The Dialectic of Position and Maneuver

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# The Dialectic of Position and Maneuver

*Understanding Gramsci's Military Metaphor*

*By*

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Cover illustration: Plate 12 from Jean Errard's *Fortification Réduicte Art and Démonstrée* (Paris, 1600).

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CHAPTER 1

# Introduction: Marxism and the Military Metaphor

Since the publication of his *Prison Notebooks*, first in Italian in the 1950s and then in English in the early 1970s, the work of Antonio Gramsci has played a major role in both critical social theory and radical political strategy. His contributions to social theory have made him one of the most important representatives of the neo-Marxist perspective and have served as the foundation for important developments in the social sciences, ranging from sociology and political science to geography, anthropology, critical management studies, and international political economy. The significance of his analysis of the relative autonomy of political and ideological superstructures from the economic base of capitalism, however, goes well beyond the left; Peter Thomas, for example, states that "[a]rguably, Gramsci is today a more popular theorist in mainstream academic debates than any other thinker from the Marxist tradition, Marx and Engels themselves not excluded" (Thomas 2010: 199). In addition to Gramsci's place within contemporary academic debates, his work has also been an important resource over the past few decades for left social movements in developing political strategy (see, for example, Harnecker (2015) and Healey (2012)).

A central element of Gramsci's social theory is his distinction between 'war of maneuver' and 'war of position.' Revolutionary political struggles emphasizing direct attacks against the state, with the ultimate goal of seizing state power, constitute the war of maneuver. The Arab Spring uprisings provide an excellent contemporary example of the war of maneuver. Contemporary political struggles in the capitalist core, on the other hand, are more likely to emphasize a broader, protracted cultural conflict than they are a direct assault against the state; this is the war of position. The war of position is associated with Gramsci's analysis of hegemony, which emphasizes how the power of the capitalist class is reproduced through a dense network of cultural practices and institutions which generate consent for its rule among the subordinate classes. While the state's exercise of coercive power remains an important bulwark of capitalist class power, the construction of a consciousness which takes the existing mode of production as a given – as the best of all possible worlds, as a permanent and unchangeable feature of human existence, or as one in which individualized forms of resistance or accommodation are all that are deemed possible – provides a much deeper, more penetrating form of class power. Any revolution which does not address the hegemonic foundations of ruling class power will come to naught. As a result, revolutionary strategy requires more

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generalized forms of cultural struggle and the creation of a counter-hegemonic power, one which offers a 'common sense' supportive of a new mode of production which can challenge and replace the existing system of hegemonic power.

The war of position has defined struggles against neoliberal austerity over the past few decades. The expansion of corporate power has brought with it intensified class inequality, the erosion of liberal democratic forms of political accountability, and the growing privatization of the public sphere. A central element of the neoliberal onslaught has been the assertion that 'there is no alternative' to global monopoly capitalism, one that seemed to be confirmed by the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. As such, the struggles of subordinate classes against neoliberal austerity have in large part sought to overcome this assumption. Occupy Wall Street is an important example of this type of struggle. Its explicit and uncompromising challenge to the 'common sense' of global capitalism lay not only in the substance of its message but in its method as well. Through its collective decision making process reflected in the general assembly, its rotation of tasks, and its community-based provision of necessities such as shelter, food, and medical services, Occupy served as a concrete expression, albeit in a preliminary and microscopic way, of a solidaristic alternative to the market.[1] Given the significance that constructing a new, more emancipatory 'common sense' has played in Occupy and similar movements throughout the capitalist core, understanding Gramsci's use of the military metaphor in discussion of revolutionary political strategy takes on a renewed urgency. The purpose of this book is to examine critically the nature of this metaphor: its origins, effectiveness, and limitations.

For Gramsci, the use of the military metaphor in his analysis of revolutionary political strategy flowed in part from the significant role that war and military matters played in Italian intellectual history, particularly in the work of Machiavelli (Fontana 1993). Machiavelli took great interest in military matters. He argued, for example, that rulers should avoid basing their military forces on the use of mercenaries and instead argued for the creation of a citizens' militia. This point was of sufficient importance that he repeated this point in all of his major works – *The Prince* (Machiavelli 1950a), *The Discourses* (Machiavelli 1950b), and *The Art of War* (Machiavelli 1990). In *The Art of War* he provided a detailed blueprint, based on the military forces of ancient Rome, of a strong, disciplined military organization which could serve as a model for contemporary rulers. In this work he addressed matters ranging from the proper size and

1 For more detail on the connection between Gramsci's war of position and Occupy, see Rehmann (2013) and Smucker (2014).

composition of military units, the appropriate conditions in which to initiate battle, how to deploy forces for maximum effect both in the offensive and in the defensive, and how to march and encamp. The significance of war and military matters for Machiavelli, however, went well beyond these organizational and strategic/tactical details. He rejected the idea that such matters should be left exclusively to military commanders and instead argued for the inseparable relationship between the political and the military:

> there is a very close, intimate relation between these two conditions [i.e., civil and military life], and ... they are not only compatible and consistent with each other, but necessarily connected and interrelated.
>
> MACHIAVELLI 1990: 4

This meant not only that military strategy must necessarily reflect political goals, but also that

> A prince should...have no other aim or thought, nor take up any other thing for his study, but war and its organization and discipline, for that is the only art that is necessary to one who commands.
>
> MACHIAVELLI 1950a: 53

For Machiavelli, then, the art of war is inherently political and the art of politics must be understood in military terms. Given the central role that Machiavelli played in the development of Gramsci's work, it is not surprising that Gramsci should make use of military metaphors in his analysis of revolutionary political strategy.[2]

In addition to this, the role played by war in Marxist theory and practice also served as an important foundation for Gramsci's use of the military metaphor. Although neither Marx nor Engels developed a comprehensive theory of the relationship between war and revolution (Draper and Haberkern 2005; Kissin 1988), the subject emerged repeatedly in their writings on specific conflicts such as the Crimean War, the U.S. Civil War, and the Franco-Prussian War. War was seen as an essential component of capitalism, both as a means of primitive capitalist accumulation and as an expression of conflict between national bourgeoisies. The question at the center of these writings was how "'this conflict, before or after war has been declared, [can] be turned to pro-

2 Machiavelli himself made explicit use of such metaphors: "The best fortress is to be found in the love of the people, for although you may have fortresses they will not save you if you are hated by the people" (Machiavelli 1950a: 81).

mote or hasten *revolution*'" (Draper 1996: 10). The First World War provided an especially important context in which Gramsci developed his social theory. The war brought with it the collapse of the Second International as most of its member parties rushed to abandon their previously stated opposition to capitalist war and succumbed to the siren song of reactionary nationalism, as well as the subsequent emergence of what would be the Third or Communist International (Nation 2009). Not only did the war serve as the spark igniting the Russian Revolution, thereby serving as a concrete validation of Marx and Engels' interest in war, but it also saw, in the subsequent writings of Rosa Luxemburg (1968), Nikolai Bukharin (1973) and Lenin (1939), the development of a more thorough analysis of the role played by war and militarism in the reproduction and, potentially, the overthrow of capitalism.

At the same time, the use of military metaphors was a common feature in the Marxist tradition.[3] Marx and Engels made extensive use of military metaphors in their analysis of capitalism. They saw competition among individual capitals in such terms, arguing that

> Industry leads two great armies ['the army of buyers' and 'the army of sellers'] into the field against each other, and each of these again is engaged in a battle among its own troops in its own ranks. The army among whose troops there is less fighting carries off the victory over the opposing host.
>
> MARX 1976A: 21

The imperative of capital accumulation is "the law that grants [capital] no respite, and constantly shouts in its ear: March! march!" (Marx 1976a: 43). As capital accumulates, the number of individual capitals increases, and the resulting increased magnitude of these capitals "provides the means for *leading more powerful armies of workers with more gigantic instruments of war upon the industrial battlefield*" (Marx 1976a: 40) (emphasis in original).

Marx and Engels argued that this war among capitals is at the same time a war of capital against labor. They referred to the bourgeoisie and proletariat as "two great hostile camps" (Marx and Engels 1948: 9) that are "in a constant battle" (Marx and Engels 1948: 18) and "a veritable civil war" (Marx 1973: 150). The factory system is one in which workers "are organized like soldiers. As privates

3 Metcalfe goes so far as to state that "the writings of Marx and Engels conceive of class struggle primarily in terms of war" (Metcalfe 1991: 82), but he does so to warn how this metaphor produces a problematic understanding of class. His conclusion, however, is obtained by using a very narrow, one-dimensional understanding of war.

of the industrial army they are placed under the command of a perfect hierarchy of officers and sergeants" (Marx and Engels 1948: 16); elsewhere they spoke of an "industrial army of workmen under the command of a capitalist [which] requires, like a real army, officers (managers) and N.C.O.s (foremen, overseers), who command during the labor process in the name of capital" (Marx 1976c: 450). The centralization of labor within the factory creates a new, collective productive power "[j]ust as the offensive power of a squadron of cavalry, or the defensive power of an infantry regiment, is essentially different from the sum of the offensive or defensive powers of the individual soldiers taken separately" (Marx 1976c: 443). The factory creates "a barrack-like discipline" (Marx 1976c: 549), and the atrocious working conditions to which workers are subjected in the factory "produces its list of those killed and wounded in the industrial battle" (Marx 1976c: 552). Those workers who are deemed to be surplus continue to play an important role in capitalist accumulation as a "disposable industrial reserve army" (Marx 1976c: 784). The contradictory nature of capitalism, however, ensures that "not only has the bourgeoisie forged the weapons that bring death to itself; it has also called into existence the men who are to wield those weapons – the modern working class – the proletarians" (Marx and Engels 1948: 15). The struggle against capital, they argued, must "not be exclusively absorbed in these unavoidable guerrilla fights incessantly springing up from the never ceasing encroachments of capital or changes of the market.... Instead of the *conservative* motto: '*A fair day's wage for a fair day's work!*' they ought to inscribe on their banner the *revolutionary* watchword: '*Abolition of the wages system!*'" (Marx 1976b: 61). Communists, Marx and Engels argued, were in a unique position to lead this struggle, as they possessed "the advantage of clearly understanding the line of march, the conditions, and the ultimate general results of the proletarian movement" (Marx and Engels 1948: 22).

Lenin likewise made extensive use of military metaphors in his discussion of proletarian revolutionary strategy. Lenin argued that the proletariat was the "vanguard fighter for democracy" (Lenin 1969: 78), and the Party was "the vanguard of the working class" (Lenin, 1976: 75); the Party was the "'general staff'" requiring "the *good* and *conscious* will of an army that follows and at the same time directs its general staff" (Lenin 1974a: 117). At the same time, he argued that it was essential to develop leadership from within this army:

> A revolutionary epoch is to the Social-Democrats what war-time is to an army. We must broaden the cadres of our army, we must advance them from peace strength to war strength, we must mobilize the reservists, recall the furloughed, and form new auxiliary corps, units, and services. We must not forget that in war we necessarily and inevitably have to put

> up with less trained replacements, very often to replace officers with rank-and-file soldiers, and to speed up and simplify the promotion of soldiers to officers' rank.
>
> LENIN 1974C: 217

The strategic goal of this general staff, the dictatorship of the proletariat, was associated with "the fiercest, most dogged and most desperate class war" (Lenin 1973b: 193). "Everyone will agree," Lenin wrote,

> that an army which does not train itself to wield all arms, all the means and methods of warfare that the enemy possesses, or may possess, behaves in an unwise or even criminal manner. But this applies to politics even more than it does to war. In politics it is harder to forecast what methods of warfare will be applicable and useful to us under certain future conditions. Unless we master all means of warfare, we may suffer grave and even decisive defeat if changes in the position of the other classes that do not depend on us bring to the forefront forms of activity in which we are particularly weak. If, however, we master all means of warfare, we shall certainly be victorious, because we represent the interests of the really advanced and really revolutionary class, even if circumstances do not permit us to use weapons that are most dangerous to the enemy, weapons that are most swift in dealing mortal blows.
>
> LENIN 1940: 76–77

Mastering all means of warfare also meant knowing when it was necessary to suspend the offensive or call for a retreat:

> This can be explained by comparing our position in the war against capital with the position of a victorious army that has captured, say, a half or two-thirds of the enemy's territory and is compelled to halt in order to muster its forces, to replenish its supplies of munitions, repair and reinforce the lines of communication, build new storehouses, bring up new reserves, etc. To suspend the offensive of a victorious army under such conditions is necessary precisely in order to gain the rest of the enemy's territory, i.e., in order to achieve complete victory.
>
> LENIN 1970: 11

> because we had advanced so successfully for many years and had achieved so many extraordinary victories (and all this in a country that was in an appalling state of ruin and lacked the material resources!), to consolidate

> that advance, since we had gained so much, it was absolutely essential for us to retreat. We could not hold all the positions we had captured in the first onslaught. On the other hand, it was because we had captured so much in the first onslaught, on the crest of the wave of enthusiasm displayed by the workers and peasants, that we had room enough to retreat a long distance, and can retreat still further now, without losing our main and fundamental positions.
>
> LENIN 1973C: 281

The important role which military metaphors played in Lenin's political theory and practice was reflected further in debates and resolutions of the Third International, which spoke frequently of the role to be played by the Comintern as the 'general staff' of the 'world army of the revolutionary proletariat' developing the"battle plans' necessary to defeat the bourgeoisie (Riddell 2012, 2015).

What was unique about Gramsci's use of the military metaphor was that it served more than simply a descriptive function – the metaphor was an *analytical* one that emphasized the importance of different forms of revolutionary strategy in different conditions. Metaphors are not simply a stylistic flourish establishing a connection between two phenomena, but rather serve as a resource for the construction of theory and for political practice by directing our attention to specific patterns of relations. In other words, they help to shape our experience of and action in the world. At the same time, we must be careful not to equate metaphor with theory itself. Metaphors contain taken-for-granted assumptions which, if not examined critically, can contribute to theory that is mechanical and one-dimensional (Metcalfe 1991). For Gramsci, the military metaphor was a useful tool for analysis, no more: "comparisons between military art and politics should always be made with a grain of salt, that is, only as stimuli for thought and as terms simplified *ad absurdum*" (Gramsci 1992: 217).[4] Given the significant role this grain of salt played in the development of Gramsci's political strategy, however, we should not focus exclusively on the end result of its use and relegate the structure of the metaphor itself to the margins. Yes, the military metaphor is a tool for analysis, but like all tools putting it to effective use requires some understanding of how it works.

One may ask why previous examinations of Gramsci's social theory have not examined the military metaphor in any detail. In part, this is due to the particular trajectory Gramsci's work has taken over the past number of decades.

4 Trotsky made a similar point: while "the analogy between the political struggle of the working class and military operations has been much abused [,]... up to a certain point one can speak here of similarities" (Trotsky 1973a: 355).

Gramsci is most closely associated with a particular school of Marxist thought known as Western Marxism, whose central feature was a shift of focus away from the political economy of capitalism that characterized classical Marxism toward analysis of cultural superstructures (Anderson 1979). An important corollary of this shift was its critique of a 'Leninist' or 'Marxist-Leninist' political strategy which emphasized the seizure of the state through the use of revolutionary violence as the means by which to initiate the transition to socialism. Gramsci's place in social theory emerged at a moment in which social movements in the West expressed increasing interest in participatory democracy and Communist parties in the West adopted (often using Gramsci's work as the foundation) a more reformist, Eurocommunist perspective. In this context, Gramsci provided an appealing alternative to a Marxism that is usually seen as overly centralized and bureaucratic. Given the association of Gramsci with Western Marxism, it is not surprising that the means by which Gramsci made his argument – the military metaphor – has not received as much attention as the argument itself. In other ways, the failure to subject Gramsci's military metaphor to critical examination can be traced to a broader failure in sociology to address war. Over twenty five years ago, Martin Shaw noted that "[d]espite a wide acceptance of the social character of war, it is equally widely excluded from the basic models of modern society which are on offer in social science" (Shaw 1988: 12). Not much, apparently, has changed since then. Michael Mann has more recently made the case that sociology has "woefully neglected" (Mann 2013: 500) the study of war and militarism. Hans Joas and Wolfgang Knöbl agree, pointing to the "blindness of contemporary sociology and, above all, social theory with regard to war" (Joas and Knöbl 2013: 2). I hope that this book makes a small contribution to righting this situation.

Chapter 2 provides an overview of Gramsci's social theory, including his analysis of the essential role played by working class organization in revolutionary politics and his analysis of social relations of power, particularly the dialectic between hegemony and coercion. In the third chapter, I examine critically his concepts of war of maneuver and war of position. I argue that Gramsci's use of the military metaphor to specify distinctive political strategies for revolutionary forces is problematic on a number of levels: (1) the application of the metaphor to political strategy is based on an incorrect assessment of changes in military strategy; (2) the imagery associated with the metaphor is ambiguous, and thus it does not provide a sufficiently strong representation of Gramsci's argument; and, most importantly, (3) it fails to reflect adequately the dialectic of hegemony and coercion that lies at the center of Gramsci's social theory. My argument here is that, as a result of these limitations, the military metaphor has taken on a life of its own as a binary divide that obscures the

dialectical character of the relationship which it is supposed to represent, that between war of maneuver and war of position. The mechanical application of the metaphor to concrete historical conditions has the consequence of sanitizing the war of position and underestimating the significance of the war of maneuver, a consequence as dangerous for revolutionary strategy as it is one-dimensional in its theory of power.

The building blocks for my critical analysis of Gramsci's work are the three major expressions of military theory and practice that have characterized the history of Marxism. Chapter 4 reviews the insurrectionary model associated with classical Marxism, particularly in the work of Engels, Lenin and Trotsky, Chapter 5 addresses Soviet military doctrine, and Chapter 6 deals with guerrilla warfare, more specifically the strategy of the *foco* most closely associated with Che Guevara and the Maoist theory of people's war. The purpose of these chapters is to locate Gramsci's military metaphor in the context of a broader Marxist discussion of war and revolution. Each of these perspectives allows us to see how Marxism has, in specific settings, understood the relationship between war of maneuver and war of position in the context of *military* strategy (that is, the structure of the tool). From here, we can better understand how war of maneuver and war of position are used as metaphors for *political* strategy (that is, how the tool is used). In each of these chapters I present Marxist military doctrine principally through the use of primary sources; my purpose here is not to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of any one of these models or the extent to which any one of them could be said to be successful, but rather to use them as a foil with which to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of Gramsci's military metaphor. In the final chapter, I draw conclusions about the limitations as well as the continued relevance of Gramsci's military metaphor for left social theory and political practice.

CHAPTER 2

# Gramsci's Marxism

Gramsci's Marxism can be understood only in the context of the collapse of the Second International initiated by the First World War. The heavily deterministic, mechanical interpretation of Marxism which dominated the Second International and was expressed most clearly in the work of Eduard Bernstein, Karl Kautsky and Georgi Plekhanov (Rees 1998) was revealed by the carnage of war to be both politically and theoretically bankrupt. For the Second International, the slow development of the forces of production would lead to the gradual improvement of workers' economic lives and the expansion of workers' democratic power. Working class organization in political parties, unions, and cooperatives was seen as important, but only to the extent that their political activity was limited to the boundaries of bourgeois democracy; the principal agent of social transformation was not the political activity of the working class, but rather the movement of economic laws of social development. As a result, the Second International's maximum program, the revolutionary conquest of power and the abolition of capitalism, came to be subsumed within its minimum program of evolutionary changes within capitalism. Gramsci's work was part of a broader movement to reclaim the centrality of the maximum program for Marxism. This movement was reflected in Gramsci's efforts to develop a sophisticated, dialectical theory of revolutionary praxis.

## Working Class Organization and Revolutionary Politics

The First World War and the revolutions emerged at its conclusion (successfully in Russia, unsuccessfully in Germany, Hungary, and Italy) made plain that the working class could not wait for the accumulation of capitalist contradictions to reach such a point that capitalism collapsed on its own accord and brought forth socialism, but instead required it to develop a revolutionary politics. It was in this context that Gramsci's article entitled "The Revolution Against *Capital*," written shortly after the Soviet Revolution, must be understood:

> This is the revolution against Karl Marx's *Capital*. In Russia, Marx's *Capital* was more the book of the bourgeoisie than the proletariat. It stood as the critical demonstration of how events should follow a predetermined course: how in Russia a bourgeoisie had to develop, and a capitalist era

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> had to open, with the setting up of a Western-type civilization, before the proletariat could even think in terms of its own revolt, its own class demands, its own revolution. But events have overcome ideologies. Events have exploded the critical schema determining how the history of Russia would unfold according to the canons of historical materialism. The Bolsheviks reject Karl Marx, and their explicit actions and conquests bear witness that the canons of historical materialism are not so rigid as might have been and have been thought.
>
> GRAMSCI 1977a: 34

In declaring the Bolshevik Revolution to be a revolution 'against *Capital*,' his criticism was not of Marxism itself but of the one-dimensional interpretation of Marx characteristic of the Second International: "if the Bolsheviks reject some of that which is affirmed in *Capital*, they do not reject its invigorating, immanent idea. These people are not 'Marxists,' that is all; they have not used the works of the Master to compile a rigid doctrine of dogmatic utterances never to be questioned. They live Marxist thought" (Gramsci 1977a: 34). By being a revolution 'against *Capital*,' the Bolshevik Revolution represented a rebirth of revolutionary Marxism's focus on class struggle.

What Gramsci found most significant about the Soviet Revolution, especially in terms of its relevance for the revolutionary movement in post-war Italy, was the specific organizational form taken by that revolution: the soviet. The Second International had emphasized working class organization in trade unions and parliamentary political parties, but as their general collapse in the face of the bourgeoisie's call to war in 1914 revealed, these were not revolutionary organizations. Indeed, Gramsci argued that these organizations were indelibly marked by the capitalist social relations in which they emerged and developed. Trade unions, in their defense of workers' labor power from capital, accept capitalism's definition of labor power as a commodity. They organize workers as wage earners, not as producers. Thus, while unions are "the first organic expression" of class struggle, "trade union action, within its own sphere and using its own methods, stands revealed as being utterly incapable of overthrowing capitalist society" (Gramsci 1977b: 104–105). Likewise, parliamentary political parties operate in a field defined by bourgeois democracy in which class has been dissolved into legally free and equal citizens and so are not capable of leading an extra-parliamentary class struggle. This is seen most clearly in Gramsci's critique of the Italian Socialist Party (PSI) for its failure to take a leadership role during the *biennio rosso* of 1919–1920.[1] From this per-

1 For a review of these events, see Spriano (1975) and Williams (1975).

spective, the events of 1914 in the Second International must be understood as something more than simply the betrayal of the proletariat by its existing class leadership. The organizational principles of the Second International could facilitate support for a war brought about by the 'highest stage' of capitalism, but could not allow for the necessity for the proletariat to fight a class war to create socialism. This new stage of capitalism required new forms of working class organization.

The soviet or, as they were known in Italian context, factory councils thus represented for Gramsci a dramatic organizational development for the proletariat. Since the revolutionary goal of the proletariat is to replace one mode of production (capitalism) with another, higher one (socialism), "the foundations of the revolutionary process [must be] rooted within productive life itself" (Gramsci 1977c: 93). Factory councils emerged organically out of the daily lived experience of the workers and provided all workers, regardless of occupation or union representation, with the means to develop the material and cultural resources necessary for the management of society by the working class. Self-managed workshops would be linked together at the factory level, which in turn would be linked with other factories at an industrial level, and the various industries would be linked through "horizontal and vertical planning…to construct the harmonious edifice of the national and international economy" (Gramsci 1977d: 77).[2] If indeed socialism represents a qualitatively new mode of production in which the working class becomes the ruling class, then one cannot wait until after the revolution for the working class to be the creative agents of socialism as was the case with the Second International, in which a relatively passive mass of workers was to be led to socialism by the trade union and party leadership. Instead, the creative power of the working class must be developed and demonstrated through the revolutionary process itself: "Whoever wills the end, must will the means" (Gramsci 1977f: 68).

In keeping with Marx's discussion, in the context of the Paris Commune, of the need for the proletariat to not simply take hold of the existing state to use for its own purposes but instead to smash the bourgeois state (Marx 1968), Gramsci argued that "the socialist State cannot be embodied in the institutions of the capitalist state…. [T]he socialist State must be a fundamentally new creation" (Gramsci 1977d: 76). The factory councils were to serve as the nucleus of this new state: "The Factory Council is the model of the proletarian

2 While Gramsci was highly critical of the syndicalists for their failure to appreciate the need for political struggle outside the unions, he also saw much of value in their perspective. He was, for example, influenced by the Marxist syndicalism of Daniel DeLeon (see Gramsci 1977e).

State" (Gramsci 1977g: 100). While the factory councils were seen by Gramsci as the principal organizational form taken by the proletariat in the class struggle, by themselves they were insufficient: "[t]he existence of a cohesive and highly disciplined communist party…that can coordinate and centralize in its central executive committee the whole of the proletariat's revolutionary action, is the fundamental and indispensable condition for attempting any experiment with Soviets" (Gramsci 1977h: 195). Workers self-management at the level of the factory required that the working class be the dominant class politically, and this in turn required the existence of a political party through which the working class could struggle for and win state power. With the political failure of the PSI during the *bienno rosso* and the subsequent creation of the Italian Communist Party (PCI), Gramsci argued that the communist party "is the model party of proletarian society. It is the governing party of the working class" (Gramsci 1977i: 167). The Communist Party represented a break with the Second International, one in which "[t]he working class no longer wishes to collaborate with other classes in the development or transformation of the bourgeois parliamentary state," in which "the working class presents itself in the political struggle as an initiator, as a leader, and no longer as an inert mass of troops directed and led by the general staff of another social class" (Gramsci 1978a: 32–33). It "is the instrument and historical form of the process of inner liberation through which the worker is transformed from *executor* to *initiator*, from *mass* to *leader* and *guide*, from brawn to brain and purpose" (Gramsci 1977j: 333). A revolutionary political party, Gramsci argued, was necessary to provide the proletariat with an understanding of its historical role as the agent of social revolution as well as coordination for the organized struggles of the masses. This did not, however, mean that the party dominates the masses:

> The principle that the party leads the working class must not be interpreted in a mechanical manner. It is not necessary to believe that the party can lead the working class through an external imposition of authority.… [T]he capacity to lead the class is related, not to the fact that the party 'proclaims' itself its revolutionary organ, but to the fact that it 'really' succeeds, as a part of the working class, in linking itself with all the sections of that class and impressing upon the masses a movement in the direction desired and favored by objective conditions. Only as a result of its activity among the masses, will the party get the latter to recognize it as 'their' party (winning a majority); and only when this condition has been realized, can it presume that it is able to draw the working class behind it.
>
> GRAMSCI 1978b: 368

For Gramsci, there was no contradiction between the participatory nature of organs of working class self-organization and the "iron proletarian discipline" (Gramsci 1978c: 364) of a revolutionary party,[3] but he was clear that the party "can only be based on the proletarian vanguard, and must be led without prior consultation, without the apparatus of representative assemblies" (Gramsci 1977k: 348). Revolution, he continued,

> is like war, it must be minutely prepared by a working-class general staff, just as a war is by the Army's general staff.... It is the task of the proletarian vanguard to keep the revolutionary spirit constantly awake in the masses, to create the conditions which keep them ready for action, in which the proletariat will respond immediately to the call for revolution.
>
> GRAMSCI 1977k: 348–349

Far from pitting masses and party against each other, Gramsci saw them related in a dialectical unity. Just as workers' self-management at the level of the factory councils was to serve as the foundation for the new socialist state, working class control of the state through the Communist Party would ensure that the proper political, economic, and cultural resources existed for successful workers' self-management of the entire social formation.[4]

The question of the relationship between the masses and the party remained a central topic of concern for Gramsci in his *Prison Notebooks*, where he developed a more thorough analysis of the role of the party in revolutionary struggles. Such struggles cannot, Gramsci argued, be based on the spontaneous activity of the masses. By itself, spontaneity "cannot have a long-term and organic character. It will in almost all cases be appropriate to restoration and reorganization, but not to the founding of new States or new national and social structures.... It will be defensive rather than capable of original creation" (Gramsci 1971: 129–130). Instead, there must be some agent capable of developing a collective will, an "operative awareness of historical necessity, as protagonist of a real and effective historical drama" (Gramsci 1971: 130), out of the concrete actions arising spontaneously from among the masses: "The command of the orchestra conductor: agreement reached in advance, collaboration; command is a distinct function, not imposed hierarchically"

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3 See Buci-Glucksmann (1980), Davidson (1977), and Salamini (1981).

4 Marxists have been highly critical of examples of workers' self-management within capitalism (for example, through workers' cooperatives), arguing that they are misguided attempts to create 'socialism in one factory' (see Mandel 1975).

(Gramsci 2007: 263).[5] Unlike Machiavelli's prince, who performed this role as an individual, Gramsci's 'modern prince' was an "organism" (Gramsci 1971: 129): the political party.

In his analysis of the political party, Gramsci identified three "fundamental elements" which are related dialectically:

> 1. A mass element, composed of ordinary, average men, whose participation takes the form of discipline and loyalty, rather than any creative spirit or organizational ability. Without these the party would not exist, it is true, but it is also true that neither could it exist with these alone. They are a force in so far as there is somebody to centralize, organize and discipline them....
> 2. The principal cohesive element, which centralizes nationally and renders effective and powerful a complex of forces which left to themselves would count for little or nothing. This element is endowed with great cohesive, centralizing and disciplinary powers; also – and indeed this is perhaps the basis for the others – with the power of innovation (innovation, be it understood, in a certain direction, according to certain lines of force, certain perspectives, even certain premises). It is also true that neither could this element form the party alone; however, it could do so more than could the first element considered. One speaks of generals without an army, but in reality it is easier to form an army than to form generals. So much is this true that an already existing army is destroyed if it loses its generals, while the existence of a united group of generals who agree among themselves and have common aims soon creates an army even where none exists.
> 3. An intermediate element, which articulates the first element with the second and maintains contact between them, not only physically but also morally and intellectually.
>
> GRAMSCI 1971: 152–153

5 Gramsci's metaphor here recalls a similar one found in *Capital* which Marx uses to illustrate the necessity of some form of coordination in any form of social labor: "All directly social or communal labor on a large scale requires, to a certain degree, a directing authority, in order to secure the harmonious cooperation of the activities of individuals, and to perform the general functions that have their origin in the motion of the total productive organism, as distinguished from the motion of its separate organs. A single violin player is his own conductor: an orchestra requires a separate one" (Marx 1976: 448–449).

It is clear from this introduction that the party cannot be governed by the same principles of worker's self-management as the factory councils. Party leaders, 'the principal cohesive element,' are the generals, while the role of the rank-and-file membership is defined in terms of discipline and loyalty. What makes a party reactionary or progressive is not the presence or absence of hierarchy – Gramsci understood hierarchy to be a "primordial, and (given certain general conditions) irreducible fact" – but rather one "fundamental" premise: "is it the intention that there should always be rulers and ruled, or is the objective to create the conditions in which this division is no longer necessary? In other words, is the initial premise the perpetual division of the human race, or the belief that this division is only an historical fact, corresponding to certain conditions" (Gramsci 1971: 144). The historical mission of the working class is to abolish class, and so the vanguard party of the working class must likewise be organized such that the division between leaders and led is abolished.

The form of party organization which Gramsci associated with this mission is democratic centralism. Democratic centralism is characterized by an organic relationship between masses and leaders, by which Gramsci meant

> a continual adaptation of the organization to the real movement, a continuous insertion of elements thrown up from the depths of the rank and file into the solid framework of the leadership apparatus which ensures continuity and the regular accumulation of experience. Democratic centralism is 'organic' because on the one hand it takes account of movement, which is the organic mode in which historical reality reveals itself, and does not solidify mechanically into bureaucracy; and because at the same time it takes account of that which is relatively stable and permanent, or which at least moves in an easily predictable direction, etc.
>
> GRAMSCI 1971: 188–189

Democratic centralism is dialectical in that, by virtue of its "'centralism' in movement" (Gramsci 1971: 188), it educates rank-and-file members to take initiative and responsibility, to become 'leaders' themselves, thereby eliminating the distinction between leaders and led: "unity between 'spontaneity' and 'conscious leadership' or 'discipline' is precisely the real political action of the subaltern classes, in so far as this is mass politics and not merely an adventure by groups claiming to represent the masses" (Gramsci 1971: 198). This is in contrast to what Gramsci called bureaucratic centralism, a situation in which party organization reproduces passivity among the rank-and-file membership and limits initiative to those relative few who occupy leadership positions. Gramsci was

> against 'vanguards' without an army behind them, against commandos without infantry and artillery, but not against vanguards and commandos if they are functions of a complex and regular organism.
>
> GRAMSCI 2007: 382

A vanguard party that divorces itself from the masses both externally and internally will ultimately fail to achieve socialism.

In order to understand how democratic centralism maintains the progressive dialectic between masses and party, it is necessary to examine the role of intellectuals in this process. Gramsci argued that every rising class generates a group of organic intellectuals, the 'intermediate element' referred to earlier, whose function is to give that class "homogeneity and an awareness of its own function not only in the economic but also in the social and political fields" (Gramsci 1971: 5). At the same time, a rising group must also win over the traditional intellectuals, the organic intellectuals of the existing ruling class and the surviving elements of those of past ruling classes, although "this assimilation and conquest is made quicker and more efficacious the more the group in question succeeds in simultaneously elaborating its own organic intellectuals" (Gramsci 1971: 11). This "elite of intellectuals" (Gramsci 1971: 334) is necessary because "[t]he active man-in-the-mass has a practical activity, but has no clear theoretical consciousness of his practical activity" (Gramsci 1971: 333). Instead, that consciousness takes the form of 'common sense,' "the conception of the world which is uncritically absorbed by the various social and cultural environments in which the moral individuality of the average man is developed" (Gramsci 1971: 419). Revolutionary struggle requires overcoming this common sense and its replacement by 'philosophy,' a more systematic and critical conception of the world. For Gramsci, "there is no organization without intellectuals, that is without organizers and leaders, in other words, without the theoretical aspect of the theory-praxis nexus being distinguished concretely by the existence of a group of people 'specialized' in conceptual and philosophical elaboration of ideas" (Gramsci 1971: 334).

There are two factors which, according to Gramsci, would prevent this 'elite' of organic intellectuals from exercising dominance over the masses. First, he pointed to the limitations inherent in the philosophy of the organic intellectuals:

> The popular element 'feels' but does not always know or understand; the intellectual element 'knows' but does not always understand and in particular does not always feel.... The intellectual's error consists in believing that one can know without understanding and even more without

> feeling and being impassioned (not only for knowledge in itself but also for the object of knowledge).
>
> GRAMSCI 1971: 418

The philosophy of the organic intellectuals, Gramsci argued, is not based on a unique social position over and above the masses, but rather can be based only on the lived experience of the masses themselves. In other words, the condition for the theoretical understanding of the intellectuals is precisely their organic relationship to the masses. Second, the distinction between 'intellectuals' and 'non-intellectuals' (i.e., the masses) is itself a false one:

> When one distinguishes between intellectuals and non-intellectuals, one is referring in reality only to the immediate social function of the professional category of the intellectuals, that is, one has in mind the direction in which their specific professional activity is weighted, whether towards intellectual elaboration or towards muscular-nervous effort. This means that, although one can speak of intellectuals, one cannot speak of non-intellectuals, because non-intellectuals do not exist. But even the relationship between efforts of intellectual-cerebral elaboration and muscular-nervous effort is not always the same, so that there are varying degrees of specific intellectual activity. There is no human activity from which every form of intellectual participation can be excluded: *homo faber* cannot be separated from *homo sapiens*. Each man, finally, outside his professional activity, carries on some form of intellectual activity, that is, he is a 'philosopher,' an artist, a man of taste, he participates in a particular conception of the world, has a conscious line of moral conduct, and therefore contributes to sustain a conception of the world or to modify it, that is, to bring into being new modes of thought.
>
> GRAMSCI 1971: 9

If what distinguishes organic intellectuals from the masses is their social position rather than one's capacity to engage actively in 'philosophy,' then the masses have the potential to develop the critical consciousness that would allow them to reject 'common sense' for a 'philosophy of praxis.' That is, while the masses may not always 'know or understand,' they are fully capable of doing so and develop this capacity through their action to change the world, and so the elite status of the organic intellectuals is at best a conjunctural reality that, in the end, will disappear:

> The process of development is tied to a dialectic between intellectuals and the masses. The intellectual stratum develops both quantitatively

> and qualitatively, but every leap forward towards a new breadth and complexity of the intellectual stratum is tied to an analogous movement on the part of the mass of the 'simple,' who raise themselves to higher levels of culture and at the same time extend their circle of influence towards the stratum of specialized intellectuals.
>
> GRAMSCI 1971: 334

The historical mission of the proletariat to abolish class thus contains within it the abolition of the social category of intellectual and its replacement by the unity of theory and practice. The development of individuals possessing the critical consciousness necessary to transform their world collectively and engage in the social self-management of that world is, for Gramsci, an essential component in resolving "the problem of the functionaries" (Gramsci 1971: 186).

Gramsci's concept of the vanguard party was, therefore, not one in which the party has unique access to and understanding of knowledge concerning capitalist development and revolutionary struggle. For Gramsci, the vanguard party, in both its internal relations between leaders and led and its external relations with organs of working class self-organization, far from substituting itself for the class it represents, was a necessary condition for the working class to become itself the ruling class.

### Political Relations of Power

Before we examine Gramsci's analysis of power within capitalism, we must first touch upon briefly the nature of his historical materialist methodology. In words that reflect Marx's Eleventh Thesis on Feuerbach, Gramsci spoke of the social world as a fundamental product of human creative activity:

> what is this effective reality? Is it something static and immobile, or is it not rather a relation of forces in continuous motion and shift of equilibrium? If one applies one's will to the creation of a new equilibrium among the forces which really exist and are operative – basing oneself on the particular force which one believes to be progressive and strengthening it to help it to victory – one still moves on the terrain of effective reality, but does so in order to dominate and transcend it (or to contribute to this). What 'ought to be' is therefore concrete; indeed it is the only realistic and historicist interpretation of reality, it alone is history in the making and philosophy in the making, it alone is politics.
>
> GRAMSCI 1971: 172

Like Marx, Gramsci saw society as a process of movement, one in which the human individual is simultaneously creator and product. Human activity occurs within the boundaries established by concrete reality, but this activity at the same time transforms that reality and, in doing so, we transform ourselves:

> each one of us changes himself, modifies himself to the extent that he changes and modifies the complex relations of which he is the hub. In this sense the real philosopher is, and cannot be other than, the politician, the active man who modifies the environment, understanding by environment the *ensemble* of relations which each of us enters to take part in. If one's own individuality is the *ensemble* of these relations, to create one's personality means to acquire consciousness of them and to modify one's own personality means to modify the *ensemble* of these relations.... It is not enough to know the *ensemble* of relations as they exist at any given time as a given system. They must be known genetically, in the movement of their formation. For each individual is the synthesis not only of existing relations, but of the history of these relations.
>
> GRAMSCI 1971: 352–353

It is in this sense that, for Gramsci, Marxism represented "absolute 'historicism,' the absolute secularization and earthliness of thought, an absolute humanism of history" (Gramsci 1971: 465).

As a result, Gramsci was highly critical of the deterministic Marxism of the Second International and, increasingly, of the Third International under Stalin. He saw the attempt to derive objective social laws which exist independently of human activity as a "degenerate tendency...which consists in reducing a conception of the world to a mechanical formula which gives the impression of holding the whole of history in the palm of its hand" (Gramsci 1971: 427–428). Such a concern for the development of an objective science, he argued, transformed Marxism into "a dogmatic system of external and absolute truths" (Gramsci 1971: 407). In addition to denying the dialectical nature of social reality, the pursuit of objective scientific laws of society has dangerous political consequences. While it is possible to identify "more general 'laws of tendency,'...statistical laws can be employed in the science and art of politics only so long as the great masses of the population remain (or at least are reputed to remain) essentially passive" (Gramsci 1971: 428). According to Gramsci,

> In reality one can 'scientifically' foresee only the struggle, but not the concrete moments of the struggle, which cannot but be the results of opposing forces in continuous movement, which are never reducible

> to fixed quantities since within them quantity is continually becoming quality. In reality one can 'foresee' to the extent that one acts, to the extent that one applies a voluntary effort and therefore contributes concretely to creating the result 'foreseen.' Prediction reveals itself thus not as a scientific act of knowledge, but as the abstract expression of the effort made, the practical way of creating a collective will.
>
> GRAMSCI 1971: 438

The very concept of objectivity, for Gramsci, "always means 'humanly objective' which can be held to correspond exactly to 'historically subjective'; in other words, objective would mean 'universal subjective'" (Gramsci: 1971: 445).

Gramsci did not place Marxism above this process; it must also be understood from a historicist perspective. Marxism is itself "a transitory phase of philosophical thought" (Gramsci 1971: 404) which emerged in response to a specific stage of social development and so, with the eventually abolition of the class society out of which it developed, it too will be abolished:

> even the philosophy of praxis is an expression of historical contradictions, and indeed their most complete, because most conscious, expression; this means that it too is tied to 'necessity' and not to a 'freedom' which does not exist and, historically, cannot yet exist. If, therefore, it is demonstrated that contradictions will disappear, it is also demonstrated implicitly that the philosophy of praxis too will disappear, or be superseded. In the reign of 'freedom' thought and ideas can no longer be born on the terrain of contradictions and the necessity of struggle. At the present time the philosopher – the philosopher of praxis – can only make this generic affirmation and can go no further; he cannot escape from the present field of contradictions, he cannot affirm, other than generically, a world without contradictions, without immediately creating a utopia.
>
> GRAMSCI 1971: 405

More immediately, Gramsci argued that we must expect Marxism itself to demonstrate a certain flexibility based on the specific historical conditions in which it develops and is deployed as a means of understanding and transforming capitalism. Gramsci's Marxism was thus one which "cannot be schematized; it is history in all its infinite variety and multiplicity" (Gramsci 1971: 428).

In this context, we can better understand Gramsci's contributions to the analysis of capitalist power. Gramsci argued against an economic determinism in which politics and culture (the superstructure) are seen as simply reflections of the economic base:

> The claim, presented as an essential postulate of historical materialism, that every fluctuation of politics and ideology can be presented and expounded as an immediate expression of the structure, must be contested in theory as primitive infantilism, and combated in practice with the authentic testimony of Marx.
>
> GRAMSCI 1971: 407

Gramsci saw a more complex understanding of the relationship between base and superstructure, one in which the base does not determine the specific forms taken by the superstructures but rather creates "a terrain more favorable to the dissemination of certain modes of thought, and certain ways of posing and resolving questions involving the entire subsequent development of national life" (Gramsci 1971: 184). At the same time, though, Gramsci did not doubt that what was "essential…[was] the decisive nucleus of economic activity" (Gramsci 1971: 161). While the mode of production is determinate in the last instance, the superstructures can be understood as having a historically specific relative autonomy from the economic base. This relative autonomy serves as the material foundation for Gramsci's interest in intellectuals in that the superstructures, rather than being simply derivative of the economic base, must be developed and articulated by their own set of "'functionaries'" (Gramsci 1971: 12). The relationship between the superstructures and the base takes the form of a 'historical bloc' in which "the complex, contradictory and discordant *ensemble* of the superstructures is the reflection of the *ensemble* of the social relations of production" (Gramsci 1971: 366). Within the historical bloc,

> material forces are the content and ideologies are the form, though this distinction between form and content has purely didactic value, since the material forces would be inconceivable historically without form and the ideologies would be individual fancies without the material forces.
>
> GRAMSCI 1971: 377

Gramsci replaced the conception of base/superstructure as distinct categories, which was the foundation of the determinism of Second International Marxism, with an emphasis on the organic interpenetration of the social relations of the superstructures with the social relations of production. Gramsci "radicalizes the base-superstructure metaphor by taking it literally: if the superstructures arise *upon* the economic structure, the former is then in fact coextensive with the latter" (Thomas 2010: 172). The specific form which this

complex totality takes cannot be deduced *a priori*, but can only be understood through a detailed historical examination of a specific social formation.[6]

Gramsci identified two major superstructural levels. The first, which he called 'political society,' refers to the coercive apparatus of state power which the ruling class uses to enforce its rule. Should the economic coercion arising from the proletariat's lack of control over the means of production be insufficient to ensure its compliance with the needs of capital accumulation, the ruling class can make use of its command of the means of institutionalized violence (police, courts, military) to impose its domination. At the same time, the state is not an instrument that is used by the ruling class to express already-existing class interests against those of the subordinate classes, but instead is a *relation* that simultaneously helps to define and organize these interests in a complex and relatively stable articulation that both is shaped by and shapes the dominant mode of production. Gramsci devoted relatively less space in his *Prison Notebooks* to coercive power than other subjects, not because they were unimportant or secondary for him but because the relevance of political society had already been well established, both by Marxists[7] as well as by contemporary Italian history; the coercive power of the state was a daily lived reality for Gramsci in fascist Italy. Having said this, it is the second superstructural level, which he called 'civil society,' that received greater scrutiny from Gramsci. Civil society refers to the network of voluntary social institutions through which the "'spontaneous' consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group" is organized (Gramsci 1971: 12). By itself, the domination of subordinate classes by the ruling class is insufficient to ensure its position. The ruling class must also exercise intellectual and moral leadership, and this requires that it construct and reproduce a specific form of "civilization" (Gramsci 1971: 170) or culture. This culture is not imposed on the subordinate classes as an alien entity, but rather takes the form of a kind of negotiation between the ruling class and the subordinate classes. In this process, the ruling class must take into account the interests and needs of the subordinate classes; it must make some sacrifices to the subordinate classes, but these are "sacrifices of an economic-corporate kind" (Gramsci 1971: 161) which do not call into question fundamental social relations. In addition to these economic concessions, the ruling class must also be prepared to make concessions to the popular-democratic

6 It is the nationally specific unity of base and superstructure reflected in the historical bloc that served as the foundation for Gramsci's argument that, while Marxism is by definition internationalist, "the point of departure is 'national'" (Gramsci 1971: 240).

7 See Engels (1942) and Lenin (1943) on the state as 'bodies of armed men.'

struggles of the subordinate classes. Any ruling class must, according to Gramsci, be able to look beyond its immediate class interests if it is to become the leading or 'hegemonic' class.

In his discussion of relations of force, Gramsci devoted the most attention to political relations of force, which he defined as "the degree of homogeneity, self-awareness, and organization attained by the various social classes" (Gramsci 1971: 181). It is here that the question of hegemony emerges and is resolved, at least temporarily. The ruling class must possess an appropriate "collective political consciousness" (Gramsci 1971: 181) in which it is aware of its historical mission and creates the specific ideological and organizational forms necessary to achieve this mission. Classes may possess forms of economic-corporate consciousness in which they are aware of their own occupational or class interests, but a class becomes hegemonic only when it

> becomes aware that one's own corporate interests, in their present and future development, transcend the corporate limits of the purely economic class, and can and must become the interests of other subordinate groups too.
>
> GRAMSCI 1971: 181

Hegemony is more than simply an alliance of classes. In order for a class to become hegemonic, it must create a "national-popular collective will" (Gramsci 1971: 130) through which subordinate classes give their consent to the ruling class. In other words, it must construct a fusion of interests of both ruling and subordinate classes into a universal culture which is capable of reproducing the dominant mode of production. In Gramsci's comparison of the role of the French and Italian bourgeoisie in the creation of their respective national states, Gramsci highlighted the success of the former in creating strong bonds between the city and countryside, thereby uniting peasants, artisans, and laborers in the bourgeois struggle against feudalism. In contrast, the Italian bourgeoisie was unable to establish similarly strong bonds, largely as a result of the divide between North (the industrial core) and South (the agrarian periphery) in Italy, and so the creation of the Italian national state occurred in the context of continued feudal relations in the countryside. The weakness of the Italian state was, for Gramsci, a function of the fact that the Italian national revolution was only partially successful in satisfying bourgeois-democratic goals.

Hegemony is thus much more than simply ideology.[8] It is rather a historically specific equilibrium in which the ruling class grants concessions to the sub-

8 For an exemplary statement of this argument, see Williams (1977).

ordinate classes in order to maintain its power. The nature of the compromises the ruling class must make in order to secure its role as the leading class is specific to particular social formations at particular periods of time. Therefore, not only does hegemony not take a general form dictated by the mode of production, it is also far from complete. Hegemony

> is conceived of as a continuous process of formation and superseding of unstable equilibria (on the juridical plane) between the interest of the fundamental group and those of the subordinate groups – equilibria in which the interest of the dominant group prevail, but only up to a certain point, i.e. stopping short of narrowly corporate economic interest.
>
> GRAMSCI 1971: 182

Hegemony takes on material form through a hegemonic apparatus, a historically specific system of institutions and practices (e.g., religion, education, the family, language) through which class struggle occurs on the level of civil society. The contradictions arising between specific components of the hegemonic apparatus make production and reproduction of hegemony even more problematic. The power of the ruling class is therefore not absolute, but rather is defined by conflict and contingency, and so must be constantly renegotiated and renewed. It also means that the potential for the hegemony of the ruling class to be destroyed always exists.

As a result, it is very likely that a ruling class will experience historical periods in which its leadership is called into question by the subordinate classes. These are, for Gramsci, moments of hegemonic crisis. While such crises can be economic in nature, there is no reason why hegemonic crises should *only* be economic. As the example of the Soviet Revolution illustrates, wars have provided fertile ground for the development of hegemonic crises. A hegemonic crisis

> occurs either because the ruling class has failed in some major political undertaking for which it has requested, or forcibly extracted, the consent of the broad masses (war, for example), or because huge masses (especially of peasants and petit-bourgeois intellectuals) have passed suddenly from a state of political passivity to a certain activity, and put forward demands which taken together, albeit not organically formulated, add up to a revolution. A 'crisis of authority' is spoken of: this is precisely the crisis of hegemony, or general crisis of the State.
>
> GRAMSCI 1971: 210

Hegemonic crises are not likely to be conjunctural crises, or those "which appear occasional, immediate, almost accidental," but rather are more likely

to be organic or "relatively permanent" (Gramsci 1971: 177) in nature. These moments compel the ruling class to engage in 'passive revolution,' or the development of "molecular changes which in fact progressively modify the pre-existing composition of forces, and hence become the matrix of new changes" (Gramsci 1971: 109). These changes are meant to disorganize transformative movements of the subordinate classes and, by articulating a new structure of consent, restore the leadership of the ruling class. As a result, Gramsci argued, capitalism undergoes stages of reorganization, but instead of this process occurring in a mechanical, deterministic manner it occurs through political struggle. Should the balance of forces change so dramatically that the ruling class can no longer secure the consent of the subordinate classes,

> i.e. is no longer 'leading' but only 'dominant,' exercising coercive force alone, this means precisely that the great masses have become detached from their traditional ideologies, and no longer believe what they used to believe previously, etc. The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear.
>
> GRAMSCI 1971: 275–276

If there is another class that has the capability to generate a new national-popular collective will, this class will become the new leading, hegemonic class (we will discuss this in much greater detail in Chapter 3). If not, the result is likely to be, in Rosa Luxemburg's words, barbarism.

Gramsci made clear that the distinction between political society and civil society is "merely methodological" (Gramsci 1971: 160). They are part of a "dual perspective" in which "the levels of force and consent, authority and hegemony, violence and civilization" (Gramsci 1971: 170) are related dialectically in the form of the state. The state, Gramsci wrote, "is the entire complex of practical and theoretical activities with which the ruling class not only justifies and maintains its dominance, but manages to win the active consent of those over whom it rules" (Gramsci 1971: 244). It must be understood as "an 'educator'" (Gramsci 1971: 247) which "tends to create and maintain a certain type of civilization and of citizen (and hence of collective life and of individual relations), and to eliminate certain customs and attitudes and to disseminate others" (Gramsci 1971: 246):

> every State is ethical in as much as one of its most important functions is to raise the great mass of the population to a particular cultural and moral

> level, a level (or type) which corresponds to the needs of the productive forces for development, and hence to the interests of the ruling classes.
>
> GRAMSCI 1971: 258

While the coercive power of political society is ever present, it is generally directed against those subordinate groups which have chosen to remain outside of or have been excluded from the national-popular collective will only as long as the ruling class has secured the consent of the large majority of the population. In other words, the successful use of coercive power by the ruling class depends upon its ability to exercise hegemonic power. In the event of a hegemonic crisis, the ruling class can make use of its command of coercive power more overtly and more broadly in the hopes of restoring order: "[t]he military are the permanent reserves of order and conservation; they are the political force which comes into action 'publicly' when 'legality' is in danger" (Gramsci 1971: 215). Order, however, can ultimately be restored only if the ruling class is successful in creating a new hegemonic compromise. For Gramsci, the exercise of domination cannot be separated from the need to exercise intellectual and moral leadership:

> A social group can, and indeed must, already exercise 'leadership' before winning governmental power (this indeed is one of the principal conditions for the winning of such power); it subsequently becomes dominant when it exercises power, but even if it holds it firmly in its grasp, it must continue to 'lead' as well.
>
> GRAMSCI 1971: 57–58

The state must simultaneously suppress antagonistic groups and lead allied groups. Hegemony, therefore, is not an alternative to dictatorship – hegemony and domination are "strategically differentiated forms of a unitary political power" (Thomas 2010: 163). At the same time, though, this dual perspective provides some insight into the Marxist argument concerning the withering away of the state. With the eventual abolition of classes, a "regulated society" (Gramsci 1971: 257) will emerge as "a technically and morally unitary social organism" (Gramsci 1971: 259). In this context,

> It is possible to imagine the coercive element of the State withering away by degrees, as ever-more conspicuous elements of regulated society (or ethical State or civil society) make their appearance.
>
> GRAMSCI 1971: 263

The functions of political society become either no longer necessary or absorbed by civil society. At this point we have, in Engels' words, left the realm of necessity for the realm of freedom.

The dual perspective is also relevant for understanding Gramsci's discussion of proletarian revolutionary strategy. It is the analysis of his discussion of political strategy, particularly his use of the military metaphor in this discussion, to which we now turn.

CHAPTER 3

# War of Maneuver and War of Position

War and military matters are topics that emerge repeatedly in Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*. Gramsci accepted the Clausewitzian principle (see von Clausewitz 1982) that war is the continuation of politics by other means: "[w]ar is an aspect of political life; it is the continuation, in other forms, of a given policy" (Gramsci 2007: 268). "Military leadership," he argued, "must always be subordinated to political leadership, that is, army commands must always be a military expression of a particular policy" (Gramsci 1992: 207). At the same time, it is incorrect to treat military leadership as a purely technical matter, one of enacting a policy determined by political leadership: "conflicts between the military and the government are not conflicts between technicians and politicians, but between politicians and politicians; they are conflicts between 'two political leaderships' that enter into competition at the beginning of every war" (Gramsci 1992: 360).

Military forces and doctrine are thus not neutral defenders of the state but rather reproduce the class relations characteristic of a social formation. This is reflected in Gramsci's broader analysis of the failure of the Italian bourgeoisie to create a cohesive national-popular will. For example, Gramsci noted that while there were notable examples of Italian military leaders, engineers, etc. in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, these intellectuals tended to be more 'cosmopolitan' than 'national.' Gramsci also pointed to the failure to build a national army during the Risorgimento, one with "responsibility of integrating the popular forces into the life of the nation and the state," one that "represented the nation under arms," one in which "compulsory military service was not to be regarded as a duty but rather as the active exercise of a right – the right of the armed freedom of the people" (Gramsci 2007: 124). This served as a considerable brake on the achievements of Italy's bourgeois revolution but provided the Italian bourgeoisie with some immediate benefit: "the less people participated in the political life of the state, the more powerful these forces became" (Gramsci 2007: 124). The class relations expressed through Italy's political-military leadership had important consequences for Italy's participation in the First World War. Rejecting the argument that Italy's unimpressive military record during the war was the result of military accident or a lack of will on the battlefield, Gramsci argued that "[i]n order to determine the historical responsibility, one must look at the general class relationships within which the soldiers, the reserve officers, and the general staff occupy a specific position,

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hence one must look at the structure of the nation for which the ruling class is solely responsible, precisely because it rules" (Gramsci 2007: 51). At the same time, the fact that the military reproduces the class relations characteristic of a social formation means that it, like all other social institutions, is potentially a site of class struggle: "One must not forget that the army reproduces the social structure of the state and that therefore the introduction of politics into the army can reproduce therein the conflicts of the outside world and thus bring about a disintegration of the military formation" (Gramsci 1996: 237).

It is his use of war and the military as metaphor, however, for which Gramsci is most well-known. While Gramsci's use of military metaphors is most closely associated with his *Prison Notebooks*, he made use of such metaphors in his earlier political writings. For example, we saw in the previous chapter Gramsci's statement, in relation to his discussion of the vanguard party, that "[r]evolution is like war, it must be minutely prepared by a working class general staff, just as a war is by the Army's general staff" (Gramsci 1977k: 348). He saw the workers and peasants as "the two wings of the revolutionary army" (Gramsci 1977l: 139). The PCI was

> a phalanx of steel, too small certainly to go into battle against the forces of the enemy, but enough to become the framework for a broader formation: for an army which, to use Italian historical language, can ensure that the battle on the Piave will follow the rout of Caporetto.[1]
>
> GRAMSCI 1978c: 215

There is, though, an important difference between Gramsci's early use of military metaphors and those found in the *Prison Notebooks*. In the former, the metaphor is a descriptive one, but in the latter the metaphor takes on an analytical and strategic form. War of maneuver and war of position are metaphors that contain within them a complex series of actions which revolutionary forces must undertake in specific situations. For Gramsci, the use of the military metaphor in his analysis of revolutionary political strategy flows from his dual perspective of domination-hegemony and, more specifically, the complex interrelationship between war and politics.

Before we examine Gramsci's use of the military metaphor, though, we must first acknowledge that he was not the first Marxist to use such metaphors in the analysis of working class political strategy. Karl Kautsky made use of a similar metaphor in his critical response to Rosa Luxemburg's identification

1 Caporetto was, in late 1917, the site of Italy's worst defeat during the First World War. At the Piave River in June 1918, the Italians imposed a crushing defeat on the Austro-Hungarian army.

of the mass strike as the principal strategic weapon of the working class. He distinguished between a war of annihilation which seeks the destruction of the enemy and a war of attrition that seeks to wear down the enemy through a protracted struggle (Salvadori 1990), and argued that working class political strategy, particularly for the German Social Democratic Party, should take the form of the latter. A strategy based on a war of annihilation was, Kautsky argued, doomed to failure given the advantages which the ruling class possessed in terms of military organization and weaponry. Indeed, he saw such a strategy as more than simply incorrect. It would likely serve as a provocation which the ruling class could use to its advantage to win support for repression against the socialist movement, and as such carried considerable risks. He did not deny the possibility of such outright battles against the ruling class, but these could come only after a successful war of attrition, a long preparatory period in which the working class made use of the existing parliamentary system and democratic rights of universal suffrage, assembly and free speech in anticipation of the revolution (Kautsky 1996).

Although Kautsky's distinction between war of attrition and war of annihilation may appear to be the equivalent and precursor of Gramsci's concepts of war of maneuver and war of position,[2] there are significant methodological differences between the two that call such an equivalency into question. Kautsky's Marxism was a representative of the positivistic, economistic Marxism the critique of which was, as we saw in the previous chapter, the foundation of Gramsci's Marxism. Unlike the strong praxis-oriented political strategy of Gramsci, Kautsky saw revolution as an inevitable process emerging from the laws of capitalist development; capital accumulation would intensify class conflict and produce ultimately an economic crisis which would serve as the spark for proletarian revolution. Such an understanding of revolution left little room for an active revolutionary politics organized by the political party of the working class:

> The Social Democratic Party is a revolutionary party, but not a party that makes revolutions. We know that our goals can be reached only through a revolution; however, we also know that it lies just as little in our power to make this revolution as it lies in the power of our opponents to prevent it. Thus it does not even occur to us to want to foment a revolution or to prepare the conditions for one.
>
> KAUTSKY 1996: 34

2 Anderson (1976) points to this connection in explaining the tendency for Gramsci to be associated with reformism.

Unlike Gramsci, for whom a counter-hegemonic strategy required the creation of new organizational forms of economic, political and cultural expression within the contradictions of capitalist society, Kautsky failed to address how the working class's use of that society's political institutions would not end up with the absorption (and thereby the demobilization) of its radical demands. At best, he left it to the inevitability of revolution to solve this problem. Democratic institutions

> have been called society's safety valve. If that is supposed to mean that in a democracy the proletariat ceases to be revolutionary, that it is content to express publicly its outrage and its sufferings, and that it renounces the political and social revolution, then this appellation is wrong. Democracy cannot eliminate the class antagonisms of capitalist society, nor can it stop avoid their necessary final result, the overthrow of this society.
>
> KAUTSKY 1996: 36

The dialectical foundation of Gramsci's political strategy thus gives his concepts of war of maneuver and war of position a vitality that is lacking in Kautsky's more unilinear and determinist perspective.[3] This explains why it is Gramsci's military metaphor rather than Kautsky's that has acquired such contemporary significance for radical social theory and political practice.

## War as Metaphor

Gramsci's discussion of war of maneuver/war of position is most often associated with the geographic distinction between East and West:[4]

> In the East, the state was everything, civil society was primordial and gelatinous; in the West, there was a proper relation between state and civil society, and when the state tottered, a sturdy structure of civil society

3 Salvadori argues that Kautsky "theorized the inevitability of escalating social conflict in general historical terms, yet constantly retreated to a passive *attentisme* when it came to the current conjuncture in Germany. He erected – and this was to remain a central feature of his writing – a sort of no-man's-land between strategy and tactics that could never be crossed in practice" (Salvadori 1990: 90).

4 This geographic distinction should not be taken too literally. Gramsci noted that "East and West are arbitrary and conventional [(historical)] constructions" (Gramsci 2007: 176). The distinction is better understood as one between core and periphery within capitalism.

> was immediately revealed. The state was just a forward trench; behind it stood a succession of sturdy fortresses and emplacements.
>
> GRAMSCI 2007: 169

With a relatively underdeveloped civil society, revolutionary strategy in the East required a direct frontal assault against the principal form of bourgeois political power: the state. Gramsci provided a description of this strategy in the context of his critique of Rosa Luxemburg's *The General Strike*, which Gramsci called "the most significant theory of the war of maneuver applied to the study of history and to the art of politics" (Gramsci 2007: 161):

> The immediate economic factor (crises, etc.) is seen as the field artillery employed in war to open a breach in the enemy's defenses big enough to permit one's troops to break through and gain a definitive strategic victory – or, at least, to achieve what is needed for a definitive victory. Naturally, in historical studies, the impact of the immediate economic factor is seen as much more complex than the impact of field artillery in a war of maneuver. The immediate economic factor was expected to have a double effect: (1) to open a breach in the enemy's defenses, after throwing him into disarray and making him lose faith in himself, his forces, and his future; (2) to organize in a flash one's own troops, to create cadres, or at least to place the existing cadres (formed, up to that point, by the general historical process) at lightning speed in positions from which they could direct the dispersed troops; to produce, in a flash, a concentration of ideology and of the ends to be achieved.
>
> GRAMSCI 2007: 161–162

In the West, however, with its more fully developed civil society, a direct, lightning frontal assault against the state would likely fail. Such a strategy reflects an "inaccurate understanding of the nature of the state (in the full sense: dictatorship + hegemony)…[and] results in underestimating the adversary and his fighting organization" (Gramsci 2007: 117). Strategy in the West must instead take into account the significance of hegemony:

> The superstructures of civil society resemble the trench system of modern warfare. Sometimes, it would appear that a ferocious artillery attack against enemy trenches had leveled everything, whereas in fact it had caused only superficial damage to the defenses of the adversary, so that when the assailants advanced they encountered a defensive front that was still effective. The same thing occurs in politics during great

> economic crises. A crisis does not enable the attacking troops to organize themselves at lightning speed in time and in space; much less does it infuse them with a fighting spirit. On the other side of the coin, the defenders are not demoralized, nor do they abandon their defensive positions, even in the midst of rubble; nor do they lose faith in their own strength or their own future.
>
> GRAMSCI 2007: 162–163

> in politics, once the 'war of position' is won, it is definitively decisive. In politics, in others words, the war of maneuver drags on as long as the positions being won are not decisive and the resources of hegemony and the state are not fully mobilized. But when, for some reason or another, these positions have lost their value and only the decisive positions matter, then one shifts to siege warfare – compact, difficult, requiring exceptional abilities of patience and inventiveness. In politics, the siege is reciprocal, whatever the appearances; the mere fact that the ruling power has to parade all its resources reveals its estimate of the adversary.
>
> GRAMSCI 2007: 109

In this case, revolutionary strategy must be a slower, more protracted process of siege warfare, in which subordinate classes wear away the existing civil society and, through their collective self-organization, create a new one.

In addition, there is also a temporal aspect to the war of maneuver/war of position distinction. While a strategy of war of maneuver may have been relevant in an earlier stage of history in the West, Gramsci argued that this was no longer the case:

> The question of so-called permanent revolution, a political concept that emerged around 1848 as a scientific expression of Jacobinism, at a time when the great political parties and economic trade unions had not yet come into existence – a concept that would subsequently be absorbed and superseded by the concept of 'civil hegemony.'
>
> The question of the war of position and of the war of movement, as well as the question of *arditismo*, insofar as they pertain to political science; in politics, the 1848 concept of the war of movement is precisely the concept of permanent revolution; in politics, the war of position is the concept of hegemony that can come into existence after certain things are already in place, namely, the large popular organizations of the modern type that represent, as it were, the 'trenches' and the permanent fortifications of the war of position.
>
> GRAMSCI 2007: 267

With the emergence of imperialism after 1870, war of maneuver had given way to war of position. Gramsci also pointed to the Bolshevik Revolution as an important milestone in the transition from war of maneuver to war of position: the "events of 1917 were the last instance" of such the political war of maneuver, marking "a decisive shift in the art and science of politics" (Gramsci 2007: 163). His critique of Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution saw it as "a reflection of the general-economic-cultural-social conditions of a country in which the structures of national life are embryonic and unsettled and cannot become 'trench or fortress'" (Gramsci 2007: 168). For Gramsci, Trotsky was "the political theorist of frontal assault, at a time when it could only lead to defeat" (Gramsci 2007: 109).[5] In contrast, Gramsci argued that Lenin, who he saw in contrast to Trotsky as "profoundly national and profoundly European" (Gramsci 2007: 168), recognized the necessity to shift strategy from the war of maneuver to the war of position with the formula of the united front.

In making the case for the relevance of war of position for revolutionary strategy, Gramsci was not arguing that war of maneuver can be ignored. It is in this context that Gramsci's discussion of *arditismo* must be understood. The *arditi* were shock troops whose role was to penetrate enemy defenses in order to allow an advance by a larger, more conventional force. They were "a select military force which had a fundamental tactical function" (Gramsci 1992: 157) "peculiar to the war of position as became apparent in 1914–18" (Gramsci 1992: 217). All of the major armies in the First World War had such forces. To the extent that *arditismo* moved beyond its technical military function to take on a "political-military function" (Gramsci 1992: 218), however, it became more problematic for Gramsci. *Arditismo* in this sense "could be found in countries [that is, Italy] whose weakness and lack of cohesion expressed themselves in a national army with a weak fighting spirit and a bureaucratized General Staff fossilized in their careers" (Gramsci 1992: 218). *Arditismo* was a poor substitute for a strong national-popular will. In extending the concept of *arditismo* to the analysis of political strategy, Gramsci was critical of its use in the struggle against fascism:

> in political struggle one should not ape the methods of struggle of the ruling classes, and avoid falling into easy ambushes. This phenomenon occurs frequently in current struggles. A weakened state organization is like an enfeebled army; the *arditi*, that is, private armed organizations, enter the field with a double task: to use illegality while the state appears to remain within legality, and as a means to reorganize the state itself. It is foolish to believe that an illegal private action can be countered by another action of a similar kind, i.e. that one can fight *arditismo* with

5 I will argue in Chapter Four that Gramsci glossed over considerable evidence to the contrary.

> *arditismo*; it means believing that the state would remain eternally inert, which never happens – not to mention the other circumstances that are different. Class characteristics lead to a fundamental difference: a class which must work regular hours every day cannot have permanent and specialized assault organizations, unlike a class with abundant financial resources whose members are not all constrained by regular jobs. These organizations, which have become professional, can deliver decisive blows and use the element of surprise at any time of day or night. The tactics of the *arditi*, therefore, cannot be as important for certain classes as they are for others; for certain classes the war of movement and maneuver is necessary because it is appropriate for them, and in the case of political struggle the war of movement can be combined with a useful and perhaps indispensable employment of *arditi* tactics. But to fix one's mind on the military model is foolish: here too, politics must rank higher than the military element and only politics creates the possibility of maneuver and movement (1992: 218).

We can see here an expression of Gramsci's critique of an adventurist political strategy organized by a small elite. *Arditismo* – the war of maneuver – may be useful tactically, but it must be subordinated to a broader political strategy:

> This does not mean that the tactics of assault and incursion and the war of maneuver should now be considered to be utterly erased from the study of military science; that would be a serious error. But in wars among the more industrially and socially advanced states, these methods of war must be seen to have a reduced tactical function rather than a strategic function; their place in military history is analogous to that of siege warfare in the previous period.
>
> GRAMSCI 2007: 162

While "every political struggle…always has a military substratum" (Gramsci 1992: 219), relations of military force are "from time to time…immediately decisive" (Gramsci 1996: 180), but this is a function of a specific conjunctural relation of forces.

In contrast, the war of position seeks control over "the commanding heights" (Gramsci 2007: 285):

> when handling a limited and specific set of forces, one must distribute them in such a way as to occupy the strategic positions that dominate the totality of the situation and permit one to control the course of events.

> (A captain who sets up camp at the bottom of a valley without first taking pains to occupy and fortify the surrounding heights and passes can be easily surrounded, taken prisoner, and destroyed, even if he has a numerical advantage; a huge piece of artillery at the bottom of a ravine and another on a hilltop do not have the same potency, etc.).
>
> GRAMSCI 2007: 285

In contrast to a war of maneuver, which is oriented toward "breaking through the points of least resistance in order to be able to strike at the most important point with maximum forces," the war of position requires that forces "must do battle with the most eminent of one's adversaries, not the weaker ones" (Gramsci 2007: 177). The war of position is organic in that it encompasses the entire social formation of the enemy:

> A war of position in fact does not consist solely of a set of actual trenches; it comprises the entire organizational and industrial structure of the territory that lies behind the arrayed forces, and it is especially dependent on the rapid-fire capacity and concentration of cannons, machine guns, and rifles (and on the abundance of materiel that makes it possible to replace quickly any equipment lost after an enemy breakthrough).
>
> GRAMSCI 2007: 162

Likewise, it requires a total commitment from within one's own social formation:

> The war of position calls on enormous masses of people to make huge sacrifices; that is why an unprecedented concentration of hegemony is required and hence a more 'interventionist' kind of government that will engage more openly in the offensive against the opponents and ensure, once and for all, the 'impossibility' of internal disintegration by putting in place controls of all kinds – political, administrative, etc., reinforcement of the hegemonic positions of the dominant group, etc.
>
> GRAMSCI 2007: 109

In addition to being a strategy encompassing the entire depth of a social formation, the organic nature of the war of position is based on its extension over long periods of time:

> In military war, when the strategic goal, i.e., the destruction of the enemy's army and the occupation of its territory, is achieved, there is

> peace. Moreover, one should point out that in order for the war to end, it is enough that the strategic goal be only potentially achieved: in other words, it is enough that there be no doubt that an army can no longer fight and that the victorious army 'could' occupy the enemy's territory. Political struggle is enormously more complex: in a certain sense it can be compared to colonial wars or to old wars of conquest when, that is, the victorious army occupies or intends to occupy permanently all or part of the conquered territory. In that case, the defeated army is disarmed and dispersed, but the struggle continues on the terrain of politics and of military 'preparation'.
>
> GRAMSCI 1992: 218–219

As a result, while the war of maneuver is limited in terms of time (i.e., emphasizing speed) and space (i.e., defining seizure of the state as the goal), the organic nature of war of position means that it is, both in terms of time and space, the political equivalent of total war.

### Analysis of the Metaphor

A critical examination of Gramsci's military metaphor reveals that the metaphor is problematic in a number of ways: (1) it is based on an inaccurate assessment of changes in modern warfare; (2) the imagery associated with the metaphor is sufficiently ambiguous that it fails to convey its intended meaning; and (3) the metaphor unravels the dialectical core of Gramsci's analysis of hegemony.

In linking the shift in revolutionary strategy from war of maneuver to war of position to an analogous shift in military strategy, Gramsci made a significant error – he mistook conjunctural changes in warfare as expressed in the First World War with organic changes. The major armies of that conflict entered the war with a strategy of maneuver, but it soon became apparent, particularly on the Western Front, that a shift in strategy was necessary. While military theory prior to the war emphasized maneuver and the offensive, a number of factors created a situation which favored the defense over the offense (Bull 2010; Keegan 1999). The largest armies that Western Europe had seen to date faced each other along a relatively narrow front that ran from Switzerland to the sea, and the resulting density of the front placed substantial constraints on the mobility necessary for a successful offensive. In addition, the uneven development of military technology contributed to stalemate on the front. It was difficult for the attacker to use secrecy to their advantage, as the necessity for

artillery to register their target (that is, pinpoint distance, angle of fire, etc. with isolated preliminary salvos) prior to the commencement of an artillery barrage was a tell-tale sign of an imminent attack. In addition, at the start of the war most artillery pieces fired shrapnel, which was effective against exposed troops but not against hardened defenses, instead of high explosives. Dense entanglements of barbed wire slowed down the advance, exposing troops to devastating fire from reinforced machine gun emplacements. The most secure form of communication between commanders and forward units were telephone lines buried deep beneath the ground, so while defenders had ready access to their communication system attacking forces become increasingly cut off from their own system as they moved into enemy territory. These tactical limitations, in short, compelled a major change in strategy.[6]

While these conditions compelled a shift from maneuver to position, this did not represent an organic shift in military strategy but rather one of necessity. Over the course of the war, new weapons and the new tactics appropriate for them emerged which, while still underdeveloped, helped to overcome the defensive advantages of a war of position. For example, the development of light machine guns gave to the offensive the same firepower that had previously, in the form of defensive machine gun emplacements, so effectively stopped its advance. The introduction of the tank provided mobile machine gun and cannon support for advancing troops as well as a means to break through heavy concentrations of barbed wire and other obstacles. Airplanes came to serve as forward observers for artillery, providing information which gave attackers a greater advantage in terms of secrecy prior to an attack, while heavy artillery capable of firing high explosive shells could more easily penetrate hardened defensive positions. Creeping artillery barrages about one hundred yards ahead of advancing troops came to replace the massive bombardments preceding an assault that gave the defense time to prepare. Finally, the devastating consequences of 'going over the top' led to changes in how advancing troops made their assault, moving away from movement by lines towards movement by smaller units from shell hole to shell hole with parts of each unit providing covering fire for the others. By 1918, with both Germany's desperate spring offensive and the subsequent Allied counter-offensive which

6 It is notable that the Eastern Front did not see the same emphasis on trench warfare found on the Western Front. In addition to more substantial differences in the military capabilities of the competing armies, the Eastern Front was much broader and more open than the tight confines of the Western Front. As a result, while geography clearly favored the defense on the Western Front, this was not so on the Eastern Front (Keegan 1999).

led to Germany's capitulation, the stalemate of war of position was giving way to greater opportunities for maneuver. While this process was just beginning to have results by the end of the war, it was the start of a recalibration of the relative balance of offense and defense that would later have such a dramatic impact in the Second World War.

As a result, the First World War did *not* herald an organic shift from maneuver to position. The transition to a war of position was instead a conjunctural shift reflecting a specific set of historical conditions. Certainly war of position did not serve as the basis for subsequent developments in military strategy – we will examine how this was reflected in early Soviet military strategy in Chapter 5.[7] In pointing to the supposed prominence of war of position in contemporary warfare as the basis for emphasizing the significance of war of position in his revolutionary strategy, Gramsci was on weak ground.

The specific way in which Gramsci used the military metaphor is equally problematic. At one point he described the state – by which he meant the coercive power of the state – as "just a forward trench; behind it stood a succession of sturdy fortresses and emplacements" (Gramsci 2007: 169). Elsewhere, as we saw earlier, he extended the same imagery to the superstructures of civil society, which he saw as 'the trench system of modern warfare.' Finally, in his analysis of the integral state, he stated "that state = political society + civil society, that is, hegemony protected by the armor of coercion" (Gramsci 2007: 75). In the first instance, the state is the preliminary defense protecting what is most essential – the fortress of hegemony, but in the second instance hegemony is transformed from fortress to trench. The 'definitively decisive' nature of the war of position is much clearer in the former image than the latter. In addition, if the state is the outer ditch or perimeter and hegemony the central fortification, then if we accept that the winning of hegemony is ultimately decisive in securing victory this can come only *after* the outer ditch has been overrun. While the seizure of the outer trenches, in other words, is not *sufficient* for victory, it is a *necessary* feature of any successful taking of the fortress. In saying that the state is hegemony armored by coercion, Gramsci was arguing that the

7 In the words of B.H. Liddell Hart, one of the most important Western writers on military strategy in the twentieth century, "Whatever the opinion of the merits of attrition, and of the argument that the whole period [of the First World War] should be regarded as one continuous battle, a method that requires four years to produce a decision is not to be regarded as a model for imitation" (Liddell Hart 1967: 178). While some failed to recognize this and planned to fight the next war in the same way (e.g., France's construction of the Maginot Line), others recognized the importance of planning for a future war of maneuver (Fuller 1928; de Gaulle 1941; Guderian 1999).

ruling class always has recourse to the state's coercive power should hegemony falter. This political interpretation of the metaphor, however, clashes with the military nature of the metaphor itself – armor must be breached first in order for the body in which it is encased to be rendered *hors de combat*. The path to revolution suggested by this imagery, one in which the armor of coercion must be overcome before the hegemonic body which it protects can be defeated, is precisely this path that is supposed to have been rendered obsolete in advanced capitalism.

This confusion can also be found in commentary on Gramsci's social theory. Femia, for example, defines coercion as "the 'outer perimeter' of the capitalist system of defense" (Femia 1987: 52) and hegemony as the "inner fortifications" of class power and emphasizes that the war of position and the war of maneuver, "the strategy of patient permeation and subversion and that of frontal attack, are two forms of a single war" (Femia 1987: 206). However, in arguing that "[t]he 'war of position' must be the fundamental approach in advanced societies" (Femia 1987: 206), Femia then states

> The 'military' aspect of the struggle becomes especially important when the proletariat has at last conquered the institutions of civil society and solidified a new counter-hegemony. At this point there remains the climactic attack on the state fortress: the 'revolution of spirit' now gives way to the 'revolution in arms'.
>
> FEMIA 1987: 206–207

Fiori presents a similar image:

> How is the new proletarian *Weltanschauung* to be diffused? The task of the intellectuals organically associated with the working class is to win over the traditional intellectuals to socialism; then they must together transform the new conception of the world into 'common sense.' It is in this way that the 'fortress' (cultural dominance) can pass into the hands of the working class, to be followed by the front-line 'trench' (political dominance), and the hegemony of the proletariat be established.
>
> FIORI 1970: 245

Buci-Glucksmann, in her discussion of the war of position, identifies it as a strategy that starts by occupying the 'buttresses' of the state, its 'organizational reserves.' This new type of class struggle bases itself on the 'massive structures of the modern democracies,' which form the 'trenches' and fortifications in the war of position (Buci-Glucksmann 1980: 281). She goes on to say that there may

be conditions in which a frontal attack is necessary, but only after the successful completion of the war of position:

> Under different conditions, and in different modalities, it is still necessary to 'smash the state.' But the state that has to be smashed will already be a state that has been transformed, deprived of its historical basis, with its mechanisms and hegemonic apparatuses undermined by a balance of forces unprecedentedly favorable to the people.
>
> BUCI-GLUCKSMANN 1980: 281

Salvadori, in turn, argues that while one "cannot begin the assault on the seizure of power (worker state and dictatorship of the proletariat) until the struggle in the trenches has opened the way to success," in the end "the assault on the destruction of the adversary remains the supreme goal" (Salvadori 1979: 246). The cumulative result of these statements is that the distinction between trench and fortress, between outer and inner fortifications, appears to be very fluid. One can argue that this reflects Gramsci's dialectical perspective, but at the same time the fluidity of this imagery has very concrete consequences. If different *military* strategies are required to overcome trench and fortress, then the failure to clearly articulate how this metaphor applies to coercive and hegemonic power means that we cannot be clear as to what a war of position would involve as a practical political strategy (Schwarzmantel 2015).

Finally, Gramsci's military metaphor undermines the complexity of his analysis of revolutionary strategy. Boggs, for example, speaks of the "multidimensional" (Boggs 1976: 115) nature of a Gramscian political strategy which emphasizes a "reciprocal interaction between the 'organic' and 'conjunctural,'"[8] but then reduces the war of maneuver (and, by implication, the war of position) to a "stage" (Boggs 1976: 114). Showstack Sassoon seems to reject reducing the war of maneuver and the war of position to stages, stating that "[t]he political and the military or the war of position and the war of movement are not two separate moments but part of a single, dialectical process" (Showstack Sassoon 1987: 195). However, other statements by her suggest a more 'stagist' understanding of political strategy. For example, the war of position, in contrast to the war of maneuver, is a "strategic principle" (Showstack Sassoon 1987: 194) and "a fundamental principle, not merely a contingent, tactical necessity" (Showstack Sassoon 1987: 200), within which the war of maneuver "can be a tactical moment" (Showstack Sassoon 1987: 202). But she

8 He does so by contrasting Gramsci with the "one-dimensional" (Boggs 1976: 115) strategy of Lenin. We will address the problematic nature of this comparison in Chapter Four.

also argues that "Gramsci identifies the choice between a war of movement or a war of position predominantly with a *tactical* decision depending on the constraints of the structural position of a class" (Showstack Sassoon 1987: 194, emphasis added). Ransome seems similarly confused, stating simultaneously that frontal attack (war of maneuver) has become "*an aspect* of the overall tactical possibilities contained *within* the larger 'positional' strategy," with the war of position a "phase of revolutionary practice [that] must come before the final and relatively short phase of 'military' assault" (Ransome 1992: 148) *and* that war of position is "a new form of revolutionary practice which *combines* the tactics of position and frontal attack within a single overall strategy" (Ransome 1992: 148). Salamini argues that war of position is a "gradual, molecular process by which progressive socialist forces prepare the condition for the conquest of power" (Salamini 1981: 128), while Adamson inverts this chronology: "[i]f the war of movement is still relevant at all, it is somehow preliminary; the only decisive battles are those in the war of position" (Adamson 1980: 226).

The tendency to dissolve the dialect of consent and coercion discussed above thus has its parallel in the tendency to dissolve the dialectic of strategy and tactics by identifying the former with consent and the latter with coercion. It is unclear whether the war of maneuver and war of position are stages, the one serving as the foundation of the other, or elements of a single process. Likewise, it is unclear whether victory in the war of position so fundamentally weakens the coercive power of the state that it falls like a house of cards in the war of maneuver or whether the war of position, while decisive, cannot ultimately be victorious unless it is accompanied by a war of movement directed against the state. Clausewitz's writings on military theory are a useful resource for untangling this knot. For Clausewitz, "tactics *is the theory of the use of military forces in combat*. Strategy *is the theory of the use of combats for the object of the War*" (von Clausewitz 1982: 173). Tactics refer to the conduct of specific battles, to how specific battles are fought. Strategy, on the other hand, refers to how these battles are combined in order to achieve a combatant's objectives in war: "Strategy forms the plan of the War; and to this end it links together the series of acts which are to lead to the final decision" (von Clausewitz 1982: 241). If tactics deal with the 'how' of a battle, strategy deals with the 'when' and 'where' of battle as well as decisions regarding the forces with which to engage in battle. For Clausewitz, the relationship between strategy and tactics is a dialectical one.[9] Strategy is the context within which tactical decisions are made, while at the same time tactics are the concrete enactment of strategy on

9 Lenin, in his notebooks on Clausewitz, makes clear what he sees as the latter's roots in the Hegelian dialectic (Davis and Kohn 1977).

a specific field of battle. The idea that one is prior to or of greater importance than the other is absent in Clausewitz – they occur simultaneously.

Gramsci implicitly acknowledged a Clausewitzian understanding of tactics and strategy in establishing the relationship between "the 'military' moment in the strict technical sense of the word and what one might call the 'politico-military' moment" (Gramsci 1996: 181) of war. The terms Gramsci used here make clear that the tactical moment of the 'military' is an inseparable part of the strategic moment of the 'politico-military.' In addition, the term 'politico-military' itself reflects the integration of hegemony and coercion that is at the center of Gramsci's work. When, however, military strategy and tactics are used metaphorically by Gramsci, this double dialectic is unraveled. With the identification of war of position as strategic and organic and war of maneuver as tactical and conjunctural, it is not clear how tactical success can contribute cumulatively to strategic success, especially if the tactical moment of the war of maneuver must be postponed until 'decisive' victory in the war of position has occurred. Even if we accept as unproblematic the primacy of the war of position for strategy, this does not tell us anything about the tactics that are shaped by and contribute to the success of that strategy. As a result, it is clear that the use of military force cannot be merely a tactical concern subsumed within the more political-cultural strategy of war of position, but rather that coercion and hegemony, and by extension the war of maneuver and the war of position, are inseparable parts of a dialectical process of revolutionary change:

> Once we grasp the nature of politics as an organized movement which concentrates the coercion of social relations, we can see why the two moments of the 'dual perspective' interpenetrate at every level. Since consent is a response to coercion, the passive moment of politics involves a recognition of realities, the winning of support from the masses.... Yet consent also involves a *response* to coercion, a counter-coercion of its own and hence the element of position passes into the element of maneuver.... Maneuver, without position, is the untenable abstraction of a pure coercion; a war of position 'on its own' implies the mechanical hypostasis of the moment of consent.
>
> HOFFMAN 1984: 148–149

Gramsci's dual perspective

> resists any mechanical separation of the two levels or any attempt to present them as successive stages, separate in time. The element of consent

> is always present in the application of force, and the element of force is always present in the achievement of consent.
>
> MOLYNEUX 1978: 150

Coercion and consent should be seen "as two tactical moments within a *single* political strategy" (Hoffman 1984: 152). As Anderson points out, Gramsci

> never intended to deny or rescind the classical axioms of that tradition on the inevitable role of social coercion within any great historical transformation, so long as classes subsisted. His objective was, in one of his phrases, to 'complement' treatment of the one with an exploration of the other.
>
> ANDERSON 1976: 47

It is a striking feature of Gramsci's military metaphor that it obscures the complexity of the relationship between force and coercion that defined the foundation of his work.

As a result, Gramsci's military metaphor cannot carry the weight that it is asked to bear in support of his argument. If the war of maneuver/war of position dichotomy cannot be sustained, then the military metaphor must either be reworked if it is to remain relevant or it must be rejected altogether. The analysis of Marxist military thought and practice which follows is meant to discover which of these two possibilities is more likely and, just as importantly, what consequences the answer has for future revolutionary strategy.

CHAPTER 4

# Marxism and Insurrection

As Gramsci's work became more well-known beginning in the 1960s, it became an important resource for the rejection of the Leninist strategy of insurrection that had dominated Marxism since the Soviet Revolution. For Boggs, the distinction between war of maneuver and war of position reflects the difference between "the classical Leninist model of 'minority revolution'... [based on] the superimposition of a new order from above, which cannot help but take on a mechanistic and *elitist* character" (Boggs 1976: 115) and a model of revolution – which he labels "Gramscian" – which is "infinitely more complex and multi-dimensional, with more of a popular or consensual basis" (Boggs 1976: 115). Boggs further points to "the Leninist focus on the 'conjunctural'" (Boggs 1976: 53) in associating war of maneuver with a "passing and momentary" (Boggs 1976: 114) stage of revolution, in contrast to the more organic nature of war of position. For Showstack Sassoon, a Gramscian strategy is counterposed to a Leninist one "in which the masses are excluded almost entirely from even the potential of effective political intervention" (Showstack Sassoon 1982: 104). Adamson argues that Gramsci's war of position is "a fundamentally new theory of revolution" in which "the dictatorship of the proletariat loses its Leninist connotations and arrives instead only in a majoritarian form" (Adamson 1980: 225). According to Femia, "[w]hat Gramsci's proposals amounted to, in effect, was the abandonment of the hallowed Bolshevik model" (Femia 1987: 53). Unlike Gramsci, argues Piccone, revolution for Lenin "turns out to be a mere shift in management. The organizational structure is retained: the Party commissar replaces the capitalist boss" (Piccone 1976: 499). Finally, Laclau and Mouffe (1985), in their distinction between democratic and authoritarian forms of hegemony, attribute to the former a cultural and participatory form of struggle and a centralized, militaristic form of struggle to the latter; implicit in these statements is a rejection of an insurrectionary strategy in favor of a counter-hegemonic one.

The contrast between a centralized, militarized Leninist strategy of insurrection and Gramsci's participatory, counter-hegemonic strategy has since become a taken-for-granted feature of contemporary radical politics in the core of global capitalism. The purpose of this chapter is to examine critically this assumption.

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### Engels and Insurrection

Engels had a longstanding interest in military matters, stemming in part from his own experience of military service as an artilleryman and of barricade fighting during the 1848 revolution. In addition, Engels made extensive study of the major nineteenth century military theorists. Engels' analysis of modern warfare had important implications for his analysis of revolution. Engels argued that, just as the rise of the bourgeoisie was accompanied by the Napoleonic revolution in warfare, "[t]he emancipation of the proletariat, too, will have its particular military expression, it will give rise to a specific, new method of warfare" (Engels 1975: 550). However, the conquest of political power by the proletariat was a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for the "real emancipation of the proletariat" (Engels 1975: 553), and so talk of an explicitly proletarian military strategy was premature. Instead, "the revolution will have to wage war with the means and by the methods of the general modern warfare" (Engels 1975: 555). In the context of the 1848 revolutions, the strategy of insurrection was grounded in a war of maneuver:

> insurrection is an art quite as much as war or any other, and subject to certain rules of proceeding, which, when neglected, will produce the ruin of the party neglecting them. Those rules, logical deductions from the nature of the parties and the circumstances one has to deal with in such a case, are so plain and simple that the short experience of 1848 had made the Germans pretty well acquainted with them. Firstly, never play with insurrection unless you are fully prepared to face the consequences of your play. Insurrection is a calculus with very indefinite magnitudes the value of which may change every day; the forces opposed to you have all the advantage of organization, discipline, and habitual authority; unless you bring strong odds against them you are defeated and ruined. Secondly, the insurrectionary career once entered upon, act with the greatest determination and on the offensive. The defensive is the death of every armed uprising; it is lost before it measures itself with its enemies. Surprise your antagonists while their forces are scattering, prepare new successes, however small, but daily; keep up the moral ascendency which the first successful uprising has given to you; rally those vacillating elements to your side which always follow the strongest impulse, and which always look out for the safer side; force your enemies to a retreat before they can collect their strength against you; in the words of Danton, the greatest

> master of revolutionary policy yet known, *de l'audace, de l'audace, encore de l'audace!*.
>
> ENGELS 1969: 100

For Engels, victory in armed uprising marked "the day of the decision" (Engels, 1969:27), the ultimately decisive factor in proletarian revolution.

By the time he wrote the introduction to Marx's *Class Struggles in France 1848–1850* in 1895, Engels had modified his earlier analysis of revolutionary strategy. The insurrectionary tactics of 1848 were no longer applicable, he argued, as developments in military technology, urban space, transportation, etc. made the advantages of organized militaries over revolutionaries even greater. As a result, "[t]he mode of struggle of 1848 is today obsolete from every point of view" (Marx 1964: 13):

> The time of surprise attacks, of revolutions carried through by small conscious minorities at the head of unconscious masses, is past. Where it is a question of a complete transformation of the social organization, the masses themselves must also be in it, must themselves already have grasped what is at stake, what they are going in for with body and soul. The history of the last fifty years has taught us that. But in order that the masses may understand what is to be done, long, persistent work is required, and it is just this work which we are now pursuing, and with a success that drives the enemy to despair.
>
> MARX 1964: 25

Instead of directly confronting the bourgeois military through a frontal attack, which in contemporary conditions would be suicidal, Engels argued that a protracted process of undermining the military from within was necessary before such a frontal attack could succeed. This explains Engels' support for general military conscription in Germany; not only would workers acquire the necessary military skills and training to fight effectively when the frontal attack occurs, but also a military that has been thoroughly permeated by the working class would more likely refuse to turn its guns on the workers when the moment of insurrection arrives.

Engels did not see this protracted struggle as eliminating the need for armed insurrection, however. He was highly critical of an unauthorized edited version to his "Introduction," published in the German Social Democratic Party's paper *Vorwärts* (see Engels 1922), which appeared to support the SPD's "tactics of *peace at any price and of opposition to force and violence*" (Engels 1982a: 461) and made Engels "appear as a peaceful worshipper of legality at any price"

(Engels 1982b: 461). In an important section that had been excised in the SPD version of the "Introduction," Engels asked whether the concern with undermining the bourgeois military from within meant

> that in the future the street fight will play no further role? Certainly not. It only means that the conditions since 1848 have become far more unfavorable for civil fights, far more favorable for the military. A future street fight can therefore only be victorious when this unfavorable situation is compensated by other factors. Accordingly, it will occur more seldom in the beginning of a great revolution than in its further progress, and will have to be undertaken with greater forces.
>
> MARX 1964: 24–25

This expressed more fully an already existing reality, which was that "[e]ven in the classic time of street fighting…the barricade produced more of a moral than a material effect. It was a means of shaking the steadfastness of the military. If it held out until this was attained, then victory was won; if not, there was defeat" (Marx 1964: 23). In other words, Engels saw insurrection not as a narrowly-defined military strategy but rather "a form of *political warfare*" (Draper and Haberkern 2005: 189; emphasis in original) that integrated, in Gramscian terms, revolutionary forms of coercive and hegemonic power. The political struggle associated with organizing a mutiny within the bourgeois military was to be the prelude to an armed uprising, which was, for Engels, still the decisive moment of the proletarian revolution.

### Lenin, Trotsky and Insurrection

Lenin and Trotsky elaborated further and put into practice Engels' concept of insurrection as the dialectical relation of politics and war. Both referred to the importance of Clausewitz for the development of a Marxist analysis of war:

> Applied to wars, the main thesis of dialectics so shamelessly distorted by Plekhanov to please the bourgeoisie consists in this, that '*war is nothing but a continuation of political relations by other* [i.e.*, forcible*] *means*.' This formula belongs to Clausewitz, one of the greatest writers on the history of war.… And this was always the standpoint of Marx and Engels, who looked upon *every* war as a continuation of the politics of given interested nations – and *various classes* inside of them – at a given time.
>
> LENIN 1930: 18

> One of the greatest theoreticians of military matters, the German Clausewitz, wrote that 'war is the continuation of politics by other means.' In other words, war, too, is politics, realized through the harsh means of blood and iron. And that is true. War is politics, and the army is the instrument of this politics.
>
> TROTSKY 1979a: 211

In applying Clausewitz to revolutionary war, Lenin and Trotsky did not mean to say that the political was determinate at all levels of military affairs. Instead, they recognized that, in this context, the military had a certain degree of autonomy from politics. Lenin saw armed uprising as "a *special* form of political struggle" (Lenin 1972a: 179) and, in the context of this struggle, recognized "the tremendous importance of military knowledge, of military technique, and of military organization" (Lenin 1974d: 565). Trotsky, in an article examining Engels' writings on the Franco-Prussian War, developed this point in greater detail. He argued that while "war is in the last analysis subordinated" (Trotsky 1971b: 171) to politics, "war continues politics, but with special means and methods" (Trotsky 1971b: 168); it was thus incumbent upon revolutionaries to study these special means and methods, to become expert at military strategy and tactics.

Lenin cited approvingly Engels' statement that insurrection is an art (Lenin 1972a) and added

> the principal rule of this art is a desperately bold and irrevocably determined offensive. We have not sufficiently assimilated this truth. We have not sufficiently learned, nor have we taught the masses this art and this rule to attack at all costs. We must make up for this with all our energy. It is not enough to rally round political slogans, we must also rally round the question of an armed uprising.... We must proclaim from the housetops the necessity of a bold offensive and armed attack, the necessity of exterminating at such times the persons in command of the enemy and of a most energetic fight for the wavering troops.
>
> LENIN 1934: 38–39

He argued that "[a]n overwhelming superiority of forces at the decisive point at the decisive moment – this 'law' of military success is also the law of political success, especially in that fierce, seething civil war which is called revolution" (Lenin 1974i: 258). Trotsky made a similar argument, stating that since revolutionary situations were generally short-lived, it was essential that revolutionaries be prepared to take the offensive and strike quickly and

unrelentingly: "attack is the only proper method for military risings: attack without any interruptions that might engender hesitation and disorder" (Trotsky 1971a: 209). In "a developing revolutionary situation," he argued, "a planned retreat is, from the start, unthinkable" (Trotsky 1971a: 264).

Lenin was sharply critical of those who saw insurrection as the work of a small vanguard, and instead argued that it must be based on a mass movement of workers and peasants:

> [t]o be successful, insurrection must rely not upon conspiracy and not upon party, but upon the advanced class. That is the first point. Insurrection must rely upon a *revolutionary upsurge of the people*. That is the second point. Insurrection must rely upon that *turning-point* in the history of the growing revolution when the activity of the advanced ranks of the people is at its height, and when the *vacillations* in the ranks of the enemy and *in the ranks of the weak, half-hearted and irresolute friends of the revolution* are strongest. That is the third point. And these three conditions for raising the question of insurrection distinguish *Marxism from Blanquism*.
>
> LENIN 1972b: 22–23

He argued that insurrection could be condemned as Blanquism[1]

> *if* it is organized not by a party of a definite class, *if* its organizers have not analyzed the political moment in general and the international situation in particular, *if* the party has not on its side the sympathy of the majority of the people, as proved by objective facts, *if* the development of revolutionary events has not brought about a practical refutation of the conciliatory illusions of the petty-bourgeoisie, *if* the majority of the Soviet-type organs of revolutionary struggle that have been recognized as authoritative or have shown themselves to be such in practice have not been won over, *if* there has not matured a sentiment in the army (if in war-time) against the government that protracts the unjust war against the will of the whole people, *if* the slogans of the uprising (like 'All power to the Soviets,' 'Land to the peasants,' or 'Immediate offer of a democratic peace to all the belligerent nations, with an immediate abrogation of all secret treaties and secret diplomacy,' etc.) have not become widely known and popular, *if* the advanced workers are not sure of the desperate situation of

1 Auguste Blanqui's advocacy of insurrection in nineteenth century France emphasized conspiracy rather than a mass uprising. See Blanqui (1971) and Bernstein (1971).

> the masses and of the support of the countryside, a support proved by a serious peasant movement or by an uprising against the landowners and the government that defends the landowners, *if* the country's economic situation inspires earnest hopes for a favorable solution of the crisis by peaceable and parliamentary means.
>
> LENIN 1972c: 212–213

Revolutionary war was not an isolated military activity narrowly defined, but instead reflected, and *must* reflect, the politics of class struggle.

The role of the party, therefore, was not to will an insurrection into existence. It was to cultivate the development of appropriate forms of political organization among the working masses so that a structural crisis of ruling class power could be transformed into a revolutionary situation:

> A people's revolution, true, cannot be timed.... But if we have really prepared an uprising, and if a popular uprising is realizable by virtue of the revolutions in social relations *that have already taken place*, then it is quite possible to time the uprising.
>
> LENIN 1974e: 153

At that point, the party's political leadership of the insurrection would be a necessary condition of its success, but this is possible only if the party is truly a vanguard – that is, an advance unit of a larger force[2] – and not the revolutionary force itself:

> Victory cannot be won with the vanguard alone. To throw the vanguard alone into the decisive battle, before the whole class, before the broad masses have taken up a position either of direct support of the vanguard, or at least of benevolent neutrality towards it and one in which they cannot possibly support the enemy, would be not merely folly but a crime.
>
> LENIN 1940: 73–74

In the absence of such leadership, armed struggle would not only be ineffective but also would likely demoralize and weaken the revolutionary movement. In the early years of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party (RSDLP) Lenin

2 Lukács stated that, for Lenin, "The vanguard party of the proletariat can only fulfill its destiny in this conflict if it is *always a step in front* of the struggling masses, to show them the way. But only *one* step in front so that it always remains leader of *their* struggle" (Lukács 1971: 35).

voiced opposition to those who sought an immediate offensive against the bourgeoisie. It is useful to quote a 1901 article by Lenin at length here:

> Far be it from us to deny the significance of heroic individual blows, but it is our duty to sound a vigorous warning against becoming infatuated with terror, against taking it to be the chief and basic means of struggle, as so many people strongly incline to do at present. Terror can never be a regular military operation; at best it can only serve as one of the methods employed in a decisive assault. But can we *issue the call* for such a decisive assault at the present moment? *Rabocheye Dyelo* apparently thinks we can. At any rate, it exclaims: "Form assault columns!" But this, again, is more zeal than reason. The main body of our military forces consists of volunteers and insurgents. We possess only a few small units of regular troops, and these are not even mobilized; they are not connected with one another, nor have they been trained to form columns of any sort, let alone assault columns. In view of all this, it must be clear to anyone who is capable of appreciating the general conditions of our struggle and who is mindful of them at every "turn" in the historical course of events that at the present moment our slogan cannot be "To the assault," but has to be, "Lay siege to the enemy fortress." In other words, the immediate task of our Party is not to summon all available forces for the attack right now, but to call for the formation of a revolutionary organization capable of uniting all forces and guiding the movement in actual practice and not in name alone, that is, an organization ready at any time to support every protest and every outbreak and use it to build up and consolidate the fighting forces suitable for the decisive struggle.
>
> LENIN 1973a: 19–20

Continuing this line of argument in *What is to be Done?*, he stated that

> our 'tactics-as-plan' consists in rejecting the immediate *call* for assault; in demanding 'to lay effective siege to the enemy fortress'; or, in other words, in demanding that all efforts be directed towards gathering, organizing, and *mobilizing* a permanent army.
>
> LENIN 1969: 167

The revolutionary upheavals of 1905, for Lenin, provided the mass movement that would make the transition from 'siege' to 'assault' not only possible but necessary. In this context, Lenin embraced the formation of small fighting squads to engage in guerrilla warfare as a means of assassinating officials and

expropriating funds to finance revolutionary activities (Lenin 1972g) and criticized the failure to develop such tactics more fully (Lenin 1972d). He saw guerrilla warfare "as an inevitable form of struggle at a time when the mass movement has actually reached the point of an uprising and when fairly large intervals occur between the 'big engagements' in the civil war" (Lenin 1972e: 219). Such tactics, however, unconnected to any kind of centralized political leadership and ungrounded in a revolutionary mass movement were a form of "revolutionary adventurism" (Lenin 1974b: 184) that was not only ineffective but in fact weakened the revolution.

With the defeat of the 1905 revolution, the Bolsheviks' strategy shifted from assault back to siege. It was not until 1917, following the February Revolution which overthrew the Tsar and installed a bourgeois government, that the potential for insurrection appeared once again. Just before his return to Russia from exile in Switzerland in April 1917, Lenin argued that the Bolsheviks should organize a proletarian militia linked organically to the Soviets to "fight for bread, for peace, and for freedom" (Lenin 1932a: 24), to serve as a bulwark against counter-revolution, and to provide "a real means for *educating the masses* so that they might be able to take part in *all* the affairs of the state" (Lenin 1932a: 31). This did not mean, however, an unqualified embrace of insurrection. Lenin criticized the Bolshevik Military Organization's attempt at an uprising in July 1917 (the July days) as premature, as the Bolsheviks had not yet established their leadership within the Petrograd Soviet nor had they won over the Petrograd garrison. By October, this situation had turned in favor of the Bolsheviks, and it was only at this point that, for Lenin, the moment had come to shift again from the strategic defensive to the offensive (see Rabinowitch 1968).

Similarly, Trotsky argued that while "insurrection, armed insurrection,... was inevitable from our point of view" (Trotsky 1980b: 170), revolutionary forces could not force an insurrection into being independent of a specific balance of forces. While he embraced the tactical rules of insurrection created by Blanqui – "a timely creation of correct revolutionary detachments, their centralized command and adequate equipment, a well calculated placement of barricades, their definite construction, and a systematic, not a mere episodic, defense of them" – he rejected the larger point "that an observance of the rules of insurrectionary tactics would itself guarantee the victory" (Trotsky 1980b: 170). In his analysis of the 1905 revolution, in which Trotsky served as the leader of the Petrograd Soviet, he made clear that "we never *prepared an insurrection*...; we prepared *for* an insurrection" (Trotsky 1971a: 396). Revolutionary forces must be ready to take advantage of an appropriate shift in the balance of forces, one in which there is an objective crisis of ruling class power as well

as a spontaneous movement among the subordinate classes calling into question the existing mode of production, which brings forth an insurrectionary moment:

> if it is true that an insurrection cannot be evoked at will, and that nevertheless in order to win it must be organized in advance, then the revolutionary leaders are presented with a task of correct diagnosis.... Between the moment when an attempt to summon an insurrection must inevitably prove premature and lead to a revolutionary miscarriage, and the moment when a favorable situation must be considered hopelessly missed, there exists a certain period – it may be measured in weeks, sometimes in a few months – in the course of which an insurrection may be carried out with more or less chance of success. To discriminate this comparatively short period and then choose the definite moment – now in the more accurate sense of the very day and hour – for the last blow, constitutes the most responsible task of the revolutionary leaders. It can with full justice be called the key problem, for it unites the policy of revolution with the technique of insurrection – and it is needless to add that insurrection, like war, is a continuation of politics with other instruments.
>
> TROTSKY 1980b: 172–173

It is the activity and consciousness of the masses, not of the political vanguard, which makes insurrection possible. In the context of the February 1917 revolution, Trotsky spoke of the importance of "the molecular work of revolutionary thought" (Trotsky 1980a: 151) in setting the stage for revolution. Once the possibility of insurrection has become real, however, the vanguard must provide the political leadership necessary for a successful armed uprising.

Trotsky argued that "there can be no question of a purely military victory by the insurgents over the government troops. The latter are bound to be physically stronger, and the problem must always be reduced to the mood and behavior of the troops" (Trotsky 1971a: 268). The success of insurrection, in other words, is based less on a narrowly-defined clash of armed force and instead is grounded in the way that armed uprising affects consciousness. "The first task of every insurrection," Trotsky argued,

> is to bring the troops over to its side. The chief means of accomplishing this are the general strike, mass processions, street encounters, battles at the barricades. The unique thing about the October revolution, a thing never before observed in so complete a form, was that, thanks to a happy combination of circumstances, the proletarian vanguard had won over

> the garrison of the capital before the moment of open insurrection. It had not only won them over, but had fortified this conquest through the organization of the Garrison Conference. It is impossible to understand the mechanics of the October revolution without fully realizing that the most important task of the insurrection, and one of the most difficult to calculate in advance, was fully accomplished in Petrograd before the beginning of the armed struggle.
>
> TROTSKY 1980b: 181–182

That is, the successful use of military force in an insurrection requires the winning over of the army to the revolution before the first shot has been fired. This process, according to Trotsky, continues after the commencement of combat:

> In every revolution, the significance of barricades is not at all the same as that of fortresses in a battle. A barricade is not just a physical obstacle. The barricade serves the cause of the insurrection because, by creating a temporary barrier to the movement of troops, it brings them into close contact with the people. Here, at the barricades, the soldier hears – perhaps for the first time in his life – the talk of ordinary honest people, their fraternal appeals, the voice of the people's conscience; and, as a consequence of such contact between citizens and soldiers, military discipline disintegrates and disappears. This, and only this, ensures the victory of a popular uprising.
>
> TROTSKY 1971a: 397

Trotsky, as did Engels, emphasized the "*moral* role" (Trotsky 1971a: 397) played by barricade fighting, not its narrowly defined military qualities.

The winning over of the army to the people is not, according to Trotsky, a peaceful, spontaneous process:

> The army's crossing over to the camp of the revolution is a moral process; but it cannot be brought about by moral means alone. Different motives and attitudes combine and intersect within the army; only a minority is consciously revolutionary, while the majority hesitates and awaits an impulse from outside. The majority is capable of laying down its arms or, eventually, of pointing its bayonets at the reaction only if it begins to believe in the possibility of a people's victory. Such a belief is not created by political agitation alone. Only when the soldiers become convinced that the people have come out into the streets for a life-and-death struggle – not

> to demonstrate against the government but to overthrow it – does it become psychologically possible for them to 'cross over to the side of the people'.
>
> TROTSKY 1971a: 268–269

He continued,

> a popular rising has been 'prepared,' not when the people have been armed with rifles and guns – for in that case it would never be prepared – but when it is armed with readiness to die in open street battle.
>
> TROTSKY 1971a: 398

What is most essential, then, about an armed insurrection is not so much the coercive power of weapons available to the revolutionaries but rather the role that consciousness plays, both in terms of the willingness of subordinate classes to risk their lives in struggle and in terms of undermining the bourgeois army's commitment to the defense of the existing social formation. Even when the people engage in direct combat with the army, the effect of the people's use of armed violence is, for Trotsky, more cultural than coercive: "an insurrection is, in essence, not so much a struggle against the army as a struggle *for* the army" (Trotsky 1971a: 269).

The development of such a consciousness does not, however, eliminate the need for armed struggle. In his study of the Russian Revolution, Trotsky noted that the

> overwhelming majority of the garrison was, it is true, on the side of the workers. But a minority was against the workers, against the revolution, against the Bolsheviks. This small minority consisted of the best trained elements in the army: the officers, the junkers, the shock battalions, and perhaps the Cossacks. It was impossible to win these elements politically; they had to be vanquished. The last part of the task of the revolution, that which has gone into history under the name of the October insurrection, was therefore purely military in character. At this final stage rifles, bayonets, machine guns, and perhaps cannon, were to decide.
>
> TROTSKY 1980b: 182

The people's use of armed violence thus has different functions which are relevant for different classes. Violence, when directed at the rank-and-file of the bourgeois military, is intended to win them over to the counter-hegemony of the revolutionaries. When directed at those class elements within the military

whose commitment to the existing social formation is unwavering, violence is meant to destroy the enemy. To the extent, though, that the first goal is accomplished, the duration and severity of armed conflict diminishes. Indeed, Trotsky was struck by just how little 'insurrection' characterized the October Revolution:

> Step by step we have tried to follow in this book the development of the October insurrection: the sharpening discontent of the worker masses, the coming over of the soviets to the Bolshevik banners, the indignation of the army, the campaign of the peasants against the landlords, the flood-tide of the national movement, the growing fear and distraction of the possessing and ruling classes, and finally the struggle for the insurrection within the Bolshevik party. The final act of the revolution seems, after all this, too brief, too dry, too business-like – somehow out of correspondence with the historic scope of the events. The reader experiences a kind of disappointment. He is like a mountain climber, who, thinking the main difficulties are still ahead, suddenly discovers that he is already on the summit or almost there. Where is the insurrection? There is no picture of the insurrection. The events do not form themselves into a picture. A series of small operations, calculated and prepared in advance, remain separated one from another both in space and time. A unity of thought and aim unites them, but they do not fuse in the struggle itself. There is no action of great masses. There are no dramatic encounters with the troops. There is nothing of all that which imaginations brought up upon the facts of history associate with the idea of insurrection.
>
> TROTSKY 1980b: 232

With mass support among the workers, peasants, and soldiers and sailors, "[d]emonstrations, street fights, barricades – everything comprised in the usual idea of insurrection – were almost entirely absent. The revolution had no need of solving a problem already solved" (Trotsky 1980b: 292).

There is one more point worth addressing here. Both Lenin and Trotsky were clear that revolution could not be limited to an insurrectionary moment, even one understood, as they did, in a more organic fashion. The transition to socialism required that the revolutionary seizure of state power be related organically to an extended process of external and internal revolution, as classes would continue to exist during the period of the dictatorship of the proletariat. The relative economic and cultural backwardness of Russia compared to Western Europe was not for them, as it was for the Mensheviks, reason to postpone

the socialist revolution until the long process of bourgeois revolution could produce the proper material conditions for the transition to socialism. It did, however, shape the boundaries within which the Bolsheviks could manage that transition:

> History gives nothing free of cost. Having made a reduction in one point – in politics – it makes us pay more on the other – in culture. The more easily (comparatively, of course) did the Russian proletariat pass through the revolutionary crisis, the harder becomes now its socialist constructive work.
>
> TROTSKY 1973C: 20

While Russia was the weak link in the imperialist chain, which accounted for the success of the October Revolution, it also offered to the Bolsheviks a meager material and cultural inheritance upon which to build socialism. Lenin, noting that in Russia "the political and social revolution preceded the cultural revolution," emphasized the importance of "that very cultural revolution which nevertheless now confronts us" for achieving success in the transition to socialism (Lenin 1973d: 475). Both Lenin and Trotsky contrasted this situation with the one likely to unfold in Western Europe, where the insurrectionary moment would be more difficult to secure but, given its more advanced material and cultural foundations, which would experience an easier transition to socialism:

> In Europe it will be incomparably more difficult for the proletariat to come to power, for the enemy is stronger; but when it does come to power it will be incomparably easier for it to build socialism, for it will receive a much larger inheritance.... If we came to power earlier than the English proletariat, this does not mean by itself that we will reach full socialism, still less communism, earlier than they. No: on the political plane, thanks to the historical peculiarities of our development, we have led the working classes of all other countries; but, on the other hand, we are now set against our cultural backwardness and forced to advance slowly, inch by inch.
>
> TROTSKY 1973C: 146–147

> Anyone who has given careful thought to the economic prerequisites of the socialist revolution in Europe must be clear on the point that in Europe it will be immeasurably more difficult to start, whereas it was immeasurably more easy for us to start; but it will be more difficult for us

> to continue the revolution than it will be over there. This objective situation caused us to experience an extraordinarily sharp and difficult turn in history.
>
> LENIN 1972f: 93

Seizing state power was thus the first step toward the transition to socialism in Soviet Russia, which was expected to be a protracted process of cultural development as well as material development.

At the same time, neither Lenin nor Trotsky were under the illusion that, having established the dictatorship of the proletariat through insurrection, that the transition to socialism could occur absent a more global revolutionary movement. They both argued that the transition to socialism could be successful in Soviet Russia only if proletarian revolution swept through Western Europe:

> History has now placed us in an extraordinarily difficult position; in the midst of organizational work of unparalleled difficulty we shall have to experience a number of painful defeats. Regarded from the world-historical point of view, there would doubtlessly be no hope of the ultimate victory of our revolution if it were to remain alone, if there were no revolutionary movements in other countries. When the Bolshevik Party tackled the job alone, it did so in the firm conviction that the revolution was maturing in all countries and that in the end – but not at the very beginning – no matter what difficulties we experienced, no matter what defeats were in store for us, the world socialist revolution would come – because it is coming; would mature – because it is maturing and will reach full maturity. I repeat, our salvation from all these difficulties is an all Europe revolution.
>
> LENIN 1972f: 94–95

> The dictatorship of the Russian working class will be able to finally entrench itself and to develop into a genuine, all-sided socialist construction only from the hour when the European working class frees us from the economic yoke and especially the military yoke of the European bourgeoisie, and, having overthrown the latter, comes to our assistance with its organization and its technology. Concurrently, the leading revolutionary role will pass over to the working class with the greater economic and organizational power. If today the center of the Third International lies in Moscow – and of this we are profoundly convinced – then on the morrow this center will shift westward: to Berlin, to Paris, to London.
>
> TROTSKY 1973b: 86–87

Revolutionary states in Western Europe, they argued, could provide Soviet Russia with assistance with the material and cultural development referred to above as well as with defense against counter-revolutionary attacks. While they were wrong in forecasting such revolutions, the general point is a valid one. The revolutionary process in Soviet Russia could be successful only if it was embedded in a world socialist system which could confront what remained of the world capitalist system. Insurrection must be indelibly linked to a more protracted global struggle.

### The Communist International and Insurrection

The most complete statement of the Communist International's policy concerning insurrection was a manual (Neuberg 1970) commissioned in 1928,[3] which stated that "armed insurrection is the highest form of political struggle" (Neuberg 1970: 25) which, "at a determinate historical stage in the evolution of the class struggle in any given country, is an absolute, an inexorable necessity" (Neuberg 1970: 29). Insurrection was not a narrowly defined military act, but rather was "the organic continuation of [the class] struggle" (Neuberg 1970: 44) which "*must coincide with the high point of proletarian action*" (Neuberg 1970: 52):

> It is not the military actions of an armed vanguard which can and must arouse the active struggle of the masses for power, it is rather the mighty revolutionary impetus of the working masses which should provoke the military actions of the vanguard detachments. The latter should move into action (according to a plan which has been properly worked out in advance in every respect) as a result of the revolutionary impetus of the masses. Whatever role the purely military factor may play in insurrection, it is still, from this point of view, a subordinate role. The mighty revolutionary impetus of the masses must constitute the social base, the social and political backdrop for the bold, audacious, decisive military actions of the advanced detachments of the revolutionary proletariat determined to smash the bourgeois government machine.
>
> NEUBERG 1970: 79–80; emphasis in original

3 Published under the pseudonym "A. Neuberg," the manual was collectively authored by, among others, Ho Chi Minh and Mikhail Tukhachevsky (whose contributions to Soviet military strategy we will review in Chapter 5).

The manual provided instruction on military strategy and tactics – how to identify essential combat objectives and the appropriate timing for insurrection, how to build a barricade, how to engage in street fighting, etc. – but at the same time recognized that "the proletariat will very rarely enjoy military superiority over the armed forces of the ruling class before the insurrection begins" (Neuberg 1970: 187). For this reason, it was necessary to organize political and ideological work within the military well before the initiation of military conflict: "the more the subversion of the bourgeois army is advanced, the stronger will the armed forces of the proletariat be, and the easier will be the struggle during the insurrection itself. The reverse is also true" (Neuberg 1970: 154). Once the moment of armed combat has arrived, revolutionary forces must strike the first, unexpected blow against the bourgeois army, and thereafter "must display total courage, must be active to the point of rashness, must not allow a single chance of dealing a blow at the enemy to escape them…., must strive to seek out the enemy and finish him off, until he has been utterly annihilated" (Neuberg 1970: 215).

The manual articulated an understanding of insurrection that was fully consistent with that developed by Engels, Lenin and Trotsky.[4] How this understanding was put into practice, however, reflected a growing move away from its privileged place in the Marxist theory of revolution. The insurrectionary strategy which Lenin and Trotsky organized for the Bolshevik Revolution was embraced by the Comintern at its First Congress in 1919, proclaiming armed insurrection to be "the highest form of revolutionary struggle" (Riddell 1987: 129). While it recognized that insurrection was contingent on a concrete situation and a particular balance of forces, since the timing of insurrection could not be established in advance it was essential that revolutionary forces begin to organize for such an event so that, when the proper conditions did emerge, they were ready to launch an insurrection. The initial optimism following the Bolshevik Revolution that proletarian insurrection would sweep the West, though, began to give way by the Third (1921) and Fourth (1922) Congresses to a more subdued recognition of the protracted nature of revolutionary struggle. This was the context for Lenin and Trotsky's critique of the ultra-left 'theory of the offensive' pushed within the Comintern by Bukharin and Zinoviev. Trotsky's comments, quoted here in some length, on the failed March 1921 uprising in Germany (see Broué 2006) are particularly instructive:

4 By this time, the contributions of Trotsky, who by this time had been expelled from the Communist Party in 1927 and sent into internal exile in 1928, had been erased from the official history of the Soviet Revolution.

You are probably aware that there was advanced the so-called theory of the offensive. What is the gist of this theory? Its gist is that we have entered the epoch of the decomposition of capitalist society, in other words, the epoch when the bourgeoisie must be overthrown. How? By the offensive of the working class. In this purely abstract form, it is unquestionably correct. But certain individuals have sought to convert this theoretical capital into corresponding currency of smaller denomination and they have declared that this offensive consists of a successive number of smaller offensives.... Comrades, the analogy between the political struggle of the working class and military operations has been much abused. But up to a certain point one can speak here of similarities. In civil war one of the two contending parties must inescapably emerge as victor; for civil war differs from national war in this, that in the latter case a compromise is possible: one may cede to the enemy a part of the territory, one may pay him an indemnity, conclude some deal with him. But in civil war this is impossible. Here one class or the other class must conquer at all costs. Soviet Russia was surrounded by the counter-revolution, and therefore our strategy had of necessity to consist of a victorious offensive. We were compelled to liberate our periphery from the counter-revolution. But on recalling today the history of our struggle we find that we suffered defeat rather frequently. In military respects we, too, had our March days, speaking in German; and our September days, speaking in Italian. What happens after a partial defeat? There sets in a certain dislocation of the military apparatus, there arises a certain need for a breathing spell, a need for reorientation and for a more precise estimation of the reciprocal forces, a need to offset the losses and to instill into the masses the consciousness of the necessity of a new offensive and a new struggle. Sometimes all this becomes possible only under the conditions of a strategic retreat.... A retreat is a movement. Whether one takes ten steps forward or ten steps backward depends entirely on the requirements of the moment. For victory it is sometimes necessary to move forward, sometimes to move backward.

But to understand this properly, to discern in a move backwards, in a retreat, a component part of a unified strategic plan – for that a certain experience is necessary. But if one reasons purely abstractly, and insists always on moving forward, if one refuses to rack his brain over strategy, on the assumption that everything can be superseded by an added exertion of revolutionary will, what results does one then get?

TROTSKY 1973a: 355–356

The March uprising served as confirmation of everything that Lenin and Trotsky had written about insurrection; in the absence of mass support, without winning over the unions and the military to an uprising, proletarian insurrection was doomed to failure. "Only a traitor," Trotsky argued, "could deny the need of a revolutionary offensive; but only a simpleton would reduce all of revolutionary strategy to an offensive" (Trotsky 1974: 29).

In light of the conditions and the balance of forces reflected in the defeat of March 1921, the Third Congress argued that a defensive strategy was necessary to protect the working class from renewed attacks by the bourgeoisie. This did not negate the importance of preparing for revolution. Indeed, it made such preparations all the more important, as it could not be predicted easily when the shift from defense to offense was going to occur:

> The character of the transitional period makes it the duty of all Communist parties to increase to the utmost their readiness for struggle. Every individual struggle can lead to a contest for power.... In a time of world revolution, the Communist Party is essentially a party of attack, of assault on capitalist society. It is obliged to broaden every defensive struggle of any depth and breadth into an attack on capitalist society. It is also obliged to do everything possible, when conditions are appropriate, to lead the working masses directly into this struggle.... Similarly, if the [revolutionary] movement is receding, the Communist leadership of the struggle has the duty of leading the masses out of the struggle in as orderly and unified a fashion as possible.
>
> RIDDELL 2015: 939–940

The Communist International thus did not abandon its understanding of the present period as an epoch of world revolution, but instead called for a retreat to the strategic defensive in order to buy time until material conditions swung the other way, at which point revolutionary forces could resume their offensive against capital. This shift from revolutionary offensive to a strategic defensive was made more concrete by the Fourth Congress in 1922 which, with its policy of the united front, emphasized working with the broadest range of political forces to achieve the immediate demands of the working class. The struggles making up the united front were seen as "a source of revolutionary education, for it is the experiences of struggle that will convince working people of the inevitability of revolution and the significance of communism" (Riddell 2012: 1158). It is clear from these statements that what was most significant in Comintern thinking about insurrection was not its narrowly-defined military aspect but its broader political one. An insurrection is not

a putsch or a conspiracy, but emerges out of a mass movement organized in the soviets, the unions, and the military. The initial enthusiasm for a revolutionary offensive expressed by the First and Second Congresses was replaced by a more sober yet active defensive position when it became apparent that the existing level of mass mobilization could not support a successful insurrection.

This reaffirmation of the Marxist theory of insurrection was undermined, however, by the internal political conflicts which characterized the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and, by implication, the Comintern following Lenin's death in 1924. Thereafter, Comintern statements on insurrection reflected growing inner-party conflict within the Soviet Union over the nature of socialism: was socialism a world revolutionary phenomenon, or was it possible to have socialism in one country? With the rise of the triumvirate of Zinoviev, Kamenev and Stalin within the Soviet party and their efforts to marginalize Trotsky, the concept of 'socialism in one country' reflected a sense of the growing stabilization of the Soviet Union which paralleled the stabilization of capitalism noted by the Third and Fourth Congresses of the Comintern. In this context, the strategic defensive in preparation for international proletarian revolution which characterized the Third and Fourth Congresses gave way, by the Fifth Congress in 1924, to one defined by the goal of maintaining and strengthening the Soviet Union (see Carr 1972). This meant that, rather than preparing to shift from retreat to revolutionary offensive, greater attention was paid to playing off contradictions between capitalist states in order to develop alliances that would prevent the isolation of the Soviet Union. By the Sixth Congress of the Comintern, held in 1928, Trotsky had been defeated and Stalin had emerged as the dominant force within the CPSU. Comintern policy now tacked to the left in order to target the Right led by Bukharin and Zinoviev (see Carr 1976). It is in this context that the Sixth Congress proclaimed the beginning of a 'Third Period' defined by the end of capitalist stabilization and a renewal of opportunities for revolutionary upheaval. With social democracy characterized as 'social fascism,' the united front policy of the Third and Fourth Congresses was put aside. While the Third Period brought insurrection back to the center of Comintern policy, the complex analysis of Engels, Lenin and Trotsky was all but ignored in the disastrous Comintern-inspired insurrections associated with this period.[5]

By the Seventh Congress of the Communist International in 1935, following the rise of fascism in Germany, the pendulum had swung back again toward an overriding concern with the defense of the Soviet Union (see Carr 1982).

5 See, for example, Isaacs' (2009) and Carr's (1978) analysis of Comintern policy in China.

The people's front, in which communists in capitalist countries established alliances not only with social democrats (now no longer 'social fascists') but also with the liberal bourgeoisie in defense against fascism, was very different from the united front of the Third and Fourth Congresses. While the united front emphasized working class organization and struggle, although in the context of a strategic defensive in response to capital's resurgence after the First World War, the people's front downplayed this so as not to frighten off the liberal bourgeoisie in Western Europe. Germany, Poland and Japan were identified as the major threats to the Soviet Union, and while the Comintern called for, in the event of another world war, "the transformation of the imperialist war into civil war against the fascist instigators of war, against the bourgeoisie, for the overthrow of capitalism" (Degras 1964: 378), it was clear that the possibility of civil war was not intended for the bourgeoisie in those countries allied with the Soviet Union against fascism. This is most clearly illustrated by the reining in of the more radical forces within the French Popular Front and the strangling of the social revolution which emerged out of the Spanish Civil War (see Carr 1982, 1984; Claudín 1975). With the Seventh Congress of the Comintern, the insurrectionary tradition that began with Marx and Engels and developed more fully by Lenin and Trotsky came to an end.

### The 'Gramscian' Nature of Insurrection

The binary 'Leninist strategy versus Gramscian strategy' does an injustice to the hegemonic foundations of insurrection as expressed by Engels, Lenin and Trotsky, who argued that the military and the political-cultural, coercion and consent, are inseparable parts of a dialectical process of revolutionary change. While arguing for the necessity of armed insurrection, they placed this in the context of a more protracted struggle to undermine support for or acquiescence to the existing balance of class forces. They rejected the idea that revolution could develop according to the Party's timetable and, instead, argued that insurrection was a meaningful project and could be successful only after the workers and peasants were convinced of the necessity of revolution. In other words, insurrection was possible only after the masses had given their consent to insurrection. It was the responsibility of the party to take advantage of objective opportunities to create the subjective conditions in which such consent would be granted. To reduce the October Revolution, therefore, to the storming of the Winter Palace is to offer a caricature of revolution. It ignores or undervalues the long, slow process of socialist agitation and organizing beginning with the Emancipation of Labor group in 1883, proceeding through the

creation of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party in 1903, the 1905 Revolution, and the final split between the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks in 1912, which ultimately culminated in insurrection (Harman 1983; Hoffman 1984). In addition, it ignores how the October Revolution, in simultaneously revealing and consolidating a new balance of forces, was itself proof that "*power is precisely a relation between classes*, and it is not an 'object' which is 'seized'" (Bettelheim 1976: 91). In this light, Gramsci's work represents not so much a rejection of this classical Marxist tradition but an elaboration and extension of the dialectic of consent and coercion found within it (Buci-Glucksmann 1980; Hobsbawm 2011; Lester 2000; Merrington 1968; Thomas 2010).

If war of position must precede the war of maneuver in the West, as Gramsci argues, this does not necessarily mean that war of position is the 'decisive' revolutionary moment in the sense in which this has been understood by most commentators on Gramsci. Engels, writing about Germany in the 1890s, in some ways anticipated Gramsci's argument about the significance for revolutionary strategy of dissolving the existing a hegemonic consensus, but there was no doubt in Engels' mind that this was in preparation for the 'decisive' moment of proletarian insurrection. The failed March 1921 uprising in Germany served, for Lenin and Trotsky, as confirmation, though in a negative way, of this position. Gramsci's support for the policy of the united front as articulated by Lenin and Trotsky, a united front defined as a strategic defensive in which to prepare for the shift back to the offensive when the revolutionary tide turned in favor of the world proletariat, was a rebuke to those like Bukharin in Russia and Bordiga in Italy who argued for the theory of the offensive based on the success of the October Revolution. But it was also, and this in spite of Gramsci's declared opposition to Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution in the *Prison Notebooks*, a rebuke to the opportunistic understanding of insurrection associated with Stalin's theory of socialism in one country, in which insurrection became more and more an instrument of Soviet foreign policy to be encouraged or discouraged depending on the immediate needs of the Soviet Union. At the same time, Gramsci's criticism of Trotsky as the theorist of the offensive or, in Gramsci's term, war of maneuver was an oblique attack on the 'third period' policies which were official Comintern doctrine through most of Gramsci's imprisonment (Coutinho 2012; Saccarelli 2008; Spriano 1979). In this context, it becomes possible to see Gramsci's point about the decisiveness of the war of position in a different light – *it is decisive not because it reduces the war of maneuver to a revolutionary coda, but because it is the very condition of success for the war of maneuver*.

Given the way in which Gramsci's work was a major resource in Western Marxism's shift away from Lenin, it is ironic that the sense of Leninism to

which Gramsci is counterposed is closer to that which emerged as such a powerful weapon in the leadership struggles, ultimately won by Stalin, that characterized the Communist Party after Lenin's death (Harding 2009; Krausz 2015; Le Blanc 1993; Liebman 1985; Lih 2008; Nimtz 2014a, 2014b; Shandro 2015) and which, in a further irony, rendered the Marxist theory of insurrection inert through the subsequent opportunism of the Party and the Comintern. It is important to recall just how much opposition Lenin found within his own party to his argument, upon returning to Russia from exile in April 1917, that the next task for the workers' movement was the revolutionary seizure of power (see Carr 1966, Rabinowitch 1976). Even after the Bolshevik leadership finally approved a resolution in favor of insurrection, many in the Party leadership were quite cautious about the possibilities for success. The Party leadership subsequently passed a resolution calling for the creation of a Military Revolutionary Center (with Stalin as one of five members) within the Party's Central Committee to become part of the Petrograd Soviet's Military Revolutionary Committee, but this group never became operational. Instead, the Party's role in the revolution was exercised more through Bolshevik leadership in the Petrograd Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies, particularly its Military Revolutionary Committee, and the Red Guards than through the Party directly (see Anweiler 1974, Wade 1984); while Lenin was responsible for "the higher strategy of the revolution," the organization of the insurrection itself was the responsibility of non-party organizations (Carr 1966: 109). It was not until years later that the official histories of the Communist Party and the October Revolution attributed sole leadership of the insurrection to the Party's Military Revolutionary Center.[6]

While Gramsci's work was an invaluable resource in challenging orthodox Soviet Marxism, many Gramscians came to accept one of the fundamental assumptions of its opponent – the picture of a highly organized seizure of power through military means by a centralized, disciplined political party – as the foil against which Gramsci's Marxism is compared. The delinking of consent and coercion and the reduction of insurrection from organic to conjunctural that

6 The Military Revolutionary Center, with Stalin at the helm, was "the leading core of the Revolutionary Military Committee of the Petrograd Soviet [with] practical direction of the whole uprising" (CPSU 1939: 206). The *History of the Civil War in the U.S.S.R.*, of which Stalin was listed as an editor, declared that "[n]o insurrection in history was carried out with such organization, coordination and careful preparation as the October Socialist Revolution was carried out" and that "[t]he general plan, communications, codes, protection of the rear, slogans, etc. were all fully and precisely formulated by the Central Committee" (Gorky et al., 1946: 298).

is often associated by Gramscians with the 'Leninist strategy' of insurrection is thus more a characteristic Stalin's construction of Leninism than an authentic Leninist strategy itself. In doing so, they have accepted as unproblematic the argument that the transition from Lenin to Stalin was a natural one, an argument that is characteristic both of Stalin as well as anti-communists seeking to deny the legitimacy of the Soviet Revolution from the very start.

CHAPTER 5

# Soviet Military Doctrine

During the First World War, Lenin had criticized those in the socialist movement who called for disarmament and pacifism. Socialists "cannot," he argued, "without ceasing to be socialists, be opposed to all war" (Lenin 1974f: 77). To do so would be to deny the possibility of revolutionary wars, "i.e., wars arising from the class struggle, wars waged by revolutionary classes, wars which are of direct and immediate revolutionary significance" (Lenin 1974g: 399). With the victory of the Soviet Revolution, Lenin's critique took on much greater importance. Given the uneven development of capitalism, it was likely that the new socialist state would face concerted efforts by bourgeois states to restore capitalist power. This threat grew more serious as it became clear that the anticipated revolution in the West on which Lenin and Trotsky pinned their hopes would not be forthcoming. "In such cases," Lenin argued, "a war on our part would be a legitimate and just war. It would be a war for socialism" (Lenin 1974f: 79). As a result, it was essential that Soviet Russia establish sufficient military force to beat back attacks by counter-revolutionary forces.

The form which these forces should take and the military strategy that should serve as their foundation were the subject of intense debate in the years following the October Revolution. There is nothing to indicate that Gramsci had any specific interest in these debates, although he would have been familiar with them (Bambery 2007).[1] As these debates were contemporaneous with the development of Gramsci's political theory and practice, and given the centrality which the war of position plays in Gramsci's political strategy, they are of particular interest for our understanding of his use of the military metaphor.

## Creating the Red Army

In the months prior to the Soviet Revolution, Lenin argued for the creation of a workers' and peasants' militia as essential for both the seizure of the state

1 Gramsci arrived in Moscow to serve on the Executive Committee of the Communist International in May 1922, shortly after the debate on 'proletarian military doctrine' (see below) at the Eleventh Party Congress of the RSDLP(b).

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and the subsequent defense of proletarian power. Lenin's *State and Revolution*, written in August 1917, argued, as Marx did in the context of the Paris Commune, that the proletariat could not simply take hold of the existing state power and use that power for its own purposes. Instead, it must destroy the existing state machinery and replace it with a new, transitional state form – the dictatorship of the proletariat. An essential part of this process was to be the abolition of the "special bodies of armed men" (Lenin 1943: 10) that served as the foundation for the repressive power of the bourgeois state and their replacement with a new repressive body serving the interests of the proletariat. The specific form this new repressive apparatus should take, Lenin argued, was a workers' militia:

> *Replacement* of the old organs of oppression, the police, the bureaucracy, the standing army, by a universal arming of the people, by a really universal militia, is the only way to guarantee the country a maximum of security against the restoration of the monarchy and to *enable* it to go forward firmly, systematically and resolutely towards socialism, not by 'introducing' it from above, but by raising the vast mass of proletarians and semi-proletarians to the art of state administration, to the use of the *whole* state power.
>
> LENIN 1974g: 181

The armed workers themselves would serve as the repressive power defending socialism and, more than that, an expression of the expansion of socialist democracy beyond its bourgeois limits.

It soon became clear that, despite the significance Lenin placed on the role of the workers' militia as the foundation of the repressive power of the dictatorship of the proletariat, the workers' Red Guards which took part in the Soviet Revolution could not in fact serve this function. While playing a major role in the insurrection and in suppressing counter-revolutionaries in the immediate aftermath of the seizure of power, the Civil War and the military intervention by the Allies in support of the Whites revealed the limits of the Red Guards, who were not as well trained, organized, and supplied as their opponents. With the possibility of the new Soviet state being bolstered by revolution in the West dwindling, there was an increased recognition that a standing army was necessary.

From his appointment as Commissar of War and Chairman of the Revolutionary Military Council in March 1918 until his forcible removal in January 1925 as part of the Party leadership struggles following the death of Lenin, Trotsky was at the center of efforts to create the new Red Army (see Deutscher

1980a and 1980b, Wollenberg 1978).[2] The Bolsheviks could not simply use the existing army for its own purposes, as that army reflected the class conditions in which it had been organized. Instead, "[s]ince the working class has taken power, it must, obviously, create its *own* army, its *own* armed organ.... [It must] *build the army on class principles*" (Trotsky 1979b: 134–135). This meant an army made of only workers and peasants, one based simultaneously on the elimination of the old forms of discipline and hierarchy and on the development of a new, revolutionary discipline based on solidarity. Trotsky saw such an army as not being simply a reflection of these class principles, but also a means of building and strengthening these principles throughout Soviet society: "The army and the people must be brought close together. In the actual process of production the people must be brought closer to the army, while the army is brought closer to the labor-process, to the factory and the field" (Trotsky 1979e: 184–185). In the context of the low level of cultural development that characterized Soviet Russia, the mass mobilization of workers in the military would provide the discipline and skills necessary to construct socialism: "the army has to act as educator for all Russia" (Trotsky 1981b: 81). Given the overwhelmingly peasant population of Soviet Russia, it was especially important that a strong working class core be developed to ensure the proletarian character of the new Red Army.

Trotsky argued that the new army could not be based on a workers' and peasants' militia, but must instead be a standing army:

> a full-blown militia is feasible only in a socialist country in which there are no contradictions, where there are no grounds for fearing conflict between one part of the population and another. The Soviet republic is not yet a socialist country, it is in a state of transition from bourgeois to socialist conditions. For that reason there can be no question of our going over forthwith to the militia system. In general, what does going over to a militia system mean? That is not entirely clear. The militia system is a particular form of military organization of millions of people. It is not possible to go over to that all at once, any more than to go over

2 For a broad discussion of the creation and early history of the Red Army, see Benvenuti (1988) and von Hagen (1990). With Trotsky's defeat in the Party leadership struggles, his role in the creation of the Red Army was expunged and Stalin proclaimed as the architect of the Red Army (Bulganin 1950; Voroshilov 1951). Following the revelations of the Twentieth Party Congress in 1956, Stalin was no longer accorded this role, which reverted to Lenin (see Korablev 1977, Milovidov 1976).

> all at once to socialism. One can only move gradually towards the goal. Consequently, the quickness or slowness of the transition has to correspond to the internal or external situation.
>
> TROTSKY 1981f: 15

A regular army based on the militia system required a level of economic and cultural development well beyond what Soviet Russia was capable of in the immediate aftermath of the October Revolution.

The nature of the standing army for the new Soviet state was a subject of some debate. The Military Opposition, for example, was a group of former noncommissioned officers who argued that the Red Army should consist of relatively decentralized units engaged in small irregular forms of warfare and that it should be a volunteer force based on democratic election of officers and rank-and-file discussion and approval of military orders. Trotsky was highly critical of this argument and instead advocated for a centralized military force. Guerrilla warfare had played an important part in the October Revolution, but its value as the primary orientation for a standing army was questionable:

> Guerrilla methods of struggle were forced on the proletariat, in the first period, by its oppressed position in the state, just as it was forced to use primitive underground printing presses and to hold secret meetings in small groups. The conquest of political power made it possible for the proletariat to use the state apparatus to build, in a planned way, a centralized army, unity in the organization and direction of which could alone ensure that the maximum results were obtained with the minimum sacrifice. Preaching guerrilla-ism as a military program is equivalent to advocating a reversion from large-scale industry to the handicraft system.
>
> TROTSKY 1979c: 246

He argued that

> the historically progressive role of guerrilla struggle ceases when the oppressed class has taken state power into its own hands.... [W]hat, in general, is the point of the working class taking state power into its own hands if it is not then supposed to make use of this power to introduce state centralism into that sphere which, by its very nature, calls for the highest degree of centralization, namely, the military sphere?
>
> TROTSKY 1979f: 260

There was, Trotsky argued, nothing inherently revolutionary about guerrilla warfare. The Whites, he noted made extensive use of guerrilla warfare during the Civil War. Instead, guerrilla warfare "is the weapon used by a weaker against a stronger adversary" (Trotsky 1979d: 81). Methods that were defined by the circumstances the Bolsheviks faced in 1917 were not necessarily relevant after the revolutionary seizure of power. Trotsky did not reject guerrilla warfare outright, but saw it as having a positive role only in conjunction with a regular army. At the same time, Trotsky recognized that the new Soviet power lacked officers with the necessary military skills to provide adequate training and leadership for the new Red Army. For this reason, Trotsky argued that it was necessary to accept officers from the former Tsarist army in the new army. During this period of transition, there would be a division of labor within the command structure of military units. Those former Tsarist officers willing to work with the new Soviet power were responsible for military tasks and commissars appointed by Soviets would perform political and educational work within these units; all military orders required the simultaneous approval of the relevant political commissar.

In recognizing the importance of conventional military skills for the development of the Red Army, Trotsky rejected those who argued for the creation of a 'proletarian' military science that emphasized offensive revolutionary war. M.V. Frunze,[3] for example, argued in 1921 for the necessity of a 'unified military doctrine.' Frunze defined this as

> the accepted teaching in the army of a given state which establishes the character of the organization of the armed forces of a country, the method of combat training of the troops, their direction on the basis of views prevailing in the state on the character of the military problem confronting it, and the methods for their solution. These views flow from the class character of the state and are determined by the level of development of the forces of production of the country.
>
> FRUNZE 1952a: 45

The nature of this military doctrine "is determined by the character of the general political line of that social class which heads it" (Frunze 1952a: 46).

3 Frunze was a distinguished commander during the Civil War. He was made a member of the Central Committee of the Russian Communist Party in 1921 and a candidate member of the Party's Political Bureau in 1924. He replaced Trotsky as People's Commissar for Military and Naval Affairs and Chairman of the Revolutionary Military Council in January 1925. He died in October 1925 under suspicious circumstances during a medical operation (Medvedev 1989).

Military strategy, Frunze argued, was not technically neutral, but rather must be specific to the class relations that define a particular social formation. This meant acknowledging the significance of class relations within Soviet Russia and its relations to the bourgeois/imperialist states in the development of military strategy and organization. In the context of the dictatorship of the proletariat, this meant that the Red Army "must be built in the direction of a maximum closeness to the ideals of Communism" (Frunze 1952a: 52). In contrast, Trotsky argued war is an art rather than a science:

> There is not and never has been a military 'science.' There are a whole number of sciences on which the soldier's trade is based.... War is based on many sciences, but war itself is not a science, it is a practical art, a skill.... War cannot be turned into a science, because of its very nature, just as one cannot turn architecture, commerce or the work of a veterinary surgeon, and so on, into sciences. What people call the theory of war, or military science, is not a totality of scientific laws which explain objective phenomena, but a totality of practical procedures, methods of adaptation and knacks which correspond to a specific task, that of crushing the enemy. Whoever masters these procedures to a high degree and on a broad scale, and is able to obtain great results by the way he combines them, raises the soldier's trade to the level of a cruel and bloody *art*. But there are no grounds for talking of science here. Our regulations are just a compilation of such practical rules, derived from experience.
>
> TROTSKY 1981e: 361

Marxism is a science, but "one cannot construct field service regulations by means of Marxism" (Trotsky 1981e: 362). Instead of abstract military doctrine, Trotsky argued for greater attention to be paid to the practical skills necessary to build an effective military force. "[A] good ration is better than a bad doctrine," he asserted, "and where boots are concerned, I maintain that our military doctrine begins with this, that we have to tell the Red Army man; learn to grease your boots and clean your rifle" (Trotsky 1981g: 310). Trotsky did not reject Engels' argument that military strategy and organization would take on new forms in socialism, but emphasized that this could happen only after Soviet Russia had moved beyond its present state of economic and cultural underdevelopment.

As a result, those who argued against incorporating former Tsarist officers into the new Red Army and for deriving the war of maneuver from the nature of the dictatorship of the proletariat were, in Trotsky's eyes, missing

the point. Rather than being a simple reflection of class relations, military matters are better seen as having a degree of 'relative autonomy' that can be understood only in the context of a concrete situation. This understanding of military organization and strategy is reflected in Trotsky's writings on Soviet military strategy during the Civil War and Allied intervention against the Soviet state. Having engaged in a war of maneuver in seizing state power, the Bolsheviks were forced by circumstances to shift to a war of position during the Civil War:

> the low level of military training and education among the Red Guards and the rebel masses, and later among the conscripts, the extreme shortage of commanders who were both qualified militarily and wholly devoted to the revolution, and the almost complete lack of cavalry naturally forced the Soviet power to adopt a 'mass' strategy and a continuous front, with features of positional warfare.
>
> TROTSKY 1979d: 85

Initially, the Red Army established a cordon system that sought to cover the Soviet Republic from every direction. Such a strategy, however, was not sustainable given the enormous area to be covered, and so there was a shift to a more mobile and flexible strategy of war of maneuver:

> We leave open, more often than not, wide, even very wide gates for our enemies to pass through; but at certain points in the most important directions we concentrate very powerful strike-forces, with, behind them, in the appropriate places, substantial reserves – and, when we have allowed the enemy to come a long way in, we hit him on the flanks and in the rear, and sometimes frontally as well, when necessity requires this. But we have entirely abandoned our old, primitive strategy of being equally strong everywhere, on every inch of our borders – which meant, more correctly, being equally weak everywhere.
>
> TROTSKY 1981a: 252

In turn, the end of the Allied intervention against the Soviet Republic was accompanied by a simultaneous stalling of revolutionary opportunities in the West, which meant that it would continue to face hostile powers on its western borders for the near future. Given the advantages held by these powers in terms of troops, war materiel, transportation and communication relative to the new Soviet Republic, a 'proletarian' strategy calling on the Red Army to take the offensive to spread the revolution westward in what Mikhail

Tukhachevsky[4] called 'revolution from without' (Tukhachevsky 1969) was, for Trotsky, untenable:

> The pace of development of the world revolution has proved to be very much slower. That means that the struggle between the bourgeoisie and the working class, in all countries, will be intense, prolonged and bitter. It may last not for just a year or two but, if we take the whole world arena, for entire decades, with fresh attempts to seize power, with intensification of civil war, with periods of lull, and with renewed upsurge of fierce struggle. This prospect is, of course, a very hard one, but, comrades, it is not for any of us to change the laws of human development and regulate history. We must know how to wait: to find our way among the objective causes of historical phenomena, and draw the corresponding conclusions.
>
> TROTSKY 1981b: 65–66

In the absence of conditions that would facilitate offensive revolutionary war, a 'proletarian' military strategy was simply an expression of "the superficialities of Leftism, here being played to a military tune" (Trotsky 1981c: 129). Just as the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, which brought an end to the war with Germany in March 1918 at considerable cost to Soviet Russia, was significant for Lenin in providing a breathing space for the consolidation of Soviet power, Trotsky saw the need for a breathing space to prepare more thoroughly for future war. He was not renouncing the significance of offensive war, but rather asserting the need for flexibility in the application of strategy in order that it correspond with the present balance of material and political forces:

> While preserving the principled foundation of waging an irreconcilable class struggle, Marxist tendencies are at the same time distinguished by extraordinary flexibility and mobility, or, to speak in military language, capacity to maneuver.
>
> TROTSKY 1981d: 330–331

In time, a proletarian military strategy may develop, but only on the basis of existing ideas about the art of war and of a Soviet Republic that had experienced sufficient economic and cultural development.

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4 Tukhachevsky, like Frunze, served with distinction as a commander during the Civil War. He later served as Frunze's deputy and became Chief of the General Staff following Frunze's death in 1925 until 1928. He was made one of the first Marshals of the Soviet Union in 1935, but was executed in 1937 as part of Stalin's purge of the Red Army (Medvedev 1989).

Trotsky was able to prevail in debates with the Military Opposition at the Eighth Party Congress in 1919 and with advocates of 'proletarian military doctrine' at the Tenth Party Congress in 1921 and Eleventh Party Congress in 1922. However, following Lenin's death in 1924 Trotsky's position became increasingly vulnerable. While members of the Military Opposition went on to provide crucial political support for Stalin's rise to power (see Deutscher 1967), they played little substantive role in the subsequent development of Soviet military science.[5] On the other hand, proponents of the 'proletarian military doctrine' were of great influence in shaping a specifically Soviet or Marxist military science. It is to this that we now turn.

## Soviet Military Science: Tactics, Operational Art, Strategy

For Soviet military strategists, the conventional definition of tactics as "the art of waging major battles" (Svechin 1992: 68) was, in the era of imperialism, no longer relevant. Prior to this point in history, battle was

> A one-act tactical phenomenon; it had no measurement in space, because its scale remained a point; it had no measurement in time, because its scale remained a moment; it had no depth because it was conducted in place; finally, it played out as an independent tactical episode which did not issue organically from the campaign as a whole.
>
> ISSERSON 1995a: 56

The First World War demonstrated that "[t]he nature of contemporary weapons and modern battles is such that it is impossible to destroy an enemy force by a single blow in a single day's encounter" (Tukhachevsky 1983a: 64). Multiple echelons of forces, some of which were located well behind the field of battle (aircraft, long-range artillery, reserves, etc.), extended lines of communication and supply, etc. transformed battle from a discrete event to "a whole line of combat events spread out over a front and dispersed into the depth" (Isserson 1995a: 53). This new reality led to the development of the concept of the operation:

5 Kliment Voroshilov, one of the leaders of the Military Opposition, served as People's Commissar for Military and Naval Affairs following Frunze's death and subsequently as People's Commissar for Defense until 1940, but his major role was "connected with the political control of the Army rather than with questions of military science and strategy" (Medvedev 1983: 9).

> Only in very infrequent cases can one rely on achieving the ultimate goal of combat operations in a single battle. Normally this path to the ultimate goal is broken down into a series of operations separated by more or less lengthy pauses, which take place in different areas of a theater and differ significantly from one another due to the differences between the immediate goals one's forces temporarily strive for. We call an operation an act of war if the efforts of troops are directed toward the achievement of a certain intermediate goal in a certain theater of military operations without any interruptions.
>
> SVECHIN 1992: 68–69

It represents "the unification of separate combat efforts, not directly connected tactically, in space along a front, in time and in depth to achieve an overall assigned aim" (Isserson 1995a: 66). In other words, operational art has a much broader spatial and temporal reality than do tactics. Tactics are still relevant, but in the more narrow sense of the way in which specific military forces and equipment are combined in a specific field of battle to defeat one's opponent and contribute to the success of the operation; it is the operational level that determines the appropriate tactics in battle.

The way in which this operational level was reflected in military theory and practice was 'deep battle,' which was defined as "the simultaneous disruption of the enemy's tactical layout over its entire depth" (Tukhachevsky 1987a:141). The "basic and decisive condition for overcoming and destroying any kind of resistance is the *penetrating force of the attack*," which required "*clear and decisive superiority on the main attack axis*" (Isserson 1995b: 78) through "*a series of successive operations from start to finish*" (Triandafillov 1994: 90) (emphasis in original). Deep battle, which became the foundation of the Red Army's 1936 Field Regulations, required coordinating multiple types of forces (e.g., infantry, tanks, mechanized airborne troops, air forces) to achieve decisive superiority over the enemy's forces at their weakest point and launching a series of unrelenting attacks at this point to penetrate the entire depth of those forces. The width of modern military fronts, however, meant that such deep, penetrating attacks at a narrow point were by themselves insufficient; they must be accompanied by intersecting attacks along the width of the front designed to encircle enemy forces at the decisive point and "free the attacker's hand relative to the remaining enemy front" (Triandafillov 1994: 116): "[t]he wider the frontage of the break-in, the greater the destruction inflicted on the enemy" (Tukhachevsky 1987d: 92). At the same time, secondary attacks in support of the main attack were necessary to tie down enemy forces along the entire remaining front to prevent their safe withdrawal or their redeployment in a

counter-attack. The mechanization of armed forces, which was "the distinguishing trait of postwar force organization" (Triandafillov 1994: 51), made it possible to ensure sufficient speed and mobility to maintain the operational tempo necessary to disrupt enemy forces to their depth.

If tactics were now determined by operational art, the latter was in turn determined by strategy. Svechin, for example, defined strategy as

> the art of combining preparations for war and the grouping of operations for achieving the goal set by the war for the armed forces. Strategy decides issues associated with the employment of the armed forces and all the resources of a country for achieving ultimate war aims.
>
> SVECHIN 1992: 69

Strategy "should be the projection of the general political line of conduct on a military front" (Svechin 1992: 307). For Soviet military strategists, the political line that served as the foundation for strategy was the class struggle:

> The war of the Soviet state against any capitalist power will have a class, a revolutionary, nature. It will be directed in the final analysis at defense of the factories and plants taken from the capitalists against their old 'masters,' of the land against the landowners, the defense of the socialist society against the possibility of restoration.
>
> TRIANDAFILLOV 1994:159

As a result of the world-historical foundation of this conflict, modern war was protracted in nature:

> the necessity for our preparing for a long and stubborn war will always be compulsory. While the conflict between the two different worlds [capitalism and socialism] remains a fact, it means a struggle to the death. The enemies of the worker-peasant Republic are many, and therefore the battle under any conditions will be long.
>
> FRUNZE 1952b: 39

Modern wars, Frunze argued, were defined by

> their universally decisive character. These will not be clashes over trifles which are capable of quick decisions. No – they will be wars of two different, mutually exclusive socio-political and economic systems…. At the base of our economic and political organization and the organization of

> the bourgeois states there is a profound, irreconcilable contradiction, and this contradiction, once it begins to find its solution by military methods, leads to a sharp, profound, and, in all probability, prolonged clash.
>
> FRUNZE 1969: 183

Tukhachevsky made a similar point, stating

> we must treat the problem of strategy not as one of strategy in general, not as one of studying its basic principles, suitable for all time and for all people, but rather we should outline the basic lines of strategic thinking, the main paths of strategic direction which we must follow in our era – an era in which we shall have to stand up for the gains of the October Revolution against incursions by the capitalist systems which surround us and during which the socialist revolution is about to embrace the whole world.
>
> TUKHACHEVSKY 1983: 52

Strategy thus acquired a considerably expanded spatial and temporal depth; wars of a socialist state were of global and world-historical significance. Such wars must be seen as an integral part of the international revolutionary movement (Tukhachevsky 1969).

In such wars, the sheer mass of forces required to achieve victory and the decisive nature of modern war meant that modern war could only be total war:

> all the forces which are at the disposal of the belligerent sides will be thrown onto the scene. At least for us, one cannot imagine a future clash which we would be able to decide with limited armed forces, which would not affect broad masses of the population, and which would not draw onto the affair all the resources which the state has at its disposal.
>
> FRUNZE 1969: 183

Soviet military strategists, for example, noted that the relationship between front and rear had changed dramatically, with the difference between the two becoming less significant. This was due in part to advances in weaponry such as aircraft and chemical weapons which subjected the rear to increased probability of attack and so "overturns the very meaning of 'front' and 'rear'" (Frunze 1952b: 39). More important than this, though, was the increased relevance of the rear for war: "The life and work of the front at every moment is determined by the work and condition of the rear. In this sense, the center of gravity in conducting war has changed from the front to the rear" (Frunze

1952b: 39). Svechin argued that front and rear have become integrated into a "single entity" (Svechin 1992: 126). "War," he argued, "is waged not only on an armed front; it is also waged on the class and economic fronts" (Svechin 1992:84), and so emphasis must be placed on "preparing the entire nation for war" (Tukhachevsky 1983b: 59). A large mass army, especially relevant "in those states in which the ruling classes have faith in the masses, and in which the masses are interested in maintaining the state structure" (Triandafillov 1994: 45), required appropriate levels of cultural development, not only to provide the foundation for an adequately trained military force but also to ensure "moral-political steadfastness" (Triandafillov 1994: 79). The mechanization of military power required appropriate levels of economic development to provide the scientific/technological capacity and forms of labor organization conducive to produce large quantities of high-quality weapons and supplies. Given the contradictions inherent in capitalist social formations, the dictatorship of the proletariat with its planned economy was seen as having distinct advantages in this regard. Achieving the necessary levels of social development, though, would require a considerable temporal expansion in matters of strategy:

> Once the direct burden of conducting war falls on an entire people, on a whole country, once the rear acquires such importance in the general course of military operations, then, naturally, the task of complete and planned preparation for it takes first place even in peacetime.
>
> FRUNZE 1952b: 39

Given the quantitative and qualitative requirements of modern military forces, preparation for war could not wait until war breaks out, but instead required that the necessary social relations and institutions were in place well in advance of any particular war. Likewise, military mobilization could no longer be a moment in time occurring at the outbreak of war but must continue throughout the duration of the war. The increased spatial depth of modern warfare has expanded the temporal depth of modern warfare as well. In Svechin's words, mobilization was now "permanent" (Svechin 1992: 198).

This had important consequences for the concepts of maneuver and position in war. Soviet military strategists argued that maneuver and position are not fixed concepts, but rather were determined by historically specific conditions of armed conflict. In a world in which strategy was expressed through a series of operations in depth, maneuver no longer meant movement through unoccupied space toward a specific target "since there will obviously not be any significant empty spaces in future theaters of military operations" (Isserson 1995b: 82). Maneuver now occurred in depth both spatially and temporally.

The possibility of positional war was not discounted, but it was clear that such a situation would result from the failure to overcome the enemy operationally to their depth. The experience of the First World War convinced Soviet military strategists that such a situation was to be avoided:

> The positional period in imperialist warfare stems not from its inevitability, but from the fact that, as a result of the gross errors committed in the operations for war of all the participants, the warring sides did not have available to them the requisite means of neutralization.... By the same token the establishment of positional fronts in future wars is entirely possible – if the resources of the modern defense are underestimated; if the means of waging offensive war are not established on a large enough scale; and if the forces are not well enough trained in the complex art of the modern offensive battle.
>
> TUKHACHEVSKY 1987C: 162

Given the strength of defense, positional war "exhausted the attacker before the defender: this was a self-exhausting system" (Isserson 1995a: 75). What Triandafillov referred to as the 'starvation' of enemy forces through positional war "cannot be considered the proper path of development for operational art"; instead, the "deep and crushing blows" associated with the war of maneuver "remain the most decisive weapon in a strategy to achieve the goals a war assigns" (Triandafillov 1994: 149).

Svechin's distinctions between strategies of destruction and attrition and between positive and negative goals are particularly useful here. In a strategy of destruction, the annihilation of the enemy's forces is the sole objective; operations are designed to achieve this goal in decisive sectors. A strategy of attrition, Svechin argued, was relevant for "creat[ing] the conditions for a 'decisive point' to exist" (Svechin 1992: 247) when no such decisive sector yet existed:

> The weary path of a strategy of attrition...is in general chosen only when a war cannot be ended by a single blow. The operations of a strategy of attrition are not so much direct stages toward the achievement of an ultimate goal as they are stages in the deployment of material superiority, which would ultimately deprive the enemy of the means for successful resistance.
>
> SVECHIN 1992: 247

A war of attrition "does not proceed as a decisive assault but as a struggle for positions on the armed, political and economic fronts from which it would

ultimately become possible to make such an assault" (Svechin 1992: 248). In other words, destruction takes precedence over attrition: the purpose of attrition is to create the conditions necessary to shift to the annihilation of the enemy. Svechin also distinguishes between positive and negative goals. Positive goals are associated with the strategic offensive and the destruction of the enemy's forces. Negative goals, in turn, are concerned with "the complete or partial maintenance of the status quo" (Svechin 1992: 250) and are associated with the strategic defensive; that is, negative goals are those which facilitate the transition to positive goals. For Svechin, positive goals are associated with war of maneuver, while negative goals are associated with war of position. Indeed, Svechin warned that "[i]t is easy to get involved in positional warfare, even against one's will, but it is not so easy to get out of it" (Svechin 1992: 255).

The increased spatial and temporal depth that characterizes both front and rear in modern warfare also has important consequences for the international revolutionary movement. Operations at the front can have broad social-political effects in the rear, and so the selection of the decisive axis for attack must take into account political as well as military objectives:

> These operations also engage and inevitably spur into movement the enormous mass of the enemy population. In some states, these operations will engage the entire population of their country with its entire economy. In others, they will engage a *significant* portion of both the population and the economy of the country. For these reasons, the results of such operations grow from the purely military factors to those of a political significance. Hence both the decisive significance of politics in the initial selection of the target and axis of the blow and the assistance politics renders to military actions during the operations themselves. Correctly placed political work among the population that the combat actions engulf can facilitate the outcome of combat actions to a significant degree.
>
> TRIANDAFILLOV 1994: 155–156

Protracted war has the consequence of "stretching all economic and social forces to the limit, accompanied by the exacerbation of class contradictions" (Tukhachevsky 1987b: 124), and so has the potential to spur on the revolutionary movement within the defeated country. Soviet military strategists rejected the idea that a revolution could be imposed from without, but they argued that 'revolution from without' was possible if a socialist offensive was "accompanied

by a continuous enlargement of its forces from local revolutionary sources" (Tukhachevsky 1969: 93–94):

> To impose a socialist revolution by force is impossible. A socialist revolution from without can only be the handing over of armed force to a revolutionary working class which is unable to get the better of the army and police of its own bourgeoisie.
>
> TUKHACHEVSKY 1969: 97

> as a result of a powerful military offensive from our side, the elements of the proletarian class movement on the opposite side would be given a free hand, the seizure of power by the working class would become possible, which in turn would mean the automatic end of the war.
>
> FRUNZE 1952b: 39

Triandafillov called for the 'Sovietization' of occupied territory, the development of a "Soviet apparatus" (1994: 164) based on local revolutionary forces, immediately after successful operations in order both to secure this territory from the forces of counter-revolution. In doing so, military victories would help to expand the proletarian revolution to other regions.

Stalin's purge of the Red Army leadership during 1936–37 had devastating consequences for Soviet military theory and practice. Tukhachevsky was executed in 1937, and Svechin in 1938. Triandfillov escaped the purge, if only because he died in 1931. Of the major theorists of operational art and deep battle, only Isserson survived the purge. In all, the purge claimed three of the Red Army's five marshals, fifteen of sixteen army commanders, all corps commanders, and almost all division and brigade commanders. In Medvedev's words, "never did the officer staff of any army suffer such great losses in any war as the Soviet army suffered in this time of peace" (Medvedev 1989: 424). The major works addressing operational art and deep battle were banned; in the words of one post-Stalin military theorist, "the highest achievement of our military-theoretical thought was temporarily consigned to oblivion" (Mariyevsky 1995: 310). The post-purge emphasis in strategy returned to linear forms of combat, a shift that was to prove disastrous in the 1940 war against Finland and in the months following Nazi Germany's June 1941 invasion of the Soviet Union. During and after the Second World War, Stalin's concept of the 'permanently operating factors' – "stability of the rear, morale of the army, quantity and quality of divisions, equipment of the army and organizing ability of the commanding personnel of the army" (Stalin 1946: 45) – became the accepted doctrine of

Soviet military strategy.[6] Following Stalin's death in 1953 and the revelations of the Twentieth Party Congress in 1956, both Tukhachevsky and Svechin were rehabilitated and the doctrine of operational art and deep battle returned to prominence in the Red Army (Sokolovsky 1963) where it remained at the core of Soviet military strategy until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

## Deep Battle and Gramsci's War of Position

The Soviet military doctrine of deep battle forces us to call into question Gramsci's argument that the First World War reflected an epochal shift from war of maneuver to war of position. The relatively static nature of trench warfare which characterized that war gave way to a much more dynamic understanding of warfare, one which was to serve as the basis for combat during the Second World War. As Gramsci's point regarding the First World War was used to buttress his argument for a similarly epochal shift in revolutionary political strategy from the war of maneuver to the war of position, the centrality of the war of maneuver in deep battle calls into question one of the foundations of his military metaphor.

Deep battle was based on a war of maneuver emphasizing the swift delivery of crushing blows against the entire depth of enemy forces. It is not enough, though, to defeat the enemy on the battlefield. Such a war requires preparation for protracted conflict between two global camps – the capitalist camp and the socialist camp – across political, economic, and cultural institutions, and it requires undermining the political, economic, and cultural power of the enemy camp through the encouragement of intensified class struggle. Deep battle is total war, total in terms of space and time. In pointing to the necessity for integrating speed and mobility on the battlefield with protracted political-economic-cultural struggle, both in the preparation for war as well as in the fighting of the war itself, deep battle integrates what Gramsci called the military moment and the politico-military moment in a dialectical manner. To put it another way, deep battle can be seen as an expression of the dialectic of coercion and hegemony that is central to Gramsci's revolutionary theory and practice but which gets lost in his military metaphor. Applying deep battle as a metaphor for revolution forces us to acknowledge the simultaneity of maneuver and position in political struggles. In both deep battle and revolution,

6 After the value of operational art and deep battle had been proved in the Soviet Union's defeat of Nazi Germany Stalin was proclaimed to be the father of this doctrine as well (Talenskiy 1995; Zlobin and Vetoshnikov 1995).

the ultimate purpose of these struggles is the defeat of the enemy's forces; in the case of the latter this would mean the overthrow of the ruling class and the seizure of power. In this context, Gramsci's argument for the decisive quality of the war of position takes on new meaning, one which we found in the previous chapter's analysis of insurrection: the war of position is decisive because it is the very condition of success for the war of maneuver.

In addition, the Soviet concept of the operation which is an essential component of deep battle requires us to reconsider how strategy and tactics are understood by Gramsci. Recall that, for Gramsci, the war of position has become of strategic importance in the West since the October Revolution, while the war of maneuver has been relegated there to tactical or conjunctural significance. The relationship between strategy and tactics that Clausewitz articulated in the early nineteenth century (see Chapter 3) was, by the early twentieth century, becoming more complicated. The importance of the individual battle as the building block of strategy had given way to that of a sustained series of operations. In this context, maneuver no longer was limited to a specific event, but instead was characterized by a more organic development of operations over a greater depth and a more extended length of time. Maneuver and position were increasingly integrated within the operation. As a result, the basis on which Gramsci's military metaphor could distinguish the war of maneuver as tactical and the war of position as strategic was becoming increasingly problematic.

Deep battle sounds very much like Gramsci's war of position. Revolution, like deep battle, requires the total mobilization of counter-hegemonic forces for a struggle that encompasses all institutions of a social formation and occurs over long stretches of time. At the same time, though, deep battle suggests that the 'total' nature of this revolutionary struggle requires that the left rethink the relationship between strategy and tactics as understood by Gramsci. The strategy/tactics binary is relevant for left political organizations as they define specific strategic goals and the tactical means necessary to achieve these goals, but it is less helpful as we conceive of political struggle beyond the organizational level. At the level of a specific social formation or the current stage of global monopoly-finance capitalism, the action of such organizations can at best be seen as tactical. It is here that the concept of the operation has much to offer, as it allows us to bridge the insurmountable gap between strategy and tactics at these higher levels. By helping us to connect, in a given moment of time and space, the actions of specific left political organizations in pursuit of the radical transformation of a specific social formation, we can in turn understand a strategy of counter-hegemonic revolution as the integration of a number of operations across time and space. This, though, requires some kind

of agent capable of linking specific struggles in an operational way and linking operations over time and space into a viable strategic challenge. The contemporary Gramscian reluctance to embrace the necessity for such an agent – this despite the central role that the 'modern prince' plays in Gramsci's work – thus serves as a major limitation to the usefulness of Gramsci's military metaphor for contemporary political struggles.

CHAPTER 6

# Marxism and Guerrilla Warfare

Marx and Engels had noted the important role played by guerrilla warfare in Spain during the Napoleonic Wars (Marx 1980), in India during the Indian Rebellion of 1857 (Marx and Engels 1959), and in the United States, particularly by Confederate forces, during the Civil War (Marx and Engels 1961), but they never made a direct connection between guerrilla warfare and proletarian revolution. Indeed, it is notable that Lenin, in writing about guerrilla warfare in the context of the 1905 revolution, made no mention of Marx and Engels in this regard. For Lenin, guerrilla warfare was a matter of tactics relevant "when the mass movement has actually reached the point of an uprising and when fairly large intervals occur between the 'big engagements' in the civil war" (Lenin 1972e: 219). Trotsky, as we saw in Chapter 5, thought of guerrilla warfare in the same way, relevant for the conditions of the Civil War but not so for the standing Red Army after the Bolsheviks achieved victory.

It was the association between guerrilla warfare and national liberation and anti-imperialist movements over the course of the twentieth century that elevated guerrilla warfare to the level of strategy for Marxism. There was no one model of guerrilla warfare applied mechanically in every circumstance, but instead a variety of forms reflecting the specific social and historical conditions in which these struggles took place. In this chapter I examine the strategy of people's war associated with Mao Zedong and the strategy of the *foco* associated with Che Guevara. There are a number of reasons why a comparison between Gramsci, Mao and Che is a fruitful one.[1] First, all three are credited with applying Marxism to the specific structural and historical realities of their respective social formations. In so doing, they exemplify Lenin's argument that Marxism is not a dogma to be applied mechanically but instead requires 'the concrete analysis of a concrete situation.' In particular, despite the tendency to situate Italy within the advanced capitalist West, the significance which the Southern Question played in Gramsci's work suggests a structural affinity with the predominantly peasant social formations in which Mao and Che developed their Marxism. Second, the problem of revolutionary consciousness

1 Corrigan, Ramsay and Sayer (1979), Dirlik (2005), and Todd (1974) have made explicit the affinity between Gramsci and Mao. While the link between Gramsci and Che has not been given the same attention, I would argue that it is nonetheless a notable one (see Rosengarten 2015).

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was at the core of their respective social theories. Gramsci, Mao and Che all spoke of the necessity for the proletariat to take a position of cultural as well as political leadership of the peasantry as a condition for a successful revolution. In this context, they pointed to the significant role played by a vanguard political party that was connected organically to the masses in constructing proletarian hegemony, both within the revolutionary movement itself and in the transition to socialism. Third, Mao and Che, as did Gramsci, represented a challenge to the leading role of the Soviet Union within the world communist movement, with its perceived distortions of the different historical and social forces characteristic of the periphery of imperialism, following the Second World War. Finally, there is a temporal connection between the three in that the significance of their work for critical social theory came to be recognized at roughly the same time (the late 1960s/early 1970s). As a result, Mao's and Che's military experience makes them especially significant for understanding the strengths and limitations of Gramsci's use of the military metaphor for understanding revolutionary political strategy.

## People's War

The strategy of people's war was developed in the context of the multiple stages of China's revolutionary war, first against the Kuomintang, then in an anti-imperialist war against Japanese occupation, and finally in the civil war leading to the defeat of the Kuomintang and the proclamation of the Peoples' Republic of China in 1949. When, under the influence of the Comintern, the Chinese Communist Party's strategy of accepting the hegemony of the national bourgeois Kuomintang and, in 1927, seizing power through armed insurrection in the cities ended in disastrous failure (Isaacs 2009), the Party retreated to the countryside in order to develop a peasant-based revolutionary movement. Mao argued that a strategy based on achieving a quick, decisive military victory, such as the insurrectionary strategy associated with the Soviet revolution, was inappropriate for the conditions faced by the Red Army in China. He was critical of those within the Party who argued that

> it is enough merely to study the experience of revolutionary war in Russia, or, to put it more concretely, that it is enough merely to follow the laws by which the civil war in the Soviet Union was directed and the military manuals published by Soviet military organizations. They do not see that these laws and manuals embody the specific characteristics of the civil war and the Red Army in the Soviet Union and that if we copy and apply

> them without allowing any change, we shall …be 'cutting the feet to fit the shoes' and be defeated.
>
> MAO 1963a: 77

The specific circumstances defining China's revolutionary war were (1) China was "a vast semi-colonial country which is unevenly developed politically and economically and which has gone through a great revolution" (Mao 1963a: 95); (2) the revolutionary forces faced a large, well-armed enemy; (3) the revolutionary forces themselves were considerably smaller in size and poorly equipped and trained; and (4) the necessity of an agrarian revolution to address the extraordinarily harsh conditions faced by the peasantry, which in turn defined the countryside rather than the cities as the principal terrain of struggle.

These objective conditions, however, "provide only the possibility of victory or defeat but do not decide the issue. To decide the issue, subjective effort must be added, namely, the directing and waging of war, man's conscious activity in war" (Mao 1963c: 226). Mao, like other Marxists, accepted Clausewitz's famous statement that 'war is a continuation of politics by other means.' War is "the highest form of struggle for resolving contradictions, when they have developed to a certain stage, between classes, nations, states or political groups" (Mao 1963a: 76); "[w]hen politics develops to a certain stage beyond which it cannot proceed by the usual means, war breaks out to sweep away the obstacles in the way" (Mao 1963c: 227). Revolutionary war, while characterized by its own specific laws, at the same time fulfills this general function of war. Indeed, for Mao, "[t]he seizure of power by armed force, the settlement of the issue by war, is the central task and the highest form of revolution" (Mao 1963b: 267). Despite the critical role played by military power in revolution, though, such power must always be subsumed within politics: "Our principle is that the Party commands the gun, and the gun must never be allowed to command the Party" (Mao 1963b: 272). In contrast to "the so-called theory that 'weapons decide everything'" (Mao 1963c: 217), which defines war in terms on which the enemy wields considerable superiority, it is people who are decisive ultimately in war. A people armed with the proper leadership and revolutionary consciousness will be able to defeat a materially stronger enemy through the strategy of people's war.

The specific conditions faced by the revolutionary forces in China not only necessitated a strategy different from that of the Soviet revolution, they also suggested a broader distinction between revolutionary strategy in China and that in capitalist countries that is in some ways quite similar to Gramsci's discussion of the difference between 'West' and 'East.' It is worth quoting Mao at some length about this:

> The seizure of power by armed force, the settlement of the issue by war, is the central task and the highest form of revolution. This Marxist-Leninist principle of revolution holds good universally, for China and for all other countries.
>
> But while the principle remains the same, its application by the party of the proletariat finds expression in varying ways according to the varying conditions. Internally, capitalist countries have bourgeois democracy (not feudalism) when they are not fascist or not at war; in their external relations, they are not oppressed by, but themselves oppress, other nations. Because of these characteristics, it is the task of the party of the proletariat in the capitalist countries to educate the workers and build up strength through a long period of legal struggle, and thus prepare for the final overthrow of capitalism. In these countries, the question is one of a long legal struggle, of utilizing parliament as a platform, of economic and political strikes, of organizing trade unions and educating the workers. There the form of organization is legal and the form of struggle bloodless (non-military). On the issue of war, the Communist Parties in the capitalist countries oppose the imperialist wars waged by their own countries; if such wars occur, the policy of these Parties is to bring about the defeat of the reactionary governments of their own countries. The one war they want to fight is the civil war for which they are preparing. But this insurrection and war should not be launched until the bourgeoisie becomes really helpless, until the majority of the proletariat are determined to rise in arms and fight, and until the rural masses are giving willing help to the proletariat. And when the time comes to launch such an insurrection and war, the first step will be to seize the cities, and then advance into the countryside, and not the other way about.…
>
> China is different however. The characteristics of China are that she is not independent and democratic but semi-colonial and semi-feudal, that internally she has no democracy but is under feudal oppression and that in her external relations she has no national independence but is oppressed by imperialism. It follows that we have no parliament to make use of and no legal right to organize the workers to strike. Basically, the task of the Communist Party here is not to go through a long period of legal struggle before launching insurrection and war, and not to seize the big cities first and then occupy the countryside, but the reverse.
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> MAO 1963b: 267–268

Mao argued that the seizure of power by armed force is, in Gramsci's words, decisive, and that this is a universal principle of Marxism. The absence of a

strong and vital civil society makes armed revolution the primary concern for the East, while the presence of such a dense network of civil society requires that revolutionary movements in the West focus on undermining bourgeois hegemony before launching armed insurrection.

Given the significance that the Soviet revolution plays as the principal example of war of maneuver for Gramsci, it is striking to note that despite the differences noted by Mao between the strategies of the Soviet and Chinese revolutions he highlighted the central role played by war of maneuver. While revolutionary forces may engage in a war of position, especially in the later stages of the armed struggle, "our fundamental strategical form must be the war of movement. If we deny this, we cannot arrive at the victorious solution of the war" (Mao 1961: 57):[2]

> Mobile warfare or positional warfare? Our answer is mobile warfare. So long as we lack a large army or reserves of ammunition, and so long as there is only a single Red Army force to do the fighting in each base area, positional war is generally useless to us.
>
> MAO 1963a: 135

When "'the enemy advances, we retreat; the enemy camps, we harass; the enemy tires, we attack; the enemy retreats, we pursue'" (Mao 1963d: 70). Since the enemy forces are better equipped and trained, a strategy that seeks direct confrontation with the enemy operates on the enemy's terms and thus will lead to defeat. Instead, campaigns should "concentrate an absolutely superior force (two, three, four and sometimes even five or six times the enemy's strength)" (Mao 1963f: 347) against the weakest points of the enemy, and this requires that revolutionary forces have the necessary mobility and speed to discover and take advantage of these weaknesses without any respite for the enemy. In this case the revolutionary forces are operating on exterior lines; that is, they seek to outflank and encircle the enemy in order to annihilate the enemy. Given the uneven balance of forces, it is likely that the revolutionary forces will often be on the defensive, but for Mao it was essential that this be an active defense

2 Schram (1989: 52) points out that while Mao was named as the author of *Guerrilla Warfare* (Mao 1961), it was in fact written by, among others, Zhu De and Peng Dehuai, both of whom were among the principle military leaders of the Red Army during both the Anti-Japanese War and the Revolution as well as after the creation of the People's Liberation Army in 1949. For a discussion of the former's activities during the Revolution, see Smedley (1956). Peng would later be purged as a proponent of the 'bourgeois military line' (see below), and Zhu would fall from favor for being insufficiently critical of Peng.

that creates the conditions necessary to go on the counter-offensive. In doing so, the revolutionary forces can compel the enemy to divide and disperse its resources, slow down or halt its military operations, and undermine its morale.

These campaigns, however, take place in the context of a protracted war. This is a defensive war in which the revolutionary forces operate on interior lines; that is, they are surrounded by the armed forces of the enemy. In such a situation, the seizure and holding of towns or cities by the revolutionary forces is of lesser importance and, by allowing the opportunity for enemy forces to concentrate and go on the counter-offensive, potentially of great negative consequence. This is not to say that such positional warfare is to be excluded altogether, but rather that it should be limited to situations such as "the tenacious defense of particular key points in a containing action during the strategic defensive, and when, during the strategic offensive, we encounter an enemy force that is isolated and cut off from help" (Mao 1963a: 138); campaigns of attrition should at best be "supplementary" (Mao 1963c: 249). Otherwise, it is essential that the revolutionary forces are dispersed sufficiently to construct relatively fluid base areas in which they can develop further and, over time, ground down the enemy in a "war of attrition" (Mao 1963c: 249) that leads to a qualitative shift in the balance of forces in favor of the revolutionary army. With such a shift in the balance of forces, the revolutionary army can make the transition from the strategic defensive to the strategic offensive.

Mao's conception of people's war therefore integrated maneuver and position in a dialectical manner. The Red Army should "[o]ppose protracted campaigns and a strategy of quick decision, and uphold the strategy of protracted war and campaigns of quick decision" and "[o]ppose fixed battle lines and positional warfare, and favor fluid battle lines and mobile warfare" (Mao 1963a: 95). The gradual destruction or attrition of the enemy occurs through an accumulation of successful campaigns of annihilation: "It is possible and necessary to use tactical offensives within the strategic defensive, to fight campaigns and battles of quick decision within a strategically protracted war and to fight campaigns and battles on exterior lines within strategically interior lines" (Mao 1963g: 155).

The dialectical nature of a strategy of people's war is reflected further in Mao's discussion of the work of the Red Army. Mao rejected the idea that military power narrowly defined was sufficient to accomplish the political tasks of revolution. Instead, the Red Army must also engage in mass work and production:

> the Chinese Red Army is an armed body for carrying out the political tasks of the revolution. Especially at present, the Red Army should

> certainly not confine itself to fighting; besides fighting to destroy the enemy's military strength, it should shoulder such important tasks as doing propaganda among the masses, organizing the masses, arming them, helping them to establish revolutionary political power and setting up Party organizations.
>
> MAO 1963e: 52

It is an essential feature of people's war to construct base areas, "great military, political, economic and cultural bastions of the revolution" (Mao 1967a: 316–317) in which the proletariat can exercise leadership within a united front which includes peasants and students as well as elements of the petty bourgeoisie and national bourgeoisie and, in doing so, construct the foundations for a new society. Rather than distinguishing armed revolution from the construction of a counter-hegemonic system both in time and space – with the former occurring prior to the latter and with the former occurring at the 'front' and the latter at the 'rear' – the strategy of people's war sees these moments as inseparable. This is reflected in Mao's discussion of the role that the Red Army must play in production (Mao 1967b). This was important, Mao argued, not only so that the army can produce those objects necessary for its survival, but also as a means of winning support for the army by reducing the burden it placed on the peasants. Success in the war of maneuver against the enemy is thus based on success in the war of position within the revolutionary forces.

With the emergence of tensions within the world communist movement between the Soviet Union and China during the early 1960s and the declaration of the Cultural Revolution in 1966, the strategy of people's war took on new meaning. People's war was identified as a "proletarian military line" representing "the highest peak of the Marxist-Leninist concept of military affairs" (Headquarters of the General Staff of the Chinese People's Liberation Army 1967: 11).[3] The proletarian military line served as a critique of the 'bourgeois military line' associated with the Soviet Union and revisionists within China and was a component of the broader 'struggle between two roads' which, according to Mao, was characteristic of socialism.[4] In emphasizing military

3 Lin Piao, referring to Engels' statement that socialism would give rise to a new form of warfare, argued that people's war was this new method. Upon Lin's death in 1971 under suspicious circumstances, he subsequently came to be associated with the bourgeois military line (see Chan 1976), although people's war remained the central principle of Chinese military strategy until Mao's death in 1976.

4 In the words of Peng Dehuai, who was Lin Piao's predecessor as Defense Minister and was subsequently identified with the bourgeois military line, "[t]here is no doubt that the Soviet

science and technology, it was argued, the bourgeois military line denied the significance of politics as the foundation for military strategy:

> What decides the outcome of a war? People or weapons? Herein lies the basic difference between proletarian military thinking and bourgeois military thinking, and between Marxism-Leninism-Mao Tsetung Thought and revisionism, old and new.
>
> HUNG and CHI 1969: 22

> Regardless of how developed modern weapons and technical equipment may be, how complicated the operations of modern warfare, victory in war is still decided by the support and assistance of the masses, by the struggle of the masses. In the final analysis, it depends on people's war. This is the most important and reliable guarantee for the defeat of the enemy .
>
> Headquarters of the General Staff of the Chinese People's Liberation Army 1967: 13

The revolutionary consciousness associated with people's war was a "spiritual atom bomb which…is a far more powerful and useful weapon than the physical atom bomb" (Lin 1966: 58). To minimize the importance of politics in warfare was to abandon the very thing that would ensure the ultimate victory of revolution.

In addition, what made China's military strategy 'proletarian' was its rejection of the Soviet policy of peaceful coexistence, which was seen as a dangerous concession to imperialism negating the necessity for revolution:

> The heart of the theory of the leaders of the CPSU on war and peace is their thesis that the emergence of nuclear weapons has changed everything including the laws of class struggle…. The leaders of the CPSU hold that with the appearance of nuclear weapons there is no longer any difference

army's advanced experience will still be the chief object of our study, because the Soviet army is the most advanced, modernized revolutionary army in the world, commanding a superior military science, a first-class military technology, and a rich store of experience in commanding modernized armies in battle. By making the utmost effort to learn from the advanced experience of the Soviet army, we may shorten the process of learning by trial and error, avoid having to advance by roundabout ways, and speedily complete the modernization of our army" (Peng 1956: 41).

> between just and unjust wars.... They hold that with the appearance of nuclear weapons the oppressed peoples and nations must abandon revolution and refrain from waging just popular revolutionary wars and wars of national liberation, or else such wars would lead to the destruction of mankind.... In short, according to the leaders of the CPSU, with the emergence of nuclear weapons, the contradiction between the socialist and the imperialist camps, the contradiction between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie in the capitalist countries, and the contradiction between the oppressed nations and imperialism have all disappeared. The world no longer has any class contradictions.
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> Editorial Departments of *RENMIN RIBAO* and *HONGQI* 1965: 242–244

The concept of people's war, in contrast, was a reassertion of the significance of global revolution in the face of Soviet revisionism:

> the whole cause of world revolution hinges on the revolutionary struggles of the Asian, African and Latin American peoples who make up the overwhelming majority of the world's population. The socialist countries should regard it as their internationalist duty to support the people's revolutionary struggles in Asia, Africa and Latin America.
>
> LIN 1966: 48–49

Just as the revolutionary forces did in China, the world revolutionary movement must undertake a protracted struggle that would overwhelm the capitalist world system. In Lin Piao's words,

> Taking the entire globe, if North America and Western Europe can be called 'the cities of the world,' then Asia, Africa and Latin America constitute 'the rural areas of the world.' Since World War II, the proletarian revolutionary movement has for various reasons been temporarily held back in the North American and West European capitalist countries, while the people's revolutionary movement in Asia, Africa and Latin America has been growing vigorously. In a sense, the contemporary world revolution also presents a picture of the encirclement of cities by the rural areas.
>
> LIN 1966: 49

People's war in any one social formation cannot be separated from a global people's war.

### The Foco

Che Guevara argued that the victory of the Cuban revolution in 1959 offered three major lessons for revolutionary movements in the Americas:[5]

(1) Popular forces can win a war against the army.
(2) It is not always necessary to wait until all the revolutionary conditions exist; the insurrectional *foco* can develop subjective conditions based on existing objective conditions.
(3) In underdeveloped America the countryside is the fundamental arena for armed struggle (Guevara 2006a: 13).

As with the other Marxists we have encountered in this book, Che pointed to the work of Clausewitz as essential for understanding the Marxist theory of war and revolution: "war and politics are intimately related by a common denominator: the effort to reach a specific goal, whether it be annihilation of the adversary in armed combat or the taking of political power" (Guevara 2003b: 294). While Che did not reject the use of nonviolent, legal means of revolutionary struggle, he argued that armed struggle is especially relevant for the conditions facing Latin America: "[a]ccepting as truth the statement that the enemy will fight to stay in power, one must think in terms of the destruction of the oppressor army. In order to destroy it, a people's army must be raised to oppose it directly" (Guevara 2003b: 302). Guerrilla warfare "is a war of the masses, a war of the people" (Guevara 2006a: 16) which begins in the countryside and which, over time, extends to the cities. The countryside provided a number of strategic advantages for revolutionary forces in Latin America.[6] Not only was the peasantry the majority of the population, making agrarian reform a central element of the Latin American revolution, but the superexploitation of the peasantry meant that they had nothing to lose by embracing revolution. At the same time, though, Che was careful to indicate that this peasant-based armed struggle must be "led by a proletarian ideology" (Guevara 1969a: 150). The countryside also presented important opportunities which revolutionary forces could use to their advantage. For example, the military forces of the ruling class were relatively dispersed in the countryside, thereby providing the guerrillas with greater space for maneuver and secure lines of retreat. While

5 Dosal (2003) identifies Che as "the principal military architect of the Cuban Revolution" (308).

6 This was not accepted universally among Latin American guerrilla movements. Guillén (1973) and Marighella (1971), for example, argued for the primacy of urban guerrilla warfare.

Che acknowledged the importance of urban-based struggles – mass struggle in the cities is "an indispensable weapon for the development of the struggle" (Guevara 1969a: 151) – he did not discuss in any detail how to develop an organic relationship between guerrilla warfare in the countryside and urban-based struggles other than to argue that at all times leadership of the revolution is to be located with the *Sierra* – that is, the guerrillas in the countryside.[7]

Guerrilla war was to be fought by the *foco*, "an armed nucleus [which] is the combative vanguard of the people" (Guevara 2006a: 16). This nucleus should be "as small as necessary, as large as possible" (Guevara 2011: 236). It initially keeps its distance from the peasantry, its goal in these early stages being to maintain and develop itself as a fighting force. The *foco* avoids major, protracted conflict with the forces of the ruling class and does not seek to defend specific territory, preferring instead to be highly mobile and launch small, quick attacks against isolated units of the military: "the fundamental principle is that no battle, combat or skirmish should be fought unless it can be won" (Guevara 2006a: 19). This is the stage of strategic defense. While it is primarily through such attacks that the *foco* accumulates weapons, more importantly each success serves as concrete proof that the forces of the ruling class are vulnerable. They serve as "the propaganda of bullets" (Guevara 2003c: 360) and reflect the "catalytic character of the people's forces" (Guevara 2003a: 76):

> The main goal of guerrilla warfare is to educate the masses in the possibility of victory and showing them, at the same time, the possibility of a new future and the necessity of change to achieve that future in the process of the armed struggle of the entire people.
>
> GUEVARA 2011: 235

As a result, new combatants are attracted to the *foco* and peasants become more willing to provide material support for the guerrillas. At the same time, the guerrilla struggle is seen as having a profound transformative effect on those who engage in it: "[a]rmed men…are not soldiers but simply armed men; a revolutionary soldier is formed in combat" (Guevara 2011: 109). Although Che recognized the need for a "minimum of necessary mechanical discipline required for the harmonious functioning of large units," he saw an "internal discipline" based on commitment to the revolutionary cause as vastly superior

7 Che was critical of the "naïve illusions of attempted revolutionary general strikes when the situation had not matured sufficiently to bring about that type of explosion, and without having laid the adequate groundwork for an event of that magnitude" (Guevara 2006b: 258) which he identified with the *Llano*, the urban-based revolutionaries.

(Guevara 1968: 176). While the *foco* may begin at a serious material disadvantage relative to the forces of the ruling class, it has a resource that is absent from the latter – political consciousness. In this way the subjective conditions for revolution can be generated even in the face of objective conditions that are not sufficiently mature.

As the *foco* grows, it establishes base areas in which it can organize production of necessities, provide medical care, establish courts, and engage in political education. In doing so, the *foco* not only reproduces itself but also demonstrates concretely the substance of revolutionary transformation. Once the *foco* has grown beyond the size of this liberated area, a new *foco* is spun off and moves to another combat zone, where the process is repeated. Despite the centrality of guerrilla warfare in this process, Che recognized that "guerrilla warfare does not afford itself the opportunity to attain a complete victory" (Guevara 2006a: 20), but rather establishes the conditions in which a people's army can develop. This people's army cannot simply reproduce "the old vestments of military discipline and organization" (Guevara 2006a: 139); instead, "the operational concepts of the guerrilla band…will determine the organic formation and the best framework for the popular army" (Guevara 2006a: 139). With the formation of a people's army, the revolutionary movement can shift to the strategic offensive at which point large-scale, decisive attacks against military centers and the cities can occur. In time, the struggle in the countryside would lead to the encirclement of the cities and destroy the regime "by strangulation and attrition" (Guevara 2006b: 210).

Régis Debray, most famously in his book *Revolution in the Revolution?*, developed in greater theoretical detail Che's experience with guerrilla warfare. Debray reasserted Che's argument that revolutionary strategy cannot be a general formula but must instead reflect the specific historical and social conditions in which revolution occurs. In the context of Latin America, this meant that guerrilla warfare was the proper revolutionary strategy. This did not, however, mean a formulaic application of the guerrilla experience in other parts of the world. In Latin America, guerrilla warfare itself must reflect Latin American realities:

> One may well consider it a stroke of good luck that Fidel had not read the military writings of Mao Tse-tung before disembarking on the coast of Oriente: he could thus invent, on the spot and out of his own experience, principles of a military doctrine in conformity with the terrain.[8]
>
> DEBRAY 1967: 20

8 Che was more willing to acknowledge the affinity between the strategy of the Cuban revolution and people's war (Guevara 1969a, 1969b).

For Debray, armed struggle was "the highest form of political struggle" (Debray 1970: 52); it was, using Clausewitz, "simply the continuation of politics by other means" (Debray 1973: 68). This struggle, however, took a specific form. Debray, for example, was critical of guerrilla warfare limited to the armed self-defense of the peasantry. This abandoned the initiative to the enemy and, by requiring guerrilla formations to defend specific spaces, came at the expense of the mobility and flexibility necessary for successful guerrilla warfare. In addition, he was highly critical of guerrilla formations engaging in armed propaganda, which has generally been understood to refer to political work among the population undertaken to build support for the revolution and, more specifically, for direct armed confrontation with the enemy. Debray did not reject armed propaganda, but rather reverses its path. Successful military action is itself "the most important form of propaganda" (Debray 1967: 56):

> [T]he physical force of the police and army is considered to be unassailable, and unassailability cannot be challenged by words but by showing that a soldier and a policeman are no more bullet-proof than anyone else.
>
> DEBRAY 1967: 51

> The destruction of a troop transport truck or the public execution of a police torturer is more effective propaganda for the local population than a hundred speeches. Such conduct convinces them of the essential: that the Revolution is on the march, that the enemy is no longer invulnerable. It convinces them, to begin with, that the soldier is an enemy – their enemy – and that a war is under way, the progress of which is dependent on their daily activities. Afterwards, speeches may be made and will be heeded.
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> DEBRAY 1967: 53

Finally, Debray rejected the idea that guerrilla formations should serve as "the 'armed fist' of a liberation front" (Debray 1967: 67). Such an understanding of guerrilla warfare sees it as a method employed by a political, usually urban-based vanguard and represents a dogmatic acceptance of the dominance of politics over military matters. In contrast, Debray argued that guerrilla warfare requires a single, centralized political-military command in which the *foco* itself serves as the revolutionary vanguard:

> Under certain conditions, the political and the military are not separate, but form one organic whole, consisting of the people's army, whose

> nucleus is the guerrilla army. The vanguard party can exist in the form of the guerrilla foco itself. The guerrilla force is the party in embryo.
>
> DEBRAY 1967: 106

The *foco* is "the 'small motor' that sets the 'big motor' of the masses in motion" (Debray 1967: 84), it is the nucleus out of which a political front develops.

Debray was careful to distinguish the vanguard status of the *foco* from a Blanquist strategy of revolution:

> the *foco* does not by any means attempt to seize power on its own, by one audacious stroke. Not even does it aim to conquer power by means of war or through a military defeat of the enemy: it only aspires to enable the masses themselves to overthrow the established power. It is a minority, certainly, but one which, unlike the Blanquist minority of activists, aims to win over the masses before and not after the seizure of power, and which makes this the essential condition of the final conquest of power.
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> DEBRAY 1970: 38–39

For Debray,

> Che's immediate objective was not to seize power, but first of all to build up a popular power with its own effective organ of activity, an autonomous and mobile military force. In his view, the establishment of a popular power took precedence over the seizure of power…, which came second in time and importance.
>
> DEBRAY 1975: 72–73

*Foquismo* rejects a quick, lightning victory, and instead is based on a protracted struggle in which the workers and peasants, through "long practical experience" (Debray 1970: 40), develop a revolutionary consciousness and engage in mass struggle.

*Foquismo* locates the guerrilla struggle in the countryside, as this is "where class contradictions are at their most violent – though the least manifest on the political plane" (Debray 1970: 42). The countryside was "the weakest link" (Debray 1970: 42) in the system of repression. It was where the military forces of the ruling class were most dispersed, where it was easier to avoid detection and maintain secrecy, and where it was possible to establish "socialist 'rehearsals'" (Debray 1967: 111) in liberated zones. Debray also argued that the city exerted powerful petty bourgeois influences on the urban working class, what he referred to as "*de facto*'aristocratization' of the relatively small working

class" (Debray 1970: 53), and on urban-based political leadership, which was more likely to emphasize national rather than class objectives in anti-imperialist struggles. It also imposed "a sense of dependence and an inferiority complex" (Debray 1967: 70) on the guerrillas:

> How can an inhabitant of these cities, however much of a Marxist-Leninist he may be, understand the vital importance of a square yard of nylon cloth, a can of gun grease, a pound of salt or sugar, a pair of boots? The truth is that you have to live it to understand it. Seen from outside, these are 'details,' 'material limitations' of the class struggle, the 'technical side,' the minor and hence secondary side of things. Such are the mental reactions of a bourgeois, and any man, even a comrade who spends his life in a city is unwittingly bourgeois in comparison with a *guerrillero*. He *cannot* know the material effort involved in eating, sleeping, moving from one place to another – briefly, in surviving.
>
> DEBRAY 1967: 70

> the first law of guerrilla life is that no one survives it alone. The group's interest is the interest of each one, and vice versa. To live and conquer is to live and conquer all together. If a single combatant lags behind the marching column, it affects the speed and security of the entire column. In the rear is the enemy: impossible to leave the comrade behind or send him home. It is up to everyone, then, to share the burden, lighten his knapsack or cartridge-case, and help him all the way. Under these conditions class egoism does not long endure. Petty bourgeois psychology melts like snow under the summer sun, undermining the ideology of the same stratum. Where else could such an encounter, such an alliance, take place? By the same token, the only conceivable line for a guerrilla group to adopt is the 'mass line'; it can live only with their support, in daily contact with them. Bureaucratic faintheartedness becomes irrelevant. Is this not the best education for a future socialist leader or cadre?
>
> DEBRAY 1967: 110–111

Being a revolutionary is not a function of objective class position or of position within a political party or union bureaucracy. Guerrilla warfare is transformative for those who engage in it, and so while "[r]evolutionaries make revolutionary civil wars…[,] to an even greater extent it is revolutionary civil war that makes revolutionaries" (Debray 1970: 111). It ensures the dominance of a proletarian perspective in the context of guerrilla formations most likely to consist of petty bourgeois (students, religious, etc.) and peasants; guerrilla formations

are forced "to *proletarize itself* morally and to proletarize its ideology" (Debray 1970: 68).

We must return to Che for one final point. As the revolutionary struggle develops in one country it serves as an example to others throughout Latin America:

> the beginning of the struggle in one area of a country is bound to cause its development throughout the region; the beginning of a revolutionary war contributes to the development of new conditions in the neighboring countries.
>
> GUEVARA 2003a: 79–80

While revolutionary forces within each country will necessarily encounter specific conditions to which their strategies must be attuned, Che rejected the idea "that victory can be achieved in one isolated country" and argued instead that "[t]he union of repressive forces must be countered with the unity of the popular forces" (Guevara 2003b: 303). Since imperialism is a world system, "it must be beaten in a great worldwide confrontation" (Guevara 2003c: 358). It was on this basis that Che made his famous call for "the creation of the world's second or third Vietnam, or second *and* third Vietnam" (Guevara 2003c: 358).[9] Guerrilla warfare for Che was an element of total war against imperialism, one in which the world revolutionary movement must "attack hard and without let-up at every point of confrontation – that must be the general tactic of the peoples" (Guevara 2003c: 353):

> We must carry the war as far as the enemy carries it: into our enemy's home and places of recreation, making it total war. Our enemy must be prevented from having a moment's peace, a moment's quiet outside the barracks and even inside them. Attack them wherever they may be; make them feel like hunted animals wherever they go. Then their morale will begin to decline. They will become even more bestial, but the signs of the imminent decline will appear.
>
> GUEVARA 2003C: 360

9 While largely an attack against U.S. imperialism, Che's call for 'many Vietnams' was also a critique of the Soviet policy of peaceful coexistence. In his Bolivian Diary, Che wrote that "[o]ur friends [in the Soviet Union and its Eastern European allies] are calling me a new Bakunin and are sorry about the blood that has been spilled and blood that would be spilled if there were three or four Vietnams" (Guevara 2006c: 197).

Guerrilla warfare is thus inseparable from a protracted, continental and even global struggle taking place on many fronts and requiring a "genuine proletarian internationalism" (Guevara 2003c: 360).[10]

## The Gramscian Character of Guerrilla Warfare

Although people's war and *foquismo* are qualitatively different forms of guerrilla warfare, they share some general principles that are relevant for socialist revolutionaries. They both offer a dialectical understanding of revolution in which "the praxis of the revolutionary vanguard is both the product of given conditions and the creator of new conditions" (Löwy 2007: 86). The dialectical nature of revolution is also expressed in both strategies through the relationship between the military and political aspects of revolution. The development of revolutionary consciousness requires recognition among subordinate classes that the ruling class is not impregnable, and armed struggle provides a concrete illustration of this fact. Guerrilla warfare seeks to annihilate enemy forces through a protracted struggle in small, quick attacks designed to overextend and exhaust the enemy, thereby raisings the costs to the ruling class of maintaining its power and demonstrates the agency that lies latent within the subordinate classes; it is only towards the end of a revolutionary war, during which the revolutionary forces have shifted to the strategic offensive, that they are capable of engaging enemy forces in attacks against larger military and political targets. At the same time, guerrilla war as a war of maneuver can be successful only if embedded in positional struggles in which a counter-hegemonic coalition of classes seeks to create liberated zones which, in turn, serve as a material and symbolic form of dual power challenging the ruling class and representing the new revolutionary state in the making and as base areas from which to support and consolidate guerrilla forces. Put in Gramscian terms, the strategies of people's war and *foquismo*, therefore, emphasize the dialectical relationship between war of maneuver and war of position. As with insurrection and Soviet military strategy, both of which emphasize war of position as the 'decisive' condition for victory in the war of maneuver, using guerrilla war as a metaphor for political strategy requires us to rethink the general interpretation of what makes Gramsci's war of position decisive.

At the same time, though, the strategic and tactical components of armed struggle cannot be applied universally or imported from without, but must

10 For Dosal (2003), Debray's failure to place the *foco* within this global context was a fundamental weakness of his analysis of guerrilla warfare.

take into account specific histories, class structures, forms of state power, and relations to the capitalist core. The creators of people's war and *foquismo* acknowledged the organic nature of guerrilla warfare, although their affirmations of this point were sometimes more equivocal than others. Lin Piao, for example, stated that people's war "is of outstanding and universal practical importance for the present revolutionary struggles of all the oppressed nations and peoples" (Lin 1966:48), while Che's self-critique of the failure of his missions to the Congo (Guevara 2011) and Bolivia (Guevara 2006c) was a more reflective appreciation of the consequences when this principle is ignored. Despite these tendencies to overlook the organic nature of guerrilla warfare, the specific conditions in which people's war and *foquismo* emerged did have a profound impact in how they were expressed organizationally that is relevant for our understanding of Gramsci's military metaphor. The more prominent role which people's war gave to the party was a function of differences in the history of the Communist parties in China and Latin America: in China, the Communist Party had largely maintained its autonomy from the Soviet Union and the CPSU following the debacle of the 1927 uprising, while the parties in Latin America had, for the most part, not been able to do so. As a result, it is not surprising that *foquismo*, which pointed to the dampening by the Soviet Union of revolutionary action in Latin America in favor of 'peaceful coexistence,' subordinated revolutionary politics to military action. Legitimate criticisms of the record of Communist parties in Latin America, however, became principled and ultimately self-defeating rejections of political leadership and revolutionary theory, particularly in Debray's formulation (Blanco 1972; Bravo 1970; Huberman and Sweezy 1968; Maitan 1967; Slovo 1968; Quartim 1970, 1971).

Debray (1977) himself was to make a similar critique a decade after *Revolution in the Revolution?*. In this self-critique, he associated *foquismo* with 'vanguard war' in the orthodox Leninist sense and argued that this represented a fatal departure from genuine people's war.[11] Revolution is thus reduced, Debray argued, to "a single instantaneous *action* whereby the political power in force is overthrown, instead of what it really is: an *objective process*" (Debray 1977: 173).

11 In words that echo those of Gramsci, Debray was highly critical of how a militarized form of organization narrows the focus of revolution to the seizure of state power: "If the State is all, then whoever occupies the fortress of the State can control and dominate the whole of society. If the State is all, then it is pointless to seek to fight a long drawn-out war for position; there are no trenches or fortifications from which a more favorable position can be achieved for attacking the central fortress from within civil society.... Fundamentally, then, all social struggles are immediately absorbed into the political struggle for power at the top; and all political struggles are ultimately absorbed into the military struggle – leaving only the most marginal room for political maneuver" (Debray 1977: 163).

This conclusion is, I would argue, overblown, especially in its reliance on a problematic acceptance of an orthodox understanding of Leninism. As we saw in Chapter 4, a more nuanced understanding of Leninism, one grounded more firmly in Lenin's own theory and political practice, acknowledges the processual nature of revolution and the dialectical relationship between the political and military moments of revolution. However, there is a valid point to be made here: the requirements of military action and discipline, if not anchored firmly in an organizational form in which politics is in command, carry with them the potential for devolving into 'vanguard war.'

There is, therefore, from a Gramscian perspective, a fundamental organizational weakness in *foquismo* which makes its affinity as a metaphor for a political strategy based on Gramsci's war of position problematic. People's war, on the other hand, in which a political party that is linked organically to the masses and is committed to developing and expanding mass struggle is the center of political leadership, serves as a potent metaphorical foundation for such a strategy. Gramsci's war of position can be seen as a politico-cultural guerrilla war, one whose victory comes not through a simple accumulation of a multitude of localized, decentralized struggles on a wide range of fronts but only through the qualitative transformation of these struggles that comes from their integration and coordination by some form of centralized political leadership. This politico-cultural represents the dialectic of self-organization and party that, as we saw in Chapter 2, is an essential feature of Gramsci's social theory. In addition, the intricate relationship between maneuver and position in people's war suggests that we must rethink how this relationship is expressed within a Gramscian framework. As we found in our discussion of insurrection and Soviet military science, the metaphor of people's war compels us to see a political war of position as decisive not in that it itself brings victory, but rather that it creates the conditions in which a war of maneuver can succeed.

CHAPTER 7

# Conclusion: Lessons for Socialist Political Strategy

The Marxist schools of military thought and practice which I have examined share certain common principles, even as they differ with regard to others. While each is shaped by specific social and historical conditions, it is also the case that Clausewitz's definition of war as a continuation of politics by other means serves as the foundation for all of them. War is not simply a method for achieving political goals, it is itself a form of politics that expresses class relations at all levels – within the military organization, in that institution's location in a specific social formation, and in relations between competing social formations in a world system. In each case, within this class struggle war of maneuver and war of position are not opposites, but rather form a dialectical unity. Insurrection, deep battle and guerrilla warfare are all forms of war of maneuver that have as their foundation and, at the same time, are the foundation of a war of position.

In contrast to a Blanquist understanding of insurrection as the act of a revolutionary elite performed in the name of the proletariat, the Marxist strategy of insurrection is based on the development of a mass struggle and an organic relationship between that struggle and revolutionary leadership. Given the unequal balance of power between the ruling class and the subordinate classes, a successful insurrection requires a prior systematic undermining and erosion of ruling class power. This was the basis for Lenin's emphasis on the creation of dual power during the Russian Revolution as well as his concern with winning support among the peasantry and the military. In turn, the seizure of state power through insurrection provides the basis on which the revolutionary state must engage in a protracted cultural revolution – in the context of a global revolutionary process – to raise the population to the economic and political level necessary for the transition to socialism.

In terms of Soviet military strategy, deep battle is a war of maneuver emphasizing the deployment of highly mobile forces to deliver crushing blows against the enemy. Deep battle is also deep in another sense – it was deep in time and space. The basis of deep battle is the total and permanent mobilization of society for war, one which produces and maintains the necessary technological and industrial foundations for military production as well as a population with the necessary political consciousness to see them through the ugliness of war. In addition, it is essential that the crushing blows of deep battle be delivered not just on a narrowly defined military front, but throughout the entire depth

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of the enemy's social formation. Victory in deep battle is, in turn, not only the key to winning a specific armed conflict but is also part of a protracted global struggle between capitalism and socialism.

Finally, guerrilla warfare emphasizes mobile, lightning attacks based on overwhelming superiority against dispersed enemy forces, but one which depend upon and facilitate the development of a multi-class alliance in a protracted struggle. With the creation of rural liberated zones providing a safe space to build up military forces as well as the experience of social self-government and with the growing connections with urban-based mass movements, the war of maneuver can then shift to a war of position emphasizing the strategic offensive. Victory in guerrilla struggle, in turn, also serves to stimulate and support guerrilla struggle in other colonial and semi-colonial countries, contributing to a global war of position against imperialism.

Despite the fact that these forms of Marxist military thought and practice emerged in very different historical conditions and despite the different ways in which Gramsci can be said to be connected to them, at the center of all three is the dialectical relationship between what Gramsci referred to as the military moment and the politico-military moment of war or, to put it another way, the dialectic of coercion and hegemony, the same dialectic that is central to Gramsci's social theory. The use of force, as we have seen in our analysis of specific forms of Marxist military theory and practice, must be seen as legitimate by members of the subordinate classes in order for it to contribute to the victory of those classes. At the same time, the use of force can serve as an important resource in the creation of a new consciousness among the subordinate classes. Marx's well-known statement in *Capital* that by acting on the world and thereby changing it, we simultaneously change ourselves (Marx 1976c) is especially relevant here. Marx argued that revolution was necessary "not only because the *ruling* class cannot be overthrown in any other way, but also because the class *overthrowing* it can only in a revolution succeed in ridding itself of all the muck of ages and become fitted to found society anew" (Marx 1974: 95). Fanon (1968) provided a powerful restatement of Marx's argument, although in the context of anti-colonial struggles, in addressing what Fanon argued was the necessity for violence in revolution. It "influences individuals and modifies them fundamentally. It transforms spectators crushed with their inessentiality into privileged actors, with the grandiose glare of history's floodlights upon them" (Fanon 1968: 36). It does so by revealing that "the settler's skin is not of any more value than a native's skin; and it must be said that this discovery shakes the world in a very necessary manner" (Fanon 1968: 45). The colonizer, who constructs a material and symbolic reality proclaiming their omnipotence and superiority over the colonized population through their

seizure of land, imposition of the colonial state's military power, and marginalization and destruction of indigenous culture, is shown to be just as vulnerable to revolutionary violence as the colonized are to the violence of the colonizer. This is a truly transformational process, since "if my life is worth as much as the settler's, his glance no longer shrivels me up nor freezes me, and his voice no longer turns me into stone" (Fanon 1968: 45). This, in turn, contributes to the growth of a collective power which can challenge and, ultimately, overthrow the colonizer:

> for the colonized people this violence, because it constitutes their only work, invests their characters with positive and creative qualities. The practice of violence binds them together as a whole, since each individual forms a violent link in the great chain, a part of the great organism of violence which has surged upward in reaction to the settler's violence in the beginning.... [It] introduces into each man's consciousness the ideas of a common cause, of a national destiny, and of a collective history.
>
> FANON 1968: 93

The point here is not to argue that a violent revolution is desirable or an objective possibility today, but rather that just as hegemony and coercion are inseparable moments of power, we must be wary of unraveling the dialectic of position and maneuver and set up one against the other. If we do so, then "Marxist strategy in the end becomes an opposition between reformism and adventurism" (Anderson 1976: 69).

Each case, however, also reveals the limitations of Gramsci's use of the military metaphor in his discussion of revolutionary political strategy. In war, position and maneuver are not opposites but rather each is the condition of the other. In applying war of position and war of maneuver to political strategy, Gramsci's military metaphor has the unintended consequence of obscuring the dialectical relationship between coercion and hegemony – between war and politics, maneuver and position – that is the foundation for the metaphor itself. If the military metaphor is to be retained as a useful tool for revolutionary theory and political practice, we must challenge the reification of maneuver and position that have emerged from this metaphor and reaffirm the inherently dialectical relationship between the two.

The debate concerning the role of the base-superstructure metaphor in Marxism is instructive in trying to understanding the limits of Gramsci's military metaphor. Marx identified the foundation of historical materialism as the following:

> In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness.
>
> MARX 1970: 20–21

For some, the base/superstructure metaphor is "a static and damaging one" (Thompson 1978: 84), one that "has always been more trouble than it is worth" and "has been made to bear a theoretical weight far beyond its limited capacities" (Wood 1995: 49). It has been associated with a very simple, mechanical form of economic determinism in which political and ideological superstructures are seen as 'reflecting' the economic base. Efforts to address the mechanical nature of this metaphor by emphasizing the relative autonomy of the superstructure relative to the base[1] are seen by these critics as inadequate, as they accept as given the separation of the economic base from the political/cultural superstructure and simply postpone the determinate power of the former

1 Such efforts are grounded in Engels' subsequent elaboration on Marx's statement: "According to the materialist conception of history, the *ultimately* determining factor in history is the production and reproduction of real life. Neither Marx nor I have ever asserted more than this. Hence if somebody twists this into saying that the economic factor is the *only* determining one, he transforms that proposition into a meaningless, abstract, absurd phrase. The economic situation is the basis, but the various elements of the superstructure – political forms of the class struggle and its results, such as constitutions established by the victorious class after a successful battle, etc., juridical forms, and especially the reflections of all these real struggles in the brains of the participants, political, legal, philosophical theories, religious views and their further development into systems of dogmas – also exercise their influence upon the course of the historical struggles and in many cases determine their *form* in particular. There is an interaction of all these elements in which, amid all the endless host of accidents (that is, of things and events whose inner interconnection is so remote or so impossible of proof that we can regard it as non-existent and neglect it), the economic movement is finally bound to assert itself. Otherwise the application of the theory to any period of history would be easier than the solution of a simple equation of the first degree" (Engels 1982c: 394–395).

to the infinite future of the last analysis. In addition, critics argue that the metaphor's expression in Marxist political practice has had disastrous political results. It was, they point out, an essential expression of the distortions of historical materialism characteristic of the Second International, in which the superstructure was reduced to a passive reflection of the base, leading to the argument that the contradiction between the development of the capitalist forces of production and the increasingly constraining fetters of capitalist relations of production would necessarily lead to the emergence of socialism. The critique of this position was, as we saw in Chapter 2, at the core of Gramsci's political theory and practice.[2] The base/superstructure metaphor was also an essential feature of Soviet Marxism, in which the replacement of bourgeois property with state property was seen as sufficient proof of the transition from capitalism to socialism (Stalin 1939, CPSU 1961), this despite the problematic nature of the social relations that came to be associated with state property (see Bettelheim 1978, Corrigan, Ramsay and Sayer 1978, Mészáros 1995).

Others, however, have argued that the metaphor "enables us to glimpse something absolutely fundamental" (Rossi-Landi 1990: 61) and so cannot be so easily discarded. Williams, for example, is highly critical of the tendency of the metaphor "to indicate either (a) relatively enclosed categories or (b) relatively enclosed areas of activity" (Williams 1977: 78), but he sees the solution to the problem lying in a dialectical understanding of 'determination' as "a complex and interrelated process of limits and pressures" (Williams 1977: 87), not in rejecting the metaphor outright. Althusser seems to agree, arguing that the metaphor has a "big *theoretical* advantage" for Marxism in that

> it simultaneously *makes us see* that questions of determination (or of index of effectivity) are crucial; that it makes us see that it is the base which determines the whole edifice in the last instance; and, consequently, that it *requires us to pose* the theoretical problem of the type of 'derivative' effectivity that is specific to the superstructure.
>
> ALTHUSSER 2014: 54

The base-superstructure metaphor highlights a "structurally ordered relationship between the social whole and its constituent parts" characterized by "the objective dialectic of historically articulated *reciprocal determinations*"

2 While Lenin, in his early work *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, offered a model of 'reflection' consistent with that of the Second International, his Notebooks on Hegel, written after the start of the First World War and the capitulation of the Second International to war fever, provided a powerful corrective to this position (Anderson 1995; Rees 1998).

(Mészáros 2011: 99 [emphasis in original]), one in which "the superstructures are at one and the same moment 'determined' and yet absolutely, fundamentally necessary and required" (Hall 1977: 61). Base and superstructure are thus "constituent parts of an indivisible whole" (Jakubowski 1976: 56) expressing the inseparable association between being and consciousness. The superstructure "is simply the 'ideal' form in which the totality of 'material' relations which make up the 'base' itself are manifested to consciousness, not a substantially separate order of reality at all" (Sayer 1987: 84).

To the extent that the base/superstructure metaphor is problematic, then, this is less a product of the logic underlying the metaphor and more the result of an uncritical acceptance of the way in which social relations *appear* as 'economic' and 'non-economic' within capitalism. This reification of base and superstructure into distinct entities or institutions obscures what is in fact a methodological distinction, "a 'guiding thread,' an orientation to empirical and historical research, not a theoretical substitute for it" (Sayer 1987: 13). I would argue that the metaphor of war of position/war of maneuver has taken on a similarly reified character. Rather than understanding the difference between war of maneuver and war of position as being methodological in nature, there is a tendency to see them as self-contained strategies that at best are related in a stagist manner and at worst are mutually exclusive. Not only is this contrary to how war of maneuver and war of position are understood within Marxist military theory and practice, it is contrary to the dialectic of coercion and hegemony that lies at the foundation of Gramsci's work. We need not abandon the military metaphor but rather, as is the case with the base/superstructure metaphor, we must restore the dialectical nature of the metaphor in order to make it meaningful as a resource for socialist theory and practice.

### The Dialectic of Position and Maneuver

What would this look like concretely? While it is important to recognize that a revolutionary strategy successful in one social formation cannot be transferred automatically to others and that strategy must be appropriate for the structural and historical realities of each social formation, the unraveling of the dialectical relationship between war of maneuver and war of position that comes from identifying the former as an event of relatively great intensity and short duration reflecting an understanding of power as a thing to be seized and the latter as a protracted process based on an understanding of power as a social relation to be transformed must be rejected. Revolution of necessity "combines act and process, event and history" (Bensaid 2007: 140). History

is not a process distinct from specific acts and events, but rather reflects the qualitative transformation resulting from a quantitative accumulation of these acts and events. At the same time, it is this process which in the end gives these acts and events meaning. Furthermore, to the extent that war is a metaphor for revolution, this dialectic between act and process in revolution is reinforced by the mutually reinforcing relationship between tactics and strategy in war; tactics form the building blocks of strategy, but it is strategy that gives these tactics meaning. As a result, even if we accept the association of war of maneuver with 'event' or tactics and war of position with 'process' or strategy we must not fall into the trap of seeing these as distinct phenomena in either time or space – they are inseparable.

To the extent that war of position and war of maneuver are defined narrowly and applied mechanically, we fail to recognize the moments of force that are inherent in a counter-hegemonic strategy and the moments of consent that are inherent in an insurrectionary strategy. In this light, given Gramsci's characterization of the war of position as a political form of siege warfare, it is helpful to understand the way in which the history of siege warfare itself reflects the dialectic of position and maneuver (Bradbury 1992; Duffy 1979, 1985; Kern 1999). The blockade of an enemy city or fortress has been an essential feature of siege warfare since its inception, but this technique was considered most appropriate for a specific set of circumstances. For all the costs a siege imposed on the besieged population, they also imposed serious limitations on the besieger. They were time-consuming affairs that tied up forces which could be used elsewhere; besiegers were usually in enemy territory, and this made it more difficult to supply a besieging army adequately for a prolonged period; and, finally (this was especially relevant before the development of professional armies), besieging armies ran the risk of growing disaffection among their troops as the siege went on. Indeed, armies on the offensive often bypassed fortress that were deemed less important; in ancient and medieval warfare this was defined in terms of opportunities for plunder, in modern warfare in terms of strategic concerns. As a result, blockades were most effective in cases where a well-disciplined and supplied besieger confronted a fortress that was poorly supplied and had little hope of relief. When the besieged fortress was well-supplied and could hold out until supplies or reinforcements arrived, thereby necessitating a more timely decision, besieging armies supplemented blockades with more aggressive techniques. Bombardment with stone-throwing catapults was a staple of ancient and medieval warfare, and with the introduction of gunpowder artillery in the fourteenth century the firepower of besieging armies increased dramatically. Attackers dug mines beneath fortress walls in an effort to force a breach in defenses, which in turn facilitated a direct

assault on the fortress by the besieging army. Such techniques required commanders to identify the weakest point in a fortress's defense and apply the maximum amount of force to that point. At the same time, an army's record of taking fortresses, especially if done so with great violence, could itself strike sufficient fear in the heart of a population that a fortress would capitulate without any resistance.[3] The history of siege warfare, therefore, demonstrates that sieges and direct assaults were not alternatives but rather the condition for the success of the other.

As we move from siege warfare to the political siege that is Gramsci's war of position, we can see the same dialectic at work. While it may indeed be the case that the objective realities of global capitalism do not allow at present for a political strategy based on a war of maneuver, this does not mean that strategy can focus on hegemony to the exclusion of coercion or that direct challenges to the coercive power of the state must be postponed into the far future. The failure to address adequately the significance of the state's coercive power means that we cannot understand fully the nature of hegemonic power. Not only is hegemony necessarily accompanied by domination of those subordinate groups who lie outside the hegemonic bloc, but the ruling class makes use of the state's coercive power to construct and maintain the hegemonic bloc in the first place. It does so by identifying the existence of threats, both real and constructed, against which the hegemonic bloc can unite. At the same time, in order for the state's coercive power to be exercised appropriately it must be grounded firmly in a broad social consensus on the necessity of such power. The military metaphor, however, has made it too easy to fetishize the war of position, allowing analysis of revolutionary strategy in the global capitalist core to postpone any serious discussion of the relevance of coercive power in both its repressive and progressive forms into the far future.

As a result, any socialist political strategy, even one based on a Gramscian war of position, which marginalizes both the coercive power of the state and the importance of challenges to that power does so at its own peril. On the one hand, doing so abandons an important site of hegemonic struggle. The left will be unable to take advantage of structural opportunities for counter-hegemonic political mobilization if it does not prepare for them in advance, and an essential element of such preparation is an analysis of and challenge to the state's coercive power. Clearly, there are limits to how much preparation is possible absent the specific social and historical context of such structural crises, but

3 It was the custom in ancient and medieval warfare that a city or fortress that capitulated could expect some leniency from their captors. For those that were taken by storm, however, no mercy was expected or given (Kern 1999; Bradbury 1992).

a left that is not ready to use these crises to maximum effect will fail in its mission. On the other hand, the failure to adequately address the coercive power of the state places the left at a critical disadvantage, as the subordinate classes out of which the left arises are the principal targets of such power. A counter-hegemonic strategy that does not prepare to challenge and defend itself against state repression will come to naught.[4] The call to reaffirm the dialectic of position and maneuver as an expression of Gramsci's dialectic of hegemony and coercion is not a rejection of a counter-hegemonic strategy nor an argument that the conditions for an insurrectionary strategy are increasingly ripe. It is, instead, a recognition that a Gramscian war of position must be informed by the strategic questions more commonly associated with the war of maneuver if it is to remain relevant as a strategy for social transformation in contemporary capitalism.

The reification of war of maneuver and war of position has taken a very specific concrete form in the tendency to see a Gramscian, positional strategy as an antidote to a 'Leninist' strategy of movement. The turn to Gramsci, by presenting a more palatable understanding of left politics than that associated with Lenin, has facilitated an institutionalization of Gramsci's work in the academy (Harman 1983; Greaves 2009; Thomas 2010) akin to the association between Gramsci and Eurocommunism in the 1970s and 1980s.[5] This is illustrated most clearly by the way in which Gramsci's work has been used as the foundation for a post-Marxist politics that replaces socialism with a radical democratic project (Laclau and Mouffe 1985). The counterposition of Gramsci to Lenin, however, reproduces a definition of Leninism more closely associated with those distortions than Lenin's revolutionary theory and practice itself. As a result, there is an underappreciation of just how close Gramsci and Lenin were in terms of their revolutionary theory and practice. Both argued that exploitation, uneven development, war, and national oppression could be eliminated only with the elimination of capitalism and the creation of a new, socialist and, ultimately, communist mode of production. In addition, both Gramsci and Lenin rejected a narrow understanding of class politics. Lenin's argument that the Party must serve as "*the tribune of the people*" responding

4 The use of violence has been an important part of popular struggles throughout U.S. history. See, for example, Adamic (2008) and Cobb (2014).

5 The irony here is that Palmiro Togliatti, the post-war leader of the Italian Communist Party who engineered the shift to Eurocommunism, made explicit the connection between Gramsci and Lenin in doing so (Togliatti 1979). The difference is that this connection was made by presenting an interpretation of both Gramsci and Lenin that was more palatable for the West (Boggs 1980; Harman 1983; Mandel 1978; Salvadori 1979).

"to every manifestation of tyranny and oppression, no matter where it appears, no matter what stratum or class of the people it affects" (Lenin 1969: 80) is strikingly similar to Gramsci's examination of the role played by national-popular struggles in socialist revolution. Lenin's theory and practice of insurrection was much more complex than simply storming the Winter Palace, and was instead based on the construction of a revolutionary hegemony among the broadest segments of the population. For his part, Gramsci was clear that insurrection was not realistic in the West, particularly in the specific moment in which he wrote the *Prison Notebooks*, and so strategy must focus on the slow accumulation of popular struggles, but at no point did he renounce the significance of insurrection or the use of coercion against counter-revolutionary forces. The differences that existed between the two reflect the concrete material realities in which they worked and the problem of how to operate within their distinctive terrains rather than more fundamental political differences.

The connection between Gramsci and Lenin is important for another reason – it reasserts the significance of *strategy* for socialist theory and practice. A central feature of the counterposition of Gramscian and 'Leninist' strategies is the association of Gramsci's war of position with what Boggs (1976, 1977) calls prefigurative politics. In contrast to a 'Leninist' politics based on a centralized vanguard party that develops political strategy from the top down, leaving no space for collective self-organization, prefigurative politics express "the embodiment, within the ongoing practice of a movement, of those forms of social relations, decision-making, culture, and human experience that are the ultimate goal" (Boggs 1977: 100) and thereby provide "a real alternative to the bureaucratic hierarchy, the power of the centralized state, and the social division of labor characteristic of bourgeois society" (Boggs 1977: 99). The creation of new social relations based on solidarity and cooperation cannot wait until after the seizure of power, but rather must be an organic component of the revolutionary process itself. Once again, I would argue that the differences imputed to Gramsci and Lenin in this regard are overstated. Lenin saw the soviets as an expression of collective self-organization among the workers and peasants, one that had the potential to serve as a school for socialism as well as a foundation for a new state apparatus (Lenin 1932b). It is this understanding of the potential of the soviets that was the foundation for Lenin's profound pessimism, expressed shortly before his death, concerning the increasing bureaucratization of the Soviet system (Lewin 1968). For his part, in identifying the failure of the Italian Socialist Party to provide appropriate strategic leadership during the *biennio rosso*, Gramsci acknowledged the limits of a purely spontaneous, prefigurative politics. This experience, which served as the foundation for the *Prison Notebooks*' concern for 'the modern prince,' calls on us to recognize that

the prefigurative quality of Gramsci's politics cannot be separated from his acute awareness of the importance of strategy. Acknowledging the close connection between Gramsci and Lenin requires us to see prefigurative politics and strategic politics as being related in a dialectical manner rather than as alternatives (Breines 1982).[6]

If politics is akin to war, and if radical politics must take the form of a war of position, then we cannot reject out of hand centralized forms of left political organization. The question here is the level at which we can speak of a meaningful war of position. Specific movement organizations may identify their specific terrains of struggle with the protracted politico-cultural strategy that is the war of position, and there is no end to the number or diversity of possible struggles or to the variety of organizational forms taken by such struggles. On their own, however, these struggles will have at best *tactical* significance within a specific social formation or within the capitalist world system in its totality. The war of position can be *strategic* only at the level of the social formation or the capitalist world system. Just as guerrilla warfare cannot be based on a multitude of isolated, uncoordinated guerrilla fronts but rather, as the strategy of people's war suggests, requires some form of centralized political leadership to ensure that attacks on multiple fronts contribute to the larger goals of the revolution, the political war of position can take place only through the agency of some form of strategic political organization that can bring together in a coherent manner the multitude of local politico-cultural struggles in such a way as to achieve the goal of revolutionary social transformation.

While contemporary left politics operate in a context very different from that in which Gramsci developed his counter-hegemonic strategy, the importance of the 'modern prince' for the success of this strategy has thus not diminished – it is an essential feature of a Gramscian war of position. Recall Gramsci's statement from Chapter 2 that "one can 'scientifically' foresee only the struggle, but not the concrete moments of the struggle, which cannot but be the results of opposing forces in continuous movement" (Gramsci 1971: 438). Organization and discipline, far from asserting a privileged knowledge of a mechanical set of principles controlled from the center which dictate the paths and means in which political struggle takes place, are necessary precisely because of the *contingent* nature of that struggle. Success in both war and class struggle requires the ability to see beyond the immediate setting and

6 This serves as an important corrective to autonomist and anarchist understandings of prefigurative politics, "the politics of the beautiful moment" (Dean 2016: 125), which reject strategy as a fatal constraint on the creativity of diverse forms of resistance, each one valuable in its own right, which emerge organically from the daily experience of exploitation and oppression (Day 2005; Holloway 2002, 2010).

context, to anticipate all possibilities, and to act in ways that maximize advantages and minimize disadvantages for one's own forces and do the opposite for one's enemy. This, however, is constrained by factors such as the possession of incomplete or erroneous information, breakdowns in communications and logistics, and confusion or low morale among one's forces or the failure of specific elements of one's forces to accomplish specific tasks, not to mention unanticipated or innovative actions by one's enemy. Clausewitz referred to these circumstances as 'friction,' and it is this "which distinguishes real War from War on paper" (von Clausewitz 1982: 164). The purpose of organization is, to the extent possible, to prepare for and overcome friction in ways that contribute to success for one's own forces and defeat of the enemy's forces. If one accepts the relevance of Gramsci's military metaphor for understanding contemporary socialist political strategy, then one must of necessity also accept the need for such an organization.

Nilsen and Cox's (Nilsen and Cox 2103) outline of a Marxist theory of social movements is particularly useful here. Starting from the 'militant particularisms' of specific struggles in a specific social context, they then identify 'campaigns' as the coming together of similar militant particularisms "around a generalized challenge to the dominant forces which construct those situations" (Nilsen and Cox 2013: 77). In turn, social movements integrate a variety of campaigns so as to move beyond the latter's "field-specific nature" and to define "the social whole as the object of challenge or transformation" (Nilsen and Cox 2013: 78). The organic development from militant particularism to social movement is not an inevitable one, especially since they confront the obstacles of hegemony and coercion. In order for radical politics to be meaningful, there must be some conscious articulation – materially, organizationally, symbolically – of how social movements contribute to the war of position against capital. It is one thing to argue that an appropriate revolutionary strategy for the left today is akin to siege warfare. It is another to say that the siege should be imposed in places and in ways without reference to the specific strengths and weaknesses of the enemy at specific moments in time and space. In the absence of strategy – that is, in the absence of some way of bringing these tactical challenges together in a coherent manner – prefigurative politics is *defensive* rather than *offensive*.

## The Gramscian War of Position and Twenty-First Century Socialism

I would argue that Gramsci's war of position, one that embraces fully its dialectical nature, is best exemplified in contemporary discussions of the theory and practice of 'twenty-first century socialism' (Carroll 2011). While the origins

of the term are found in the Bolivarian Revolution in Venezuela led by Hugo Chavez (Gott 2005; Wilpert 2007), a broader understanding of twenty-first century socialism has potentially great value in other settings for rejuvenating the socialist project. In reaffirming the relevance of and necessity for socialism (Mészáros 1995), twenty-first century socialism is a powerful corrective to the post-Marxist abandonment of socialism for radical democracy. This is not a rejection of radical democracy, but rather a recognition that radical democratic forms of organization and political practice are possible only in the context of a socialism defined by social ownership of the means of production, social production based on relations of cooperation and solidarity, and development of communal institutions to ensure the satisfaction of social needs (Lebowitz 2010). This 'socialist triangle' recognizes that socialism can be established only by "radically restructuring the totality of existing reproductive relations" (Mészáros 1995: 823); this point, as we saw in Chapter 2, lies at the heart of Gramsci's work. At the same time, this is a socialism that, like that of Gramsci, emphasizes the importance of a broad range of struggles. Movements against racial, gender and sexual oppression, war and militarism, and ecological destruction are essential to the construction of a new hegemony (Harnecker 2015) which combines "into a coherent whole, with *ultimately* inescapable socialist implications, a great variety of demands and partial strategies which in and by themselves need not have anything *specifically socialist* about them at all" (Mészáros 1995: 700).

Twenty-first century socialism is an affirmation of the centrality of prefigurative, participatory democratic forms of political practice in socialism:

> Creating the necessary mediations towards [socialism] cannot be left to some far-away future time, like the apologetically theorized 'highest stage of communism.' For if the mediatory steps are not pursued right from the outset, as an organic part of the transformatory strategy, they will never be taken.
>
> MÉSZÁROS 1995: 729

In this way, twenty-first century socialism is a critique of the Soviet model of socialist development in which the power of a bureaucratic, centralized party substituted for that of the associated producers themselves (Mészáros 1995; Lebowitz 2012). The concern with creating prefigurative forms of socialist organization such as communal councils and workers' councils, though, is accompanied by an acknowledgement of the significant role played by a "new political instrument" (Harnecker 2007: 83) or "a party of a different type" (Lebowitz 2010: 161) – in Gramsci's terms, a 'modern prince' – for the

construction of socialist hegemony. The purpose of such an organization is not to impose specific strategies, tactics, and organizational forms on popular struggles, but rather to facilitate their autonomous development and initiative in ways that ensure that the subordinate classes themselves, and not some entity speaking in their name, become the rulers of the new society. This organization can provide a space in which popular struggles can learn from each other, coordinate their activities, and move beyond a partial, localist understanding of politics to a more collective, global one. It is, in other words, an expression of the central role of strategy in revolutionary politics. "Rather than a single line of march in this asymmetrical warfare against capital," Lebowitz argues, such a strategy is characterized by "guerrilla units functioning under a general line and understanding the need for unity in struggle for major battles" (Lebowitz 2010: 162). This new political instrument, far from being an obstacle to the diversity and creativity of popular movements from below, is its very condition of success.

The integration of strategic and prefigurative politics in twenty-first century socialism is also reflected in the dialectical relationship between popular movements and the state. The left cannot simply take hold of the existing state and use it for its own purposes, but must radically transform the state:

> the 'withering away of the state' refers to nothing mysterious or remote but to a perfectly tangible process which must be initiated right in the present. It means the progressive reacquisition of the alienated powers of political decision making by the individuals in their transition to a genuine socialist society.
>
> MÉSZÁROS 1995: 728–729

The connection here with Gramsci is obvious. Decentralizing decision-making powers and resources to workers' councils and communal councils facilitates the development of collective self-organization, thereby ensuring that the components of the 'socialist triangle' are governed by the associated producers themselves rather than the party or a centralized state. Forms of collective self-organization from below are essential for a participatory planning process, one in which workers and communities identify unmet social needs as well as the capacities necessary to meet these needs. They also serve as an extra-parliamentary constraint on forces favoring bureaucratization within the state as well as on the extra-parliamentary power of capital. At the same time, though, twenty-first century socialism acknowledges the important role played by the state in the transition to socialism. It provides the political and economic resources which allow workers' councils and communal councils to

develop to their fullest extent, and it serves as a means of protecting against the localist tendencies of such organizations by facilitating the development of a solidaristic culture. The state is significant also for its ability to wield coercive power in defense of socialist transformation and against the inevitable counter-offensive of capital and its national and international allies.[7] Until such time as a socialist mode of production can ensure its own reproduction (Lebowitz 2010), the mode of regulation characteristic of the transition to socialism cannot dispense with the state in its old form, but this must be a state whose task is to nurture its eventual withering away by contributing to the development of the powers of social self-management become truly social.

The failures of twentieth century socialism tend to be associated with the distortions of Soviet Marxism and the integration of social democracy within capitalism. It would be a mistake, however, to ignore how

> from another perspective, socialism's failure stands out in the sense of the absence, especially in the advanced capitalist countries, of that conscious, organized and creative movement for a democratic, cooperative and classless society which, in so far as it is an expression of massive popular support, is the *condition sine qua non* of realizing socialist aspirations.
>
> PANITCH 2008: 17

Twenty-first century socialism is not a blueprint that can be applied universally – it will and must take different forms in different social formations. Nonetheless, it offers the best path for reaffirming the revolutionary humanism of Marxism as well as making the socialist project relevant to contemporary struggles against global capitalism. In the best of the Marxist tradition, of which Gramsci serves as an exemplar, it compels us to ask the right questions concerning the forms of political strategy and organization necessary for the development of a socialism worthy of the name. A dialectical understanding of Gramsci's war of position will make a major contribution to the success of this project.

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7 In this regard, Harnecker contrasts the "armed peaceful transition" in Venezuela with the "unarmed peaceful transition" that occurred during the Popular Unity government in Chile and which ended with a military coup in 1973 (Harnecker 2015: 104).

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