

The Southern Question Today: An Area of Preoccupation in the English Speaking World

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As various scholars have noted, for whatever reasons, a number of Gramsci's main concepts are of interest these days in the English-speaking world. This paper underscores this point taking up one of them in particular, that of the Southern Question. The Southern Question or how the imperial countries imagine the South, which is what the subject in effect becomes is an important subject. As a short cut to what could be obviously a rather large undertaking, it was decided to concentrate simply on two main uses the concept has been put to in academic writing. On doing this, what was found was that although academic writing does base itself on Gramsci as one would expect when it takes up the Southern Question, it appears less concerned with the oppression of the South or the struggle of the South for emancipation than did Gramsci. Often, the concept appears more as a rationalization of why inevitably there is a South, yet one must admit this work contains its share of insights.

Within Anglo-American scholarship, there appear to be two principle ways the concept is used. One of these ways, one which I associate with international political economy, approaches the Southern Question by contrasting American democracy with the non-democratic or perhaps archaic, subaltern global South, this South taken to be the Southern Question, the second way, one which I associate with the World Social Forum and which has a large Anglo-American input, takes the idea of a global North and global South to imply a need for global alliances between Southern peasants and Northern workers for the sake of development. While one learns much from this newer work, still one might wonder do these newer insights warrant the abandonment of the traditional usage of the term Southern Question, the one associated with particular nation states? Is the propensity to emphasize the international today more of a scientific conclusion or more an expression of acceptance of the prevailing imperial rhetoric? Is, for example, Italy today beyond the traditional Southern Question or is it otherwise, is the traditional Southern question still in existence in Sicily or Sardinia or is it not? The last section of this paper takes up this question finding the nation state continues to be alive and well and by extension it would seem the Southern Question in its classic sense.

1-Variation One-The Southern Question understood as a Subaltern Identity in a Global Democratic World.

This variation doubtless has many influential proponents in social thought. One

example, a good one for our purposes, is one which could be drawn from Neo-Gramscian international relations. Here a bit of background is doubtless in order. Neo-Gramscianism is a trend in I.R. which arose in the early 1980's and which was originally associated with Robert Cox. Writing in the context of the Cold War and later of the breakdown of the Soviet Union, Cox found the maintenance of hegemony involved a battle of ideas. Hegemony at this point implied not just the traditional persuasion on the national scale but persuasion on the world scale as well. As democracy triumphed, Cox came to believe that the idea of democracy bound people all over the world together under the leadership of the United States. In this variation, the South and by extension the Southern Question represents a whole world of "others", be it made up of the subalterns, the culturally archaic or simply the non-democratic regime types and not simply Italian type regimes. What sustains the Southern Question in this expanded sense is the "Passive Revolution", a mix of contradictions working their way down and finally impacting on these archaic and subaltern peoples, arousing a crisis of identity leading sometimes to various movements especially New Social Movements.(1)

Thus, for example, the "Southernness" of the archetypal example, the Mexican Zapatista might today best be explained in terms of a Passive Revolution combined with a subaltern Mayan cultural identity. For others it would not appear this way. An identity analysis of the Zapatista might bring some new insights but it would not be one which has a foundation. One would wonder if those espousing subalternism also assume Mexican history is now irrelevant. (2)

From this it is clear that one important point to ascertain about different conceptions of the Southern Question is that of where they came from and to what can they be compared. For Neo-Gramscian IR, it appears the relevant background of the Zapatistas is NAFTA and globalization while from a Gramscian social history perspective, the background of today's Zapatista minimally would be one including the Mexican Revolution and the career of Emiliano Zapata. By extension, it would include other similar examples, and not simply from Mexico. If one took Italy for example, one might recall the "Red Years" in Turin of the early 1920's when Gramsci tried to unite the Northern worker with the Southern peasant. The events of Turin like those of the Mexican Revolution were parts-and this is the basis of their comparability- of what is often called "interrupted revolutions" following the Mexican theorist Adolfo Gilly. It appears that what is going on in Mexico today between Marcos and Obrador may unfortunately also result once again in an interrupted revolution.

In the Italian case, what Gramsci had managed to do was to politicize a small number of workers in Turin, have them think in terms of controlling the work place and of reaching out to the migrant laborers in the fields of the Piedmont. And while this was only still in process, it brought a hysterical reaction from the Italian liberals. They (the liberals) abandoned their belief in rule by law in order to protect their property. They voted for the Fascists and the Fascists came to power ushering in repression and the destruction of the left for the next twenty years. Gramsci's strategy, which was in this application a disaster, in theory had not only worked but it changed the Left's understanding of revolution probably forever. In hindsight, one might conclude, as doubtless Togliatti did, that for all the theoretical brilliance of the Turin communists, their choice of where to begin resisting the Italian state given the power differential between the left and the state

in the North was however problematic.

What Marcos, the Zapatista leader, did by way of contrast was to begin his campaign in the South. There the weight of numbers, the filter of culture, the remoteness of the region and the long-term hatred of the state felt by everyone around worked in his favor. In the 1996 demonstration in Puebla, a city in South central Mexico he reached out to Northern labor; in the 2001 March on Mexico City, he reached out to the Mexican people as a whole. The results so far have been amazing: the fall of the PRI and the utter dependence of President Fox and now President Calderon on the US.

What will be the outcome in Mexico? This is of course unknowable but the way the issue is framed on the level of scholarship certainly leads in quite different directions. Will the success or failure of the Zapatista movement hang on the playing out of global contradictions as democracy spreads, in the context of "Passive Revolutions"? Alternatively, will the success or failure of the Zapatista movement rest on the choices made by the Mexican working class? Will the working class choose to make a deep alliance with the Zapatista this time or will they buy their own peace as they did in the Ayala Plan during the Mexican Revolution?

IPE, one might want to add, continues to develop. In a recent book, Adam Morton overcomes some of the Eurocentrism of the older IPE by embedding his discussion of neo-liberalism in elites around the world including in Mexico.

2-A Second Variation of the Southern Question-The Alliance of the Northern worker cum NGO and the Southern Peasant as in the World Social Forum

In 2001 an important meeting of people from all over the world in Porto Alegre Brazil began the World Social Forum. Quickly the WSF became a kind of international discussion event, one which is quite congenial both to the progressive NGO's of the North, and to a number of movements of the global South including peasant movements and of course others as well. A number of proponents of the WSF began to envisage the politics of the future as global and beyond the nation state as this is what the WSF itself is. As writers reflected on the success of the WSF, the Southern Question seems to have become a matter of Southern underdevelopment. (3) NGO's from the North should move in and play a role in alliance with local groups; this will overcome the Southern Question. This may be the case, although it seems difficult to imagine. If it were the case, it would, however, be in contrast to Gramsci's insistence in the Southern Question that only when Northern workers control the workplace can they be of any use to the Southern peasantry. One might ask does the WSF-centered re-reading imply the end of the struggle for socialism? Has the goal of economic development replaced the struggle to eliminate capitalism? Is this what the Southern Question is today?

Sometimes, one might think so. If for example the WSF claims that "another world is possible", this is pretty far from the ordinary Marxist view that another world is necessary. Are we to look to the expansion of civil society? Is civil society the "great equalizer"? (4) Is civil society the "second world power"? For a number of writers from IPE, WSF, from Post-Colonial Studies and elsewhere, it is a matter of belief that civil society has the power to overcome the oppression currently to be found in the global South, a belief associated in many instances with a certain reading of Gramsci.(5) On the other hand, in a more traditional nationalist

reading, the existence of civil society was simply a political fact, one which had to be confronted by the Modern Prince, the Modern Prince, a party which was anti-capitalist and anti-hegemonic. For Gramsci the existence of civil society was not a sign of progress or of hope, it was a battle ground. For Gramsci colonial alliances were not a Passive Revolution.

3-The Southern Question today with some Reference to Italy and Mexico following a more traditional reading of Gramsci

The traditional formulation of the Southern question, one might claim, still has a continuing scientific role to play in today's context for historical sociology. The traditional formulation remains the key to understanding counter hegemonic struggle in about a dozen countries in the world, countries divided North and South. Several of these countries are in Europe, several in Latin America, plus Egypt, India, Nigeria among others around the world. This finding is an empirical one but it is one which has as was noted a certain theoretical base as well, a middle level one. As an aside here, one might want to recall that in contrast to that of Trotsky's or Lenin's, Gramsci's methodology does not function in terms of universals, in other words not every country has a Southern Question, rather it's a methodology rooted in a middle level analysis as in historical sociology, one which applies to certain countries but not others. In all of the countries, just mentioned the state plays the Northern working class off against the Southern peasant. In all these countries, race, ethnicity, gender and other contradictions appear but there is a certain ongoing regionalization of them in the political imaginary. In other countries this is not the case. Let us illustrate what is meant by the "traditional" Southern Question today by looking at Italy and Mexico today. Italy and Mexico are useful examples because they are countries divided North and South.

Turning to Italy of the past few years, one finds the South to be what it always was, an amalgam of the oppressed, concretized regionally but always more than simply its territorial expression. In the year 2002, the Bossi-Fini Law succeeded in making the life of the immigrant to Italy difficult in many ways as he became dependent on his employer for a contract to retain a legal status in the country. Is this simply post-modern migration or is it a part of the current amalgam of the older Southern Question once again in transition? This is the historiographical question. In other words, is there still counter-hegemonic struggle in some stage of re-formulation in Italy today? This would be the dividing line. If there isn't, if there is simply class struggle, one might as well consider the post-modern approach to migration but if there is that is a different story. What appears to be the case is that since World War Two, many Southerners managed to break into Northern society but the state nonetheless succeeded in re-building the oppression of the South by imposing investment on it and by dumping more oppressed people into the country. However, the resistance to the Southern Question has continued. As various researchers have shown, there are cultural institutions such as the Centri Sociali, which have grown up and which serve as laboratories for the reformulation of the struggle against oppression. In this context one might

mention the special contribution of popular music, especially Rap music. Rap music has unique possibilities for cross-over and fusion and this is what the reconstruction of the Southern resistance currently requires. This is in other words a stage of cultural preparation. Later, history will witness the coming together of what the Sicilian writer Elio Vittorini has called the "insulted world" in a more conventional political sense. In other words even with some changes in detail such as one would inevitably find after fifty years, confronting the Southern Question today still means what it always meant, i.e., it means resisting the government's attempts to racialize and mystify the exploitation of whoever's labor is being exploited. And this no doubt explains the relevance of music groups, such as, Hannibal's Children, Half Black and Sa Razza from Sardinia.(6) Gramsci in his day too was concerned with the reformulation of the Southern Question. It was never simply static. He wrote about colonized people, about Albanians, and about other groups who too came from the insulted world, making all of these a part of the South. The South he always insisted was exceedingly complicated and this still applies.

Let us now return one last time to the case of Mexico, the country which represents a kind of advanced example of resistance to the Southern Question today. In June 2005, the Zapatista issued the "Sixth Declaration of Selva Lacandona". From reading this declaration, it becomes clear that the Zapatista movement is much more of a Mexican national movement than generally thought. The declaration portrays the Mexican people fighting against a state, which has been high-jacked by a group of neo-liberal criminals. As the declaration also makes clear, the Zapatista are much more socialist than was commonly realized and much more overtly anti-capitalist. The identity issue-Indianness- which the state intellectuals always emphasize seems to be quite secondary. Again, one hears echoes of the 1926 Southern Question, the essay in which Gramsci attacked the Socialists for poisoning the minds of the Northern workers with their anti-Southern pseudo-scientific racism about "Southern primordialism".

To sum up, in recent times, the concept of the Southern Question has re-entered Anglo-American Gramsci circles after a certain absence as a part of new social thought and this has awakened scholarly interest in the possibility of applying the term in new ways. This paper attempted a very brief survey. It found most such work more or less accepting the idea of a South which is outside of history. Such an assumption however does not fit well with a writer who is as historically-minded as is Gramsci. As the Zapatista case and the case of Italy itself illustrate the more a movement gets enmeshed in politics, the more the world of Gramsci and the nation state seem to suddenly re-emerge as well, at the same time, one can not gainsay the growth of international networks these days. Still, how much has changed in the capitalist mode of production since Gramsci in a fundamental sense is a hard question to decide while we are still part of it.

Endnotes

1-Adam David Morton, "Structural Change and Neo-Liberalism in Mexico: 'Passive Revolution' in the global political economy," Third World Quarterly v.24/4(2003)631-653. This is further elaborated in his recent book, Unravelling Gramsci-Hegemony and Passive Revolution in the Global Economy (London:

Pluto, 2007). My reading of Gramsci led to the idea that his center of gravity was the nation, Italy in particular. Passive Revolution has a particular meaning in Italian national history. On the margin of his work on Italy, which was always his primary concern, he used terms more loosely so that Passive Revolution in certain places might seem to apply everywhere. Going back to Marx, there have always been commentators of Marx who believed one should put everything he wrote on an equal plane. In my view this is unsatisfactory as an approach to theory and I would apply this idea to the attempt to expand Gramscian theory in this manner.

2-Adam David Morton, "La Resurreccion del Maiz: Globalization, Resistance and the Zapatistas," Millenium, Journal of International Studies v. 31(2002)27-54.

3-Patrick Bond, "World Social Forum: `NGO Trade Fair' or Left Wing Politics," ZNET (February 1, 2007)1-5.

4-Marc Becker, "World Social Forum" Peace & Change v.32/2(April 2007) p. 203-218

5-Pasquale Verdicchio, Bound by distance-Rethinking Nationalism Through the Italian Diaspora (Madison, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1997).

6-Ashley Dawson and Patrizia Palumbo, "Hannibal's Children: Immigration and Antiracist youth subcultures in contemporary Italy," Cultural Critique 59(2005)165-186.