



Revisiting the Gramsci–Bukharin relationship: Neglected symmetries

Mark McNally

University of Leeds, Leeds, LS2 9JT, UK

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Available online 7 January 2011

Keywords:
Gramsci
Bukharin
NEP
United Front
Historic Bloc
Hegemony

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 20th century Marxism emerges that have been poorly recognised in the literature on Gramsci to date.

© 2010 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

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 20th century.

The most widespread interpretation of the relationship between Gramsci and Bukharin's work in the current literature

is that Gramsci developed his political thought 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. 1, ed. J. A. Buttigieg (New York, 1991), 520.

E-mail address: m.a.mcnally@leeds.ac.uk.

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

² See, 'Quaderno 11,' in: A. Gramsci, *Quaderni del Carcere*, 4 vols. ed. V. Gerratana (Torino, 2007), vol. 2, 1363–509.

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 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 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 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

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.

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.

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

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

⁷ R. Bellamy, 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).

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, 1967–1975), Vol. 1.

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

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/1158972>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/1158972>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)