**Passion for concepts and emotions: historicism and populists**

**ABSTRACT**

We aim that concepts from Marxist theory tend to create a spirit of scission in society, according to Antonio Gramsci assertions for “spirit of scission” and hegemony. We aim that spirit of scission is translatable in a denial of immutable principles and natural right. Leo Strauss call this denial of historicism. We agree with Leo Strauss that historicism reinforces totalitarian regimes, due to nihilist consequences of historicism. We suggest that history teaching in Latin America, particularly in Brazil, where Marxist concepts gained special relevance in the last decades stimulated spirit of scission, which contributed to populism phenomenon.

**KEYWORDS: HISTORICISM – POPULISM – MARXISM**

The main idea is to associate history teaching and populism. In Brazil, as other countries of Latin America, Marxism gained special relevance inside universities as a substratum applied at the “sciences of spirit” (*Geisteswissenschaften*). History and the others social sciences has been widespread outside universities classrooms, especially, through concepts such dominant class, struggle class, alienation, hegemony. Our efforts is to comprehend the mechanisms of Marxism and history in classrooms and populism.

Antonio Gramsci affirmed that Marx was one of the greatest examples of “impassioned sarcasm”. The “impassioned sarcasm” is an expression to identify the substratum that allows the transition – for another “point of view” – among historians. The “impassioned sarcasm” often leads to historicism because historicism denies that notions of “justice” and “right” of past societies may be considered immutable and extended to other societies. Although Gramsci had marked a difference between two kinds of “impassioned sarcasm”, – one from left and other from right, and for him, the latter is the only one that is purely destructive because it does not replace a new – we aim that both “sarcasms” tend to increase historicism.

In conformity with “impassioned sarcasm”, Gramsci aims a necessity of creating a “spirit of scission” – what some authors would call, nowadays, of “construction of

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1 Gramsci, Q 1, § 29.
2 Idem.
3 Gramsci, Q 3, § 43, Q 25 §5
identity” ⁴ in order to defeat the hegemony of dominant class. State stays as a unit that can not be judged for its past actions since it was only merely appropriated by a class, or an alliance of classes, while other institutions called “private” are too involved with hegemony of dominant classes through their “beliefs”. It would lead, as a matter of fact, to a phenomenon of “statolatry”. Statolatry combines the words state and idolatry. Gramsci considers that “statolatry” is necessary when some groups start to participate of the state before they could develop, during a large period, their own and independent moral and culture. ⁵ According to Juan Carlos Portantiero, the concept of populism must not be identified with a mere ideological element that in risk to lose their fundamental trait – that appears in every experience of populism – which is the latent defense of “state”. ⁶ Portantiero also affirms that in every idolatry of a party is the seed of statolatry. ⁷

1. “Spirit of Scission”

“What resources can innovative class set against this formidable complex of trenches and fortifications of the dominant class? The spirit of scission”, says Antonio Gramsci⁸. This would be the first step in order to create proletariat hegemony: that “subaltern classes” must call “they” the “social enemy”, at the same time, the subaltern classes may perceive themselves as “us”. Juan Carlos Portantiero, who studied the phenomenon of populism in Argentine and was one of the first authors who introduced gramscian thought in Latin America, states⁹:

Joining the capitalist state, like trenches, which protect it of falling, […] there are] institutions called “private”, they are grouped in the concept of civil society, and it runs function of hegemony of dominant group in society. Family, churches, schools, trade unions, parties, media, are some of these […]¹⁰

In other words, socialist revolution is not even “wished” by working class because these institutions – family, churches, schools – prevent them against socialism. The first

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⁴ According to Daniel Campione, “under this name [spirit of scission] or its synonymous ‘distinction’ or ‘separation’, Gramsci calls something similar to what we call nowadays “construction of identity”⁴.
⁵ Campione, p. 7.
⁶ Gramsci,
⁹ Gramsci, Q 3 §43.
¹⁰ “[…] integran al estado capitalista, como ‘trincheras’ que lo protegen de la irrupción […] el conjunto de instituciones llamadas ‘privadas’, agrupadas en el concepto de sociedad civil y que corresponden a la función de hegemonía […]. Familia, iglesias, escuelas, sindicatos, partidos, medios masivos de comunicación, son algunos de estos organismos:” Portantiero (1977), p. 186.
step in order to interrupt this influence is to create the spirit of scission in the “reality” of superstructure – where the hegemony lays.

2. Historicism

Historicism says that all human thought is historical. From thereon, it is argued that the validity of a truth is temporary. And finally, radical historicism says that we are not able to find immutable principles. Rather, that immutable principles do no exist, and to say that is dogmatism. In a sentence, our past is always dogmatic, because all societies from past are trying to forge their own world, which is not the reality, but a “cave”. For Strauss:

Whereas, according to ancients, philosophing means to leave the cave, according to our contemporaries all philosophing essentially belong to a historical world, ‘culture’, ‘civilization’, ‘Weltanshuung’, that is, to what Plato had called the cave. We shall this view, this last one, historicism.  

3. Historicism and Marxism

The previous well-known formula Marxist said there always two components: structure (reality) and superstructure (ideology) in societies. In Gramsci’s writings, the concept hegemony will be responsible to establish an organic unit between structure and superstructure in the renewal of Marxism. At the beginning of reception of gramscian ideas, Althusser’s critics were spread in several Marxists circles. For Althusser, historicism in Gramsci would be a serious threat to Marxism. It would threat Marxism’s ability to “prove” their knowledge of capitalist society and to pursue new political projects in order to defeat it.  

Engel’s formulation that ‘the unity of the world consists in its materiality demonstrated […] by the long and laborious development of philosophy and natural science’ contains the germ of the correct conception in that it has recourse to history and to man in order to demonstrate objective reality. Objective always means ‘humanly objective’, which can be held to correspond exactly to ‘historically subjective’: in other words, objective would mean ‘universal objective’. Man knows objectively in so far as knowledge is real for the whole human race historically unification takes

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13 Thomas (2009), p. 244.
place through the disappearance of the internal contradictions themselves are the condition for the formation of groups and for the birth of ideologies which are not concretely universal but are immediately rendered transient by the practical origin of their substance. There exists therefore a struggle for objectivity (to free oneself from partial and fallacious ideologies) and this struggle is the same as the struggle for the cultural unification of the human race. What the idealist call ‘spirit’ is not a point of departure but a point of arrival, it is the ensemble of the superstructures moving towards concrete and objectively universal unification and not a unitary presupposition etc.  

There is no hegemony without a “spirit of scission”. But, instead of “scission” with the dominant class, “scission” becomes with the whole past, because, historically, the dominant classes sustained domination due their “beliefs” of right and wrong, of criminal and law. “Politics is, in fact, in each occasion, the reflex of tendencies of structure development, tendencies that has no obligation of becoming reality necessarily.” Therefore, hegemony is not linked to the “objective reality” but to the “objective contradiction”, which characterizes historicism, the substitution the truth for the present. Hegemonic projects are born in the “objective contradiction”.

The historicist argument has a certain plausibility which can easily be accounted for by the preponderance of dogmatism in the past. […] We ought therefore to welcome historicism as an ally in our fight against dogmatism. But dogmatism – or the inclination to ‘identify the goal of our thinking with the point at which we have become tired of thinking’ – is so natural to man that it is not likely to be a preserve of the past. We are forced to suspect that historicism is the guise in which dogmatism likes to appear in our age. 

4. Spirit of scission, Marxism and populism

Gramscian Marxist theory creates a spirit of scission with past through Marxists concepts. According to Ipola and Portantiero, the populist regimes – more advanced historically – stimulate the spirit of scission of masses. The first consequence is, like Portantiero noticed, the latent “approve” of State. During military regime in Argentine, some of Argentinian Peronists stated that Peronism would guide to socialism regime. Portantiero and Ipola argued that Peronism could never become socialist in fact, due to

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the trait of “statolatry” of the former and “regulated society” of the later. However, Portantiero and Ipola noticed that “organicist” hegemony is present in both, populism and socialism (ad usum) governments. Only socialism as an expectative is far from being in defense of State.

“...”

Our conviction is that the strong presence of an organicist conception of hegemony characterizes real populisms – like, of course, socialisms ad usum, but for the populisms, there is a congruent relation between ideological model and reality that cannot be imagined, not even theoretically as a “deviation”.18

“This is the way how Marxism has hegemonic force, becomes the culture, the philosophy of modern world”, says Portantiero. Marxism is a substratum that applied to “sciences of spirit”, is never condemned, but its aim is to condemn, not the negative presence in us, but class dominant hegemony. “What would happen to a historiography, that finally, abolish the last rests of singularities, to cede […] exclusively to intrigue?”19

5. Conclusion

We often do not associate Marxism and historicism. Marxism was born in the extreme side of positivism and historicism. However, the spirit of scission leads to a historicism that deny any immutable principle and natural right. How can Marxism propose a change if all past is dogmatic? Since we are dealing with hegemony, would say Gramsci, this would not be the State, but the civil society. We often do not associate populism and Marxism, but the recent experiences in Latin America indicate that the concepts from scope Marxist were too present.

References

18 “Esta confrontación entre una concepción organicista y otra pluralista de la hegemonía aparece como de importancia decisiva para poder pensar las relaciones entre democracia (como el elemento más subversivo inherente a ‘lo popular’) y socialismo y/o populismo como alternativas políticas de articulación de demandas y tradiciones”. Ipola and Portantiero (1981), p. 12.


