the priority of these challenges. In fact, from May 1922 to November 1923 Gramsci had served in Moscow as PCd’I Representative of the Executive Committee of the Communist International (ECCI) at a time when the NEP and the United Front were coming into their full ascendancy.⁴¹ As leader of the PCd’I from 1924 onwards Gramsci steered the Party

⁴⁰ ‘Extracts from the Theses on the Bolshevization of Communist Parties adopted at the Fifth ECCI Plenum,’ in: *The Communist International 1919-1943: Documents*, 189. Paradoxically, it was precisely this mode of Bukharinist ‘evolutionary’ thought that led Zinoviev into opposition in late 1925.

⁴¹ It should be noted that Gramsci’s developing understanding of Italian fascism as a *mass* movement with cross-class support particularly from the rural petty-bourgeoisie could only have encouraged his realisation of the importance of these shifts in communist thinking towards mobilising a broad popular front against capitalism. A. Davidson, *Antonio Gramsci: Towards an Intellectual Biography* (London, 1977), 193; Bellamy and Schecter, *Gramsci and the Italian State*, 68.

towards the general line of the International,⁴² and in April 1925 he actually attended the Fifth Enlarged Executive Meeting of the Comintern where the relative stabilization of capitalism, organizational and ideological work among the masses and especially the peasantry under the slogan of Bolshevization were the central issues of the day.⁴³ However, while this proximity to NEP Russia and the United Front Comintern during Bukharin's theoretical ascendancy is undoubtedly significant, it is only when we turn to the actual conceptual work of the late Gramsci and the 'post-Saggio' Bukharin - developed in response to the above challenges - that we can fully appreciate the symmetries in the most advanced thought of these two key Marxist thinkers of the early twentieth century.

Part II

'Holism' to 'Integral' Analysis of the 'Relations of Forces': Overcoming Theoretical Economism and Developing a Realistic Revolutionary Strategy

We have already seen that one of the major challenges identified by Bukharin in the mid-1920s was to develop a more realistic mode of analysis that abandoned the excessively schematic and unrealistic approach typical of theoretical economism - whether passivist or voluntarist. In place of this fetishization of theory Bukharin insisted that a realist approach demanded 'holistic' analysis of the relations between all of the social forces in

⁴² J. Humbert-Droz, *De Lénine à Staline: Dix Ans au Service de l'Internationale Communiste, 1921-1931* (Neuchâtel, 1971), 262-3.

⁴³ J. Degras, 'The Fifth Enlarged Plenum of the ECCI,' in: *The Communist International 1919-1943: Documents*, 183-8.

the national economy.⁴⁴ Bukharin used this language to attack what he saw as Trotsky and Preobrazhensky's tendency to view things from an excessively 'one-sided' perspective, "'from within" the state economy, and sometimes even "from within" industry on its own.'⁴⁵ According to Bukharin, this determination that the Russia Revolution should return to the model of a narrow dictatorship, concerning itself solely with the proletarian sector and its economic interests, led to totally unrealistic industrialization programs. Indeed, treating the industrial sector 'in isolation' would in the end 'undermine and destroy socialist industry and the national economy as a whole.' In the real Russian economy, he maintained, industry was reliant on accumulation in the agricultural sector - not only to feed the workers and provide raw materials, but also to supply a market for its produce.⁴⁶ In one of his clearest expositions of this holistic approach Bukharin thus insisted 'we must ...come out of our "industrial" shell and see the elements of the entire national economy in their linkages, their interdependence and their mutually conditioned movement.'⁴⁷ NEP, he maintained, had ushered in 'a new relationship of forces ...and a new combination of economic relations'⁴⁸ and he cautioned that a failure to take adequate account of the intermediate sectors of society due to excessive 'philosophizing' would ultimately leave them prey to capitalist counter-revolution.⁴⁹

⁴⁴ N. Bukharin, 'The Road to Socialism and the Worker-Peasant Alliance,' in: *Selected Writings on the State and the Transition to Socialism*, 220.

⁴⁵ N. Bukharin, 'Towards a Critique of the Economic Platform of the Opposition,' in: *Selected Writings on the State and the Transition to Socialism*, 118.

⁴⁶ Bukharin, 'A New Revelation,' 169.

⁴⁷ Bukharin, 'Platform of the Opposition,' 143.

⁴⁸ Bukharin, 'The New Economic Policy,' 194.

⁴⁹ Bukharin, 'A New Revelation,' 170-1; Bukharin, 'The Road to Socialism,' 230.

While this move in Bukharin's thought certainly served to shift the mode of revolutionary analysis away from a narrowly focused economistic and workerist concern with a dictatorship that served only industry and the state economy in favour of a more holistic and empirically-informed approach, it is important nonetheless to recognise that Bukharin remained primarily concerned with 'economic' groups in society and especially the peasantry and the 'petty bourgeoisie.' Insofar as he discussed other social and intellectual groups in Soviet society, it was mainly in terms of the necessity to 'make use of' these 'private' or 'petty-bourgeois' elements in the early stage of the transition period until the day arrived when they could be 'squeezed out' or 'proletarianized.' Gramsci, however, not only deployed a holistic terminology to combat what he regarded as 'economic-corporatist' influences in the PCd'I, but also expanded the mode of analysis extensively to include historically-determined intellectual forces as well as economic groups in society that would all have to be weighed up in the effort to develop an effective revolutionary strategy. No reading of the Italian's late writings can fail to recognise the symmetry between his political language and that of the 'post-*Saggio*' Bukharin, as illustrated by his frequent insistence on the necessity for an 'integral' analysis of the 'relations of forces' which he sharply contrasted with 'economic-corporate' approaches.

In fact, Gramsci first began to employ this language in 1924-26 in his confrontations with the Bordigan opposition in the PCd'I. In this period Bordiga continued to reject United Front tactics and accused Gramsci of following a Comintern strategy that had abandoned Marxist-Leninist theory for 'eclectic' and "politicking" analysis' dominated by the

singular preoccupation of immediate success' and 'justified by the aim of taking account of changes in the objective situation.' This approach, Bordiga argued, had allowed the [Italian] proletariat to fall under the influence of other classes.⁵⁰ Gramsci's response to these charges was to condemn Bordiga's brand of extreme theoretical economism, pointing out that Lenin had insisted 'that every communist must abhor revolutionary poses and superficially scarlet phrases' and become 'not only a revolutionary, but also a realistic politician.'⁵¹ Gramsci's critique not only appealed for proper empirical analysis of 'the relations of forces' but - like Bukharin - he too focused in particular on the issue of the peasantry and the petty bourgeoisie. Bordiga's position, Gramsci thus maintained, 'was based neither on a deep study, nor even on a superficial one, of the relation of forces and general conditions existing in Italian society.' Indeed, he claimed that it was precisely this brand of narrowly corporatist analysis that had allowed fascism to mobilize the peasantry against the proletarian revolutionary surge in the early 1920s and was in danger of making 'it possible for the bourgeoisie, defeated in its own area [the North], to concentrate its forces in the South and make this part of Italy into the marshalling-ground of counter-revolution.' Like Bukharin, Gramsci was in no doubt of the 'economistic' and 'schematic' source of this flight from reality. But in Italian conditions, he related Bordiga's economism to the passivism typical of those economistic thinkers who expected capitalism to collapse and a 'dictatorship of the proletariat' to follow

⁵⁰ A. Bordiga, 'Minutes of the Political Commission Nominated by the Central Committee to Finalize the Lyons Congress Documents,' in: A. Gramsci, *Selections from the Political Writings 1921-1926*, ed. Q. Hoare (Minneapolis, 1990), 319-23.

⁵¹ Gramsci, *Selections from the Political Writings 1921-1926*, 298.

automatically - ‘a kind of corporatism, which mechanically awaits the realization of revolutionary aims from the mere development of the general objective conditions.’⁵²

This attack on theoretical economism would moreover become a major theme of the *Quaderni* where it was now countered with an even broader deployment of the language of ‘integral’ analysis of the ‘relation of forces’ that went beyond Bukharin’s ideas. In a key passage in the *Prison Notebooks* that is regarded as a crucial staging-post in his thinking,⁵³ the theory of hegemony is thus developed by Gramsci in considering three levels of ‘the relations of forces’: ‘the relation of social forces [(classes)]; ‘the political “relation of forces”’; and ‘the “relation of military forces.”’ What gave Gramsci’s analysis its unique flavour here was its overt amplification of the wider political struggles in society that now took on a much more ideological character. A crucial factor in determining the outcome of the ‘political’ relation of forces he thus argued is the ability of a social group to see that its interests ‘go beyond the confines of the economic group’ and ‘can and must become the interests of other subordinate groups.’ For Gramsci this marked ‘the clear-cut transition from the structure to complex superstructures;’ a phase in which ‘previously germinated ideologies come into contact and confrontation with one another, until one of them - or, at least a single combination of them - tends to prevail, to dominate, to spread across the entire field, bringing about in addition to economic and political unity, intellectual and moral unity.’⁵⁴ It was precisely Gramsci’s determination

⁵² A. Gramsci, *Selections from Political Writings 1921-26*, 392, 397-8.

⁵³ C. Mouffe, ‘Hegemony and Ideology in Gramsci,’ in: *Gramsci and Marxist Theory*, ed. C. Mouffe (London, 1979), 180.

⁵⁴ Gramsci, *Quaderni*, Vol.1, 457-8. To provide the original context in which Gramsci’s ideas emerged in his prison writings Gerratana’s critical edition of the *Quaderni* is used here. However, all the translations which follow from the *Quaderni* are reliant on the two volumes of selected writings in English: A.

to make Italy's 'previously germinated ideologies' and intellectual traditions a major theme of the *Quaderni* that gave his analysis a much broader and more 'integral' complexion than that of Bukharin, even if the symmetry in their language is unmistakable.

'Bloc' to 'Historic Bloc': Overcoming Sectarianism and Winning over the Masses

This shared endorsement of 'holistic', 'integral' and 'relational' analysis was closely bound up with the development of a strategy to address that second major challenge identified by Bukharin as an absolute pre-requisite for revolutionary success both in Russia and internationally: winning and maintaining mass support, and especially among the peasantry. Here too there were significant similarities in the language employed by Bukharin and Gramsci in the mid-1920s around the familiar Bolshevik strategy of a 'bloc' or an 'alliance' between the workers and peasant masses, which both of them developed conceptually in a manner that went beyond Lenin to attack the sectarianism of their respective party opponents.⁵⁵ As Laclau and Mouffe have argued, Lenin had mainly written of this 'bloc' as a 'tactical alliance' to traverse an adverse and contingent historical period in which a mass proletarian social base was absent.⁵⁶ The implication here was that the peasantry would be jettisoned as soon as conditions proved favourable enough for the proletarian state to stand on its own two feet by developing its own social

Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and transl. Q. Hoare and G.N. Smith (London, 1971); A. Gramsci, *Further Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and transl. D. Boothman (London, 1995).

⁵⁵ In a very short article in 1972 Ernesto Ragionieri suggested a Bukharinist influence on Gramsci's immediate pre-prison writings and particularly his subsequent development of the notion of an 'historic bloc.' E. Ragionieri, 'Il Problema Bucharin,' *Studi Storici*, Jan-Mar., 1972, 171-81.

⁵⁶ Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 55-7.

base with the help of successful revolutions in more advanced capitalist countries. However, Laclau and Mouffe have failed to adequately recognise that alongside this dominant ‘tactical’ idea of the alliance in Lenin there was also a more democratic conception in his NEP writings that Bukharin would pick up on. For Lenin at times suggested that the alliance between workers and peasants would become an enduring feature of the Revolution as the peasantry became full members of socialist society through a system of rural cooperatives.⁵⁷

Bukharin once again exploited and developed this reformist tendency in Lenin’s late writing to the full - which it must be added was frequently tempered with more traditional interpretations of NEP and the worker-peasant alliance⁵⁸ - insisting that the *smychka* or ‘worker-peasant bloc’ was the very kernel of Leninism. Far from being abolished at an opportune moment in the future, the bloc - which provided the Revolution with its mass social base - would be strengthened and consolidated in the advance towards socialism. Indeed, the Revolution depended on this. Bukharin thus presented the idea of ‘a bloc’ as “a condition sine qua non of the proletarian revolution”⁵⁹ and insisted that *compromise* and *cooperation* were mutually beneficial and formed an important part of the continuing class struggle against the bourgeoisie in Russia. They were in fact the very means through which the peasantry ‘will be able to grow gradually into our system of socialist

⁵⁷ V.I. Lenin, ‘On Cooperation,’ in: *Collected Works, Vol.33*, 467-71.

⁵⁸ Those like Trotsky who were critical of the increasing rapprochement with the peasantry under NEP could thus take heart from Lenin’s very last article where NEP was once again occasionally associated with a contingent diversion; the necessity ‘to keep going until the socialist revolution is victorious in more developed countries’ when it would then be possible ‘to change horses, to change from the peasant, muzhik horse of poverty ...to the horse which the proletariat is seeking and must seek - the horse of large-scale machine industry, of electrification, of the Volkhov Power Station, etc.’ V.I. Lenin, ‘Better Fewer, But Better,’ in: *Collected Works, Vol.33*, 498, 501.

⁵⁹Bukharin, ‘A New Revelation,’ 152; Cohen, *Bukharin and the Bolshevik Revolution*, 145

relations'⁶⁰ and 'become comparable with the proletariat...and be transformed into equal members of socialist society.'⁶¹ Lenin's renowned distaste for 'reformist' and 'opportunistic' compromise would never have allowed him to conceptualise the worker-peasant bloc in this manner, and indeed, that sectarian dimension of his early work was inherited by the Left Opposition who used it to accuse Bukharin of selling out the Revolution to the 'petty bourgeoisie' in the countryside.⁶² Bukharin in turn amplified his former leader's most reformist statements on the peasantry and consistently drew on the 'Leninist' idea of the 'worker-peasant bloc' to charge the Opposition with 'underestimating the peasantry,'⁶³ propagating a 'shop-centred'⁶⁴ 'guildlike,'⁶⁵ 'trade-unionist' ideology⁶⁶ and failing to understand that a socialist economy must be 'guided by the necessity of satisfying the needs of the masses' and eschewing the capitalist model of exploitation.⁶⁷

By 1925 Bukharin's insistence on the centrality of the peasantry and the 'worker-peasant bloc' had reached the Comintern where he was propagating the idea that 'the most fundamental task to be accomplished by the communist parties is to study the agrarian

⁶⁰ Bukharin, 'The New Economic Policy,' 204.

⁶¹ Bukharin, 'The Road to Socialism,' 266. See too, 'Platform of the Opposition,' 146; 'A New Revelation,' 161; 'The New Economic Policy,' 187.

⁶² Trotsky in particular attacked the Central Committee for 'Ignoring or directly denying the petty-bourgeois character of peasant property and peasant economy' which he regarded as 'a departure from the Marxian position towards the theories of the Socialist Revolutionaries.' L. Trotsky, *The Platform of the Joint Opposition 1927* (London, 1973), 15-16.

⁶³ Bukharin, 'Platform of the Opposition,' 119.

⁶⁴ Bukharin, 'A New Revelation,' 181.

⁶⁵ Bukharin, 'The New Economic Policy,' 195.

⁶⁶ For Bukharin 'the basic shortcoming of all Trotskyism' is its 'failure to understand the most fundamental problem of our constructive activity, the problem of the worker-peasant bloc' (Bukharin, 'Platform of the Opposition,' 149). However, it was Preobrazhensky's willingness to treat the peasantry as a 'colony' that provoked his most vociferous criticism at the time, accusing him of taking up a position that 'is a threat to the bloc of workers and peasants, the bloc upon which the entire position of orthodox Bolshevism has been, and continues to be, built.' Bukharin, 'A New Revelation,' 175.

⁶⁷ Bukharin, 'A New Revelation,' 173.

problem in their own country and ‘their colonies’ and to set to work on devising a strategy ‘to emancipate the relevant strata of the peasantry from the influence of the bourgeoisie and the landlords.’⁶⁸ In Gramsci’s writings of this period a renewed interest in the peasantry and the notion of a ‘bloc’ or ‘alliance’ with the peasantry is too discernible,⁶⁹ and it would form the starting-point for one of his most penetrating and important concepts in the *Quaderni*: the ‘historic bloc.’ The conceptual symmetries with the post-Saggio Bukharin are again striking.

On Gramsci’s return to Italy from Comintern duties in May 1924 he thus endorsed for the first time the Comintern’s strategy of fighting elections - like the French communists - under the banner of a ‘Workers’ and Peasants’ Bloc’ against Bordiga’s insistence that the movement maintain its traditional and narrowly-defined title ‘the Communist Party.’⁷⁰

At Lyons Gramsci again defended this strategy of orientating the Party to win over the worker and peasant masses against Bordiga as the latter claimed that Lenin and the history of Bolshevism had shown that ‘it is better to be few than many’ and that it was only necessary to conquer the majority ‘in a period that was considered as preceding a struggle for the conquest of power.’⁷¹ Gramsci, like Bukharin, in both his late political writings and in the *Quaderni* drew on the conception of the worker-peasant ‘bloc’ or ‘alliance’ to condemn this narrowly elitist workerism. He thus railed against Bordiga’s ‘extremely sectarian political tactics’ and its fixation with keeping the Party ‘immune

⁶⁸ N. Bukharin, ‘Extracts from the Theses of the Fifth ECCI Plenum on the Peasant Question,’ 203-4.

⁶⁹ In both his *Ordine Nuovo* writings and in an article at the foundation of the Communist Party Gramsci had written briefly of the importance of a ‘bloc’ or ‘alliance’ with the Southern peasantry (see, A. Gramsci, *Selections from Political Writings 1910-1920*, ed. Q. Hoare (London, 1977), 148-9, 376). It was, however, only on his return from Comintern duties in 1924 that this became a major concern in his writings.

⁷⁰ A. Gramsci, ‘Gramsci’s Intervention at the Como Conference’ in: A. Gramsci, *Selections from Political Writings 1921-1926*, 253.

⁷¹ Bordiga, ‘Minutes,’ 320.

from infiltrations of petty-bourgeois ideologies’ which ultimately resulted in leaving the PCd’I without a social base as it was passively ceded to fascism. Significantly, Gramsci identified the strategy of developing a mass social base with the application and realisation of one of the key principles of ‘Bolshevism’ and ‘Bolshevization’: ‘the alliance between workers and peasants.’⁷² In the *Quaderni* he returned to this theme of tackling ‘the traditional apoliticism and passivity of the great popular masses’ by means of developing a ‘social bloc... linked organically to a national-popular mass’ and contrasted these favourably to “‘Vanguards’ without armies”⁷³ and the ‘bureaucratized’ party which ‘at moments of acute crisis’ found itself ‘voided of its social content and left as though suspended in mid-air.’⁷⁴

Like Bukharin, Gramsci too saw the ‘worker-peasant bloc’ and ‘compromise’ with the peasantry as a pre-requisite for winning over the masses that was mutually beneficial. As early as 1921 he had recommended ‘an alliance between the industrial workers of the North and the poor peasants of the South’ that would ‘serve to industrialize the backward agriculture of Italy and hence raise the level of the national produce to the benefit of the working masses.’⁷⁵ By 1926 his faith in the revolutionary potential of the southern peasantry was confirmed too as he made clear that ‘after the industrial and agricultural proletariat of Northern Italy’ they were ‘the most revolutionary social element of Italian society.’⁷⁶ In the *Quaderni*, he indeed rejected any notion of ‘exploiting’ or ‘coercing’ the peasantry in favour of genuine compromise and made clear that the peasantry were to be

⁷² Gramsci, *Selections from Political Writings 1921-1926*, 299-300

⁷³ Gramsci, *Quaderni del Carcere, Vol.3*, 1623-4, 1676.

⁷⁴ Gramsci, *Quaderni del Carcere, Vol. 3*, 1603-4.

⁷⁵ Gramsci, *Selections from Political Writings 1910-1920*, 376.

⁷⁶ Gramsci, *Selections from Political Writings 1921-1926*, 396.

totally integrated into the socialist revolution. In a note in which he attacked the economic 'intransigent theories' of Bordiga he thus insisted that 'Force can be employed against enemies but not against a part of one's own side which one wishes rapidly to assimilate, and whose "good will" and enthusiasm one needs.'⁷⁷ In Notebook 19 of the *Quaderni* on the Italian Risorgimento Gramsci returned to this theme of the correct relationship with 'kindred and allied groups,' attacking the exploitation of the peasantry of Southern Italy and their inferiorization by Northern workers under the influence of racial doctrines spread by bourgeois intellectuals. This, he suggested, would have to end if the rural masses were to be won over to the Revolution. The Party would in fact have to take on a 'Jacobin' character that the Action Party in the Risorgimento had failed to do, and 'not only in external "form", in temperament, but most particularly in socio-economic content' developing 'an organic programme of government which would reflect the essential demands of the popular masses, and in the first place of the peasantry.'⁷⁸

If the symmetries between Gramsci and Bukharin's conception of the worker-peasant bloc were therefore significant, it is nevertheless important to point out that his analysis of the bloc moved beyond Bukharin. The major advance here was Gramsci's much more thorough and sophisticated account of the role of intellectuals in determining the political allegiances and mobilisation of the rural majority. 'Every organic development of the peasant masses,' he thus argued, 'up to a certain point, is linked to and depends on

⁷⁷ Gramsci, *Quaderni del Carcere*, Vol.3, 1612-3.

⁷⁸ Gramsci, *Quaderni del Carcere*, Vol.3, 2010-3, 2021-4 .

movements among the intellectuals'⁷⁹ and he insisted that 'Credit must therefore be given to Croce's thought for ...it has forcefully drawn attention to the study of the factors of culture and ideas as elements of political domination, to the function of the great intellectuals in state life, to the moment of hegemony and consent as the necessary form of the concrete historic bloc.'⁸⁰ For Gramsci then it would not simply be enough to woo the peasant masses with economic compromises and a genuine commitment to a mutually beneficial and enduring alliance, support was also required 'from the intellectuals of the middle and lower strata, by concentrating them and stressing the themes most capable of interesting them.'⁸¹ Gramsci thereby entered a new and crucial social and cultural element in the politics of constructing a solid mass 'worker-peasant bloc' that incorporated non-Party 'mediating' intellectuals in a way that Bukharin had clearly not envisaged.

'Leadership' to 'Hegemony': Overcoming 'Command' and Organizing Ideologically

Just as the notion of 'a bloc' was employed by both Gramsci and Bukharin to combat sectarianism and foreground the need to win the support of the masses, so too did the conceptions of 'leadership' and 'hegemony' play a central role in their thought. Although Bukharin preferred the former and Gramsci the latter, both thinkers employed these terms in their later work and often in an interchangeable manner.⁸² There were of course

⁷⁹ Gramsci, *Quaderni del Carcere*, Vol.3, 1521.

⁸⁰ Gramsci, *Quaderni del Carcere*, Vol.2, 1211.

⁸¹ Gramsci, *Quaderni del Carcere*, Vol.3, 2024.

⁸² Buci-Glucksmann argues that the concept of hegemony 'plays a central role' in Bukharin's thought and points out that Bukharin used it 'in a sense that might appear close to Gramsci's.' Yet besides for a few illuminating asides of this nature on possible symmetries her analysis is again informed by a reading of

distinctions in the way they used them, but there were also significant similarities that have so far been overlooked. Importantly, the two concepts were particularly aimed at addressing that key task that had been identified as an additional necessity of combating the aforementioned reliance on command-like structures in favour of developing communist movements that could direct from above while also fostering mass initiative from below. The latter in particular was seen as a crucial *ideological* task since the success of NEP in Russia and that of the United Front strategy in Europe depended not simply on brokering enduring compromises with the mass of peasant workers to achieve compliance, but also, gaining their *active and committed involvement* in the revolutionary struggle.

In Bukharin's NEP writings 'leadership' had at least three aspects that would also appear in Gramsci's writings in somewhat adjusted and developed forms. Firstly, Bukharin employed the concept as an important weapon in guarding the Party against the Left Opposition's sectarian calls to return to the apparatuses of coercion and administrative command to deal with all non-proletarian social elements, insisting instead, that the Party must now rely on the ideological tool of *persuasion*. For Bukharin, effective 'leadership' in the transition period required not only coercing the forces of the counter-revolution and steady economic development, but also, the adoption of a more 'national' ideological orientation in the communist movement itself - a rational development from his emphasis on 'holistic' analysis of all the national forces. 'Under its own dictatorship' Bukharin thus

Bukharin based on 'the Saggio' as interpreted by Gramsci in the *Prison Notebooks*, rather than his NEP writings which are all but ignored. Buci-Glucksmann, *Gramsci and the State*, 7, 199-236.

argued the proletariat ‘stands for civil peace’ and ‘leads society as a whole’ ‘fortifying’ and ‘stabilizing’ it. It defends in particular the ‘worker-peasant bloc under the hegemony of the working class as the leading and directing force of this bloc’⁸³ and accepts the necessity for party leaders ‘to outgrow the methods of issuing commands or orders’ for ‘a decisive, total, and unconditional switch to methods of persuasion.’⁸⁴

Secondly, Bukharin saw that ‘leadership’ of this nature required a complementary ideological organisational apparatus outside the Party to link with and encourage initiative from below that was radically different from the bureaucratic machinery of ‘War Communism.’ Paradoxically, as Stalin - his then ally - prepared the ground for an even more oppressive state bureaucracy in the mid-1920s, Bukharin was campaigning for an expansion and blooming of Soviet civil society.⁸⁵ Soviet power, he thus argued, ‘encourages an unprecedented flourishing of all possible organizations of the working class and the labouring masses in general ...the workers’ trade unions, peasant cooperatives and committees, organizations of workers’ and peasants’ press correspondents, all kinds of voluntary societies and associations.’⁸⁶ Their autonomy and internal democracy was to be respected, but the Party’s intellectuals would seek to infiltrate them and use them and the ‘leading peasants’ as ‘a bridge’ to the masses, encouraging their involvement in the building of a new Soviet economy and society.

⁸³ Bukharin, ‘Platform of the Opposition,’ 111-5.

⁸⁴ Bukharin, ‘The Road to Socialism,’ 273.

⁸⁵ Biggart, ‘Bukharin’s Theory of Cultural Revolution,’ 157-8.

⁸⁶ Bukharin, ‘The Road to Socialism,’ 269-70.

Bukharin indeed implied that this expansion of mass organisation in civil society was the means to combat the bureaucratization of the state organism.⁸⁷

Finally, Bukharin endorsed a form of 'leadership' that not only regarded this ideological struggle in the institutions of civil society as a campaign of persuasion, but also, and more importantly, a campaign to *educate* the peasant masses into socialism. For Lenin the Cultural Revolution had concerned itself almost exclusively with raising the 'general education' of the [peasant] masses in the interests of economic development, but Bukharin maintained that the struggle in civil society should serve as the basis of creating a whole new *proletarian civilisation*.⁸⁸ 'The numerous and diverse organizational cells of all these associations of labouring people,' Bukharin thus argued, along with Soviet power 'form a single system, which embraces, organizes, enlightens and reforms the broad strata of the toilers.' Indeed, in order to secure its 'leadership' he insisted the proletariat were required to 're-educate the peasantry in a socialist manner, constantly elevating it and pulling it upward to the same material, economic, and cultural-political level as that of the leading strata of the proletarian population.'⁸⁹

In Gramsci we witness similar themes emerging around the conceptions of 'leadership' and 'hegemony' - with once again a greater focus on intellectuals and their autonomy - as he grappled with the same problem of an *ideological organization* of the worker and peasant masses behind the Revolution. Thus in that crucial essay in his development of a theory of hegemony - 'Some Aspects of the Southern Question' - Gramsci takes up the

⁸⁷ Bukharin, 'The Road to Socialism,' 270-3.

⁸⁸ Biggart, 'Bukharin's Theory of Cultural Revolution,' 44.

⁸⁹ Bukharin, 'The Road to Socialism,' 266, 270.

anti-sectarian ideological drive to create a ‘national’ orientation in the Italian movement, arguing that in Italy ‘only two social forces are essentially national and bearers of the future: the proletariat and the peasants.’ ‘The proletariat,’ he argued, was required ‘to strip itself of every residue of corporatism’ and to learn to ‘think as workers who are members of a class which aims to lead the peasants and intellectuals’ who ‘in Italy represent the majority of the population.’ A failure to take up this challenge, he insisted, would mean that ‘the proletariat does not become the leading class’ and the popular masses would remain ‘under bourgeois leadership.’⁹⁰ In the *Quaderni* he went further, marking ‘hegemony’ off from ‘economic-corporate’ approaches and insisting that in this struggle ‘the development and expansion of the particular group are conceived of, and presented, as being the motor force of a universal expansion, of a development of all the “national” energies.’⁹¹

Gramsci, like Bukharin, also saw ‘civil society’ as a crucial arena of ideological struggle for ‘hegemony’ and it is significant that in 1926 he was too insisting on the necessity ‘of organizing increasing significant masses of poor peasants into autonomous and independent formations’ and making use of ‘the leadership’ of the intellectual current represented by the liberal-left intellectual Piero Gobetti to build the worker-peasant alliance.⁹² In the *Quaderni* Gramsci would go on to argue that civil society would have to be transformed from a defensive rampart around bourgeois rule to that of a bulwark of

⁹⁰ Gramsci, *Selections from Political Writings 1921-1926*, 448-9, 462.

⁹¹ Gramsci, *Quaderni del Carcere*, Vol. 3, 1584. Elsewhere in an attack on Trotsky’s ‘vague’ and ‘ideological’ ‘internationalism’ Gramsci maintained the validity of the Russian Majority’s view that ‘A class that is international in character has - in as much as it guides social strata which are narrowly national (intellectuals), and indeed frequently even less than national: particularistic and municipalistic (the peasants) - to “nationalise” itself in a certain sense.’ Gramsci, *Quaderni del Carcere*, Vol.3, 1729-30.

⁹² Gramsci, *Selections from Political Writings 1921-1926*, 462. For the relations between Gramsci and Gobetti see, J. Martin, *Piero Gobetti and the Politics of Liberal Revolution* (London, 2008).

the new emerging proletarian state. Building on the Russian debate, he in fact drew a sharp distinction between the struggle for ‘domination’ which was related to capturing the traditional institutions of the state (dictatorship), and the struggle for mass consent, which was waged at the level of ‘the “private” apparatus of “hegemony” or civil society.’⁹³ While Gramsci - like Bukharin - never lost sight of the fact that coercion would have to be used against the forces of counter-revolution, he too condemned an excessive reliance on force which he tellingly identified with ‘Bronstein [Trotsky], who in one way or another can be considered the political theorist of frontal attack in a period in which it only leads to defeats.’ The battle for leadership in civil society, by contract, took the form of a ‘war of position’ that required ‘enormous sacrifices by infinite masses of people...an unprecedented concentration of hegemony ...[to] organise permanently the “impossibility” of internal disintegration’ and the ‘reinforcement of the hegemonic “positions” of the dominant group.’ The symmetries with the Bukharinist theme of organizing the masses in civil society is once again unmistakable, as is the importance with which he regarded this struggle, ‘since in politics’ Gramsci argued, ‘the “war of position”, once won, is decisive.’⁹⁴

There can be little doubt, moreover, of the similarity between Gramsci and Bukharin’s conception of leadership and hegemony, as involving *ideological* struggle of an

⁹³ Gramsci, *Quaderni del Carcere*, Vol.2, 801, 865-7.

⁹⁴ Gramsci, *Quaderni del Carcere*, Vol.2, 801-2. Gramsci attributed ‘the doctrine of hegemony as a complement to the theory of the State-as-force’ to Lenin and in a letter to Tania Schucht he maintained that it led ‘to certain determinations of the concept of State, which is usually understood as political society (or dictatorship; or coercive apparatus to bring the mass of the people into conformity with the specific type of production and the specific economy at a given moment) and not as an equilibrium between political society and civil society (or hegemony of a social group over the entire national society exercised through the so-called private organisations, like the Church, the trade unions, the schools, etc.’ Gramsci, *Quaderni del Carcere*, Vol.2, 1235; A. Gramsci, *Letters from Prison*, 2 vols, ed. F. Rosengarten (New York, 1994), Vol.2, 67.

educational nature in the institutions of civil society to achieve committed mass allegiance to the revolutionary project of ‘the leading group.’ Gramsci in the *Quaderni* captured the character of this ideological task by identifying it as one of creating ‘a tradition ...in an active and not in a passive sense.’ This would require a ‘cultural battle to transform the popular “mentality”” and the ‘education of the masses, of their “adaptation” in accordance with the requirements of the goal to be achieved.’⁹⁵ While ‘every relationship of “hegemony”” between ‘leaders [dirigenti] and led’ was therefore for Gramsci like Bukharin ‘necessarily an educational relationship,’ it is important to point out that Gramsci developed the educational nature of leadership beyond his Bolshevik contemporary by insisting that it was by no means a top-down one-way process. In fact Gramsci saw the educational relationship between the leaders and the led as ‘active and reciprocal so that every teacher is always a pupil and every pupil a teacher.’ In this understanding of the educational content of hegemony the leaders become ‘democratic philosophers’ who ‘draw the necessary problems for formulation and resolution’ from their own cultural environment which ‘reacts back on the philosopher and imposes on him a continual process of self-criticism.’⁹⁶

Indeed, and despite the significant symmetries, it is at this point that Gramsci’s conception of leadership and hegemony once again takes a radical deviation from that of Bukharin and the Marxist tradition in general. For while Bukharin clearly saw the task of leadership as bringing ‘proletarian ideology’ and civilization to the masses - and especially the peasantry - as a means of securing economic development in Russia,

⁹⁵ Gramsci, *Quaderni del Carcere*, Vol.2, 757, 1330,

⁹⁶ Gramsci, *Quaderni del Carcere*, Vol.2, 1331-2.

Gramsci's much more historical and cultural analysis of Italian society and the way to revolutionary success there led him in the *Quaderni* to a more complex conception of leadership and ideological struggle. The latter involved the leading group forging a 'national-popular collective will'⁹⁷ and 'balancing' the various ideological currents in the bloc. This notion was premised on the abandonment of the class reductionism that continued to mark Bukharin's theory of ideology, and an early Marxist endorsement of identity as 'composite.'⁹⁸ According to Gramsci in the process of educating and being educated the proletarian party's 'intellectual and moral leadership' required it to become 'an organizer of intellectual and moral reform,'⁹⁹ which crucially necessitated a *reciprocal* transformation of the leaders and the led as they developed into what the Italian called 'a collective man' - the very precondition for a successful revolutionary act.¹⁰⁰ Within this 'new ideological and theoretical complex' the masses collectively recognize the proletarian element as the hegemonic 'nucleus,'¹⁰¹ but as noted earlier the proletariat too must 'nationalize itself,' internalizing popular struggles as its own and developing them into a coherent socialist world view.¹⁰² Ideological hegemony in Gramsci was thus achieved in conditions of historically-contingent plurality and this of course made the struggle a great deal more complicated than Bukharin's bifurcated view of ideology had conceived it.

⁹⁷ Gramsci, *Quaderni del Carcere*, Vol. 3, 1560.

⁹⁸ 'The personality is strangely composite: it contains Stone Age elements and principles of a more advanced science, prejudices from all past phases of history at the local level and intuitions of a future philosophy which will be that of a human race united the world over.' Gramsci, *Quaderni del Carcere*, Vol.2, 1376.

⁹⁹ Gramsci, *Quaderni del Carcere*, Vol. 3, 1560.

¹⁰⁰ Gramsci, *Quaderni del Carcere*, Vol.2, 1331.

¹⁰¹ Gramsci, *Quaderni del Carcere*, Vol. 2, 1058.

¹⁰² Gramsci, *Quaderni del Carcere*, Vol.3, 1729; Gramsci, *Quaderni del Carcere*, Vol. 2, 1397-8.

'Dynamic Equilibrium': Securing a Steady and Expansive Revolutionary Tempo

But even if this advanced ideological conception of 'hegemony' set Gramsci apart from Bukharin to some extent, it should nonetheless be recognised that the elevation of the ideological struggle in the work of both these thinkers led them to similar conclusions about the tempo of revolutionary advance. The issue here was the need for the Party to direct the revolutionary struggle in accordance with solid mass initiative and avoiding hopeless and demoralising 'frontal assaults' - that final major task of communism in Russia and in Europe in the mid-1920s. For Bukharin one of the key conceptual weapons in the reorientation of movements towards a steadier but surer pace of revolutionary progress was the notion of 'an equilibrium' which in his thought was both dynamic and dialectical.¹⁰³ What attracted Bukharin to this concept was its conceptual richness as it incorporated the notions of holistic interdependent and optimal development based on mutually beneficial compromises which, as we have seen, were central to his interpretation of NEP. Although a full account of Bukharin's theory of equilibrium cannot be provided here,¹⁰⁴ that aspect of it that relates specifically to ideological struggle and the tempo of the revolutionary process deserve particular mention since it is precisely here where the symmetries with Gramsci's work are strongest.

¹⁰³ Lenin's famous assessment of Bukharin in his 'Testament' - 'the major theorist of the Party' and 'rightly considered the favourite of the whole Party' but one who 'never made a study of dialectics' or 'fully appreciated' it - would appear to have stung Bukharin in his NEP writings into insisting on the dialectical character of his thought at every turn. V.I. Lenin, 'Letter to the Congress,' in: *Collected Works, Vol.36*, 595. For the 'dynamic' character of Bukharin's theory of equilibrium see, Cohen, *Bukharin and the Bolshevik Revolution*, 91.

¹⁰⁴ For an economic analysis see, K.J. Tarbuck, *Bukharin's Theory of Equilibrium* (London, 1989).

As early as the much maligned ‘*Saggio*’ Bukharin had in fact formulated a conception of socialism emerging dialectically - through ‘constant internal contradictions’ and a ‘clash of forces’ - out of a contracting capitalist ‘unstable equilibrium with negative indication’ towards an expansive socialist ‘unstable equilibrium with positive (favourable) indication.’ The latter would, he argued, place the social and economic order on ‘a new and “higher” basis ...on which society will increase and develop.’¹⁰⁵ Importantly, although the dominant tendency in the ‘*Saggio*’ was to present this progression as mechanical and inevitable, there was too an emerging idea there that a properly equilibrated society would require a sustained ideological struggle by proletarian intellectuals through the press and the education system to ‘mould the minds of the people’ on the model of Taylorite and Fordist capitalism in the United States in an effort to maintain ‘an equilibrium ...between the material work as a whole and the superstructural work as a whole.’¹⁰⁶

This monstrously abstract idea of a dynamic equilibrium in the ‘*Saggio*’ was to underlie much of the more concrete analysis in Bukharin’s NEP writings where it clearly informed not only his well-known insistence on optimal compromises between the industrial sector and the peasant sector in the expectation of ‘mutual fertilization,’¹⁰⁷ but also, his demands for a great ‘ideological’ and ‘educational’ campaign in Russian civil society to coordinate and rationalise the superstructure to facilitate economic development. His understanding of the immensity of these tasks - and especially the requirement to raise the cultural standards of the peasant masses out of ‘semi-Asiatic’ barbarism to play a full role in

¹⁰⁵ Bukharin, *Historical Materialism: A System of Sociology*, 72-7.

¹⁰⁶ Bukharin, *Historical Materialism: A System of Sociology*, 219-21, 208-9, 255-6.

¹⁰⁷ Bukharin, ‘The New Economic Policy,’ 187.

Russian economic development¹⁰⁸ - led Bukharin, however, to see this dynamic equilibrium as necessarily moving at a much slower tempo. Citing Lenin, he insisted that the sacrifice in pace would be more than compensated for by 'stability' and 'certainty,' for even if they advanced 'infinitely more slowly' they would at least advance 'in such a way that the entire mass will actually move forward with us.'¹⁰⁹ 'Our former expectations concerning the development of a socialist order' Bukharin thus argued in 1925, 'involved elimination of the market and capitalist economy immediately ...we were mistaken.' The transition phase in fact requires 'a process of gradually squeezing out, overcoming, and reshaping a whole series of intermediate forms' and Bukharin made clear that 'every Communist Party, without exception, agrees with this course of development' as it was 'now embodied in the draft program adopted by the Communist International.'¹¹⁰

Given that Gramsci had attended the very Plenum of the ECCI in which this program was drafted and had no doubt assimilated its emphasis on the necessity for Communist parties to give much greater attention to ideological and cultural struggle under the slogan of Bolshevization,¹¹¹ it is not surprising that in his late writings we find similar declarations about the effects this would have on the tempo of revolutionary advances. Indeed, Gramsci's much more complex understanding of ideological struggle and leadership -

¹⁰⁸ Bukharin, 'The Road to Socialism,' 277-9.

¹⁰⁹ Bukharin, 'Platform of the Opposition,' 143.

¹¹⁰ Bukharin, 'The New Economic Policy,' 190.

¹¹¹ Party sections were thus instructed to abandon their 'passive attitude' and to put in place 'ideological training' for the party membership including an 'agitprop department' and 'a party school.' Gramsci not only responded enthusiastically to these instructions but it was tellingly Bukharin's 'Saggio' which he turned to in order to provide propaganda material for the PCd'I school - an indication of who he regarded as the leading Bolshevik theorist of the day. 'Extracts From the Draft Rules for the Organization of Agitation and Propaganda Work by the Sections of the Comintern, Submitted by the Agitprop Department of the ECCI,' in: *The Communist International 1919-1943: Documents*, 179-82; See too, Buciu-Glucksmann, *Gramsci and the State*, 199-203.

involving the forging and organisation of a 'national-popular collective will' - in the period before the capture of power led him to an even more radical departure from the traditional Bolshevik endorsement of a swift and audacious strike at the moribund capitalist state. The symmetries with Bukharin are, however, unmistakable as he too drew on conceptions of balance and equilibrium to orientate Italian communism towards a much steadier and surer revolutionary advance.

He thus theorized the revolutionary process as dynamic and dialectical like Bukharin, requiring an active mass intervention rather than a reliance on Bordiga's 'palingenetic' economic laws or Trotsky's futile 'frontal assaults.'¹¹² He in fact commended Machiavelli for his vision of society as 'a relation of forces in continuous motion and shift of equilibrium' which required the 'active politician' to apply his 'will to the creation of a new equilibrium among the forces which really exist and are operative.'¹¹³ The latter were of course for Machiavelli and Gramsci the popular masses of workers and peasants, and when Gramsci turned to the advance towards hegemony and consolidating the alliance between these popular forces there can be little doubt that he too saw this as a process of dialectical expansion that would proceed at a much steadier tempo than the 'palingeneticists' or the advocates of 'frontal assault' assumed. Revolutionary progress in the West in particular was thus for Gramsci a complex one in which the proletariat would be required to 'exercise the hegemonic function' of 'holding the balance between the

¹¹² Gramsci, *Quaderni del Carcere*, Vol.3, 1612; Gramsci, *Quaderni del Carcere*, Vol.2, 801-2.

¹¹³ Gramsci, *Quaderni del Carcere*, Vol.3, 1577-78. For the wider relationship between Gramsci and Machiavelli's thought see, B. Fontana, *Hegemony and Power: On the Relation between Gramsci and Machiavelli* (Minneapolis, 1993).

various interests in “civil society;”¹¹⁴ ‘a continuous process of formation and superseding of unstable equilibria (on the juridical plane) between the interests of the fundamental group and those of the subordinate groups.’¹¹⁵ Indeed, in a move that resonated with his early conception of working class institutions as prefiguring a new socialist order,¹¹⁶ Gramsci seemed to suggest an even slower revolutionary tempo and longer transition period than even Bukharin had been prepared to contemplate. For while Bukharin consistently argued that the constructive phase of the transition period would be mainly assigned to the period *after* the seizure of power,¹¹⁷ Gramsci by contrast, maintained that ‘A social group can, and indeed must, already exercise “leadership” before winning governmental power’ which was for him ‘one of the principal conditions for the winning of such power.’¹¹⁸ This of course meant that a successful revolution for Gramsci was preceded by, and dependent on, a prolonged ideological struggle in civil society. If this certainly demonstrates another important divergence with Bukharin, the overall picture is nonetheless one again of symmetry in their emphasis on a dynamic yet steady revolutionary tempo, and a more long-term strategy in the transition period related to the ideological battle in civil society which is precisely the most enduring legacy that Gramsci in the end bequeathed to the PCd’I.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁴ Gramsci, *Quaderni del Carcere, Vol.1*, 662. This note that appears in one of the earliest Notebooks (Notebook 5) and identifies ‘the hegemonic function’ with the organization of ‘balance’ and ‘equilibrium’ is a crucial if neglected staging-post in Gramsci’s development of his theory of hegemony in the *Quaderni*. For a broader exploration of the ideas of balance and equilibrium in Gramsci’s political thought see, M. McNally, ‘The Organization of Balance and Equilibrium in Gramsci’s Hegemony,’ *History of Political Thought*, 29, 4, (2008), 662-89.

¹¹⁵ Gramsci, *Quaderni del Carcere, Vol. 3*, 1584.

¹¹⁶ C. Levy, *Gramsci and the Anarchists* (Oxford, 1999), 74-77.

¹¹⁷ Bukharin, ‘Platform of the Opposition,’ 111-2; ‘The Road to Socialism,’ 245.

¹¹⁸ Gramsci, *Quaderni del Carcere, Vol.3*, 2010-11.

¹¹⁹J. Barth Urban, *Moscow and the Italian Communist Party: From Togliatti to Berlinguer* (Ithaca, 1986), 23-36.

Conclusion

The aim of this article as stated at the outset was to call into question the established view in the literature on Gramsci of a fundamental disparity between his thought and that of Bukharin. What I hope to have shown above is that if we resist the temptation to see Bukharin's work simply through the lens of Gramsci in the *Quaderni* and reduce his thought – unfairly and ahistorically in my view – to his well-known work, *Historical Materialism*, a more complex and much more interesting picture emerges of a whole series of unexplored symmetries in their writings. This of course need not lead to the opposite extreme of insisting that their thought is identical, as I hope also to have demonstrated above. However, it does provide an important corrective to the rather unpersuasive and unsophisticated treatment that Bukharin has generally received by scholars of Gramsci up to this point. Moreover, it raises the possibility - as others have done¹²⁰ - that the influence of the NEP phase in Russia was much more important in the development of Gramsci's thought and his advance towards a theory of hegemony than has been recognised to date. If this is in fact the case then Bukharin's central role in the development and conceptual defence of NEP in its economic, political and cultural dimensions as I have illustrated above can only mean that the Gramsci-Bukharin relationship may require yet further revision and exploration.

¹²⁰ L. Paggi, *Le Strategie del Potere in Gramsci. Tra Fascismo e Socialismo in un Solo Paese 1923-26* (Rome, 1984); Thomas, *The Gramscian Moment*, 234-40.