



Francesca Antonini

Caesarism and Bonapartism in Gramsci: Hegemony and the Crisis of Modernity

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About the reviewer

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The rise of authoritarian or semi-authoritarian regimes, the crisis of modernity alongside with the crisis of democracy and politics in different part of the world, leads to new debates in social and political theory on the relationship between the growth of autocracy and democracy. Observed in contemporary democracy is the loss of independence of a division of powers, the

dominance of executive over legislative, the personalisation of politics, single-man regimes, the increase of anti-liberal values, the spread of authoritarian sentiments and values in institutions such as academia. All these recent tendencies promote a set of questions about Caesarism, Bonapartism and their relation with democracy.

In this respect, the publication of *Caesarism and Bonapartism in Gramsci: Hegemony and the Crisis of Modernity* by Francesca Antonini is very timely in that it represents a retrospective analysis, that is, an analysis of the fascist or interwar period, which holds great potential for contributing a theoretical, historical and conceptional framework to the current debates on democracy. The major writings of Italian political thinker, philosopher and revolutionary Antonio Gramsci, including both pre-prison writings and prison notebooks, are at the centre of this substantial contribution. Moreover, Antonini applies Marx's writings on the issue and to the wide contemporary studies taking place in Gramscian literature, particularly those written in Italian. Antonini's book addresses important issues about Gramsci's theory and his relation to Marx and his basic writings regarding Caesarism and Bonapartism, some of which have not been deservedly argued until now. She also tries to touch on, although very

briefly, Hegel's influence on Gramsci which has not been sufficiently investigated by Gramscian and Marxian scholars.

Antonini makes the following three contributions: 1.) first, contrary to the classical approach to the relationship between Marx and Gramsci which highlights a *rupture* between two revolutionary thinkers, she tries to bring to light how close Gramsci is to Marx's understanding of the model of Bonapartism and Caesarism beginning from his pre-prison writings to the *Prison Notebooks*, in which the concepts gained their originality at the theoretical level. In this regard, she writes that 'in the *Prison Notebooks* Gramsci can grasp the deepest sense of Marx's analysis, but the analysis of Marx has to fit within Gramsci's conceptual framework, and not vice versa' (97). The investigation of Bonapartism serves for analyzing Caesarism. Considering that Gramsci's main aim was to understand the modern crisis of authority and how authoritarian regimes came to power and how this politico-social transformation could be conceived, the conception of Caesarism in the modern period was at the focus of his studies. Antonini underlines that the Caesarist-Bonapartist paradigm is crucial in Gramsci's view for two reasons: using this paradigm as a tool, the aim is first to explain the organic 'crisis of modernity'; second, to reveal the form of state emerging on the European scene (147), which was authoritarian, totalitarian and, in Italy, fascist. 2.) She carries out a deep analysis of Bonapartism and Caesarism in Gramsci and their missing relationship between each other, which has usually been ignored by Marxist and Gramscian scholars. Throughout the book, the author underscores the *continuity* between pre-prison writings and prison notebooks. 3.) Through an analysis of Marxian concepts of Caesarism and Bonapartism, she tries to unveil Gramsci's understanding of fascism and democracy by exploring his conceptualization under the new terms that he contributed to the traditional Marxist understanding. In this regard, Antonini's question is: how did Gramsci use these concepts in its historical and cultural context and hence develop a new approach different from that of Marx?

These three contributions are attributed to the Marxist notion of historical materialism. The Caesarist-Bonapartist paradigm shows historical, national and regional facts through the recognition, approval and critiques of Marxist terminology. It can be said that Antonini regards the categories of Caesarism and Bonapartism as against convention and she tries to disclose their true meaning and usage in Marx and Gramsci. According to her, for Marx, the concept of Bonapartism was well-defined, while the Marxist tradition after Marx used it as 'a generic form of authoritarianism' (27). Both Marx and Gramsci drew attention to the specificity of the events and their impact on historical and political facts. In

this respect, Gramsci wrote 'Caesarism [...] does not in all cases have the same historical significance' (Q13 §27: 1619).

Although Gramsci referred explicitly to the concepts of Caesarism and Bonapartism in few notes between the end of 1932 and the end of 1933 (the first appears May-November 1930), his conceptions and theory have played important role in intellectual debates. However, Antonini's research demonstrates that there are many indirect and mediated references in different parts of the pre-prison writings and prison notebooks. Her work represents a historical journey of development of these concepts and the interpretation of the Caesarist-Bonapartist model. While Marx contributed to the emergence of the concepts, Gramsci, in the twentieth century, succeeded in contributing new meanings and terms to this model. Caesarism and Bonapartism are different historical and philosophical concepts. That's why Marx, in particular, tried to avoid the confusion between the two and separated them from each other (5).

Analyzing Gramsci's pre-prison writings, Antonini tries to express how he used the concept of Bonapartism when criticizing the reformists and maximalists in his time. In his pre-prison writings, he related the category of Bonapartism to the maximalists. Otherwise, Gramsci applied the concept of Bonapartism to the concept of parliamentary cretinism, the term used by Marx in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louise Bonaparte* (1852). Antonini writes that Gramsci 'attacks as "Bonapartists" those who, having seen in the adherence to the socialist ideal a "bridge" to reach a position of prestige, quickly abandoned the party' (26). Gramsci stressed that in the Italian socialist movement there had always been a Bonapartist aspect (26-27). In contrast to the concept of Bonapartism, the concept of Caesarism appears only once in his pre-prison writings where he said that 'the petty bourgeoisie became Caesarean', meaning that 'the middle class has taken up the Bonapartist and fascist ideals, fascinated by the charm of the strong man, of the charismatic leader' (33).

Antonini asserts that in 1921, Gramsci's priority was no longer the crisis of the capitalist state, but focused on Italy, on the problems of the political system of the country and the transformations found in society (54). Beginning that year, the fascist movement became much stronger and aimed to establish a political party (September 1921). Gramsci in 1924 affirmed that fascism began to exist in Italy and no longer remained a theory but a practice, specifically in his 'Class Struggle (*Lotta di classe*, 24 June 1924 published in *L'Unità*)' (57).

The book also talks about revolution since Caesarism and Bonapartism represent a social and political transformation of a social order, which is explained by Marx and Gramsci's conceptions. These concepts describe and explain a

transformation of a certain historical period like the moment witnessing the rise of a fascist movement. Gramsci examined the renovation of capitalism under American Fordism and under the Bonapartist form of fascism. Thus, he analysed the rise of fascism in Italy by elaborating these categories in conjunction with Caesarism. Gramsci's great contribution to Marx's thought on Caesarism and Bonapartism is a 'balance of class forces'. According to Gramsci, Caesarism expresses a situation in which there is a conflict between the classes and they balance each other in a way that the conflict can be terminated only by way of a destruction of both forces (Q13 §27: 1619; Smet 2016, 96). Gramsci defined this situation catastrophic (*catastrofica*) (Q13 §27: 1619-1622). For example, with regard to a subaltern class or working class struggle for power with the dominant class, this can be ended with the domination of one over other, but none of them can come to power without one defeating the other; however, a third force can intervene and dominate over both (Q13 §27: 1619). In this regard, Caesarism refers to a crisis which cannot be resolved by the force of either the working class or the ruling class, but by the mediation of a third party (Q13 §27: 1619; Smet 2016: 96). For Gramsci, the reference to a 'balance of class forces' is essential to investigate Italian politics and society (51-52). Based on different relations between two social blocs and the result of their balance, Gramsci separates modern Caesarism from pre-modern (122). He underlines that different political crisis can lead to the rise of Caesarism.

As said, Gramsci, different from Marx, contributed new terms and meanings to Caesarism and Bonapartism while analysing the rise of totalitarian regimes in Europe, especially as in the national case of Italy, and in the Orient, that is, in Russia. Some of these related to Caesarism and Bonapartism can be classified as follows: 'passive revolution', 'war of movement (or manoeuvre)' and 'war of position'. According to Gramsci, 'war of movement increasingly becomes war of position, and it can be said that a State will win a war in so far as it prepares for it minutely and technically in peacetime' (Q13 §7: 1566; Smet 2016: 83). As Brecht De Smet points it out, the distinction between 'position' and 'movement' is not an absolute historical and geographical differentiation, 'as they constitute discrete moments within the development of bourgeois society and of its proletarian antithesis' (Smet 2016: 84). While Gramsci classified popular interventions such as strikes, demonstrations and uprisings as forms of movement which are 'concentrated and instantaneous form of insurrection', boycotts, for example, can be considered as a form of position which are "diffused" and capillary form of indirect pressure' (Q15 §11: 1769; Smet 2016: 84). In other words, the first is direct and the latter an indirect movement. These two modes of struggle do not exclude each other. Gramsci's description of these two concepts belonging to a military art brings us to the concept of 'passive revolution'. Indeed, Gramsci, in

Prison Notebooks, asks whether “the concept of “passive revolution” can be related to the concept of “war of position” in contrast “war of manoeuvre” (or of movement) (Q15 §11: 1766; Smet 2016: 85).

As Antonini demonstrates throughout her book, Gramsci emphasized different gradations of Caesarism (Q13 §27: 1619-1622), such as qualitative and quantitative Caesarism (Q13 §27: 1622), intermediate forms, different categorizations such as progressive and regressive Caesarism (Q13 §27: 1619), etc. This perspective is another contribution of Gramsci to Marx’s interpretation of the categories. Besides, contrary to a classical understanding of Caesarism which emphasizes a historico-political situation in which a great personality plays a role, Gramsci writes that ‘[a] Caesarist solution can exist even without a Caesar, without any great, “heroic” and representative personality’ (Q13 §27: 1619; Smet 2016: 98). What Gramsci tried to say is that in the contemporary period, Caesarism cannot be explained by individual charismatic figures such as Caesar, but that modern Caesarism resulted from ‘a specific socio-political combination which can lead all social groups to converge on a party that progressively “saturates” the political landscape, by developing totalitarian characteristics’ (194). In this regard, in the same notebook and passage, Gramsci stated that a Caesarism one finds in the time of Napoleon III cannot represent a modern period in which there are economic, trade-union and party political coalitions (Q13 §27: 1620; Smet 2016: 99). Following Marx, Gramsci remarked that the historical forms represent its uniqueness while concrete and real events must be analysed. In this regard, Gramsci wrote that Caesar can be evaluated through ‘different combination of real circumstances from that represented by Napoleon I’ (Q13 §23: 1610; Smet 2016: 98).

Antonini’s book is very significant in comprehending and situating the place of Marx’s works in Gramsci’s theory; but also in analysing the current occurrence of authoritarian and quasi-fascist regimes in the light of his concepts. The book gives detailed and elaborative research on Gramscian Caesarism which is a multifaceted concept, meaning that it can ‘describe an extremely broad and varied spectrum of political events’ (125). His method is based on the combination of historical reality and theoretical formulation. Gramsci gives importance to the history of the concept and the events ‘that have determined its genesis and development’ (130). As Antonini puts it, Gramsci is not only interested in the historical conceptions for the contemporary situation, but he ‘searches in the past for the deep roots of current phenomena, by formulating a fascinating a critical theory of modernity as a whole’ (131). For this reason, Gramsci makes history.

15 April 2021

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