



Luxemburg and Gramsci. The Role of Optimism and Pessimism during the Struggle for an Alternative to Capitalism

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ENG Abstract: What I try to do in this paper is to analyze and probe what Rosa Luxemburg and Antonio Gramsci understand by pessimism and optimism. Luxemburg and Gramsci demonstrate how liberal capitalist ideology uses “a false form of hope to keep people yoked to the system that oppresses them.” In this “terrible world” and under the current capitalist circumstances which lead to economic, social, political and ecological crises, it may be difficult to be optimistic about the future. Besides, not only the multiple crises but also the many defeats suffered by progressive movements in the different areas of struggles against ongoing economic and political regression bring along a depressive and desperate feeling that could also be called pessimism. The questions I am asking are very simple: What is pessimism and optimism for Luxemburg and Gramsci? For them, what sort of social conditions lead to pessimism or optimism? In this paper, I will try to demonstrate that both Rosa Luxemburg and Gramsci adopted a dialectical approach to pessimism and optimism, they were “pessoptimists” so to speak. Based upon what Hegel once said, “the negative is just as much positive”, I will explain this dialectical relationship by claiming that pessimism exists in optimism and vice versa. For this purpose, I will focus on some of Rosa Luxemburg’s texts in the recently published volumes on Revolution as well as in her letters. Furthermore, I will concentrate on some texts by Gramsci in which he makes particular reference to pessimism and optimism as symbolized by his famous “pessimism of the intelligence, optimism of the will”.

Keywords: optimism, pessimism, pessoptimism, Gramsci, Luxemburg, Hegel.

ES Luxemburgo y Gramsci. El papel del optimismo y el pesimismo durante la lucha por una alternativa al capitalismo

Resumen: El propósito de este trabajo es analizar y explorar lo que Rosa Luxemburgo y Antonio Gramsci entienden por pesimismo y optimismo. Luxemburgo y Gramsci muestran cómo la ideología capitalista liberal utiliza “una falsa forma de esperanza para mantener a la gente sometida al sistema que la oprime”. En este “mundo terrible” y bajo las actuales circunstancias capitalistas que conducen a la crisis económica, social, política y ecológica, puede resultar difícil ser optimista sobre el futuro. Además, no sólo las múltiples crisis, sino también las numerosas derrotas sufridas por los movimientos progresistas en los diferentes ámbitos de lucha contra la regresión económica y política en curso traen consigo un sentimiento de depresión y desesperación que también podría llamarse pesimismo.

Las preguntas que planteo son muy sencillas: ¿qué es el pesimismo y el optimismo para Luxemburgo y Gramsci? Para ellos, ¿qué tipo de condiciones sociales conducen al pesimismo o al optimismo? En este trabajo intentaré demostrar que tanto Luxemburgo como Gramsci adoptaron una concepción dialéctica del pesimismo y el optimismo: eran “pesoptimistas”, por así decirlo. Basándome en lo que Hegel dijo una vez, “lo negativo es tanto como positivo”, explicaré esta relación dialéctica afirmando que el pesimismo existe en el optimismo y viceversa. Para ello, me centraré en algunos textos de Luxemburgo contenidos en los volúmenes recientemente publicados sobre la Revolución, así como en sus cartas. Además, me centraré en algunos textos de Gramsci en los que, haciendo especial referencia al pesimismo y al optimismo, se expone la famosa doctrina del “pesimismo de la inteligencia, optimismo de la voluntad”.

Palabras clave: optimismo, pesimismo, pessoptimismo, Gramsci, Luxemburgo, Hegel.

Sumario: Hegelian dialectic. Rosa Luxemburg: the optimist of pessimism... Antonio Gramsci: the pessimist of optimism... Conclusion: Towards a pessoptimism of the will and intellect. References.

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“I can’t be a pessimist because I am alive. To be a pessimist means you have agreed that human life is an academic matter. So, I am forced to be an optimist. I am forced to believe that we can survive, whatever we must survive” (Baldwin, 2019).

When I was reading Rosa Luxemburg’s and Antonio Gramsci’s letters, especially those from prison, the following question arose: how did they manage to be optimistic while the general period and their personal situations seemed to be so pessimistic? Following this question, I thought that the concepts of pessimism and optimism—which seem to me to be among the most dominant psycho-political states of mind in the 21st century—can be a good starting point for this paper, in particular, for people like me who come from an authoritarian country such as Turkey. Concretely, the ongoing ever intensifying political and economic crisis in my country makes, to quote Rosa Luxemburg (2022a), “depression and [a] pessimistic frame of mind [...] the overwhelmingly dominant” (p. 378) force among many people, a depression that has only deepened with Erdogan’s victory in the 2023 elections. Then again, both Rosa Luxemburg and Antonio Gramsci are known for what appeared to be their unwavering faith in revolution. Hence, I thought it would be worthwhile to find out what Luxemburg and Gramsci had to say about these two concepts, both in their personal lives and in their political-philosophical writings.

Interestingly enough, starting from childhood, Luxemburg and Gramsci have much in common.¹ While Luxemburg “faced a childhood illness that left her with a permanent disability”, Gramsci suffered from a malformation of the spine that left him seriously hunchbacked. However, these so-called disabilities never prevented them from attending school, overcoming adversities due to their sex, nationality/region and later becoming the Marxist revolutionaries that, in spite of their all too early, violent deaths, continue to be of vital theoretical and practical inspiration until our times. In fact, I would argue that, starting from childhood and thanks to the multiple oppressions they experienced, optimism was a dominant presence throughout what became their revolutionary lives. And though we may not find many explicit references to optimism in Luxemburg and Gramsci, and although one can argue that certain pessimistic and depressive attitudes can be identified at different stages in their personal and political lives, their writings and how they lived their lives can nonetheless tell us much about how to engage in revolutionary struggle in both favourable and adverse political and personal circumstances.

So, what is pessimism? What is optimism? How can we relate these concepts to the notion of revolution? In his book *Hope without optimism*, Terry Eagleton finds optimism to be of quasi dangerous nature. For him, optimism is “self-sustaining” and “more a matter of belief² than of hope. It is based on an opinion that things tend to work out well, not on the strenuous commitment that hope involves” (2015, p. 1). Hope, on the other hand, is “a question of whatever manages to survive the general catastrophe” or “the general ruin” (Eagleton, 2015, p. 115). Curiously, instead of emphasizing on hope as a stimulative force, the First Nation activist and artist Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2022), in a recent letter to Robyn Maynard, stresses the beauty of absence of hope. She writes that “our movement and mobilizations do not have the privilege of resting upon [such] a fleeting emotion. The absence of hope is a beautiful catalyst” (p. 257). Instead of preferring or refusing one particular political motivator, she insists on their interchangeability. She writes “tenacity, persistence, stubbornness, rage, resentment, pessimism and despair are all motivators. So are joy, love, attachment, care, truth, optimism, respect and reciprocity. So is the delicious soup in which all those exist at once” (Simpson, 2022, p. 257). What Simpson tries to say here is something *in-against-and-beyond* optimism and pessimism: an expression one can find in John Holloway’s (2022) recent book *Hope in Hopeless Times*.³ As such, it

¹ In recent years, some scholars of Rosa Luxemburg and Antonio Gramsci have begun to associate Luxemburg and Gramsci more and consider their theory, thought and political struggles together (Antonella and Prestipino, 2010; Caloz-Tschopp, M. C., Chollet, A. and Felli, R., 2018; Wainwright, 2019; Douet, 2020; Liguori, 2020b; Roio, 2020; Doğan, 2021; Haug, 2023). For the differences and continuity between them, also see some old texts such as Amodio (1986) or Vitantonio (1987). In her article in *Historical-Critical Dictionary of Marxism*, Frigga Haug (2023) writes that “Gramsci can also be read as a ‘Luxemburgist’.” In the article, Haug concentrates on the concept of Luxemburg-Gramsci-Line which was coined by Peter Weiss in order to demonstrate how their approaches converge towards each other.

² I think that one cannot argue hope without belief. Since we believe in something, we can still have a hope (about something to happen).

³ What Holloway says here about hope, in my view, can be applied to pessimism and optimism. Underlying the dialectical understanding of hope, he claims that “hope is negative, but it is more than opposite. It is an overflowing, in thought and in action. It starts

seems to me that Luxemburg and Gramsci could be viewed as 20th century ancestors to both Simpson's and Holloway's dialectical conceptions of optimism, pessimism and hope, a theme to which I will come back further on. In this perspective, Luxemburg and Gramsci's conceptions of optimism and pessimism are more than opposing concepts originated from a critique of liberal capitalism.

I believe that what Luxemburg and Gramsci did is to demonstrate how the liberal capitalist system uses "a false form of hope to keep people yoked to the system that oppresses them" (Martel, 2019, p. 125). Optimism is generally related to liberal capitalism. In other words, we may speak of different types of optimism such as revolutionary, liberal and religious/dogmatic optimism. Lauren Berlant (2011) calls liberal optimism a type of "cruel optimism" because in effect there has never been any realization of the promises that liberal capitalism has offered such as happiness, safety, riches. Optimism is thus a part of the liberal ideology. Despite these liberal promises, the current political and economic crisis which uncovers the optimistic face of this ideology also leads to a pessimistic feeling among people about their future *life*. One can state that there are two different types of pessimism: one resulting from liberal capitalism; the other coming from defeats of progressive struggles against oppression. In other words, on the one hand, there is the optimism and pessimism resulting from liberal capitalism and the multiple crises that it leads to, on the other hand there are the many defeats⁴ in the realm of the myriad struggles against current economic and political regression that can bring about a depressive and desperate feeling like pessimism.

In more general terms, I believe that pessimism is not an integral part of the Marxist attitude towards life, rather, as some scholars claim (Castillo–Flores, 2021, p. 82), it may be a temporary stage or episode. That is to say, Marxism as a theory and practice is an analysis of pessimism-inducing conditions and optimistic revolutionary transformation. Marxists like Rosa Luxemburg and Gramsci do not refuse the existence of pessimistic feelings as a psycho-political state of mind, but they accept it as a reality of human's ontology or nature which can be overcome, and which is in fact conditioned by social-economic and political-cultural forces. According to Antonio Labriola, historical materialism overcomes the antithesis between pessimism and optimism. He writes that "historical materialism, being a philosophy of life, instead of its mere intellectual phenomena, overcomes the antithesis between optimism and pessimism, because it passes beyond their limits and understands them" (Labriola, 1897). Labriola describes pessimism and optimism as emotions conditioned by personal and social experiences and he also draws our attention to the fact that we make them "the axis, the fulcrum, or the finality of the universe" which is considered by Luxemburg and Gramsci to be dangerous not only for political struggle but also for one's personal life.

So, what does it mean to be a pessimist? In the simplest terms, it means to be in a negative mood or spirit because of a lack of belief and hope in any kind of positive changes within society and or the transformation of existing personal-political and economic conditions, thereby resulting in a type of despair about everything. A dialectical pessimistic view, on the other hand, brings with it a sceptical conception of the existing situation through a process of intellectual *reasoning* in a Luxemburgian and Gramscian sense, both of whom consider it a negative process concluding in an affirmative result in the sense of Hegelian dialectic to overcome this psycho-political spirit towards an optimistic will and *desire*. Following this, the next question arises: what does it mean to be an optimist? To be an optimist is not losing hope when conditions get worse. However, it is also important not to fall into a sort of *false optimism*, which excludes any kind of critical or sceptical stance, and which can result in and from false consciousness about the existing system.

Here, instead of talking about what Antonio Labriola (1897) called "the prevalence or triumph of one over the other", I will try to refer to their mediated relationship. In terms of Hegelian dialectic and his concept of negation, I will state that pessimism is a process, and that therefore related feelings such as despair can at best be regarded as stages but not goals. As Peruvian poet César Vallejo (2015, p. 203) affirms: "to stir and ignite the spirit, they [pessimism and desperation] must develop until transforming into consecutive affirmations. Otherwise, they don't amount to more than pathological germs, condemned to devouring themselves". Vallejo refers to a kind of transformation and negation of pessimism and desperation into consecutive affirmations. We may call this process a "constructive affirmation" of the negation of pessimism. Or in the words of another Peruvian, Marxist philosopher José Carlos Mariátegui (1894-1930): "all great human ideals have started from a denial, but all have also been an affirmation" (2021, p. 129).⁵

In short, I believe that both Rosa Luxemburg and Gramsci had a dialectical approach to pessimism and optimism (Castillo–Flores, 2021, pp. 76-92). In fact, both thinkers emphasize the danger of an excessive existence of these emotions or forces in one's personal and political life. Informed by what Hegel (n. d.) once said, "the negative is just as much positive", I will try to explore this dialectical relationship by claiming that, in Luxemburg and Gramsci, pessimism exists in optimism and vice versa. This brings me to the concept of

from being in, but moves against and beyond" (Holloway, 2022, p. 38) Holloway does not refer to Hegel but it seems to me this is what Hegel refers to with the term/verb "*aufheben*".

⁴ According to Gramsci (2007), defeatism means to "find that everything is going badly without pointing out, in a critical manner, how one might solve the problem" (Q7, §43, p. 192). *Prison Notebooks*, hereafter *PN*; *Quaderni del carcere*; hereafter *Q*, notebook number will be hereafter given with the paragraph number (§), i.e., Q7, §43; *Selections from Prison Notebooks*, hereafter *SPN*. In this respect, Gramsci continues that "an intellectual has a way of formulating the problem and resolving it: by working concretely to produce those scientific works that he bitterly laments are lacking, instead of just calling on others (whom?) to do the work" (Q7, §43, pp. 192-193). Gramsci suggests that the intellectual, while taking action to create a work, remains critical, particularly self-critical, and that this work should be a "work on a solution to a cultural problem" (Q7, §43, p. 193), because for him, it cannot in itself be a solution.

⁵ About the similarity between Gramsci and Mariátegui, see Noakes (2022).

the dialectic of revolution or revolutionary dialectic in Luxemburg and Gramsci. Rosa Luxemburg (2019, p. 47) draws our attention to how “we are all incorrigible metaphysicians, no matter how dialectically we imagine ourselves to think”. This is so because according to her “in our immediate, everyday states of consciousness, we cling to the notion that things are unchangeable” (Luxemburg, 2019, p. 47). While the idea and practice of revolution are against this metaphysical belief that “things are unchangeable” and demand or bring radical change against or through the existing oppressive system, dialectic helps to “inwardly adjust our thinking patterns to this new reality” (Luxemburg, 2019, p. 47) and see that while the old is negated, the new –change– can be affirmed. In addition, a dialectic of revolution helps to see the contradictory and antagonistic character of the existing capitalistic system. Revolutionary dialectic, for Rosa Luxemburg (2022c), does not recognize a “rigid, mechanical-bureaucratic conception” of struggle “as the product of organization that has attained a certain level of strength” but on the contrary, “the living, dialectical development gives rise to organization as a product of struggle” (p. 237). What is crucial in dialectics is “the consideration of phenomena not in their frozen form, but in motion” (Luxemburg, 2022b, p. 307). Revolution and dialectics hence complete each other since they are both based on the concept of negation and change coming from a historical subject, that is “the most naturally revolutionary class—the most interested in political freedom” (Luxemburg, 2022a, p. 376).

Moreover, Luxemburg’s and Gramsci’s faith⁶ in revolution and dialectics is what makes them optimistic. They do not find revolution to be, as Rosa Luxemburg (2022a) writes in 1908, a “magical” (p. 378) instrument or a “sorcerer calling up spirit” (p. 377) of revolution appearing in any moment in history but the result of historical and political maturity. Their faith in the necessary end of, as Marx says, the “catastrophe of the capitalist world” (Gramsci, 1988, p. 89) is their optimism.⁷ In other words, they do not find revolution to be, as Gramsci (1988) writes in 1919, “a magical act but a dialectical process of historical development” (p. 92) and, of course, *collective*, people’s-led struggle.

But where does this optimism and pessimism come from? In my view, the answer has to do with their critique of the capitalist mode of production along with a critique of the optimism of liberal capitalism.

The concept of optimism and pessimism in Luxemburg and Gramsci will be analyzed in relation to their conceptions of revolution, struggle, reality, illusion, tactic or strategy. Their optimism comes from their belief in subjects and in this regard, subjectivity is important for the revolutionary possibility which creates optimism and negates pessimism. For them, pessimism means to be able to distinguish reality from illusion and to adopt a critical thinking approach towards hopeless and desperate conditions. Optimism, on the other hand, means to be able to encourage actions without falling into illusion. In other words, in situations when you are too optimistic, this pessimist dialectical and critical thinking can appear and when you are too pessimistic, an optimistic strategy and tactic can bring with itself a critical thinking to engage with it. This is why I found their approach to be dialectical and Hegelian.

In this paper, I will try to focus on some of Rosa Luxemburg’s texts in the two recently published volumes of her writings on Revolution as well as her letters. I will also concentrate on some texts of Gramsci in which he specifically talks about pessimism and optimism – such as those containing the famous expression, borrowed from Romain Rolland (1866-1944), “pessimism of the intelligence, optimism of the will” –, both from his pre-prison writings and those in *Prison Notebooks* along with his letters from prison.

Hegelian dialectic

Very briefly, I would like to explain which Hegelian concepts might help us understand this dialectic. To begin with, in his dialectics, Hegel posits the power of the *negative* (Cunningham, 1910). For example, in the introduction to his *Logic* (Hegel, n. d.), he underlines that for the achievement of scientific progress, the recognition of the logical principle is necessary and for securing the dialectical of thought it is necessary to realize that “the negative is just as much positive, or that what is self-contradictory does not resolve itself into a nullity, into abstract nothingness, but essentially only into the negation of its particular content” (§62). In addition, in the Preface to the *Phenomenology*, Hegel (1998) writes that “[...] in speculative (*begreifenden*) thinking ☒ the negative belongs to the content itself, and is the positive, both as the immanent movement and determination of the content, and as the whole of the process. Looked at as a result, what emerges from this process is the determinate negative, which is consequently a positive content as well” (§59, p. 36). That is to say, through a process of negation pessimism can be sublated, that is *aufheben*⁸ keeps negativity within positivity, and vice versa. Cunningham (1910) writes that “simple relation to another is, for Hegel, negation: in so far as an object refers beyond itself it involves negation.” For Hegel, thought is a process of negation. Thought is not only affirmative, but it is also negative. In the process of thought, the negative transforms into positive, and vice versa. Therefore, the bare immediacy cannot be there anymore.

⁶ I used faith and belief interchangeably since my reading of Luxemburg and Gramsci demonstrates that sometimes they use the concept of faith, other times the concept of belief, although faith seems to have a more religious connotation.

⁷ Similar to Rosa Luxemburg, Gramsci, in “The Development of Revolution” (1919) presents two options: either socialist revolution or barbarism: “Either a conquest of social power on the part of the working class, using its own methods and instruments, in order to put a stop to the dissolution of the civilized world and lay the foundations of a new order, an order which will favour a resumption of productive activities and the generation of a drive towards higher forms of production and social existence. Or the death of the majority of the workers through starvation and exhaustion. Or an endless slaughter in society until a balance has been restored between capitalistically managed production and the consumer masses.” (Gramsci, 1988, p. 89).

⁸ *Aufheben* can be translated overcome, surpass, sublate etc. It means to conserve and at the same time put an end to the other from itself. Hegel in the *Science of Logic* writes that something is taken away only insofar as it has entered into unity with its opposite.

This means that thinking involves the transcending of the particular and the negative; that is the transformation of the particular into the universal and the negative into the positive (Cunningham, 1910). Nonetheless, it is important to mention that the particular is not merely eliminated or cancelled but it is also affirmed. Thus, we can arrive at an important point that thought is both positive and negative: “to hold fast the positive in the negative is the most important aspect of rational knowledge” (Cunningham, 1910).

Returning to optimism and pessimism, both Rosa Luxemburg and Gramsci define pessimism as a kind of fatalism and passivity. And passivity is introversion. Thus, in the Hegelian sense, it still remains in an intangible dimension that is direct and immediate and must be transcended, negated, sublated (*aufheben*). Then optimism is reached. It brings us to self-consciousness because in the Hegelian sense it is a representation of a hopeful, critical, and rational moment.

Rosa Luxemburg⁹: the optimist of pessimism...

In my view, optimism, in Rosa Luxemburg, can be read in terms of at least four different points: first, historical necessity; second, her love or hunger for life; third, her belief in subjects and fourth her faith in struggle and hope for revolution.

Optimism 1: faith¹⁰ in *historical necessity*¹¹

In 1906, Luxemburg (2022d, p. 271) writes that “those who grasp the course of the revolution in their innermost being will by no means give into any pessimism”. The conception and knowledge of revolution as transformation and subversion, destruction and/or the overthrow of exploitation and alienation, for her, cannot allow people to be pessimistic. Her optimism is based on her belief in *historical necessity*, the “unavoidable consequence”, the

decline of capitalism, which just like previous economic forms is not of eternal duration, but is simply a transitional phase of history, a rung on the endless ladder of social development. The doctrine of the emergence of capitalism thus logically turns into the doctrine of the decline of capitalism, the science of the mode of production of capital into the scientific foundation of socialism, the theoretical means of the bourgeoisie’s domination into a weapon of the revolutionary class struggle for the liberation of the proletariat (Luxemburg, 2013, p. 141).

What lies at the heart of Luxemburg’s idea of revolution is hence to snatch people from their captive bonds and support them to achieve their true freedom. From her writings, it is clear that, according to Rosa Luxemburg, the destruction of the existing exploitative society was not a possibility but a necessity. Therefore, the establishment of a new or communist society was indispensable, considering the conditions of the working class.¹² In one of her 1906 writings, “The Year of the Revolution”, Rosa Luxemburg sees revolution as a “historical necessity” (2022e, p. 80). This necessity is her optimism.

Despite serious setbacks, especially in relation to the outbreak of WWI, Rosa Luxemburg never lost her belief in the necessity of the abolishment of capitalism, the realization of this duty by the working class as the subject of their action, and the growth of proletariat’s self-consciousness in order to achieve the long overdue liberation of humankind. What comes with the socialist system is that

the system of socialism will truly liberate humanity—it will end inequality between people, the exploitation of some people by others, the control of some people by others, the oppression of conquered nations by imperialist nations, the impairment of women by the rule of the male sex, and the persecution of faith, religion, or conviction (Luxemburg, 2022f, p. 27).

Optimism 2: faith in capacity of masses as a *historical subject*

The realization of this “historical necessity” will be made possible by the main subjects of the struggle. In this sense, one of the elements that makes Rosa Luxemburg an optimist lies in her belief in these subjects who could and should be leaders of their own struggle. Necessity is made possible by these subjects’ own struggles and initiatives coming from their own (class) consciousness. Rosa Luxemburg is hence not only an optimist for the necessary end of any sort of exploitation, but she is also an optimist for the formation of the working class’ own consciousness through their own struggle during the revolutionary process. About this revolutionary process, Luxemburg writes (2022f, p. 26), “to bring about a revolution, one thing was needed: that the working class understood that abolishing capitalism was its duty, and that it joined the struggle as an organized body with unity of purpose”.

⁹ Considering the title of the article “alternative to capitalism”, it should be said that Rosa Luxemburg is not only seen as someone fighting for the alternative, but also seen as a third alternative, a third way between Lenin and Kautsky (Aubert, 1983, p. 11).

¹⁰ Luxemburg uses the notion of faith different from its religious connotation, in the sense of believing in something, like an idea or ideology and changes.

¹¹ Similarly, Gramsci (1988a, p. 86) in one of his early writings (*Workers and Peasants*, 1919, *L’Ordine Nuovo*) writes that “factory workers and poor peasants are the two driving forces of the proletarian revolution. For them, especially, communism is a *vital necessity*: its advent signifies life and liberty, while the continued existence of private property signifies the imminent danger of being crushed, of losing everything, including life itself” (italics mine).

¹² Riccardo Bellofiore (2015) writes that “il comunismo è stato per lei non una necessità ma una possibilità di cui era vano ricercare la ‘garanzia’ in una filosofia della storia o in una ontologia.” However, evaluating this statement from today’s perspective, it seems to me that this “possibility” transformed itself into “necessity” (p. 68).

Yet, as Riccardo Bellofiore (2015, p. 78) says, and as we can see from the emergence of multiple new subjects as part of social movements around the world, “the social subject of the conflict is not a given but must be constantly reconstructed”. In this respect, Rosa Luxemburg (2022e, p. 77) writes when a mass of workers took the street against tsarism in Russia in 1905, that they “had stood up at a single command to fight for a common purpose”, that is to overthrow absolutism. Rosa Luxemburg defines these subjects who took action during the revolution of 1905 as follows:

And that command was given voice not by a brilliant leader, not by a new Napoleon, but only by the spirit of brotherhood and solidarity living in each worker: the very instinct of those pushed down by exploitation and class oppression was their infallible and all-powerful commander (Luxemburg, 2022e, p. 77).

What brought these subjects together was not only their common interest but also their common political and economic situation, which exploited their labour and lives.

Optimism 3: belief in and love for life or “hungry for life” (Gornick, 1987)

In terms of her love or hunger for life, Luxemburg (2011, p. 392) differentiates her optimism from “a cheap, fatalistic optimism which only seeks to veil its impotence [...] The kind of outlook that, [...] is so hateful” to her. In her letters, optimism comes out within/through a sometimes deeply pessimistic spirit. In a letter (April 15, 1917) from prison to her friend Luise Kautsky, she continues to be optimistic and speaks hopefully while trying to encourage her depressed friend, though she herself does not feel well (2011, p. 392). She is aware of the pessimism of the situation and the conditions and tries to stay upbeat and embrace life with optimism. In this sense, life itself is a crucial element that makes her optimistic, because life, *in spite of* its complexity and suffering, can produce many possibilities towards change. As laid bare by the above quote, this type of optimism should be distinguished from a fatalistic optimism and could be called Luxemburg’s revolutionary optimism. What does revolutionary optimism mean? I think we can find it out in the following statement from Rosa Luxemburg to her friend Luise.

I’ve just learned from the history of the past few years, and looking farther back, from history as a whole, that one should not overestimate the impact or effect that one individual can have. Fundamentally the powerful, unseen, plutonic forces in the depths are at work, and they are decisive, and in the end, everything straightens itself out, so to speak, ‘of its own accord’ (Luxemburg, 2011, p. 392).

Luxemburg’s optimism seems to be hidden in her approach to the small *details of life* and the notion of “*in spite of everything*” with which she so often finishes her letters. It means that individual efforts and the details within life should not be stigmatized and ignored. Moreover, revolutionary optimism means to be ready to appear on the stage of world history, that is, the stage where the struggle takes place. She explains it in the following passage:

I am ready at my post at all times and at the first opportunity will begin striking the keys of World History’s piano with all ten fingers so that it will really boom. But since right now I happen to be “on leave” from World History, not through any fault of my own but because of external compulsion, I just laugh to myself and rejoice that things are moving ahead without me, and I believe with rock-hard certainty that all will go well. History always knows how to manage for the best even when it seems to have run into a blind alley of the most hopeless kind (Luxemburg, 2011, pp. 392-393).

According to this hiddenness in details, any individual, along with collective effort, can contribute to transform the old society into a new one even in the most hopeless of times.

As a matter of fact, Rosa Luxemburg seems to have “hope [even] in hopeless time”, to use the title of John Holloway’s most recent book (2022). In this sense, one could argue that Rosa Luxemburg in this letter to her friend Luise Kautsky tries to “organize pessimism for political ends”, anticipating what Walter Benjamin (1979, p. 237) called the “organization of pessimism”.¹³ It seems to me that life is here a very important element that leads Rosa Luxemburg to organize a pessimist state of mind and transform it into an optimistic one. For her, pessimism is the state of constantly drawing a bad conclusion and seeing something evil:

Dearest, when one has the bad habit of looking for a drop of poison in any blossom, one finds good reason, as long as one lives, to be moaning and groaning. If you take the opposite approach, and look for the honey in every blossom, then you’ll always find reason to be cheerful. Besides, believe me, the time that I—and others as well—spend behind bars, under lock and key, will not be in vain. In the great overall settling of accounts this too will somehow prove to be of value (Luxemburg, 2011, p. 393).

In these sentences, one can see a direct and strong relation of emotion to her intelligence (Gornick, 1987).

In sum, Rosa Luxemburg believes in life’s totality and unity, in the sense of a dialectical relationship between collective and individual life, or rather a combination of one’s individual life with social and political life. Here, it is worth mentioning Bellofiore’s quoting of Rossana Rossanda who once wrote about Luxemburg’s ontological view of human beings and said that she speaks about “the unity of a person in the aching web of pain and hope, of intelligence and feelings, of the self and of the world, recomposed” (Bellofiore, 2015, p. 79).

¹³ For Benjamin (1979, p. 238), the organization of pessimism or “to organise pessimism means nothing other than to expel moral metaphor from politics and to discover in political action a sphere reserved one hundred percent for images”.

Her relationship with life is her relationship with revolution: As she writes: “Not a single day without new moral victories, and not a single hour without the revolution making new progress! It is a joy to be alive!” (Luxemburg, 2019a, p. 340).

Optimism 4: belief in struggle and hope for revolution (being in action: activity against passivity)

Luxemburg’s belief in the subjects of struggle and her hope for revolution are her optimism. Writing towards the end of the 1905-06 Russian Revolution when reaction had begun to assert itself once again, she writes:

if we are to gain anything from the Russian Revolution, it is not with pessimism but the greatest optimism that we await the future, with the greatest boldness in calling out with tenfold force: *In spite of everything* (italics mine), we will prevail! (Luxemburg, 2022d, p. 272).

Here one might see Luxemburg as an *optimist of pessimism*. She underlines the importance of the task of social democracy which is to “take steps to counteract any pessimistic downheartedness among the worker masses,” (Luxemburg, 2019, p. 49) any “indolent type [of pessimism]” (Luxemburg, 2019b, p. 75).

Although optimism and pessimism seem to be two opposite elements, in her writings, they sometimes appear as elements that go beyond each other rather than being presented as opposites. These concepts do not ignore each other. On the one hand, there are defeats resulting in pessimism and hopelessness; on the other hand, there are ongoing struggles leading to an optimistic feeling regarding future struggles: as one was suppressed, another appeared. Concerning the 1905 Russian Revolution, even if the revolt ultimately ended with the victory of the tsar, Luxemburg seems very clear about this dialectical relationship. She writes: “The tsar was victorious, for he sapped the blood of the rebellious of Moscow; the tsar was beaten, for from every drop of this blood arises a fresh avenger of crimes against the people.” (Luxemburg, 2022g, p. 21). That is, from every defeat there will be born a fresh resister: from a pessimist result can be born a new and fresh optimism. Luxemburg (2019c) considers pessimism as the result of the “loss of faith in the possibility of a political mass movement and a genuine people’s revolution” (p. 93).¹⁴ What leads Rosa Luxemburg to negate a pessimistic situation and affirm an optimistic view is her historical and dialectical materialism. In order to explain this materialistic approach, Luxemburg (2022f), in another writing, refers to rebelling workers in the middle of the 1800s in different parts of Europe and affirms that, “at that time, the rebelling workers did not yet understand where the source of their deprivation lay or where to look for changes for the better” (p. 24) and they do not have a class consciousness yet but throughout history, which is the place of strikes, struggles, rebellions and fights, the awareness of workers will rise. Although the present situation of the working-class still lacks class-consciousness and knowledge to find out the true pattern of struggles, class-consciousness can happen in its historical development, not suddenly and spontaneously but by different experiences on the battlefield.

In relation to what I said about hiddenness in details, beyond collective struggle against social and personal issues, Rosa Luxemburg believes in self-overcoming or self-struggling. As a lover of Goethe, she states that every person stuck in a pessimistic state of mind, can adopt or “at least strive toward” an outlook on life that is the “universalism of interests and inner harmony” (Luxemburg, 2011, p. 367). According to her, to fight against pessimism or any sort of political, social, economic or personal difficulties has nothing to do with being a political fighter but for her “a fighter is precisely a person who must strive to rise above things, otherwise one’s nose will get stuck in every bit of nonsense” (Luxemburg, 2011, p. 367).¹⁵ Here, to fight is about overcoming, negating and transforming these difficulties in which one finds oneself. Rosa Luxemburg draws our attention to the pessimism of getting stuck in the complaints of an individual about their personal state of mind and conditions which can prevent one from seeing “that the overall disaster is much too great to be moaned and groaned about” (Luxemburg, 2011, p. 366). On the one hand, it is necessary to be aware of what reality is; on the other hand, it is necessary to negate-destroy this reality and believe in the human capacity to destroy the reality by redeeming, purifying, improving the collective state and private conscience (Mariátegui, 2021, p. 128). In this respect, Rosa Luxemburg writes:

when the whole world is out of joint, then I merely seek to understand what is going on and why, and then I have done my duty, and I am calm and in good spirits from then on. *Ultra posse nemo obligatur*. And then for me there still remains everything else that makes me happy: music and painting and clouds and doing botany in the spring and good books and Mimi and you and much more. –In short, I am ‘stinking rich’ and I’m thinking of staying that way to the end (Luxemburg, 2011, p. 366).

Pessimism leads Rosa Luxemburg to critical thinking about what is going on and this critical approach brings her to be in “good spirits” after this analysis. Beyond the “overall disaster”, Luxemburg underlines the positivity and optimistic elements in life itself. Being an optimist or a revolutionary optimist thus means to see the good sides of the pessimistic world and maintaining hope and belief in possible and necessary transformation.

¹⁴ “From a political standpoint, in the present situation we must first of all look at terror in a substantially different way from the way it was viewed in earlier times. The actual terrorist movement which preached and practiced terror as a systematic means of political struggle was born historically out of pessimism, from loss of faith in the possibility of a political mass movement and a genuine people’s revolution in Russia. Terror as a system was thought of naturally as a method to be carried out only by particular individuals from among the revolutionaries and directed against particular individual representatives of the absolutist regime. It essentially stood in opposition to [the idea of] a mass movement of the working class, whether or not the terrorist fighters were aware of this themselves, whether they would admit this or preferred to keep such thoughts out of their minds” (p. 93).

¹⁵ She continues to say “obviously I’m thinking of a fighter on the grand scale, not a weathervane of the caliber of the ‘great men’ who sit around your table, who recently sent a greeting card to me here....” (p. 367).

Finally, as mentioned several times already, pessimism is not just the result of the economic and political downturn. It is also the result of the defeats at the end of the revolutionary struggle. In this regard, in the *Junius Pamphlet* (1915) Rosa Luxemburg writes:

So many old illusions and potencies have been destroyed, so many new forces and problems have been created that a return to the old Europe as it existed before August 4, 1914 is out of the question. [It is] as out of the question as a return to pre-revolutionary conditions even after a defeated revolution (Luxemburg, 2004, p. 337).

In other words, Luxemburg by way of pessimism of the intellect underlined the existence and appearance of problems while the old was dying, whereas her optimism of the intellect highlighted the appearance of new forces created by these problems and the lessons that could be learned from defeats.

Antonio Gramsci: the pessimist of optimism...

Speaking of pessimism of the intellect, Gramsci's relationship with optimism and pessimism is mostly associated with, and at times reduced to, the famous expression "pessimism of the intelligence, optimism of the will."¹⁶ According to Stephen Gill, with this expression

Gramsci meant that we should look at contemporary political challenges with a sober realism in order to be able to transcend the political limits of the possible that were posed by national and international conditions. Note that Gramsci's maxim was linked to the injunction that we should examine contemporary conditions with an analysis that directs attention 'violently towards the present as it is, if one wishes to transform it (Gill, 2009, p. 98).

Similar to Gramsci's expression, the aforementioned Peruvian writer, journalist, politician and Marxist philosopher, José Carlos Mariátegui (1894-1930), in a 1925 article, talks about "pessimism of reality, optimism of the ideal" (Mariátegui, 1925; 2021, pp. 128-132).¹⁷

In this article, Mariátegui writes that "the attitude of people who intend to correct reality is certainly more optimistic than pessimistic. They are pessimistic in their protest and in their condemnation of the present; but they are optimistic in their hope for the future" (Mariátegui, 2021, p. 129). In addition, Mariátegui (2021) made a differentiation between the optimism of the easy and lazy Panglossian, that is, excessively optimistic people who think that they live in the best of all possible worlds, and an optimism that does not believe that the world must inevitably and eternally be as it is and believes that it can and should be better (p. 129). In my view, this is also at the heart of Gramsci's criticism of optimism.

Returning to Gramsci's famous sentence, there are a number of writings (Re, 1990; Gill, 2009; Haider, 2020)¹⁸, which well-contributed to its meaning from different perspectives. With this contribution, I try to interpret his conception of pessimism and optimism through Hegel's concepts of desire and negation. Gramsci demonstrates that individual desire and will can coincide with collective desire and will. In fact, the concept of will (Q10, §48, pp. 1335-38) is crucial for Gramsci's philosophy in order to flee from passivity. Will is

distinct from an impulse (*Trieb*) or a desire (*Begehren, Begierde*), since one may not will to do what one has an impulse or desire to do, and one may will to do what one has no impulse or desire to do (Inwood, 1992, pp. 311-312).

In the Western tradition of thinking, will means "the capacity to act purposively. Actions performed according to one's will are intentional and based on choice; they are called voluntary and are conceived as essentially free" (2013, p. 265). The concept of will is traditionally considered as the faculty and capacity of mind which helps us decide and choose. It is described as a rational desire or a "rational appetite" (Pink, 1998). Will is a tendency to desire and seek to arrive at an end. It is important to underline that this desire is not a vain and arbitrary desire but a rational one.

The intellect and the will: Dialectics of reason and feeling

At this point, it is important to look at the concepts of intellect and will: a *dialectical relationship* between reason and feeling in a Hegelian sense. In a recent text inspired by Gramsci's dictum, the late Leo Panitch discusses precisely this relationship between the will and the intellect. He writes that "the intellect is not all abstract reason and positivist empirical calculation. Ethics and imagination are also embedded in the intellect. Optimism of the intellect involves bringing reason, ethics, imagination to bear on how to realize optimism of the will" (Panitch, 2016, p. 357). I agree and hence I think that what is important in Gramsci's expression is not to focus only on the notions of pessimism and optimism but also on both the intellect and the will, or in a Hegelian sense "the sensuous and the intelligible" (Hegel, n. d., p. 1) along with the unification

¹⁶ Gramsci first used this expression of Romain Rolland in "Address to the Anarchists," published in *L'Ordine Nuovo* in April 1920.

¹⁷ Mariátegui knew the work of Romain Rolland (and that of Labriola). Like Vasconcelos, Romain Rolland is a pessimist of reality and an optimist of the ideal (Mariátegui, 2010, p. 409).

¹⁸ Lucia Re (1990), in *Calvino and the Age of Neorealism: Fables of Estrangement*, discusses Gramsci's optimism for the collective will and Freud's pessimism for it (p. 342). According to Re (1990), unlike Freud who "remains to the end sceptical that the fulfilment of individual desire and individual happiness could ever coincide with collective desire and collective well-being", "Gramsci, [...], places great emphasis on the control of individual desires and fantasies as a precondition for the affirmation of a collective will for political change" (p. 342).

or reconciliation of optimism and pessimism, which is their dialectical relationship. Hegel, in *The Difference Between Fichte's and Schelling's System of Philosophy*, writes "the intelligible realm has effects upon the sensible realm or the sensible upon the intelligible." (n. d., p. 1)

In Gramsci's expression, this Hegelian dialectical relationship is explained through the concept of the intellect and will in relation to pessimism and optimism that complete each other in a dialectical way. Concretely, Gramsci talks about a rational, not arbitrary, will, "which is realised in so far as it corresponds to objective historical necessities, or in so far as it is universal history itself in the moment of its progressive actualisation" (Q11, §59, p. 1485; *SPN*, 1992, p. 345). Gramsci's definition clarifies the immediate relation between the individual and universal will and intellect. The subjective becomes objective or universal in so far as the objective also includes the subjective or the individual. For Gramsci, it is important "that the objective possibilities exist for people not to die of hunger and that people do die of hunger," but "the existence of objective conditions, of possibilities or of freedom is not yet enough: it is necessary to 'know' them, and know how to use them" as well as "to want to use them" (Q10, §48, p. 1338; *SPN*, 1992, p. 300). It seems that Gramsci talks about "organization of one's own impulse" (Bodei, 1984, p. 67) to build collectively individual will. Gramsci, in this regard, states that human being is concrete will, in other words "the effective application of abstract will or vital impulse" (Q10, §48, p. 1338; *SPN*, 1992, p. 300). The intellect and rational faculties give a direction or pave the way for the will to act. If will is a rational desire or a rational appetite which is the faculty and ability to choose to achieve a specific end; one can state that will and desire as a feeling are in relation at least by definition. Will is "effective decision, not vain fancy" (Bodei, 1984, p. 63) nor irrational desire or blind passion.

Furthermore, for Gramsci (1992), the intellectual's error is to separate the two realms of intellect and feeling from each other. He criticizes those who believe that "one can know without understanding and even more without feeling and being impassioned (not only for knowledge in itself but also for the object of knowledge)" (*SPN*, p. 418). One can deduce this dialectical relationship from his clarification about the true relationship between intellectuals and the people-nation. For Gramsci (1992) in this relationship there should be an organic cohesion "in which feeling-passion becomes understanding and thence knowledge (not mechanically but in a way that is alive) [...]" (*SPN*, p. 418). Thus, Gramsci defines this relationship as something beyond being in opposition, which, with Holloway's words, we may call *in-beyond-and-against*, or in Hegelian terms, *aufhebung*.

Gramsci's understanding of pessimism and optimism should be read in two different forms of optimism and pessimism as Mariátegui claims: *dialectical* pessimism and optimism against *blind* pessimism and *false* optimism. What constructs the idea of pessimism and optimism in Gramsci is, in my view, his criticism towards pessimism as a leading element of despair, fatalism, passivity, illusions and his emphasis on a dialectical optimism through his belief in struggle, the end of capitalism, and the capacity of subjects gathering under a collective will and soul.

For the purposes of this paper, I have come up with five different categories through which we can understand Gramsci's relation to the notions of optimism and pessimism: 1) *Desire against undialectical* pessimism; 3) intelligent enthusiasm against passivity and fatalism; 4) capacity of the revolutionary subject; 5) collective desire for constructive collectivity.

Pessimism and optimism 1: *Desire against undialectical pessimism and false optimism*

For Gramsci, pessimism generally results from the political and economic conditions of the time. In his 1924 text "Against Pessimism", Gramsci describes the Italian atmosphere of the time as being dominated by "the thick, dark cloud of pessimism, which is oppressing the most able and responsible militants, and is in itself a great danger". In his view, this dark pessimism could be dissipated by "look[ing] at the little that we have done and the enormous amount of work we still have left to do" (Gramsci, 1924). Pessimism is thus considered by Gramsci to be a danger because it could lead to "political passivity, intellectual slumber, scepticism about the future" (Gramsci, 1924). Scepticism is acceptable for Gramsci (1992a) only if it comes in the form of pessimism of the intelligence (p. 175), not any sort of undialectical pessimism (p. 278). In other words, pessimism as a concept is similar to fatalism¹⁹ and passivity and therefore opposed to the social-political struggle that Gramsci dedicated all his life to.

Against this type of pessimism, it is necessary to be a critical optimist and believe, like Luxemburg, in the negation of pessimism through struggle. From pessimism, optimism can appear by a *desire* of the transformation of the existing capitalistic society. I think that Gramsci considers important not only the will but also the desire to destroy all types of oppression. Regarding desire, in his *Berlin Phenomenology*, Hegel (1981, p. 65) states that self-consciousness is a mediation, and this mediation constitutes desire. In the same pages, self-consciousness itself is defined as desire. For Hegel, the transition from consciousness to self-consciousness is made possible by the transformation of this abstract desire into a concrete one, and the realization of self-consciousness through desire is possible only through negativity. In fact, Hegel considered desire generally as destructive. He writes that desire is "generally destructive in its satisfaction, just as it is generally self-seeking in respect of its content, and since the satisfaction has only been achieved in singleness, which is transient, it gives rise to further desire" (Hegel, 1981, §428, p. 69).

In this sense, Gramsci's optimistic desire can be a destructive force by seeking to satisfy itself in order to move from an abstract pessimist emotion into a concrete optimistic one via the will for transformation and the active negation of the old. In his *Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci (1992, p. 129) writes that "destruction and

¹⁹ For a positive approach to fatalism, see Frank Ruda (2016).

negation cannot exist without an implicit construction and affirmation—this not in a ‘metaphysical’ sense but in practice, i.e. politically, as party programme”. Another important concept is passion in Gramsci’s politics. For Gramsci, feeling-passion (*sentimento-passione*) is a nexus or connection which keeps the relationship alive and organic between the ruler (*governanti*) and the governed (*governati*) (Forenza, 2009, p. 628). According to Gramsci, without this passion, without this sentimental connection between intellectual and the people-nation, it could not be possible to make politics and history (Q11, §67).

Pessimism and optimism 2: being sceptical of facts and the present situation of the world against illusions²⁰

The second point that we can find in Gramsci regarding pessimism and optimism is the latter’s relation to illusions, passivity and fatalism. Gramsci draws attention to another problem regarding any possibility of falling into illusions while desiring to transform the existing situation without considering the current social and political circumstance. In the 1920s, during the factory strikes in Northern Italy, when many factories were occupied by the workers, Gramsci was worried about a type of false optimism that the revolution was around the corner. His suggestion was to critically consider the true power relations between workers and bourgeois state, still strongly in favour of the latter, and hence avoid “being demoralized by temporary and partial setbacks or the manufacturing of too many illusions as a result of easy victories” (Gramsci, 1988a, p. 86). This caution and scepticism can help to not fall both into pessimism because of setbacks and false optimism because of some temporary achievements. However, this caution about possible illusions does not mean to give up fighting because optimism of the will or optimistic desire helps us to be ready to take action for any possible changes. I believe that desire can be a crucial concept to understand the transformation of an oppressive, capitalist society. It cannot be all about will, but it can be about desire itself, in the sense of desiring to change and desiring to be optimistic by way of the transformation of what makes one pessimistic and desperate.

Pessimism and optimism 3: intelligent enthusiasm against passivity and fatalism

Regarding passivity and fatalism, Gramsci affirms that optimism is often nothing more than “a way of defending one’s laziness, one’s own irresponsibility, the will to do nothing. In addition, this is a form of fatalism and mechanism” (Gramsci, 1975, Q9, §130, p. 1191). Gramsci finds this approach problematic because this means that one depends on factors extraneous to one’s own will and industriousness. By way of passivity and fatalism, one exalts these factors and seems to burn with a sacred enthusiasm (Gramsci, 1975, Q9, §130, p. 1191). This enthusiasm is for Gramsci an “external adoration of fetishes”.²¹ Gramsci’s counterproposal is a type of enthusiasm that is only justified when “accompanied by intelligent will, intelligent industriousness and inventive creativity for concrete initiatives that modify existing reality” (Gramsci, 1975, Q9, §130, p. 1192). Gramsci aims to replace the passivity created by fatalism with what Jodi Dean (2012) calls “new assertions of will, desire, and collective strength” (p. 6). Furthermore, for Gramsci, in the face of intellectual and moral disorder, “it is necessary to create sober, patient people who do not despair in the face of the worst horrors and who do not become exuberant with every silliness. Pessimism of the intelligence, optimism of the will” (Gramsci, Q28, §11, pp. 2331-32; *PN*, 2011, p. 172). He calls self-experience, self-practice, self-organization, self-strength, and self-education within and beyond collective togetherness.²²

I believe that one of Gramsci’s letters from prison to his brother Carlo (December 19, 1929) most powerfully summarizes his dialectical, embodied conception of optimism and pessimism:

a man ought to be so deeply convinced that the source of his own moral forces is in himself —his own energy and will, the iron coherence of ends and means— that he never despairs and never falls into those vulgar, banal moods, pessimism and optimism. My own state of mind synthesizes these two feelings and transcends them: my mind is pessimistic, but my will is optimistic. Whatever the situation, I imagine the worst that could happen in order to summon up all my reserves of willpower to overcome each and every obstacle. Since I never build up illusions, I am seldom disappointed. I’ve always been armed with unlimited patience —not a passive, inert kind, but a patience allied with perseverance. Today there is an extremely grave moral crisis, but there have been other, graver ones in the past; and there is a difference between this time and that former one (Gramsci, 1973, p. 159).

Gramsci refers to the power of will, self-energy and self-power, accompanied with “unlimited patience” — instead of passivity and the withdrawal— to overcome the terrible and catastrophic situation. In Gramsci, the dialectical and reciprocal relationship between one’s faculty of cognition or knowledge and the affective or appetitive faculty is crucial to establish a materialistic view of world.²³

²⁰ One can find the analysis of Aubet (1983, p. 113) about Rosa Luxemburg’s critique of the support of the socialists for the radical bourgeois government in general in Europe and in particular in France as an illusion which for Rosa Luxemburg would have ended up favoring the most reactionary tendencies (Marxpedia, 2008, p. 37).

²¹ Lelio La Porta, “Pessimismo”, in *Dizionario gramsciano 1926-1937*, eds. Guido Liguori and Pasquale Voza, Carocci, 2009a, p. 638; Lelio La Porta, “Ottimismo”, in *Dizionario gramsciano 1926-1937*, eds. Guido Liguori and Pasquale Voza, Carocci, 2009b, pp. 606-607.

²² When Gramsci talks about collective action and collectivity, he defines it “as the product of painstaking will and collective thought attained through concrete individual effort and not through a reliance on a process of destiny that is extraneous to the individual, hence the need for inner discipline, not just external and mechanical discipline” (Gramsci, Q6, §79, pp. 750-51). The individual efforts are crucial to attain a collective action.

²³ “Under the faculty of cognition or knowledge are aggregated such operations as those of sense-perception, memory, imagination, judgment, and reasoning; under the affective or appetitive faculty are included desires, aversions, emotions, volitions, and

Dialectical Optimism against undialectical pessimism 4: Capacity of subject

Like Rosa Luxemburg, Gramsci's belief in the transformation of capitalism by the oppressed is his optimism. In this regard, Gramsci's analysis of culture and society is one of the indications of his optimism about the capacity of human beings to realize revolutionary change. In his article, *Socialismo e cultura* (in *Il Grido del Popolo*, 29 January 1916) Gramsci "advanced a definition of culture as the conquest and enhancement of one's self, and therefore the growth of subjectivity" (Liguori, 2020a, p. 3). In the same article, Gramsci (2007) criticizes those who see culture as "encyclopaedic knowledge" and those who consider human beings as "mere receptacles to be stuffed full of empirical data and a mass of unconnected raw facts, which have to be filed in the brain as in the columns of a dictionary" (*PN*, p. 430, footnote 2 to §34). According to Gramsci, culture and individuals are not separated and abstract from each other. Culture is more than a social web of values and relations:

It is organization, discipline of one's inner self, a coming to terms with one's own personality; it is the attainment of a higher awareness, with the aid of which one succeeds in understanding one's own historical value, one's own function in life, one's own rights and obligations (Gramsci, 2007, p. 430).

What Gramsci says here is similar to what he later argues in the *Prison Notebooks* about philosophy and the intellectual. For instance, in Q8 (§204) and Q11 (§12), Gramsci speaks of the need to break down a common misconception about philosophy. According to this conception, philosophy as an intellectual activity that experts can understand is an extremely difficult activity. Gramsci (1975) writes that this general misconception should be deliberated, criticized and before everything else it should be shown that everyone is a philosopher (Q11, p. 1375). That is, Gramsci does not see philosophy as something incomprehensible and difficult to grasp, apart from the structure of society but immanent to it. As Hegel (2001) defines it in the preface to *Philosophy of Right*, since philosophy is the basis of the rational, it is the [real] understanding of the present and the real, otherwise it is not the construction of the other side [beyond the real] (p. 17).²⁴ For Gramsci, philosophy and culture are two tools to gain class/self-consciousness. Every subject has this capacity of philosophizing and attaining a level of capacity to transform the existing evil. In other words, for Gramsci (1992), "our capacity to think and act on the world is dependent on other people who are themselves also both subjects and objects of history" (*SPN*, p. 346).

Pessimist of optimism 5: Collective desire for constructive collectivity²⁵

Both Gramsci's and Luxemburg's optimism is based on their trust in the revolutionary subject and its role in shaping historical progress. In one of the pre-prison writings, Gramsci (1988b) writes about the transformation of the subject from a disciplined industrial object into a responsible subject (p. 345). The workers "have to create for themselves a collective personality, a collective soul, a collective will" (Gramsci, 1988b, p. 345)²⁶ to realize a classless society. They will organize themselves externally with others and they will organize internally within their thought and will towards a collective will and desire (Gramsci, 1988c, p. 35). Collective will as "an instrument of liberation, a transitory necessity" (Bodei, 1984, p. 68) is an answer to passivity resulting from pessimism and optimism.

In this regard, it is necessary to briefly speak about the collective will in Gramsci (*SPN*, 129; Q13, §1, 1558; *PN* 3, p. 247; Q8, §21, p. 951). Gramsci does not believe that collective will is a naturalistic fact, which blossoms and develops for reasons inherent in things, etc. (Q15 (1933), §35, p. 1789). Rather, it is the result of social relations, experiences, and conditions. The masses "pulverized into many atoms without will and orientation" (Gramsci, Q15 (1933), §35, p. 1789) can unite under the collective will and desire. The individual and atomistic wills and desires are preserved, negated or sublated by a dialectical process and therefore transformed into collective will and desire. The main point of Gramsci is that the subjects or oppressed cannot develop a class-consciousness "in an automatic and spontaneous manner" (Bodei, 1984, p. 56). In this regard, "the formation of [...] a collective will is essential in overcoming the direction-spontaneity (elsewhere 'leaders-led') dichotomy" (Coutinho, 2021, pp. 128-133). Gramsci's definition of collective will is: a "will as operative awareness of historical necessity, as protagonist of a real and effective historical drama" (Q13, §1, p. 1559). This brings us to Gramsci's idea of the modern prince. I will not argue it in detail as it needs a deep discussion, but it will be helpful to discuss it briefly in relation to the collective will as a "supporting element of the transition" (Bodei, 1984, p. 68).

Gramsci believes in people's own organization similar to that which Luxemburg called "the spirit of brotherhood and solidarity living in each worker" and therefore it was beyond "a brilliant leader" or a new personality like Napoleon but it was the masses or workers' "infallible and all-powerful commander" (Luxemburg, 2022e, p. 77). Correspondingly, Gramsci writes

the like" (Maher, 1915).

²⁴ "Philosophy is, as I have already observed, an inquisition into the rational, and therefore the apprehension of the real and present. Hence it cannot be the exposition of a world beyond, which is merely a castle in the air, having no existence except in the terror of a one sided and empty formalism of thought" (Hegel, 2001, p. 17).

²⁵ The expression, "collective desire for collectivity", is from Jodi Dean, *Communist Horizon*, Verso, 2012, p. 158.

²⁶ In the *Prison Notebooks*, collective will is sometimes qualified as "national-popular collective will."

the modern prince, the myth-prince, cannot be a real person, a concrete individual. It can only be an organism, a complex element of society in which a collective will, which has already been recognized and has to some extent asserted itself in action, begins to take concrete form (SPN, p. 129).

This modern prince can be viewed as a proposal to overcome pessimism as a state of spirit in order to establish and organize a state of optimism. Gramsci states in Q5 (127, 662) that a prince can be a head of state, head of government, but also a political head who wishes to conquer another state or establish a new state. In this sense, according to Gramsci, the “prince” can be translated as a “political party” in modern language.²⁷ For Gramsci, “the modern prince is the organizer of an intellectual and moral reform, which in turn creates the ground for a further development of the popular national collective will towards the fulfilment of a superior and total form of modern civilization” (Q13, §1, p. 1560). It is important to bear in mind that for Gramsci, the collective will plays a very important role in constructing a social order.

Conclusion: Towards a pessoptimism of the will and intellect

In *All about Love: New Visions* bell hooks (2001) writes that

psychologically, we were in despair even as economic booms opened up jobs for women and men from previously disenfranchised groups. Instead of looking for justice in the public world, individuals turned to their private lives, seeking a place of solace and escape. Initially, lots of folks turned inward to family and relationships to find again in a sense of connection and stability. Coming face to face with rampant lovelessness in the home created an overwhelming sense of cultural brokenheartedness. Not only did individuals despair about their capacity to change the world, they began to feel enormous despair about their ability to make basic positive changes in the emotional fabric of their daily lives (p. 108).

For me, what bell hooks describes, we might call the pessimism of our century²⁸, a sort of *pessimism on an ontological and/or existential level*, in line with Fredric Jameson’s compelling though the overused dictum about imagining the end of the world²⁹, which I believe to be different from the one that Luxemburg and Gramsci describe and criticize. As I have tried to argue, Luxemburg and Gramsci refer to a type of pessimism that exists *within the struggle* rather than an *ontological* pessimism. Today, ontological pessimism emerges when individuals are left alone in their struggles with life and when they, in a Marxian sense, are alienated from each other, from society, nature, their labour etc. The system’s understanding of individuality forms the basis of this ontological pessimism.

As we can see from Luxemburg’s letter to Luise Kautsky and Gramsci’s letter to his bother Carlo, both of them try to avoid falling into this existential pessimism by trying to transcend it. In this sense, pessimism is considered a strategy for reasoning and understanding what is happening in current society, and optimism is the desire to transform it. Pessimism is negated but at the same time preserved (in a Hegelian sense) and optimism rises with a *pessoptimist* critical and reasoning. This dialectical relationship might be a Hegelian “pessoptimism”, a term I am borrowing from the 1974 book title of the Palestinian novelist and politician Emile Habiby, *The Secret Life of Saeed the Pessoptimist*. According to Anjuli Kolb, pessoptimism refers

to the inseparability of hope and despair, of desire and knowledge under untenable historical conditions. [Optimism and pessimism] feed each other through their synthesis, as do the intellect and the will, each term cancelling out its ‘vulgar, banal’ opposite in a kind of noble perfection, a certainty of vision, an ‘iron coherence’ (Kolb, 2017).³⁰

²⁷ Gramsci grasped the importance of Machiavelli’s texts in Europe and criticizes the moral prudence of these texts. According to Gramsci, no Machiavelli scholar has dealt with Machiavelli’s books in relation to the development of states throughout Europe in the same historical period (Mitarotondo, 2009, pp. 499-501). For Gramsci, Machiavelli offers a complete understanding of immanence with his opposition to the church and feudalism. In other words, Machiavelli indirectly establishes the understanding of absolute immanence and historicism, in which human beings determines their own destiny, even though not under the conditions that they create. For Machiavelli, there are no transcendental rules of social order. The person ceases to be the object of politics and becomes the subject, that is, the one who determines the politics, becomes the decision maker (Gramsci, 1949, p. 90).

²⁸ I believe that each century has its own form of pessimism and optimism. For instance, according to the author of “Nonclassical Science and the Philosophy of Optimism” (Kuznetsov, 1974), the pessimism of the seventeenth century is based on fear or rather “melancholy feeling of the impossibility of comprehending infinity” (pp. 197-231). In this regard, “the pessimism of the seventeenth century feared [...] from the infinity of time that remains after death, but also from the infinity of past time” (p. 215). Furthermore, he describes modern optimism with “a deep faith in the inevitability of radical transformations of the world picture and in the positive effect of such transformations on the tempo of technical, economic, and cultural progress” (p. 227).

²⁹ Fredric Jameson, in *The Seeds of Time* (1994) writes that “it seems to be easier for us today to imagine the thoroughgoing deterioration of the earth and of nature than the breakdown of late capitalism; perhaps that is due to some weakness in our imaginations” (p. xiii) and then in “Future City” (2003), he writes that “someone once said that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism. We can now revise that and witness the attempt to imagine capitalism by way of imagining the end of the world” (p. 65). This view can be read in Mark Fisher’s most influential book on capitalist realism: *Capitalist Realism: Is there No alternative?* (2009) and as a critique of those who believe in an alternative to capitalism along with his article, “Exiting the Vampire Castle” (2013) in which he extends his argument of capitalist realism.

³⁰ An example of pessoptimism can be given from Emile Habiby’s (1974) novel: “Take me, for example. I don’t differentiate between optimism and pessimism and am quite at a loss as to which of the two characterizes me. When I awake each morning, I thank the Lord he did not take my soul during the night. If harm befalls me during the day, I thank Him that it was no worse. So which am I, a pessimist or an optimist?” (p. 12).

And so is this Luxemburgian and Gramscian “certainty of vision [and] ‘iron coherence’” (Kolb, 2017) that will forge the collective will and desire for the long overdue transformation of barbarism. In other words, Rosa Luxemburg and Gramsci foresee “a pessimistic view of the future of capitalism” (Harcourt and Kriesler, 2012) while at the same time offering a Hegelian dialectical vision of the revolutionary political subject of the past and of our times as well.

In short, one can draw the following conclusion from their dialectical, historical and materialistic approach to optimism and pessimism, which help them not to fall into false and illusionary feelings and thoughts: 1) their view and insistence on collective desire for a collective struggle; 2) critical and dialectical optimism and pessimism; 3) (revolution as) historical necessity for/of decline and abolishment of capitalism; 4) their belief in revolutionary subjects and in life. As Frigga Haug (2023) writes: “To study both of them in their reciprocal interactions has a synergic effect that reinforces political hope and, with it, the capacity for action” (p. 572).

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