

# **Gramsci's Ideas of Practical, Ideological and Political Defeats**

## **Political Party Action and Collective Will in the Social Transformations in Italy and Portugal**

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### **Abstract**

Based on Antonio Gramsci's ideas about three different types of defeat a political party can suffer, we adopted a historical approach in this study of the political history of two Political Parties. Firstly, this work is based on a literature review, which investigates the national context and the main political forces involved in the democratic transition in both countries. Secondly, we propose a formulation of the Political Parties action in the national context, trying to provide elements to the comprehension of the real politics the PCI and PCP adopted in the EU integration process. Therefore, this paper brings the Gramsci's concepts related to Political Parties in order to offer a view of the importance of the class organizations not only in the national context, but also in the international relations, paying attention to the lessons of the recent political experiences in Italy and Portugal.

### **The contribution of the Gramsci's texts: *Prison Notebooks* and *Political Writings***

Gramsci wrote that for the concrete analysis of the relation of forces it is necessary to consider methodologically the relation of social forces with the productive forces structure in development, and the relation of political forces and military forces. The Gramsci's idea is that the constitution of the political power has to be involved in the form of the Political Party: the Modern Prince, which contain the complexity and particularity of the class which belongs to (GRAMSCI, 2014: 1558).

As an alive organism leading the social transformation, the Modern Prince (the Modern Political Party) can suffer defeats in its historical and practical process of constitution. From the Gramsci *Political Writings*, in a letter sent to Palmiro Togliatti, Gramsci is concerning about different levels of defeats can occur to the class organization, the Communist Party in particular in that moment (GRAMSCI, 1978).

Such discussion is more broadly present in our Master dissertation, and here the aim is to highlight the Gramscian discussion within contemporary problems, despite the fact this is not a clear elaboration in his writings, we can identify the importance of thinking different levels of transformations an organization can carry on in its action. Hence, those levels do not mean a

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categorization or the establishment of steps, or degrees, which necessary one organization has to surpass. The dynamic connection among such particular approach regarding defeats provide the general character of the analysis, avoiding mechanical views.

The dialogical way that Gramsci conducted the discussion over general aspects of the Modern Prince, pointing out specific concerns of the practice, is the methodological approach present through the *Quaderni* and other writings.

From the *Quaderni*, we cannot see the history of any political party apart from the situation of the dominant class in a specific moment, what require also an overview regarding a specific national context. The importance of domestic politics to the international movement and also International Relations (the broad area of Political Sciences) acquired more importance during the XX century, when national movements demonstrates its capacity to influence international affairs. For instance, the policy of the Bolshevik Party during the years of constitution of the Soviet Union after the First World War and the Russian Revolution, when the Political Party leading subaltern classes through the creation and application of international policies.

Gramsci learn from the Bolshevik experience that domestic relations has a logical implication on IR and, in this sense, the hegemonic purpose of the dominant class is to maintain the internal peace/cooperation among classes. Moreover, political parties are an organic movement inside a structure, which is capable to carry on the defensive and attacking forms of passive revolution (THOMAS, 2009). Therefore, the class organization is an expression of the mass movement (FEMIA, 1981).

### **The Modern Prince**

To what concerns this work, the theorization of the Modern Prince is central in the Gramscian elaborations. In particular, in the *Quaderni* a more complex analysis of the Machiavellian discussion of the Prince is present, in order the problem of class organization program in the socialist revolution.

In Gramsci words,

Il moderno Principe, il mito-principe non può non essere una persona reale, un individuo concreto, può essere solo un organismo; un elemento di società complesso nel quale abbia già inizio il concretarsi di una volontà collettiva riconosciuta e affermatasi parzialmente nell'azione (GRAMSCI, 2014: 1558).

The creation of the *new* derives from the collective will, from the subaltern wish to overcome consciously the subordinated situation. To accomplish it, the organism is the Political Party. Hence, the central point of such elaboration is that the Modern Prince, the Modern

organization of the subaltern classes, must have present the collective will as a connection with its social basis as an element of Jacobinism.

In an attempt of a Marxist methodology, is important to consider in the analysis also the problem/subject as a whole composed by its parts, in an attempt to bring to light not only the development of one organization in a period, but also the relation of opposite forces to the collective will. This is a view over the relation of forces of political parties, what Gramsci called hegemonic system within the State.

From the mentioned above, we can also consider the Gramsci elaboration before the Prison period, considering his action and thought present in the texts that composes the Political Writings. The Gramsci concern includes the relativization of damages in the structure and ideas of the organization: the practical (isolation), the ideological (reformism) and political (the death) levels (GRAMSCI, 2004: 132).

Following the Gramsci debate with Togliatti, we can summarize the defeats as: the practical defeat as an isolation of the communists in the national context ensuring the opposition in the government. The ideological, as an ideological transformation and affirmation of the impossibility to overcome the isolation. Finally, the political defeat, the choice of disintegration of the entire organization. Again, it must be seen as a historical process, as a set of inter-connected relations related to the tactics and strategy of the Political Party in the national and international context.

### **The Italian case**

After the II World War, Italy was under an imminent civil war. The PCI was attempting to collaborate in the construction of the national unity (under military occupation), after the defeat of the fascist regime.

Settled the democracy as the national political terrain and a step towards socialism, the PCI agreed collaborating in laying down the weapons of its organized forces, conquering an important strategic victory. This choice became known as the “Svolta di Salerno”. After such agreement with other democratic forces, the PCI start adapting its policies to act inside the new structure, what included participating in the electoral process (AGOSTI, 1999).

Starting the reconstruction of the country in different perspectives (social, economical and political areas), the influence of the Western world was present in the establishment of the character of the new moment. Liberalizing the economy and creating democratic institutions – that was the typical formula, even if preserved some national particularities.

Applying the formula to the Italian context, a government of national unity was created to

ensure the continuity of the internal peace. Through the blessing of the Communist Party, the democratic system started with the election of the Christian Democracy as the biggest force, force which was the opposition to the PCI program of socialism. The PCI, however, passed to be the second or even the third electoral force, acting in the background of the State politics.

The programmatic problem was put in the relation between democracy and socialism. Achieved the first, remained the second task to get done. Less space was left to the communists in the national political context, resulting that the plan of the culture was the fortress and the terrain of praxis since a subaltern position (BERLINGUER, 2013).

From the strategy of the PCI, the action under the democratic regime should be focused on the parliamentary fight and collaboration with other democratic forces. However, in such context and related to the purposes of the Party, we established this moment of performance in the democratic institutions as the first *practical defeat*, because the PCI could not assure its presence as an expressive social force defending the subaltern classes interests. Hence, this is a defeat because of the type of development which was been implemented in the country, even though the democracy were better than the fascist dictatorship.

Based on Gramsci definition, the practical defeat is the isolation of the political party in the national context, which allowed other forces to be in power instead.

Further, the appearance of the *eurocomunism* as a strategy of combination of different political forces in Europe was the most important action the PC took during the 1970's. The eurocomunism allowed the communist forces to create new alliances in their national contexts. For instance, the PCI developed the "historical compromise" with the democratic Italian forces, in order to achieve normality in the country and guarantee the continuity of the democratic development. Another one was the *democratic alternative*, an attempt of broad collaboration with other democratic forces in the country (MAIA, 2017). Those policies were composing the set of new ideas that was guiding the PCI.

But the fact is that the working classes had not guaranteed its hegemony under such circumstances, i.e. were unable to create an effective policy to exercise power and to ensure social consent over other associated groups and social classes. Meaning, therefore, a stagnation in the relation of forces, allowing the opposite side to put forward its political program.

Together, eurocomunism, historical compromise and democratic alternative constituted the set of policies which we consider as the *ideological defeat* the PCI suffered along decades of action in the Italian political context. Again, based on Gramsci discussion with Togliatti, the ideological defeat means the ideological transformation in the Political Party ideas and its impossibility to reverse the isolation.

Those defeats are not separated or independent in time and space. Further, the policy of alliances designed after the II WW did not present the expected results to the PCI in the *war of position* (PCI, 1981). The policy of alliances failed and the profound ideological transformation of conception were reasons for the defeat.

The coronation of the process came to light during the 1980's. Transformations in the leadership of the Party, new values in the strategy, new international approach and new internal methods conduct the PCI to operate/suffer a radical transformation. The domestic context were impregnated by corruption, the approach of the common market in the integration process also were another problem to the economy.

New points came out in the Thesis of the PCI Congresses during the '80s, such as the programmatic centrality of the fight for peace, sustainable environment, feminism and youth; considering itself more and more as a *modern reformer party*, the PCI was distancing itself from the revolutionary perspective in its political program and practice anymore. The leadership of the Party<sup>2</sup> launched the *new course*, associating the necessity of national reforms to the context of the organization. In fact, the transformations in course in the Soviet Union were a strong point to be addressed in the Party, and to its social basis.

The *svolta della Bolognina* marks the fast period of death of the PCI. Connecting the international and the national contexts to the organization history and particularity, new proposals came out in the last Congresses, and most of them were approved, implying a radical transformation in the – what were yet a– massive organism of the working classes. Thus, an organism under a crisis of direction since decades.

The death of the PCI in the Congress of Rimini, 1991, and the birth of the *Democratic Party of the Left* were the modernization of the communist movement in Italy, indicating the flowering of something that already existed in the Party. In the end, the defeat was *political*.

## **The Perspective in Portugal**

The Portuguese Communist Party was a strong organization in the country, acting under the legality against the fascist dictatorship. The Political Party had a fundamental role in the 1974 Revolution which leads the country into a new regime. The communist political revolutionary program to be developed in the country was partially supported by other forces, as the Movement of Captains (after Movement of the Armed Forces) and some Political Parties, and has been successful during the revolutionary moment.

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<sup>2</sup> In the figure of Achille Occhetto.

Within the revolution, internally and also in the international relations, the Portuguese approach changed substantially. The colonization had an end<sup>3</sup>, the internal productive structure changed within nationalizations, aspects of double power appeared in some parts of the country. The revolution had a short time of duration, the main forces were defined in few years.

Established the leading forces of the revolution, the effective program to develop new social relations in the country were the next logical step. As an important force in the relation of forces, the PCP aimed to create a basis to support its strategical purpose: to settle the democracy as a political regime. The initial form was the composition of the Provisional Governments, in which the communists and the armed forces were protagonists. Thus, the first strategic victory had been achieved (CUNHAL, 1994).

Concluded the elimination of the old forces, the new ones started to define the competition among themselves. The situation passed from the revolutionary moment to the implementation of the democratic process, with institution, constitutions, characterizing a passage to the normality and stability (VARELA, 2011).

The transformation of the relation of forces and of the context forced the PCP to adapt its basis to collaborate at the institutional level (PCP, 1988). Participating in the sequence of provisional governments, step by step the presence of the communists in the war of position in the new State was relegated to a secondary position. A strong new force were leaving the scenario to the appearance of an another new one. The Armed Forces Movement make way to the Socialist Party, which with international support knew how to take advantage from the stable situation<sup>4</sup>. Within the PS gaining positions in the internal dispute for the government, the PCP face a new moment of the national development.

Not participating in the eurocomunista policies, the PCP developed its own internal transformation according to and following the national particular situation. The conquests of the Carnation Revolution (such as nationalizations) started to be reversed by the democratic forces in power, through privatizations and the return of the great companies to the country – just few years after the conclusion of the revolutionary process.

However, with the exhaustion of the revolutionary process and foundation of democracy, as we saw in the Italian case, the PCP went to the background of the political scenario, despite the first strategical victory. Beyond the action of organized revolutionary forces, the democratic context brings another ones, such as the PSD (Social Democracy) and CDS (Social Democratic Center).

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<sup>3</sup> Years of wars in different countries were in course at the moment of the Revolution in Portugal, been one of the main reasons of the crisis the fascist regime found in its last years.

<sup>4</sup> The PCP supported some actions against strikes and popular manifestation, in order to maintain its promise of stability.

The relation of forces in the democratic period was marked by the fact that the PCP was the a target in the battle of ideas. Moreover, a different social perspective of development of the country was been implemented, the liberalization of the economy.

From this scenario, the perspective of continuity of the democratic revolution towards socialism were every time more and more distant from the PCP horizon. Removed from the government by the democratic relation of forces, and finding itself in a complicated situation with its social basis, the PCP suffered a *practical defeat*. As we characterized before, a defeat caused by the isolation in the national context, rendering difficult the continuity of the the strategy towards socialism.

Portugal, through its governments, was approaching its social and economic basis to the European parameters, narrowing their relations and aiming a structured association to complete the integration. The integration of Portugal in the economic European area was concluded by 1992, but it began to be prepared many years before. Not only the economic and productive structure was in transformation. To support those modifications, the ideological aspect was fundamental, in particular in a society which few years ago carried on the democratic revolution.

Adapting its conception of modernization of relations in Portugal, gradually the PCP became more and more close to the democratic forces stabilization purposes. In such context, the PCP started creating new strategic conceptions, for instance, the PCP passed from the idea of “with the Democracy, for the Socialism” to the idea of “With Portugal for the democracy”, signing its adherence to the democratic camp. Later, the new idea was expressed in the slogan “Portugal, a advanced democracy in the XXI century” (PCP, 1988).

The continuity of the situation of isolation and successive transformations of ideas, characterized an ideological displacement, meaning a second defeat, the *ideological defeat*. In front of the incapacity to implement a new socialist strategy, the adaptation of the part to the national situation confirm the isolation of the Party, and prevent its development. Hence, and important to comprehend the PCP action is that some new elements had been adopted in the ideas of the Party, and the ideological foundation related to the Marxist tradition was and still connected to Marxism-Leninism ideas.

Although the succession of defeats, the PCP preserved the internal unity and the democratic centralism as a method, what allowed the Party to continue acting in the national relation of forces, however being in a isolated situation. Thus, we cannot say the PCP suffered a political defeat. Instead, one of the victories of the Party was and still been alive after the collapse of the communist movement.

## Rethinking the Left Movement from the Gramscian perspective

“Quando si può dire che esistano le condizioni perché possa suscitarsi e svilupparsi una volontà collettiva nazionale-popolare?” (GRAMSCI, 2014: 1559). In fact, this is the leitmotiv of the passive revolution.

Both, Italy and Portugal had the left-wing forces reduced to minorities expression in world's politics. Despite that, still alive the presence of the left ideas. With the inclusion of both countries in the European Union structure, by 1992, the relation of forces among national organizations passed to be a relation of forces in an such international level.

The EU is a new terrain in which the political struggle has replaced the classes organization. Following the new circumstances, after the defeats that marked the experiences of the post-II World War, emerged the *New Left* in Europe. Researches are in course in order to provide a interpretation of such new organizations.

From Gramsci, still the idea of connecting the subaltern organization to the classes interests – what could result in a Jacobin mode of making policies. The problem settled by Gramsci here is the problem of the Modern Prince, but now in the XXI century. From the defeats suffered, is clear that the class organization can lose its social basis when deciding to put institutional interests as a strategic option in the immediate fight – as the institutional terrain is not a proper and unique way to develop the communist strategy towards a new social relations (GRAMSCI, 1978).

After successive failures of working class organization during the last years of the XX century, in particular in the context of the so called new type of passive revolution in Europe (the European Union), still open the discussion about the need of establishing new forms of social organizations. Hence, in a more wide and international perspective, putting the accent to the need of maintaining the integrity of the concepts in its historical meaning.

Gramsci argue about the war of position as the appropriate strategy to the class struggle in the Western world. However, maintaining a historical interpretation of reality and maintaining the leadership<sup>5</sup> of the Modern Prince as a progressive organism, connected to its basis, seems to be yet a lesson to be carried on. Thus, an international political society is the new scenario in which the Modern Prince will act in the war of position, trying to find and exercise its counter-hegemony in the first time, and then settle its own hegemony.

No fight for hegemony, by the working classes perspective, is dissociated from the class struggle and human emancipation (BIANCHI, 2007), and Gramsci provided some arguments to the discussion: the Modern Prince can be the instrument of classes organization, and the war of position its strategy. If new forms of social relations cannot appear before the maturation of its material

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<sup>5</sup> The progressive element is the organic intellectual.



condition, in other words, while the capitalism still alive, remains the duty of class organization. Thus, we suggest a particular interpretation of the process that lead the left movement into a crisis during the 1990's. The Modern Prince, is complex social organism which can bring to the level of the political society the expressions of needs and expectations of the classes of the civil society.

The real battle of ideas is the terrain to the development of a world conception (SEMERARO, 2001), to the extent of the Political Party is one agent in the fight for hegemony. From practical and popular experiences, the intelligibility of the real can be translated into a proper theorization (SEMERARO, 2001).

This research has as its scope to put a light on the importance of the Modern Prince in the constitution of the new, through the endeavor of creating a counter-hegemony (ROBINSON, 2005). For the Western world, Gramsci argue about the war of position, based on historical facts, to indicate, in Peter THOMAS words, how “roads to the cultural elevation transformed into a maze of trenches” were created in order to put obstacles in the development of subaltern uprising (2009: 148).

Exist an intrinsic relation between war of position and hegemony, in the sense that both of concepts are dependent. Putting politics in a terrain world, the war of position can be a strategic way to achieve the political purposes which the working class carries on, since a subaltern position in the capitalist order. By the reversion of depolitisation of politics, the Modern Prince also has its fundamental importance as being the expression of intellectual set of working classes capable to act in superior instances maintaining its progressive basis.

## **Conclusion**

In the study of the relation of forces is necessary to consider the strategy and tactics of the organization (GRAMSCI, 2014: 1561). Thus, which was the performance of the PCI and PCP during the EU integration process? How was combined the domestic and the foreign policies?

The PCI and the PCP were expressions of the communist Left in the Western world during the Cold War. The PCI emerged from a context of war, international and military occupation, as one of the main parties in the Italian scene in the democratic transition. The PCP, during the Carnation Revolution appears from the clandestinity also as one of the principal political national forces.

Both of those parties fought against fascist forces, and further against liberal forces after the stabilization of the popular movements. Among adaptations and transformations, PCI and PCP bring the communist ideas through the second half of the past century.

During the EU integration process, with the conclusion of the integration of the single

market, both parties were acting in what we can define as war of position inside the European structure. However, according to the national situation, both parties were under isolation and with its strategies far from the socialist transformation, thus in a defensive approach in the war of position to respond the bourgeois attacks. Acting in such scenario, the 1980's showed a deep transformation of Political Parties in particular, but also in the communist movement as a whole.

With the end of the Soviet Union, the Western communist movement also started to operate its transformation. The PCI suffered the most dramatic transformation, such as in its name, structure and strategy, becoming the Democratic Party. This last transformation we classified as the political defeat, marked by the reformism assumed as a strategic approach and also the desegregation of the Political Party. Although, the PCP did not suffered such final transformation, still confident in its gradual strategy towards socialism, adhering to the European Union structure with criticism.

Thus, the death of the old form of doing socialist policies marked a conclusion of a process which starts with the socialist revolution in Russia, and also opened a new moment in the communist and socialist movement. Reinvent the left organization is still a need, at the international level.

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