

Cassano Group

Graham: Today we'd like to have a conversation about 20 years of Rethinking Marxism. We want to talk about the past and about the future. About the possibility of Marxism in the world today, the way Marxism has been utilised by Social Movements in the past and in a neo-liberal globalised economy, what the future of Marxism is.

I'm here with two of the most significant contributors, I think, to Rethinking Marxism, especially when it comes to rethinking strategies for the socialist future; Joe Buttigieg and Maliha Safri. And I want to begin, Joe, by asking you to tell us what you've been doing over the last few years, bringing Gramsci to an English speaking audience and how it differs from the way Gramsci has been received in the past.

Joe: Well I've been devoting most of my energies to preparing a complete edition of Gramsci's notebooks with a large critical apparatus to bridge gaps of knowledge and gaps of history between us and him, and the reason for this is that, when I started, Gramsci was an important point of reference for, not only Marxists, but people, for the most part, progressive thinkers, but people working in diverse camps and the use of Gramsci struck as extremely selective and there was relatively little work, based on a thorough knowledge of his text. Equally I was convinced, and this was not just me, when I proposed this project I really wanted to do another selection of Gramsci's work, which would cover terrain, not covered by the existing, though excellent anthologies like the whole internet selections from the prison notebooks, and it was, in fact, Edward Said who persuaded me, through repeated and insistent argument, that there was something extraordinarily valuable in the way Gramsci worked.

Graham: Can I ask you a question about your relationship to Saed; because I've noticed you reference him in your published works. Was this a personal relationship or was this just intellectual inspiration that you drew from his works? Did you know Saed?

Joe: Yes, I actually did know him very well. I mean these arguments took place in, either his office or sometimes on the phone and so on.

Graham: And were these in the context of political activity or were these purely theoretical discussions? Were you already beginning to think about Gramsci as a strategist or as an opponent of the opposition between civil society and the state?

Joe: No. Those ideas came to me later as I, myself, got to understand him more thoroughly. The interest came, primarily, from my being first and foremost a literary scholar. I mean I'm trained to work with texts and interpreting them and so was Edward, you know, who insisted, correctly, that the nature of the text itself merited attention and, in fact, when I started working on Gramsci and I finished the first volume, I wrote something that I had not planned to write, which was an introduction devoted, almost entirely, or at least for the most part, to, what I called Gramsci's method, the way in which Gramsci thinks is of

fundamental importance in itself, this is not because of some formalist interest, but just to mention one aspect of it, because, for example, what Rick Wolff talks about, the anti, dogmatic nature of Gramsci's thought is, perhaps, most immediately perceivable in the way he wrote, the way he studied.

Graham: Now this is what strikes me as, by far, the most interesting aspect of the project. I've read a few of your essays on Gramsci and I think I've read the introduction you're talking about and I had seen you, in fact, quite compellingly, break open these rarefied systems, open up Gramsci's text in a new way.

What's interesting to me is that you raise some problems that I've dealt with myself. I also come from a literary tradition and, as a sociologist, I find myself often in foreign territory, in the sense that I'm consumed with questions of interpretation and especially with questions of open texts. So, for instance, I think of an American parallel of Gramsci is Charles Sanders Peirce. There is a whole series of very close parallels, including the fact that Peirce, in the 1930s is what was collected by a number of Harvard philosophers, who put it in the form of the so-called collective papers, which just picked and chose from Peirce's 35 years of writing and put passages together without any regard whatsoever for context, and what you get is Peirce as a proto-positivist; Peirce as a pre-figuration of American 1930s philosophy. Whereas the Peirce I find is the radical, critical person that Deluse talks about Carlito Apple talks about. And I bring all this up because here is the paradox, or at least a difficulty for me, which is that you and I are both engaged in the same project, attempting to break open close texts and we do that strategically by talking about the imposition that previous interpretive systems and interpreters have imposed, or the senses that have been imposed on these texts.

So the question I have for you is, why isn't what you're doing yet another imposition? Why isn't it yet another form that is externally created by a leader who is quite foreign to and distant from the actual context of textual production?

Joe: Yes, well I still maintain it's different. First of all because I am attempting to be as rigorous as possible in presenting to the reader the text; Gramsci's very difficult and labyrinthine text, in the way he produced it, that is to say, I do not order it around themes, I do not, in any way, cluster notebooks that might, in fact, belong to a certain line of thinking.

Now, clearly, in my critical apparatus, I indicate to my reader when Gramsci finished this note, he actually started in a completely different notebook, writing these other notes, while also writing other notebooks.

Now, to some degree, you might say in that manner I am prompting a way of reading them, however, the reproduction of the text in my edition does not do that. The reproduction is as chronologically accurate as we can guess and there are very solid, reliable ways of dating, more or less, precisely when he wrote and in what sequence he wrote the notes.

So, to start with, that means that with an edition of this nature, which is identical to the Italian edition, except I also check the manuscript, since there have been some debates over the fidelity of the transcription. When I do this I am saying to the reader, 'It is still possible for you to reconstruct the line of thinking separately. This is how they are in the manuscript; here is the disposition of them.' That is not, in itself, an interpretive act, of course there is prompting towards a certain interpretation with what I do in the critical apparatus, although I am very conscious that it is necessary to provide help, without imposing a reading of them.

Graham: So you wanted to separate your own critical apparatus for your understanding of Gramsci from the actual work you've done in reconstructing...

Joe: Correct, and also I think this is a corrective because if you look at a lot of Gramsci Scholarship, people overcame the difficulty of the manuscript by picking and choosing, even when Hoare and Smith did the selections from the *Prison Notebooks*, which I consider to be an extraordinarily good selection. The people who used it, used it in a manner that jumped back and forth, selecting those bits and pieces that suited their thesis and I wrote, in fact, one essay early on called "Philology and Politics," using Gramsci, in which I demonstrated how, for example, Bobbio does this, and also a very influential essay on Gramsci, perhaps one of the most influential, which is Anderson's *The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci*. It is based on unacceptable, picking and choosing and stitching together of elements from this vast manuscript. Stitching them together in a manner that was going to reinforce is pre-determined thesis.

Graham: Now, what I'd like to do at this point is, begin to shift the conversation over this way and I'd like to do that by asking you, what are your thoughts about the relationship between, the way you think about it, Gramsci and politics and socialist strategy should be for the 21st century?

Joe: To say this succinctly I would start by saying that the term 'hegemony' which as Eric Hobsbawm pointed out, is now almost equated with Gramsci. Gramsci needs hegemony, hegemony needs Gramsci you know. The concept of hegemony has not always been examined and understood in as thorough a fashion as one would have liked.

Hegemony is a concept that Gramsci did not have when he started writing the prison notebooks; he arrives at it and elaborates it very gradually, and there is no notebook entitled hegemony. There are very few note titles where the word hegemony even appears. But one aspect of hegemony that I believe needs to be more fully appreciated is that, the concept of hegemony is a concept that enables an analysis of the prevailing forces. It is not a concept that starts as a strategy. It is a concept that emerges out of an analysis of the situation, an analysis prompted by the question, how is it that in certain moments in history, the progressive forces who set in motion the process of change, do not end up being, in fact, empowered? And he asks this question for the first time in the first notebook of the Action Party.

The Action Party was an Italian party which endorsed and, in fact, expressed the ideals of Mazzini and the idea was to convert Italy from a monarchy into a unified republic. The unification of Italy occurs – Garibaldi and company – and the people who come to power are not the Action Party, but the Moderate Party – that is the part of Cavour. And Gramsci says ‘Why?’ And he says, ‘You know, the Moderate Party was exercising leadership in society,’ (later, he would have said, ‘In civil society,.) before it came to power.’ Before, in other words, it took over the reigns of government. So, political class leadership appears to precede the coming to power. So this is a description, which then becomes central to Gramsci’s distinction between the revolution that occurred in Russia, which yielded the Soviet Union and the West.

Well he says, ‘Things are different. You cannot have, in the West, the same modern, liberal bourgeois societies.’ The sort of revolution that you had in Russia where, with one foul swoop you knock off a regime and you install another. Why? Because even if you knock the centre of power, that does not change anything, since everything, the power is surrounded by all these battlements in trenches and all kinds of things, which is, in other words, civil society, the institutions that perpetuate certain values, etc, etc. And this is the core of hegemony, to understand how, in our societies, we generate legitimacy for power and therefore perpetuate it, through consent.

So first of all it’s a description. Now, the strategy that comes from it is obvious; you cannot have a fronted attack because it gets you nowhere, that is a strategy.

Graham: Now, can I ask you a question about that and I don’t know if you can answer this? But, do you see a relationship between the development of hysteria for hegemony and his involvement in the factory occupations, in Turin and I think they were the Fiat occupations, right? Do you see a relationship between his actual concrete political involvement there and the development of this notion for hegemony?

Joe: Yes, there is a complicated relationship, of course, and many years have past, but in the notebooks Gramsci is examining, among other things, the reasons for defeat and the Factory Council Movement, which in fact, at one point, was on the verge or appeared to be on the verge of success when they took over the Fiat factory in Turin, occupied it; but it failed and part of the analysis that Gramsci produces has to do with the failure precisely, or the forces that prevented this Movement from generating a larger base of support, and why it was defeated. It’s, at this time, of course, Gramsci when he was active in the Factory Council Movement, had not yet even started to think in terms of hegemony, but that experience becomes one of the elements that contributes to his elaboration of the concept of hegemony.

Graham: So, now, the reason I ended with the question of factory occupations, of course, Maliha because I think what you talked about today and some of your recent work that I’ve seen, suggest to me, and maybe in part because it’s similar to the work I’m doing, that you’re doing some of the most important work for Rethinking Marxism’s future and,

perhaps, for the future of radical social transformation and that is work concerned with and consumed with the education of desire.

So, I'd like you to begin by talking about what the relationship between desire and social change and subjectivity, how do you conceive the relationship between those three forces?

Maliha: Let me start by talking just a little bit about the Community Economies Collective because I think that's where I first encounter these questions.

The Community Economies Collective is a project that joins researchers from AESA (The Association for Economic and Social Analysis), both in the US and Australia; the JK Gibson-Graham have been very important in the formation of that Collective. And they did a series of interviews with urban planners, city officials, in Holyoke, Amherst, Massachusetts, a variety of contexts, as well as community members and researchers, and they tried to create a language of the economy. They tried to document the diverse forms of economy in which people participate.

So they found themselves interviewing and finding out that people are involved with all these different kinds of economy, in their households, in their communities and yet, when it came to connecting to or believing in the possibility for a non-exploitative economic forums, there was this problem that people somehow either didn't believe that it was possible or there just wasn't a desire for that, as a specific forum. So, we started to kind of do all these reading groups between graduate students and really going into different aspects and different theoretical traditions that examined subjectivity.

Graham: So were these just graduate students or were you doing reading groups with actual workers, who are engaged in and trying to figure out what exploitation is?

Maliha: The reading groups took place after those conversations had taken place. So they weren't big, massive community conversations. They were more like a bunch of us slogging through these texts and trying to figure out what they meant. So that's kind of where I started to really get into this problematic.

Graham: And did that influence your involvement with the Journal, Rethinking Marxism, or were you already involved with the Journal?

Maliha: No, very much so. They kind of began at the same time. So the other people in that reading group, Steven Healy, Yahya Madra, Ceren Özselçuk all of us were doing this work and Jack Amariglio and Julie Graham were also participants. Julie was, on paper, the teacher of this course, although it was more like a seminar, where we kind of met together and we were teaching each other this stuff.

Graham: So, wait, let me understand this. You have a group of politically engaged, politically active graduate students ...

Maliha: All of whom were sort of committed to Marxism.

Graham: Who are committed to Marxism and who decide to go take a look at texts like Foucault, and I assume Althusser and Deleuze, perhaps Freud and Lacan and make those texts relevant to your concrete political activities ...?

Maliha: Exactly.

Graham: How could those texts possibly be relevant to concrete political activity?

Maliha: Well they had to do with the formation of subjectivity; how it is that people come to connect to ideologies, how they're formed as social subjects and this is where, I think, Lacan was helpful for us – the idea of a fantasy, as not just being these private, perverse little things, but also really formative of the economy and society.

Graham: I tell my students in social theory that the most important proposition in social theory is that desire desires the other's desire.

Maliha: Yes, I got that from Lacan. So subjectivity this is where, I think, there is a lot of important work being done in the Occupied Factory Movement and where they're actually using the language of subjectivity.

Graham: So I'd like you to talk about what you said to the panel, if you don't mind, about the factory occupations and a relationship between that and the re-education, the transformation of social desire?

Maliha: I talked very briefly, just mentioning a few key elements that I think are pertinent to this conversation.

There is about a 180 factories in Argentina, there's probably around 1200 occupied factories in Venezuela – there's a lot more than that, even, I think in Brazil, but I'm not sure exactly of the number there.

Anyway, if we just take the Argentinean context; 10,000 workers, about 180 to 200 factories. A lot of those factories had to kind of undertake these long occupations and the majority of them are about 70%.

The Argentinian Sociologist, Fajn, has sort of documented how, in those cases, where there were long and protracted occupations, neighbourhoods were really important forces for the success of those occupations, just by endowing or being there with their physical presence and also giving food and water supplies. And you see this interesting phenomenon, where the cooperatives are interacting a lot more inside the neighbourhoods, and I gave some examples like, Grissinopoli, which staged a series of musical concerts called *Musica en Las Fábricas* and they invited the Scandinavian Orchestra because they said that they and their neighbours don't have access to that kind of cultural product, so they wanted the factory to be a space for that. Or another cooperative, Chilavert which opened a library in a community space – that was open for anybody to use in the community.

As a side note, in Harlem, I've just noticed, in the last seven community meetings that I've gone to, all of them have taken place in churches and it's a great thing that churches open their doors like that, just not once I'd like to go to a community meeting and not have to say a prayer once. So it felt like offering the community a meeting space, is an important thing for social transformation. In Grissinopoli the neighbours installed and invested an alarm system, right after the occupation was successful, they said in case the workers couldn't respond to some sort of re-appropriation of the factory, the neighbours could get there quicker. So that required this autonomous Movement from the neighbourhood to protect this social Movement and, in a lot of the cases where re-appropriation attempts took place, neighbourhood resistance was really crucial in preventing that re-appropriation.

So, in all these cases you see lots of other examples. IMPA started a secondary school. Quite a few different cooperatives have started educational programmes.

What I think is interesting about all of these is a re-articulation of the link between the factory and the community or the firm and the community, where the community comes to have a stake in the sustenance and maintenance of the cooperative and the cooperative also has a stake in the neighbourhood. So you see lots of cooperatives participating in this political institution which is sort of interesting; that started happening in 2001 called Neighbourhood Assembly. So it's not state assembly, it's not city assembly, they were neighbourhood assemblies and the cooperatives had participated in those and came to those, held seats, so that felt like a very grassroots Movement.

Graham: Now that's tremendously interesting and I wonder do they take the next step and do what you are doing at UMASS go up from that practical experiment in radical democracy, to attempting, for themselves, to theorise?

Maliha: In MNER, that's the National Movement for Recovered Factories, the leader (Murua) in interviews, he uses the concept of subjectivity and says that the workers and co-op members are learning to talk and think in a new way and maybe the problem is that this transformation in subjectivity, it doesn't take place with all the co-op members, in which case, he sees a problem for the continuation of the Movement. So it seems like they really are creating these conversations with social scientists and trying to come up with ways to reproduce this social Movement and one of the arenas that they've identified as important is this role of subjectivity, what he called creating a rupture in subjectivity, but also reproducing that subjectivity, again in time.

Graham: Now this is a question actually for both of you; the common critique that you hear on the left, what's going on in Argentina, is that because of the political alienation there was insufficient attention devoted to turning this Communal Movement into a concrete political strategy, at the level of the state apparatus, and I wonder how you would respond to that?

Maliha: There's a lot of variety in the Occupied Factory Movements, for example, I think there's only one cooperative who is advocating for national socialisation of the means of production in their particular cooperative. The other cooperatives are pushing for expropriation, but in 2005 there was this regional conference in Caracas that's where representatives from occupied factories in Argentina, Brazil and Venezuela all got together, and you see a lot of variation there.

So in the Venezuelan context, almost the majority are pushing for socialisation, whereas in the Argentinean context, the majority are not pushing for socialisation. So you have, in these different Movements, different relationships to the state and different demands of the state.

Graham: And yet, are they able to build common ground, even though they have those fundamental differences?

Maliha: I think so. I think in that conference almost all of the members, despite their differences, saw it as crucial for them to form regional links. So they established trade links with one another, they also established ways of extending technical assistance, to fledgling co-ops in different places, and even if they might not have hoped to connect to the Argentinean state, they did have ideas about connecting to the Venezuelan state and connecting regionally to other cooperatives. So there is a sense of reaching out and creating global linkages, maybe not necessarily with their own state though.

Graham: What I'm hearing from you is that you see a real decentred revolution in the full sense of the term, happening; in the sense that linkages rather than the old-fashioned coalitions and solidarities that we had some 50 or 60 years ago.

Maliha: In this particular context, yes, I think so, and again, in the Venezuelan occupied factories it might be different though. There you see a little more of what you just asked about, where the occupied factories are pushing for a stronger link to the state and that's also, perhaps, because the state might be a little more conducive to those kinds of links. So they've set up a whole Ministry that is supposed to coordinate and support and provide conditions of existence for the occupied factories and that's become an explicit component of state policies, in a way that necessarily is not a part of Argentina. So you could have a potential coalition between the state and occupied factories because a state is more open to that there, than in Argentina.

Joe: Well I'm delighted that Maliha immediately responded to your question by saying, there's a lot of variation and I think it's essential to address these questions first, through very detailed consideration of the particularity of each situation. At the same time, I also believe it is necessary, given if we are talking, for example, about a specific situation like the United States, to move beyond where we were in the 80s, in the phase of self-critique and we said, 'We are the inheritors of an unacceptable concept of party' and all of that. I'm not advocating a return to party structures that prevailed in the 50s and 60s, but we have to figure the degree to which our own theorising of the problem of party has resulted in 1) a disabling, a true romanticisation, disabling

of political effectiveness. In other words, the notion that, through what, on a discursive level, appears very attractive, we are not going to have a party structure, we're going to have multiple Movements, they will see their overlapping and they will come together and a new dawn will rise – it didn't happen. And we are seeing the absurdity of this utopian vision today, as we see, what everyone might call the progressive forces, in the United States, lacerated by identity difference, not by the overlapping and merging of perceived interests and so on and so forth.

So we need to both do a particular thing, but also get over that phase and at the same time analyse the manner in which other organisations took place, which were not progressive, and the degree to which their success was ... I mean not that I like to call it success, but I'm thinking of things like the Home School Movement in the United States and its association with certain Church Movements; how that success was achieved; the Movement that in fact was, to some degree, about discipline and also to some degree subsumed under the umbrella of party, precisely during the phase, when in the United States, in theory we were opposed to that and in Europe too, where, for example, the Communist Party in Italy, at the first moment that somebody said, 'How dare you call yourself communists after 1989!' immediately said, 'Yes, we shouldn't call ourselves communists,' and now it consists of something like four different parties, who in the face of the right are saying, 'What should we do to become more coherent?'

Graham: Well this has been a very nice conversation. Thank you Joe, thank you Maliha; this was a lot of fun.