

**Some methodological debates in Gramscian studies: A critical assessment**

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Employing Antonio Gramsci's political and cultural theories to the study of social and political phenomena has been widely accepted in various academic fields. However, concentrating only on the field of comparative politics, there has been a number of methodological debates existing in the sub-field of Gramscian studies. This paper aims to provide two major methodological debates in Gramscian studies in comparative politics including the first debate; Gramsci's critique of economism, a kind of determinism in social explanation and the second debate is Gramsci's idea on social and political agencies.

### **Debate I: Critique of Economism**

Among the various social, cultural, and political thoughts of Antonio Gramsci, the idea of the critique upon 'economism' of some Marxists is one of the most crucial ideas of Antonio Gramsci's contributions to both Marxism and the study in comparative politics. Critique of economism is the most crucial theoretical tool to open up a proposal to solve the problems of determinist social explanation. This section deals with the question of what is economism, and Gramsci's solution to the problem, which is the concept of 'structure and superstructure relationship'.

The term economism, in fact, was first developed by Lenin (Bottomore, 1991: 168). He defined economism as a separate trend in the social democratic movement with a vulgarisation of Marxism, which downgraded the conscious element in social life. Lenin mainly argued against economism found in *What is to be done?* He mainly used the term economism in the context of practical politics, but economism also has a theoretical significance as elaborated in Gramsci (Bottomore, 1991: 168-169).

For Gramsci, economism has been used in various terms such as finalism, fatalistic, mechanistic, automatism, and determinism almost without distinction (see Gramsci, 1971: 410,412; Kolakowski, 1978: 231). The term economism can be defined as the interpretation of Marxism, which holds that political developments are the expression of economic development (Simon, 1999: 14). Gramsci creates this notion of

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economism in order to oppose, reject, and analyse the deterministic character in the theoretical error in some Marxists (Sassoon, 1987: 187), for example, the theoretician of the Second International such as Kautsky and Bernstein, who had a passive perspective that can be argued as a 'wait and see' position. In other words, this theoretical perspective about social change of this kind of Marxism just awaited the automatic evolution of the situation (Sassoon, 1987: 188). This kind of mechanical determinism tends to promote passive attitude towards the social agents to wait for the inevitable economic collapse (Simon, 1999: 15; Callinicos, 2007: 111-115).

Rather than just waiting and seeing things and situations have changed automatically, Gramsci proposes the more comprehensive theoretical perspective by putting the place for other elements e.g. history, ideology, and roles of human beings in his analysis of social transformation. Gramsci's attempts to against the economic determinism clearly appeared in his prison writings, for example,

Mechanical historical materialism does not allow for the possibility of error, but assumes that every political act is determined, immediately, by the structure, and therefore as a real and permanent (in the sense of achieved) modification of the structure. (Gramsci, 1971: 408)

Gramsci shows that the determinist Marxist makes a theoretical error in the explanation of social transformation because they absolutely concentrated on the economic base or the structure but neglected the other elements in their consideration of social change. Gramsci argues in the passage below that instead of the creation of the general law of social explanation, in contrast, the more important thing in his perspective is to find the deep relations of many social forces in the society.

It is from these considerations that one must start in order to establish what is meant by 'regularity', 'law', 'automatism' in historical facts. It is not a question of 'discovering' a metaphysical law of 'determinism', or even of establishing a 'general' law of causality. It is a question of bringing out how in historical evolution relatively permanent forces are constituted which operate with a certain regularity and automatism. (Gramsci, 1971: 412)

Therefore, in order to construct a more comprehensive framework to explain the world of social relations, Gramsci proposes to combat against economism by offering the concept of hegemony which rely more on complex relations *of social, cultural, political, and economic* elements in its explanation to social conversion. The passage below shows Gramsci's position to economism:

It is therefore necessary to combat economism not only in the theory of historiography, but also and especially in the theory and practice of politics. In this field, the struggle can and must be carried on by developing the concept of hegemony (Gramsci, 1971: 165)

### **Gramsci's Solution: Structure and Super structure relationship**

Gramsci notion of rejecting economism is based on the need to reformulate Marxist theory and the problem of relations between structure and super structure. Nonetheless, one of Gramsci's theoretical distinctions is that he is the first Marxist that weighted the importance of the ideological factors, which emerge in the sphere of superstructure in his analysis of social transformation. Marx, in his *Preface to A Critique of Political Economy*, shows the materialist conception of history by offering that the mode of production of material life conditions the social, political, and intellectual life process in general. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness (Marx, 2000[1859]: 425). Moreover, he argues that the opinion of an individual is not based on what he thinks of himself, so can we not judge such a period of transformation by its own consciousness; on the contrary, this consciousness must be explained rather from the contradictions of material life, from the existing conflict between the social productive forces and the relations of production (Marx, 2000[1859]: 426, 427). For Marx, the change of the economic foundations the entire immense superstructure is more or less rapidly transformed (Marx, 2000[1859]: 426).

Nevertheless, Gramsci's conceptions of the relations between structure and superstructure are different from Marx as Bobbio (1979) points that in Marx, the structure is primary and superstructure is secondary and subordinate, while in Gramsci it is exactly opposite because he was aware of the complexity of the superstructure (Bobbio, 1979: 33-34). Gramsci concentrates on the important roles of *ideology* as a factor driving social transformation. For Gramsci, not only material condition in the structure determines human conditions but also ideological elements in the superstructure, which is significant to social change. In short, the first methodological debate—Gramsci critique of economism—is the most important foundation thought in order to employ Gramsci's theories as a theoretical perspective to analyse social and political reality in the field of comparative politics. To solve this problem, Gramsci offers in his analysis of the relationship between structure and super structure. His main argument is to pay more

attention on the factors in the sphere of super structure e.g. ideology, philosophy, human will etc. in order to examine a given social transformation.

## **Debate II: Gramsci's social and political agencies**

Although Gramsci's prison writings were presented on various topics, the main aim of Gramsci is to discuss the problem of capitalist society and ways to solve it. Gramsci's unit of analysis in his focusing on social and political agencies have been provided in various terms such as *social forces, dominant class, subaltern, subordinate, or instrumental* (Hoare and Nowell Smith, 1971: xiv). In his writings, he usually refers to social forces similar to social groups or classes. Gramsci focuses on the relation between each social force and his political agencies in his political analysis. The purpose of this section is to provide Gramsci ideas about class, social groups, and social forces. These Gramscian concepts are crucial to understand his authentic social and political agencies, which are helpful in grounding basis understanding in using Gramscian theories in comparative politics.

Gramsci's major concern in his political thought is the social relation of each social group and class. He concentrates on these social relations rather than focusing on individual behaviour. Therefore, his idea on social class (as political agency) consists of two main classes, including the dominant class or the ruling class and the subaltern, subordinate, or the dominated class. This is worth noting that Gramsci rarely uses the term 'class' in the prison notebooks. More often he prefers to use the term 'social group' when he mentions each social and political agency (Nemeth, 1980: 86; see also Pozzolini, 1970: 67-75).

In Gramsci's thought, the ruling class is a group of people who can become a state (see Gramsci, 1971: 53), which is the group of people who can maintain their force and consent over the entire social dominated groups. Gramsci argues that the ruling class or the dominant class wish not only to lead other groups or classes but also to dominate people. They wanted a new force, which is independent of every compromise and condition, to become the arbiter of the nation (Gramsci, 1971: 105).

On the other hand, more important social groups to which Gramsci pays his attention is the subaltern or subordinate class. Gramsci's notion of subaltern social group and the ruling group are similar to other Gramscian concepts which are unsystematic,

scatter and diffuse throughout his prison notebooks (Green, 2002: 2). Marcus Green (2002) explains that the Gramsci conception of subaltern is rarely systematically presented in English because most of Gramsci scholars usually refer to Gramsci's selection from prison notebooks (1971) in which there are few essays concerning the subaltern (Green, 2002: 1). Green argues that the most systematic concerning on the subaltern of Gramsci prison notebooks was presented in notebook 25 in which Gramsci identifies slaves, peasants, religious groups, women, different races, and the proletariat as subaltern social groups (Green, 2002: 2).

Moreover, in Gramsci's last political writing prior to being sentenced by Mussolini fascism, *Some Aspects of the Southern Question* (1926), he drew some preliminary ideas about the subaltern social groups before he proposes this again in his prison writings. In *Some Aspects of the Southern Question*, Gramsci provides throughout this short paper that the subaltern includes peasant, proletariat in a wider sense, including, e.g., metal workers, joiners, building workers, priests, and intellectuals (see Gramsci, 1978: 441-462). In short, the term subaltern/subordinate means not just the oppressed social groups but also the groups lacking autonomy, subjected to the influence or hegemony of other social groups, and not possessing one's own hegemonic position (see Sassoon, 1982: 16).

Later on, in his prison notebooks, Gramsci argues that the history of subaltern classes is intertwined with the civil society and thereby, with the history of state and the group of state (Gramsci, 1971: 52). Moreover, he argues that the subaltern groups are always subject to the activity of ruling groups, even when they rebel and rise up (Gramsci, 1971: 55). This means that in order to analyse the subaltern groups in the Gramscian sense, we need to pay attention to the Gramscian conception of 'integral state' with the combination of the terrain of civil and political society.

In short, this section reinforces that in Gramsci analysis of political agency, Gramsci emphasises more on the role of subaltern/subordinate social groups rather than the ruling class in order to overcome the capitalist mode of social relations.

## **Conclusion**

The paper offers two major methodological debates in Gramscian studies in the field of comparative politics, including the first debate, Gramsci's critique of economism, a kind of determinism in social explanation. Gramsci critiques some vulgar Marxists of

the second International who had passive character and one-dimensional perspective based on the economic element in their explanation of social transformation. His solution to the problem of economism is that we need to consider the relationship between the structure and the super structure in order to gain more comprehensive understanding on, for example, ideological, philosophical, and human will factors along with economic matter. The second debate is Gramsci's idea on social and political agencies; this methodological debate is helpful in Gramscian studies in order to give a picture of Gramscian sense of social and political agencies in which he concentrates more on the subaltern social groups rather than the ruling/dominant group. This second debate will benefit future research in Gramscian studies in comparative politics.

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