

A criticism of the transitions literature is that it sees climate change as a problem that can be adapted to by having technical innovations, developed by the private sector, rolled out into society via supportive public policy and market incentives.

There is no opposition or inertia; no losers or vested interests. It is a process without politics.

### **Pessimism of the intellect**

Bush Senior at the Rio Conference in 1992

A decade later Bush Junior said that the Kyoto Protocol is unfair to the US because it exempts big countries like China and India from carbon dioxide reduction. 'I will not accept a plan that will harm our economy and hurt American workers'.

Why pessimism?

- Politicians trapped in games structured by the defence of 'national interests', the electoral cycle, etc.
- Misinformation
- Vested interests in the carbon economy as a result of direct financial relation (profit/wage) or because political legitimacy has become reliant on emissions
- Problem presented as an immediate threat to way of life (or so distant and catastrophic as to invite fatalism)

### **Optimism of the will**

Re-defined the limits of the possible in society and overcame detractors who said it couldn't/wouldn't/shouldn't work

- Climate equivalent of Apollo project: technological breakthrough and civilian deployment
- Green New Deal: state-led employment programmes in low-carbon infrastructure and energy production; green investment banks for private sector
- Avoid climate apartheid and internationalise struggle
- Eco-socialism, and more recently, agro-ecology

Although longer projects, each has its moment of triumph

### **Gramsci**

He was a founding member and one time leader of the Communist Party of Italy and was imprisoned by Benito Mussolini's Fascist regime in the 1920s.

Use Gramsci for two reasons:

- 1) Theorised broad historical transformation
- 2) Asked how capitalism stood in the way of this – that is to say, he thought the study of the polity was best understood within the context of class formation, class struggle and the social relations of production

## **Capitalism**

- The accumulation drive means that capitalism must constantly expand and this has required constant conversion of the planet into commodities. Individual capitalists may be swayed by green ideas, but as a class they cannot help but treat the earth as a collection of resources to exploit, otherwise they are forced out into the proletariat.
- Inequality mitigates collective action since it makes it difficult to build coalitions around shared sacrifice, as well as giving those who have made their fortunes through carbon-intensive business the means to lobby against change

## **Hegemony (business as usual)**

Writing on the absence of socialist revolution in Western Europe, Gramsci argued that capitalism had been able to survive because of the cultural hegemony of the middle-classes. Ideological norms had filtered through civil society leading the working classes to identify their own good with that of the bourgeoisie. This meant they would work to preserve the status quo because the narrow 'economic-corporate' interests of the ruling classes had now been universalised and become the common sense values of all.

Hegemony implies that the ruling class need not enforce discipline by coercion but rather through consensus.

To achieve hegemony, the elite seeking dominance must form alliances with a variety of other forces. This requires making a number of compromises and providing moral and intellectual leadership about what is 'right and wrong' and what is 'feasible and unfeasible'.

In this way, the hegemonic class is able to define the 'limits of possibility' within the polity and also set its interests in universal terms, often using social institutions such as the school, church, media, council, etc.

- Post-war hegemony was managed liberalism: family wage, consumerism, freedom... Fordism and automobility
- Post-70s hegemony has been neoliberal: cheap travel, cheap consumer goods, etc.

See this in the rollback of welfare state and rollout of market governance – carbon trading rather than carbon taxes; private energy companies rather than nationalised utilities. But also competitiveness (=airports, roads, etc.) and choice (= consumerism, etc.).

## **Counter-hegemony**

Civil society as the site of resistance to, as well as maintenance of, hegemony

Civil society not reduced to professional NGOs like Greenpeace but includes all organisations beyond political society (government, army, police, courts, etc.)

Question as to whether climate change can be understood in class terms and as a project of social transformation (i.e. change the politicians as well as the politics?)

Gramsci's notion of a 'war of position' (as against a 'war of manoeuvre') was a battle for hearts and minds. He acknowledged that those with an interest in preserving the status quo wouldn't simply sit back and watch others attempt to mobilise the population to an altogether different political settlement. They would act to defend their privileged position.

How would hearts and minds be won and counter-hegemony happen?

### **Organic intellectuals**

For Gramsci, radical political change comes about through challenging, undermining and eventually replacing a dominant ideology. How does this happen?

Organic intellectuals are thinkers attached to particular social classes but who are able to explain the world in ways that were understandable and appealing to a broad cross-section of society, and thereby change to change basic political habits and political thoughts.

Gramsci said that all men are intellectuals, in that all have intellectual and rational faculties, but not all men have the social function of intellectuals. Organic intellectuals were also different to traditional intellectuals – say, ivory tower academics (*intelligentsia*) – who attempted to stand apart from society and act autonomously. In contrast, it was the function of organic intellectuals to act as 'permanent persuaders' in organising cultural hegemony within civil society and articulating strategies by which this could be pursued.

They do not simply describe social life in accordance with scientific rules, but instead articulate, through the language of culture, the feelings and experiences which the masses could not express for themselves. This is why Gramsci saw the need for popular workers' education to encourage development of intellectuals from the working class.

### Climate organic intellectuals?

James Hansen was head of NASA's Institute for Space Studies for 46 years.

Hansen is a climate scientist, not an economist or politician (which makes him different to another campaigner such as Al Gore). But he has waded into policy debates by heavily criticizing the cap-and-trade mechanisms that Europe and California are using to curtail their carbon emissions. Instead, Hansen says, it would be better to have a simple carbon tax on the well-head or mine-shaft (i.e. on the companies extracting rather than using fossil energy), with the revenue rebated to the public. Notably, one of his criticisms of cap and trade was that it makes millionaires on Wall Street and other trading floors at public expense.

Since retiring, Hansen has increased his activism. He was arrested for protesting the Keystone XL tar sands pipeline. Hansen: "We have reached a fork in the road and the politicians have to understand we either go down this road of exploiting every fossil fuel we have — tar sands, tar shale, off-shore drilling in the Arctic — but the science tells us we can't do that without creating a situation where our children and grandchildren will have no control over."

Might Hansen be joined by other intellectuals: ranchers; residents on low-lying land; wildlife enthusiasts, etc.

## Credibility

For ideas to become effective and assume the 'fanatical granite solidity of popular beliefs' they had to connect with a particular constellation of social forces. For prevailing common sense assumptions to be transformed into a counter-hegemonic consciousness or 'good sense', it was imperative not just to unite subordinated social forces around an alternative socio-political project, but also to secure for that project credibility for its attendant mode of production

## Spirituality

For Gramsci, Marxism could supersede religion only if it met people's spiritual needs, and to do so people would have to think of it as an expression of their own experience

Caroline Lucas: "The Green message has been delivered in hair shirts. As a party, we have to show what it would look like to live in a zero carbon economy"

De-growth and the shift to non-monetary, non-consumptive lifestyles – e.g. work sharing, low-cost family activities, valorisation of the 'local', access to the commons, health benefits, etc. This popularises the idea of reducing consumption, although many (including socialists) remain sceptical of the idea that this could end accumulation while capitalism remains.

## War of Position

Machiavelli wrote during the Italian Renaissance of a Prince, an absolute sovereign to whom history assigns a decisive task: the constitution of a nation. Gramsci wrote of the modern Prince, the mass Communist Party, to which history had assigned the political project of proletarian revolution and the institution of socialism.

Who will be the historical figures of the climate change movement?

Neo-Gramscians like Stephen Gill has proffered the postmodern Prince, a global plural group with no clear leadership structure, but which seeks to combine elements of identity formation (*Ubuntu, buen vivir*) with transnational solidarity. Can be seen in the coming-together of climate justice activists at the World Social Forum and other global gatherings = environmental public

Others like John Bellamy Foster have stuck closer to the traditional focus on labour. The case here is for a red-green politics: a critical Marxist approach requires an ecological worldview, while a critical ecology requires an anti-capitalist and ultimately socialist orientation, as crystallised in worker's struggles against toxic environments in capitalism's periphery = environmental proletariat

Both wish to claim the protests and practices of climate refugees, 'natural' disaster victims, anti-drilling communities, rainforest campaigners and so on as part of their constituency

Gramsci's own experience is instructive here... The failure of Italian workers' councils to develop into a national movement led Gramsci to believe that a Communist Party in the Leninist sense was needed. He believed that many trade unionists had settled for a gradualist approach in that they had refused to struggle on the political front in addition to the economic front. While Gramsci envisioned the trade unions as one organ of a counter-hegemonic force in capitalist society, the trade union leaders simply saw these organizations as a means to improve conditions within the existing structure. Gramsci equated this to covert reformism and even liberalism.

## Passive revolution

Gramsci proffers that under modern capitalism, the bourgeoisie can maintain its economic control by allowing certain demands made by trade unions and mass political parties within civil society to be met by political society. Thus, the bourgeoisie engages in passive revolution by going beyond its immediate economic interests and allowing the forms of its hegemony to change – e.g. the neoliberal ‘revolution’ of the 1970s saw finance capital ascend over industrial capital, and ‘flexible’ labour ascend over organised labour.

### Might climate capitalism or the green economy be another form of co-option?

The Carbon Tracker Initiative is one of those attempts, like carbon trading and the Carbon Disclosure Project, to encourage action by changing the market incentives facing firms.

It identifies the scale of *unburnable carbon* currently listed on stock exchanges around the world in order to demonstrate the systemic risk to markets if (and it’s a big if!) carbon reduction targets are enforced by governments.

They are interesting politically because of:

- (a) Who they enlist in coalition – Carbon Tracker Initiative was founded by a financier and academic, with a campaigner as Chairman
- (b) Which fractions of capital they target – financial companies (insurers, institutional investors, trading firms, banks) and equity markets

The growth of these profit-making opportunities and profit-defending strategies has created a shift in the balance of forces – financiers would not necessarily be in the pro-climate coalition without carbon markets as a policy response.

This could be seen as a ‘divide and conquer’ strategy...or a false solution & passive revolution

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On the flip-side, the notion of self-sufficiency and ‘back to the land’ have been criticised as forms of passive resistance. Political action is the only option.