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Some Reflections on the Chinese Socialist Experience

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**Conceptualizing the Crisis of Socialism:
A Gramscian Approach**
Some Reflections on the Chinese Socialist Experience

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Conceptualizing the Crisis of Socialism: A Gramscian Approach

Some Reflections on the Chinese Socialist Experience

In the context of understanding the important societal transformations which have taken place since the end of 1980s, it is necessary to indicate that the failure of socialism including the Chinese experiment is a matter of tremendous complexity encompassing questions which relate to various domains of social sciences. It is obviously beyond my ability to deal with this issue satisfactorily within the limits of this article. Here, the intention is to provide a conceptualization framework for understanding and interpreting the the crisis of socialism in general and Chinese socialism in particular, which from a theoretical perspective differs from the mainstream approaches within the economic sphere¹. Many of Gramsci's political thoughts and theoretical implications are used as an analytical framework for studying the experiences as well as limitations of modern socialism.

The crisis of socialism: themes and debates

By the late 1980s, the term "crisis" was used with dramatic frequency in describing the sudden fall of the Soviet Union and other socialist states. Western politicians and academics who predicted imminent crisis of socialism tended to view it as endemic and self-evident without developing a convincing crisis theory. The conventional argument often assumed that "economic and administrative steering problems automatically spill over into political and cultural spheres to create a general awareness of crisis among the population" (Ray, 1996: 100). Others saw the failure of the socialist societies as a variant of the crisis of the welfare state (Hettne, 1995: 3). Different scholars emphasize different aspects of the crisis even though all of them are aware of the consequences arising from the interaction of various factors within political, economic and ideological domains.

The crisis of Marxist socialism as a science of history and society, in certain respect, can be referred to what Kuhn calls a "paradigm crisis": deviations between observed reality

¹ The traditional ideological debate between socialists and liberalists over the relative merits and strength of socialist versus capitalist economic systems focuses on two essential economic issues: first, whether economic planning of supply and allocation or market mechanism determination is the best system for a modern economy; second, whether public or private ownership of the means of production is more efficient and rational.

and the expectations generated by the theory (Sweezy, 1980: 136). That is, the old paradigm has generated anomalies that demand new theories and explanations. In Sweezy's view, the anomalies can be understood by a number of facts: 1) socialist states have not eliminated classes except in a verbal sense; 2) the state has not disappeared, rather, it has become more central and the dominant institution of society; 3) each socialist state interprets proletarian internationalism in a way to support its own interests and policies; 4) they go to war not only in the name of self-defense but to impose their will on others (ibid.: 137). In its modern history, China had also experienced two major "paradigm crises," i.e. the crisis of Confucianism as a state ideology in the beginning of this century, and the crisis of socialist-ideology since the end of the 1970s.

Just a few decades ago Marxist socialism was not only influential in the politics of most developing countries but also influenced a whole generation in the Western industrial world. It is an undeniable fact that Communism had once shown significant achievements, and the proposition of socialism was very popular after the Second World War. Maoist socialism based on self-reliance and self-sufficient was once widely seen as an inspiring model for the Third World and was even considered as a challenge to Western modernization ideology. But, what we see in China and elsewhere today is a rapid restoration of capitalism. So, the question arises as to: What are the anomalies that lead to crisis? This question is directly related to a new basis of understanding that needs to be applied to Marxist socialism with regard to what Sweezy calls the post-revolutionary societies.

Marxism on capitalism and socialism

"The test of Marxism emerges in its relation to socialism, not to capitalism" (Heilbroner, 1980: 173). The power and validity of Marxism in its descriptions, analyses, and insights concerning capitalist development, its historical and dialectical materialism, and its perspective of the dynamics of revolution have been integrated into social sciences, and the humanities. It is only after the overthrow of capitalism that Marxism begins to face a challenge and the theory itself is placed on the defensive: the factual inconsistency between the theory speculating on determinant possibilities and the failed experiments of existing socialism. Thus, the debates are much centered on the revolutionary Marxist assumptions regarding the transition from capitalism to socialism.

The study of the Marxist perspective on transition to socialism cannot be separated from the study of its analysis of capitalism since they are interconnected. Marxism tried to explain events that happened in the world according to a conceptualization that views economic factors as determining the course of history. Marx and Engels assumed that social institutions could be understood from the premises of economic analysis and from the perspective of class relations. They predicted that the inherent contradictions of capitalism would eventually result in “the formation of the proletariat into a class, overthrow of the bourgeois supremacy, conquest of political power by the proletariat” (Engels in Le Blanc, 1996: 84). After the working class achieved political power - “the dictatorship of the proletariat,” bourgeois capital would be nationalized; and the means of production would be centralized in the hands of the workers’ state. As a result, the total productive forces would rapidly increase. According to *the Manifesto of the Communist Party*, in the new social system of highly developed socialist societies (the final stage of communist society), “accumulated labour is but a means to widen, to enrich, to promote the existence of the labourer... In place of the old bourgeois society, with its classes and class antagonisms, we shall have an association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all.”

However, such a social order, according to Marx and Engels, must develop from the womb of highly advanced and productive industrial capitalism. In the Marxist understanding of social and historical development, the feudal system was broken down through capitalist industrialization generated by the emerging bourgeois forces. Capitalism was thus a historical product of the industrialization process. But after that, the urban working class, burdened by the oppressive injustice of industrial capitalist, would stand up and push forward social change to overthrow the capitalist order and establish a more fair and free society. Socialism, according to this assumption, demanded as a precondition a process of capitalist industrialization, and could not develop directly from less developed peasant or agrarian societies.

Looking into the classical Marxist tradition of socialism, we can see a distinction between the means and ends of socialism, that is between the “process” for reaching socialism and the end-socialist state. Socialism, according to Marx and Engels, is “an end-state and presupposed certain prior conditions in the socioeconomic and political structure of societies and in their associated intellectual cultures and normative systems” (Leftwich 1992: 27).

Thus, as an end-state socialism in the Marxist version implies: 1) that preconditions have been met and the country is at an advanced stage of its development; 2) the long and complicated process of industrialization, which is the necessary basis and precondition for the building of socialism, is excluded from the definition of socialism. This is perhaps why Marx had not elaborated much on the actual content of socialist development strategy since socialism was expected to emerge from developed capitalism with advanced and exhaustive productive forces.

However, the transition from capitalism to socialism was not theorized by Marx. The fact that socialism has thus far been unable to succeed liberal capitalism in the industrialized countries, and many communist and socialist parties in the West have been in a defensive situation of low profile and reform, is indeed a strong challenge to the classic Marxist theory of social change and development. Since Marx's time no socialist transition has ever occurred according to his scheme. The major communist revolutions, i.e. the Chinese and Russian, were not able to fill the theoretical emptiness. They represented basically revolutions to social contradictions and "a response to underdevelopment, rather than an outcome of capitalist development" (Hettne, 1995: 247). Besides this, there have been varieties of "socialist experiments" in the West and in the Third World with certain degree of state intervention and planning aiming at resolving different socio-economic problems. In many cases socialism has not developed according to the Marxist frame. Rather, it has been used as development alternatives by many states in order to reject the mainstream development model and ideology.

Nevertheless, the Marxist notion of socialism assumes preconditions for reaching the end-socialism including the arduous industrialization process. Marx did not envision a socialist path to end-socialism (Leftwich, 1992: 30). The building of a communist society would be inconceivable directly based on a clear cut-off from the old foundations, but would be "in every respect, economically, morally and intellectually, still stamped with the birthmarks of the old society from whose womb it emerges" (Engels in Le Blanc, 1996: 86). It involves a series of process from liberating the proletariat by a democratic state, guaranteeing the proletariat the means of existence, creating work for all, offering a full public education, and socializing the entire economy. A communist society would mean a dramatic transformation of human relationships, culture and psychology.

Who then would be the agency behind this transitional process? According Marx and Engels, it is the state, which itself is a product of class society and a tool of class oppression. But under socialism the state would have to be transformed, and in their view, “When the proletariat class seizes political power and turns the means of production into state property,” but “the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery, and wield it for its own purposes”; for Marx the solution was: “Between capitalist and communist society lies the period of the revolutionary transformation of the one into the other. Corresponding to this is also a political transition period in which the state can be nothing but the revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat.” Engels added that the proletarian state “is only a transitional institution which is used in the struggle, in the revolution, to hold down one’s adversaries by force” (Marx & Engels in Le Blanc, *ibid.*: 87). The Paris Commune of 1871 was seen as an example of the proletarian dictatorship. Lenin had a similar understanding of the role of state. In his booklet *State and Revolution*, he described it as “an instrument of the ruling class,” and a “machine for the repression of one class by another.”

In addition to Marxist theories on the state and socialist transition, two other controversial issues have equally raised endless debates among scholars within the disciplines of social sciences: economic determinism², and the role of ideology. According to one interpretation (Martin, 1997: 37), the Marxist tradition operates with two sources for the process in which the continuity and survival of capitalism as well as the legitimation of its political institutions are realized through the successful reproduction of the conditions for the

² In this chapter many theoretical analyses and discussions are related to the criticism on Marxist “economic determinism” (or economic reductionism). Marx has been criticized for his neglect of other elements considered as important as the economic aspect. At this point, it is crucial to point out that Marx and Engels were themselves aware of the problem and they had reasons to make such a “mistake.” This can be understood from Engels’ letter to Bloch commenting on the misunderstanding of his and Marx’s work:

According to the materialist conception of history, the *ultimately* determining element in history is the production and reproduction of real life.... if somebody twists this into saying that the economic element is the *only* determining one, he transforms that proposition into a meaningless, abstract, senseless phrase. The economic situation is the basis, but the various elements of the superstructure.... also exercise their influence upon the course of the historical struggles and in many cases preponderate in determining their *form*.

Marx and I are ourselves partly to blame for the fact that the younger people sometimes lay more stress on the economic side than is due to it. We had to emphasise the main principle *vis-à-vis* our adversaries who denied it, and we had not always the time, the place or the opportunity to give their due to the other elements involved in the interaction. (Engels in Hindess, 1987: 87)

This letter reveals that Marx and Engels were fully conscious of the fact that other non-economic elements must be given their due. This has been overlooked by both Marxists and non-Marxists.

accumulation of capital: First, at the structural level, reproduction is based on a process of extracting surplus value from producers which is converted into capital; at the political level, in order to avoid antagonistic tendencies which might affect the reproduction of capital, the bourgeois state with its class representatives in the highest position use ideology to pacify the working classes. Bourgeois legitimation is thus reflected by the interaction of these two levels:

Both structural and political sources of legitimation involve an account of ideology: in the structural account, it is the construction of formally free and equal citizens at the level of exchange that is ideological. Formal equality masks the process of exploitation of the workers in the extraction of surplus value. In the political account, it is the dominance of ideas and beliefs supportive of bourgeois interests that constitutes ideology. (ibid.: 38)

However, some related questions can be raised: to what degree and extent does economic structure determine all aspects of human activities and social arrangement? Institutions such as parties, trade unions and churches which are able to play their independent political and ideological role do exist outside the exclusive influence of state and economic control. If we agree that social transformation must not only bring about changes in the economic structure but also in the political and ideological spheres, is it correct to ignore that the role of politics and ideology emanating from those institutions might be different from those of bourgeois dominant ideology and politics?

It has been argued that because of its economic determinism Marxism "pays insufficient attention both to the complexity of the institutions of the superstructure, and to the influence they have *in their own rights*," and "The relationship between economic and non-economic institutions should therefore be regarded as one of interaction and mediation than of cause and effect" (Ransome, 1992: 21). Although the bourgeoisie, as the dominant class, exercises power and control through the monopoly of the economy, its centrality of power and control is also materialized in relation to a wide network of institutions whose roles are not necessarily confined exclusively to economic influence. For instance, the role of religion (churches and temples), welfare and democratic institutions have been highly integrated into the complexity of social life which makes the economic explanations of control inadequate and unsatisfactory. This complexity of society is demonstrated by Ransome in the following way:

... although exploitation may provide an index of revolutionary motivation, the *realisation* of this potential cannot be taken for granted. Exploitation may be the

prerequisite for social change, but it does not guarantee that particular individuals or groups of individuals will make the connection between their circumstances and the nature of society as such. Social transformation, in other words, depends upon the extent to which individuals become *conscious* of this relationship and decide to act; it is an *organic* rather than *mechanical* process. (ibid.: 22)

Furthermore, with the development and advance of society and with the increase of variety of occupations created by modern technologies, the definition and division of class based on economic criteria become inadequate. People within the working class itself have developed into different categories holding different economic status.

Marxist economic determinism is predetermined by the centrality given to the antagonistic nature of the struggle between the bourgeoisie and the working class. However, it has been argued that Marx perhaps underestimated the capacity of the bourgeois class to contain the emerging social crises and to accept a process of reorganization through compromises in order to reestablish its hegemony. What Gramsci saw was that capitalism worldwide was undergoing a series of transformations from laissez-faire capitalism to a more regulated system based on controlled and rationalized production. This is what he called "passive revolution," such as Fordism, Keynesianism, New Deal, etc. These far-reaching modifications in the economic structure were accepted by the ruling class in order to defuse the social contradictions. This "compromise" refers to certain realization of general consensus or consent through which social control is maintained. Politically, in Western capitalist societies social consent has come to be regarded as the system of democratic institutions and liberal ideology through which an exchange of ideas between the population and the state seems functional to the stability of the societal structure. It is believed that the non- or semi-state institutions such as the media and the church can have a tremendous ideological impact on people's consciousness, their way of thinking and daily lives, which helps to maintain the power and legitimacy of the capitalist ruling class.

Marxism has been critical of these democratic institutions and the liberal ideology which were seen as being articulated and manipulated to the advantage of the ruling bourgeois class. From a Marxist economic point of view, the bourgeois-liberal ideology achieving consensus or consent is in fact a mask which hides its factual exploitation and control over the means of production. Seen from this perspective, the resolution of the societal contradictions

of capitalist mode of production and economic structure is more important than to operate change in bourgeois ideology.

However, nowadays it is widely recognized that ideas and ideologies play an important role on social, political and economic development and transformation. It is argued that one strong factor behind the collapse of modern socialism was its failure in maintaining its ideology in order to bind together a bloc of diverse social elements. In other words, it was a crisis in the realm of ideology. Thus, in order to conceptualize the abortion of socialist transition and especially the restoration of capitalism in China as this paper intends to do, there is a need to establish a framework of analysis based on a non-reductionist and non-economist Marxist perspectives. In view of this need, the Gramscian theoretical frame of reference offers a useful perspective in providing dynamic and inspiring arguments and explanations while raising some fundamental issues.

The Gramscian approach is related to the new perspectives in developing an understanding of Marxism. Gramsci's theoretical contribution provides the possibility of applying a critical Marxist framework to explain contemporary political development. Scholars who still value Marxism as a tool of analysis and attach a great importance to Gramsci in particular are trying hard to find answers to the puzzling reality: capitalism has continued to be the dominant national and world economic system while those countries which have had revolutions and adopted the socialist system, most notably China and the Soviet Union, were identified with totalitarianism and repression rather than with democracy and freedom.

Notwithstanding this apparent miscarriage of socialism, many people including myself still see the Marxist worldview of society as an important perspective in analyzing the process of social development and change. The effort to revitalize Marxism is based on the assumption that although capitalism has succeeded in sustaining economic growth and prosperity in the West, there is no doubt that capitalist growth and prosperity have been achieved not on the basis of equality but on the basis of exploitation. So, the crucial questions which we need to understand are "how capitalism has become so dominant, and why so many individuals continue to support it by participating in a system which seems to act against their own best interests in so many ways" (ibid.: 2). A comprehensive understanding of this complexity can, in turn, provide some answers to the crisis of socialism in the recent past.

The subsequent discussion of the important concepts in Gramsci's political theory will look at the various implications of his writings. The analytical discussion reflects a process of interpretation and comprehension based on an instrumental reading of Gramsci's writings as well as many other sources. It must not be regarded as providing the *answers*, rather, it aims at constructing a framework for understanding the crisis of socialism including the Chinese experience and the complexities of such an effort on the basis of historical novel forms of political, social and ideological relations. Many key concepts of Gramsci's theory seem to be applicable to the analysis and understanding of post-revolutionary societies.

Gramsci's political thought and theoretical implications

Before starting to center the discussion, it is necessary to emphasize several points although they will not be included in the subsequent discussion:

1. The awareness of the external geopolitical factors concerning the development of socialism is indispensable in order to get a complete picture of the possibilities and constraints of such an endeavour. For example, the hostility of the US-led capitalist world-system, to a large extent, played a decisive role in imposing pressures, difficulties and constraints to the development of socialism especially in the Chinese case. Thus, it is important to study both the historical development and international context of the post-revolutionary societies in order to understand why their efforts in building socialism ended in fiasco. But in this section, the analysis will be focused on the internal social and political factors.
2. This paper's analytical conceptualization will focus on issues regarding politics, ideology, and society. That is to say, questions within the domain of economics, such as the conventional discussion over the merits and demerits of planned versus free market economy will not be included even though it is a part of the debate.
3. The internal and external conditions, in which Gramsci lived and wrote explain certain limitations in his thoughts as applied to understand events at later stage. His Prison Notebooks was written under prison censorship, and so he had to use ambiguous language that concealed his real sense. Some of the ideas are not clear and remain controversial. One problematic area is his use of the bourgeois struggle for power against feudalism as a starting point to develop many of his concepts and arguments which are used as a metaphor for the workers' struggle for power in capitalist society. But this can

be misleading because the relations of production in these two struggles are completely different (Harman, 1983: 25).

4. In the process of developing his political thought Gramsci often used the concept of bourgeois hegemony as a point of departure, and he frequently compared the East (the USSR) with the West (Western industrial societies). Did he overestimate the role of bourgeois democracy? Did he suggest that the struggle for power of the proletarian class should imitate the politics of the bourgeoisie? Was he excessively influenced by the experience of the Russian Revolution in his thinking?
5. In applying Gramsci's theory to explain the Chinese case, it is important to keep in mind that China was basically an agrarian society, besides having different social structures and cultural traditions than those of Russia. It is not surprising to find that many conditions and premises in both Marx's and Gramsci's theories and analyses hardly fit into the Chinese reality.

Awareness of these limitations, however, does not affect the validity of Gramsci's theoretical insight and the usefulness of his analyses and arguments in providing a framework for understanding the limits and problems of the contemporary socialist experiments. The subsequent discussion aims at analyzing the dislocations between theory and practice, between hegemony and consent, between ideological paradigm and material reality in post-revolutionary societies with China as the main case.

Theories, concepts and discourses

Gramsci's theoretical thought and philosophical insights are concentrated in his *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* in which his conceptual analyses are centered on the state, on the interaction and relationship between civil society and the state, and on the relationship between politics, ideology and production. The Gramscian theory of *hegemony* which involves a number of interrelated elements such as power, class struggle and interest, national-popular, civil society, material base, democracy, etc., constructs a profound conceptualization framework of the dialectical relationship between state and society, politics and ideology. Most of his writings provide insightful analyses of bourgeois hegemony in Western advanced capitalist societies and valuable thoughts on the hegemonic qualifications which the working class needs to obtain prior to establishing its own hegemony on state power. Antonio Gramsci did not live to contribute a theoretical explanation to the crisis of

post-revolutionary societies. Nevertheless, I find that Gramsci's thinking, particularly his concept of hegemony, is valuable and helpful in understanding the crisis behind the collapse of modern socialism.

The point of departure of the theoretical framework which Gramsci developed is the notion of *hegemony*, i.e. a dominant class exercises power over subordinate classes by means of a combination of coercion and consent. It aims at finding some answers to the limitations of classical Marxist economic explanations. Traditional Marxism asserts that when productive forces have developed to the level that existing production relations can no longer be compatible with their further growth, social revolution will be irresistible and the old systems will crumble. The theory of hegemony attempts to explain why Marxist assertion was not realized by looking at other dimensions: "a powerful mechanism of consolidation exists within the social and political superstructure which helps to stabilize the ascendancy of a class at the limiting point of production compatible with its continuity" (Scruton, 1996: 219). The theory tries to widen the analytical perspective and stress the necessity and importance of studying social aspects other than the economic sphere.

Gramsci's point of departure for the concept of hegemony was developed in relation to the Third International when it was considered that under socialism "the workers exercised hegemony over the allied classes and dictatorship over enemy classes" (Cox, 1993: 50). Then he began to apply this guideline to discover the apparatus or mechanisms of hegemony of the bourgeoisie as the dominant class. Gramsci conceptualized the phenomenon of "rule with consent" as the "hegemony of the bourgeoisie" in which the bourgeois class is able to maintain its ruling position with the "consent" of the subordinate classes. So, the important thing for us is to comprehend, with the help of Gramsci's theoretical analysis, the dialectics whereby subordinate classes accept bourgeois rule with consent and to understand how economic dominance leads to political and ideological leadership.

Hegemony in Gramsci's sense (rule with coercion and consent) is a concept of ideology. Marx defined ideology as "the social function of consolidating a particular economic order" (Scruton, 1996: 250). As used by Lenin it is incorporated in the strategy for revolution: a strategy which the working class and its supporting groups should adopt to win the support of the majority (Simon, 1982: 22). Gramsci converted hegemony from being a revolutionary strategy into a concept in which he added a new dimension to include the practice of a dominant class both in gaining and maintaining state power. A dominant class,

called by Gramsci a hegemonic class, is “one which gains the consent of other classes and social forces through creating and maintaining a system of alliances by means of political and ideological struggle” (ibid.: 22-23).

Besides Gramsci’s analytical work, there are a number of contributions which aim at interpreting the notion of “bourgeois hegemony.” Some perceive the notion of hegemony as result of ideological “false consciousness,” and others share the Weberian notion of “rule of legitimation.” Based on their arguments and interpretations, the reason why the bourgeois class is able to rule with consent from the subordinate classes is because the former has been conducting an endless process of “massive indoctrination” as well as enjoying “ideological supremacy” over the subordinate classes. However, Gramsci’s theses are much more complex than “false consciousness” or “ideological predominance.”

The problematic that Gramsci wanted to indicate is that ideological leadership (hegemony) cannot be reduced to a matter of “legitimation,” “false consciousness” or “manipulation”; a human being or an individual’s *common sense* (worldview) consists of a variety of elements, and some of which may contradict the dominant ideology. What is important for a dominant and hegemonic ideology is to “provide a more coherent and systematic worldview which not only influences the mass of the population but serves as a principle of organization of social institutions” (Bottomore, 1983: 201). The dominant ideology which the ruling bourgeois class enjoys includes active consent, not passive submission, from the subordinate classes. Nor is it imposed, but rather, “it is ‘negotiated’ by unequal forces in a complex process through which the subordination and the resistance of the workers are created and recreated” (Simon, 1982: 64).

The notion of hegemony is understood to be a process that is entered into by both the dominators and dominated: both the rulers and ruled use psychological and material rewards in an endless exchange of social, political and economic reproduction. This clearly denotes one of Gramsci’s key theoretical presuppositions that “hegemony has a material basis.” As an Italian Marxist, he, like Marx, recognized economic structure as primary for any class to gain a ruling position. However, for Gramsci, hegemony also implies “intellectual and moral leadership,” which is understood as “an economic compromise in the fundamental relations of production, actualized, and made explicit at political and ideological level” (Im, 1991: 125). Though a dominant class exercises economic leadership, this leadership does not automatically lead to political and ideological dominance. To transfer its economic leadership

to political and ideological hegemony it needs to deal with the relations between politics and ideology on the one side, and the mode of production or the rule of capital on the other.

In the view of Gramsci, the supremacy of a class or a social group resides in two closely interrelated aspects: domination and hegemony. Domination implies a certain kind of compulsion, and hegemony refers to the rule by consent or passive consensus. Gramsci stresses that the concept of *hegemony* connotes an essential implication that in order to maintain its ruling position the dominant bourgeois class in advanced capitalist economies tends to use "rule by consent" rather than "rule by force." To rule by consent is to claim to represent the universal interests of the whole society not only politically, economically but also culturally and ideologically. What is the most important element in the "rule by consent" is the understanding as well as the ability of the bourgeois class to appear to materialize the interests of the subordinate classes thus establishing the fundament of the so-called "false consciousness."

Thus, the important part of Gramsci's hegemony theory lies in the thesis that intellectual and moral leadership cannot exclusively be achieved and sustained by ideological indoctrination; and in order to establish ideological hegemony the dominant class must provide the subordinate classes with material condition. Ideology, for Gramsci, is not "something which, as it were, floats in the air high above the political and other practical activities of men and women" (Simon, 1982: 58), rather, it has a material existence in these activities. To say that ideology has a material existence is to indicate that it is embodied in individual practices and in the political and economic institutions and organizations where these practices occur, such as political parties, trade unions, industrial and financial institutions, etc. It is through individual practices as well as the effects of these practices in various institutions and organizations that ideology is formed, sustained and expanded. Seen from this perspective, I consider Gramsci's theory as being convincing because it establishes the concept of hegemony by revealing the parallel working mechanism of both superstructural and material relations. As Gramsci points out, "Though hegemony is ethical-political, it must also be economic, must necessarily be based on the decisive function exercised by the leading group in the decisive nucleus of economic activity" (Gramsci, 1971: 161). In other words, living-standard and welfare can also be seen as an inherent part of the material base of hegemony.

Then, the question is, why is the material base so important for the establishment and sustenance of hegemony? This is because, as Gramsci clarifies:

precisely material forces are the content and ideologies are the form, though this distinction between form and content has purely didactic value, since the material forces would be conceivable historically without form and the ideologies would be individual fancies without the material force. (ibid.: 377)

As Im further explains, the notion of the material base of hegemony refers to a kind of economic compromise between the dominant class and subordinate classes. On the one hand,

A dominant class can achieve hegemony by making concrete coordination of interests with subordinate classes. In order to make concrete coordination of interests, the dominant class must not sacrifice the actual interests of the subordinate classes but rather to some extent realize those of the subordinate classes by sacrificing some of its own material interests. Therefore, without becoming the most dominant force in the world of production, the dominant class cannot maintain the material base of the economic compromise. The development of material forces of production provide the objective base for the establishment of hegemony of a dominant class. In order to reproduce hegemony continuously the dominant class should make every effort to reproduce the existing mode of production. (Im, 1991: 128)

On the other hand, the compromise, which is necessary, must not challenge the economic order on which the hegemony of the dominant class is based. To lose the economic order is to lose the reproduction of the existing mode of production which a dominant class uses to create the material basis so as to sustain its hegemony and to “buy” the consent of the subordinate classes. Under all circumstances, “a hegemonic class must be able to create and to maintain an equilibrium between its own fundamental interests and those of subordinate classes to the extent that the dominant mode of production cannot be touched and at the same time the subordinate classes do not withdraw their consent to the rule of the hegemonic class” (ibid.: 128-129).

From a Marxist point of view, in capitalist society the above equilibrium cannot succeed. The inherent contradictions of capitalism associating with the excessive profits of the bourgeoisie class in relation to the wage level of the working classes tend to break the societal equilibrium. However, as time passes on, the capitalist class in modern and advanced capitalist economies has realized the necessity to develop a capacity, for the sake of maintaining its own hegemony and interest, to reward the material demands of the subordinate classes without giving up the mode of production and its fundamental class interest. In other

words, the capitalist class is able to maintain the fundamental but often *unstable* equilibrium: on the one hand, to earn enough profit for capitalist accumulation and reproduction, and on the other hand, to realize material well-being for the masses so that they accept the rule by capital.

Notwithstanding the equilibrium, the economic and material factors, although important, are not sufficient to consolidate the hegemony of a dominant class. In order to obtain a real hegemony, the dominant class must be able to “transcend the corporate limits of the purely economic class” (Gramsci, 1971: 181) and become a *universal* class that can associate its own interests with those of subordinate classes. That is to say, when economic dominance is combined with the superiority in the superstructural spheres, such as culture, religion, politics, education and social system in general, a real hegemony is thus established and consolidated.

A genuine hegemony implies that the political and ideological realms in the superstructure must function in such a way as to bring both the dominant class and subordinate classes to make compromise in order to maintain the basic social and economic system. A true hegemony, therefore, denotes class compromise both from above and below, which lead to general political, economic and ideological consensus. To make the superstructure function in order to create general consensus, the issue of bourgeois democracy (capitalist democracy) plays a decisive role.

Capitalism has three basic elements: market economy, individualism, and last but not least private property and means of production. A capitalist society is understood to be dominated by the struggle between two fundamental classes, each representing capital and labour, together with a complex network of relations between the classes and other social forces. Within such a society, a variety of social relations are embedded in diverse institutions and organizations such as political parties, trade unions, the mass media, churches and non-governmental organizations. To deal with these complex relations, bourgeois *democracy* aims not only at legitimizing its dominance at the system level but also at receiving tacit consent to the *status quo* from all subordinate classes and social groups.

What bourgeois “democracy” does is to single out and differentiate individualism as an individual human being and an individual citizen from individual as a member of a specific class. The trick behind bourgeois democracy is to individualize the subordinate classes into “individual person” or “citizen” so as to dissolve the collective core or common basis without

which a class cannot exist. In this sense, "Every individual member of a class no longer acts qua class but acts qua people or citizen" (Im, 1991: 131). Everyone is supposed to have the freedom and rights to participate in elections, legislation, government representation as well as political and economic decision-making as an individual citizen or voter, but not as a member of a class. The deliberate separation of the political and economic spheres produces among the people "the ideological belief that they exercise self-government in the representative State" (Anderson in Martin, 1997: 41). This leads to various forms of democracy which help preserve capitalism while making it more acceptable to both workers and the petty bourgeoisie.

Moreover, bourgeois democracy, in the view of Gramsci, provides each individual with a means to express his/her interest. This is to ensure that the possible effect of bourgeois democracy with its emphasis on individual and group will not undermine the fundamental capitalist mode of production on which bourgeois dominance depends. In other words, bourgeois hegemony is identified as "a political consent account of consent whereby extra-economic modes of domination serve to enforce a 'dominant ideology' favourable to the reproduction of capitalist relations of production" (Martin, *ibid.*: 51). Lenin described bourgeois democratic politics as "the best possible political shell," which tolerates and encourages superficial democracy among all classes in order to rationalize its image as the universal representative of the interests of the whole society. Until the bourgeoisie is able to go beyond its narrow corporative interests, to exert a moral and intellectual leadership, and to make compromises (within certain limits) with a variety of allies, who are unified in a social bloc of forces, which Gramsci called the *historical bloc*, its hegemony is established on the basis of convergence of its interests and those of all subordinate classes. In this way, the social order, which the bourgeois ruling class has created and recreated in a web of institutions, social relations and ideas, represents a basis of consent (Bottomore, 1983: 201). The process of realizing such an order is *passive revolution* in which the bourgeoisie responds to an organic crisis by making necessary compromises and modifications as well as social reorganizations so as to reestablish its hegemony.

Bourgeois hegemonic dominance can be seen not only at the national level but also at the global level. With the disappearance of the ideological challenge of socialism and in the current globalization process characterized by the transformation of ideologies from pro-socialist and pro-labour systems of social welfare to individualist private capitalism, what we

are witnessing is closely related to Gramsci's idea of capitalist (bourgeois) hegemony. The power of modern capitalism has the ability to prevent political, economic and social conflicts from reaching a level of revolutionary crisis: in the United States, for example, "struggle over the ownership of the means of production, that is, socialism, has hardly ever reached the public agenda" (Ross & Trachte, 1990: 9). And in this respect, the hegemony of capitalism can be understood to possess not only "the ability to prevail in conflict" but also the "ability to mold the ways in which actors understand any potential conflict" (ibid.: 9).

Hence, the power embedded in the hegemony of bourgeois ideology is its skillful competence to win the "rule of legitimation" through materializing the "false consciousness" which perceives the capitalist political and economic system and social structure as being rational and inevitably natural. In other words, it is able to depoliticize social conflicts or explicit contentions with "a 'prepolitical' process which constructs the public agenda and thus predisposes 'politics' to a narrowed set of choices" (ibid.: 9).

What is the agency that functions as a mediator between various classes in case of emerging conflicts? It is the state where the "universal interests" of a society as a nation or community are represented. Classical Marxism-Leninism has tended to believe that power is concentrated in the state, and the goal of proletarian revolution was to capture state power. Although Gramsci, like Marx and Lenin, recognizes that the ideological or consensual nature of bourgeois rule is to be found in the state, he enlarges the definition of the state as *force plus consent*, or hegemony armoured by coercion (Gramsci, 1971: 263), in which *political society* (state) organizes force whereas *civil society* provides consent - in other words a balance between political and civil society.

Consequently, the political struggle of the proletarian class for socialism should not be narrowed to the capture of state power, but should be extended to winning the whole civil society. The power of the state, for Gramsci, does not necessarily represent the particular interest of the bourgeois class or functions as an instrument for the dominant class. As Sassoon argues, the state can be seen as the instrument for producing class compromise necessary for bourgeois hegemony (Sassoon in Im, 1991: 134). The definition of state as "force plus consent" means that the state not only initiates compromise but also uses "legal power" to enforce discipline on those elements who do not consent or do not make compromise.

Since bourgeois hegemony is strongly entrenched in civil society, the bourgeoisie often does not have to run the state itself as long as state rulers recognize the hegemonic structure of civil society as the basic limits of their political action (Cox, 1993: 51). It is on the levels of both political and civil society that the true and comprehensive notion of hegemony is finally maintained and consolidated: on the one hand, the civil society corresponds to the function of hegemony; on the other hand, the political society maintains hegemony through forced coercion of state "juridical power."

The implication of Gramsci's theory: power and ideology

Gramscian theory of hegemony posits that the leadership of a class is maintained at two levels: 1) material basis of hegemony through reforms and compromises; 2) political and ideological basis to represent the universal spirit of the society. Lack or weakness of any of them means an incomplete hegemony because,

... any economic notion of politics or ideology which looks for immediate economic class interests in politics and culture is incapable of an accurate analysis of the political situation and of the balance of political forces and cannot produce an adequate understanding of the nature of state power (see economism). Consequently it is inadequate as a basis for a political strategy for the working-class movement. (Bottomore, 1983: 202)

As a contribution to the Marxist analysis of leadership and hegemony of social groups and classes, Gramsci puts less emphasis on economic dimension as a determinant but more on the interactions between material and ideology. A fully functional hegemony (class dominance) must depend on consent, and on a collective will of all classes and groups in the society.

As a Marxist, Gramsci believes that, "The proletariat can become the leading and the dominant class to the extent that it succeeds in creating a system of alliances which allows it to mobilize the majority of the population against capitalism and the bourgeois state" (Gramsci, 1971: 443). However, the working class can only develop into a dominant class and sustain its leadership position by taking into consideration the interests of various classes and social forces. To a certain extent, the working class has to prepare to make compromises even at the expense of sacrificing its own interests in order to become a universal class representing a broad bloc of social forces.

In addition to the above, the proletarian class can obtain hegemony not only by means of an alliance of classes or social forces but also through what Gramsci called *national-*

popular. The concept of national-popular refers to the capacity of the dominant class to extend its own interests and to take into account the popular and democratic demand including those who do not necessarily fit into any class category, in other words, including people who are not directly affected by relations of production. Popular movements like the student movement, peace movement, women's movement, human rights movement, etc., must not be reduced to class struggles. Many of these movements reflect conflicts between the people and the bureaucracy, or officialdom, which are different in nature from the class conflict between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie in relation to production relations. The hegemony of the proletarian class, in Gramsci's sense, should have the qualification of embracing both a class consciousness and a national-popular dimension. That is to say, in building a socialist society the autonomy of all subordinate classes and their contribution should be preserved and tolerated by the dominant proletarian class who has the responsibility to form a broad democratic alliance of various social forces. This kind of broad unification of various social forces and groups under the general consent of the ideology of the dominant class is what Gramsci called a *war of position*.

In revolutionary praxis, socialist revolutionaries have been involved in ideological struggle using the tactics of the united front in the struggle to win leadership of the whole society, nonetheless, there are specific moments of armed confrontation where one side tries to overthrow the other by armed insurrection. This moment is what Gramsci considers as "the decisive moment of struggle." The strategy of the "mass line"³ during the Chinese Revolution in the 1930s and 1940s was consistent with what Gramsci describes as national-popular and war of position. During the anti-Japanese War and the Civil War, the Chinese Communist Party (hereafter CCP), which assumed the vanguard role of the proletarian class⁴, achieved success in transforming itself into a hegemonic class. This was done by building an alliance with all social forces and combining them into the class struggle to create a collective will to achieve national independence and build a prosperous and equal society.

³ During the Chinese Revolution, the Communist Party showed a deep understanding of the possible obstacles to draw peasants' participation in the revolution. Mao also made concrete investigations on this issue. The strategy of the "mass line" was developed in order to overcome the hindrances.

⁴ The original power of the Chinese Communist Party came from peasant's movements in the countryside rather than from urban-based proletarian struggles, although there were some urban uprisings. Within the CCP there were divergences on this: Mao was identified with the peasantry while Liu Shaoqi was identified with urban workers.

The problematic, seen from the history of the socialist countries, lies in the maintenance of hegemony after state power has been gained. As Gramsci stresses, even after a social class or group has become dominant and achieved power, it must continue to “lead” as well. Hegemony can never be taken for granted, but has to continually be maintained. This requires the leading class to maintain and strengthen its social authority in all areas of civil society, and to further make compromises which are needed to adapt the existing system of various alliances to changing conditions (Simon, 1982: 37). In other words, once a class or social group has gained state power and achieved hegemony, the system of “united front” (historical bloc) in the realms of ideology, class struggle, material bases and civil society on which its power and dominance is built has to be continually readjusted and renegotiated.

The most influential part of Gramsci’s theory of hegemony is the argument that popular consent has to be an *integral* part of the process by which political institutions are established rather than how these institutions are legitimized by consent (Martin, 1997: 38-39). The implication of this theory is to explain the fact that the real power behind bourgeois hegemony lies in its capacity to control social conflicts before they appear on the public agenda: contending parties are constrained, in the scope of the conflicts in which they engage, and the solutions they seek, by their ability to formulate ideas and to imagine alternatives (Ross & Trachte, 1990: 9).

Gramsci’s political thoughts and the crisis of socialism

Politics, state and civil society

To Marx, politics was of primary importance, although he did not develop a comprehensive theory of politics comparable to his economic theory (Hobsbawm, 1982: 20-22). This perhaps is what is referred to as the weakness behind Marxist economism. In this respect, Gramsci’s major contribution to Marxism lies in having developed and redefined the meaning of politics, including the strategic context for preparing for the transformation of capitalism as well as for the construction of socialism. In his political theory, in which basic thoughts have been discussed above, Gramsci provided a framework for the analysis of the political party in addition to the organizational analysis of Marx and Lenin. In this framework he theorized the relationship between the various elements in a new society and especially between social actors such as party, ruler and ruled as well as between classes.

The centrality of Gramsci's concept of hegemony contributed to reveal the mechanism whereby the dominant class succeeds in persuading the other classes or groups of society to accept its moral, political and cultural values (Blecher, 1989: 11). Through the concept of hegemony he problematized the difficulties of gaining and maintaining the leadership position based on the consent of the majority. In criticizing the limits of the Russian Bolshevik Revolution⁵ and the Stalin era, he argued that politics and political institutions had been neglected in socialist societies and socialism could not be built without democracy, and without popular participation in the political process (Hobsbawm, 1982: 20). According to this view, politics cannot be simply reduced to the level of party and state and must encompass all levels and areas of society. Furthermore, it should be viewed as "a process which continually meets new challenges and which cannot be captured within fixed institutional forms" (Sassoon, 1987: xv). It was precisely in this understanding that Mao attempted to establish socialist hegemony at an epistemological and ontological level.

Some lessons for the failure of socialism can be drawn from looking at Gramsci's theory on the relative sophistication of bourgeois democracy in Western capitalist societies as a system combining hegemony and domination. Gramsci's political thought was able to grasp the profound modifications in bourgeois politics appropriate to the need of monopoly capitalism. With the socialist revolution the proletarian class can succeed in seizing power by destroying bourgeois domination - the coercive power of the state. However, it has not yet gained complete hegemony, which will have to be built constantly. After the seizure of state power and the assumption of the leadership position, the proletarian class has to continue the struggle for hegemony and deal properly with the relationship of the elements of the new society. Such a strategy should already have been prepared even before assuming leadership. In this respect, we can see that Gramsci gives priority to the need of continuing the political transformation in the organic relationship between the party, the rulers and the ruled; that is, the continual struggle to lead and represent the interest and consent of the entire population and nation.

One of the problems which the ex-socialist states faced was that old relations were being constantly reproduced, although the goal of the socialist project aimed at breaking down

⁵ It has been argued that Gramsci's understanding of socialist revolution and socialism came mainly from his knowledge of the Russian Revolution and the Stalinist socialism. At that time it could not be otherwise

the traditional division between rulers and ruled. To Gramsci such a goal is both idealistic and possible, but might never be realized. This is because although ideas, practices and institutions may change, they are deeply rooted in the tradition. The traditional bureaucratic relations between leaders and the led: the relations of domination and subordination and the old division in the social, political and economic domains, were still being reproduced in the ex-socialist states. To put it in another way, bureaucracy is not only a problem under capitalism but also become a serious question under socialism. Thus, Gramsci did not expect a cataclysmic break dividing socialism from capitalism since the problems of current (capitalist) society may indicate that the same issues that would have to be faced by post-revolutionary societies. This is further explained by Sassoon as follows:

For if the specific forms of institutions, structures, relations, and practices are 'given' in the sense that they come from the past and must be taken into account by any political force, they are not the inevitable product of historical development or the reflection of relations inherent in a mode of production. (ibid.: xvii)

In this sense, Gramsci's historical materialism, which avoids causal explanations, is a contribution to Marxism and contains lessons for socialism.

Thus, the method to firmly establish itself on the basis of the relics of the old society is for the proletarian class, according to Gramsci, to continue to consolidate popular consent. To Gramsci's understanding popular consent can be passive and active. For passive consent, it is instrumentalized by the state and the masses are treated as "masses for manoeuvre," whereas for active consent, it is a real interchange between the leaders and the led (Buci-Glukzman, 1982: 118). Active consent is also expansive consent. In this sense, we can see that Gramsci was aware of the loss of expansiveness in the Stalinist "revolution from above" and criticized

the complex of channel which establish passive consent from above to below, in which politics is always identified purely with the statist and instrumental domain of domination (bureaucratic centralism, authoritarian paternalism, forms of Caesarism and totalitarianism, corporation, etc.). (ibid.: 119)

Thus, the Stalinist hegemony is conceived as one based on passive consent. A real hegemony must primarily be a strategy for winning the active consent of the masses through various forms of apparatuses such as the civil society, the school and also the family in order to create a collective political will.

As Gramsci pointed out in his analysis of bourgeois democracy, this kind of democracy was perceived to be comparatively strong and durable particularly because it recognized the importance of political institutions and mechanisms. In Hobsbawm's explanation,

This is why political arrangements have become a powerful means for reinforcing bourgeois hegemony. Slogans such as 'the defence of the Republic', 'the defence of democracy' or the defence of civil rights and freedoms bind rulers and ruled together. This is no doubt for the primary benefit of the rulers, but this does not mean that they are irrelevant to the ruled. They are thus far more than mere cosmetics on the face of coercion, more even than simple political trickery. (Hobsbawm, 1982: 32)

According to this view, socialist societies concentrated too much on establishing a economic system - the transformation of means of production while not enough effort was made in consolidating and perfecting the actual political, institutional and legal systems. The neglect and inefficiency of politics in socialist societies contrast with the development experience of bourgeois societies which stress the importance of political institutions and compromised democracy. The weakness of socialist societies, based on the understanding of the above discussion, is the area of politics as compared to the skillful experience of advanced bourgeois societies. In other words, it was the shortcomings in the political domain of socialist transition which prevented the resolution of the problems of social transformations and the establishment of hegemony.

The Chinese party-state formation consisted of a self-perpetuating elite whose qualification was mostly based on political criteria rather than the Western type of Weberian bureaucracies with appointment based in principle on technical or professional qualifications⁶. Mao's emphasis on political awareness and socialist consciousness of Party members and among the masses came out of his belief that a proper attitude and consciousness could unleash individual motivation and devotion for socialist construction. This was the basic thinking behind his advocacy of "red and expert" - a combination of political consciousness and professional qualifications. However, in many cases, those who proved themselves "red" through their participation in the Chinese Revolution or through their ability in convincing party leaders of their ideological reliability rose to leadership position. A ruling class,

⁶ It has to be pointed out that in the West, political attitude, to certain extent, does affect individual job career and choice of profession.

comprised of such individuals who did not really possess a political commitment to socialism and who “ held the red flag while opposing it,” turned state socialism into bureaucratic socialism. Under such conditions, the communist leadership would eventually become a new form of a ruling and exploiting class⁷ within a system that would become state capitalist rather than socialist. Within the CCP there was a long-lasting “two line struggle” between Maoist socialist line and the revisionist line with the former insisting on continuing to represent the working class and the latter attempting to pursue the Party’s modernization program based on its own agenda.

The revisionist line came to power after Mao died. At this point, it can be argued that Chinese socialism did not fall apart because of its merits. Rather, it was intentionally torn down by members of its own elite who became increasingly pro-capitalist. The on-going marketization process was not a revolution from below since the popular majority obviously did not have the intention to destroy socialism in spite of its many flaws. It was indeed a “revolution” from above led by Deng Xiaoping and the elitist coalition that supported him and that benefited from it. This proves the validity of Mao’s belief when he pointed out that the anti-socialist forces (capitalist roaders) existed right inside the party organization, and the party should be open to the criticism of the masses.

As mentioned before, during the revolutionary period, the CCP achieved hegemony based on the leadership of a “united front” which appeared to represent the interests and aspirations of peasants, workers, intellectuals as well as petty bourgeoisie. However, in the post-war period the question was how to make socialism accountable to the majority. Unfortunately, the party-state system failed in doing so because of its transformation into bureaucratic socialism:

The state/party displaced and then subordinated the masses, and turned their unions, cooperatives, and other organizations into apparatuses. It transformed itself into the official emblem of the revolution and of socialism; government on behalf of the workers’ interests turned into the regime of officials; the primacy of the plan became the primacy of the planners; and the defense of the revolution became the rule of the state security apparatuses. (Vilas, 1990: 97)

As a result, since the 1960s the notion of the dictatorship of the proletariat gradually became a dictatorship without hegemony: the state was substituted for class; it created the

⁷ The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has, in my view, transformed from being the leading representative of the Chinese proletarian class to becoming a class of its own.

coercive apparatuses of administration, bureaucracy, law-enforcement; and the sophistication of hegemony was replaced by direct coercion. Mao did realize the importance of grass-root democracy in terms of mass participation in political and economic activities, and through mass mobilization he vigorously attacked what he saw as the emergence of a bureaucratic class. However, this realization was never institutionalized: Democratic centralism became bureaucratic centralism (organic centralism); and mass movements were mobilized once a while to keep the political bureaucracy in check; power was highly centralized in the Party-state apparatus which directly controlled the means of production, monopolized political and economic decision-making; and bureaucratic socialism turned the class relations into "paternalistic relations between an active leadership, claiming 'scientific knowledge,' and an inactive populace that had to depend on cadre economically, politically, and socially" (Durand, 1990: 11). This problem was interpreted by the Communist Party in its Resolution on the CCP History 1949-1981 in this way:

It remains difficult to eliminate the evil ideological and political influence of centuries of feudal autocracy. And for various historical reasons we failed to institutionalize and legalize inner-Party democracy and democracy in the political and social life of the country, or we drew up the relevant laws but they lacked authority. (CCP Resolution in Robertson, 1984: 331)

The problem of Chinese socialism in politics, in other words, is connected with the relationship between the state and (civil) society. It can be argued that socialism has been driven by "the power of the state against those elements of civil society which are seen as strongholds of antisocialist hegemony" (Blecher, 1989: 7). The understanding of the state derived largely from Marx, Engels as well as Lenin's notion which was based on the following conceptualization: bourgeois democracy under the hegemony of capitalism is an instrument for the ruling bourgeoisie to exercise dictatorship over the proletarian class; the goal of a socialist revolution is to overthrow the bourgeois democratic state and establish a new state in which the proletariat will practice dictatorship over the capitalists. This conceptualization had been a general guideline for socialist revolutions.

It is obvious that Gramsci disagreed with the Marxist-Leninist conceptualization and understanding of the role of state because of its class reductionism which relegates the complexity of politics and ideology to class relations (Simon, 1982: 67). According to Gramsci,

... the State is the entire complex of practical and theoretical activities with which the ruling class not only justifies and maintains its dominance but manages to win the active consent of those over whom it rules. (Gramsci, 1971: 244)

Here, the state is not described as an “instrument,” “apparatus” or “machine,” but as the totality of the activities of the ruling class. Although in any type of societies, the unity and power of the ruling class is realized through it, the state cannot simply be used as a device for domination that imposes the ruling class’s own interests on other social groups and classes.

As discussed before, the notion of the role and power of the state in relation to society and class was expanded theoretically by Gramsci in a broad outline. Accordingly, “little understanding of the state means little class consciousness,” and the state cannot be fully conceptualized without a comprehensive understanding of *civil society* (Simon, 1982: 68). In this sense, the nature of the state has to be understood from its relation to the civil society. Civil society is defined by Gramsci as comprising all the “so-called private” organizations,

such as churches, trade unions, political parties and cultural associations which are distinct from the process of production and from the coercive apparatuses of the state. All the organizations which make up civil society are the result of a complex network of social practices and social relations, including the struggle between the two fundamental classes, capital and labour. (ibid.: 69)

Here, civil society is contrasted to *political society* which refers to the coercive state institutions such as the armed forces, police, law enforcement and prison as well as various governmental departments. A state is understood to be comprised of both political and civil societies. Political society (state) is the primary source of coercive domination, while civil society is the primary source of consensual power. Hence, for Gramsci, an authentic hegemony is a combination of state (coercion) and civil society (consent):

What we can do for the movement is to fix two major superstructural ‘levels’: the one that can be called ‘civil society’, that is the ensemble of organisms commonly called ‘private’, and that of ‘political society’ or the ‘state’. These two levels correspond on the one hand to the function of ‘hegemony’ which the dominant group exercises throughout society and on the other hand that of ‘direct domination’ or command exercised through the State and ‘juridical’ government. (Gramsci, 1971: 12)

In his writings Gramsci attached great importance to civil society. He perceived bourgeois parliamentary democracy as a form of capitalist hegemony which was based on the full development of civil society (Vacca, 1982: 47). This is because,

Civil society is the sphere where capitalists, workers and others engage in political and ideological struggles and where political parties, trade unions, religious bodies and a great variety of other organizations come into existence. It is not only the sphere of class struggle; it is also the sphere of all the popular-democratic struggles which arise out of the different ways in which people are grouped together – by sex, race, generation, local community, region, nation and so on. (Simon, 1982: 69)

The hegemony of the ruling class must find its basis in civil society which will eventually affirm the legitimacy of political society. Gramsci's concept of power is perceived in terms of *relations*. Civil society as social relations is also relations of power. In this sense, political society can be viewed as visible power whereas civil society as invisible power. In this sense, he viewed the development of the first Leninist state in a critical manner. In doing this Gramsci made a comparison between Western societies with Tsarist Russia:

In Russia, the State was everything, civil society was primordial and gelatinous; in the West, there was a proper relation between State and civil society, and when the State trembled a sturdy structure of civil society was at once revealed. The State was only an outer ditch behind which there stood a powerful system of fortresses and earthworks: more or less numerous from one State to the next, it goes without saying - but this precisely necessitated an accurate reconnaissance of each individual country. (Gramsci, 1971: 238)

Thus, Gramsci compares the organizations of civil society in the West to “a powerful system of fortresses and earthworks” as a contrast to the Russian civil society which is “primordial and gelatinous.” This comparison is to suggest that the power of civil society as social relations is, though in a different way, decisive as the coercive relations of the state.

Such a comparison is also suitable to China. Its traditional state-centred hierarchical social structure, its “Asiatic mode of production,” its lack of countrywide organized working class and its lacking history of capitalist development did not endow Chinese society with a social structure comprised of multi-faceted institutions and diversified social network, nor of traditions of democracy at any level. On the one hand, this proved beneficial to the Chinese revolution in rapidly resolving social contradictions - both internal and external - through a revolutionary process. On the other hand, it became an obstacle for socialist construction not only because of the lack of the required development level as emphasized by Marx but also in terms of consolidating proletarian ideological hegemony in all social relations. In this sense, China was not building socialism but was building the preconditions for socialism.

In studying the factors of why the ruling bourgeois class in the West is able to reduce the potential of working class revolution, Harman points out that,

The power of the ruling class in the West rests mainly, not on physical control through the military-police apparatus, but on its ideological domination exercised through a network of voluntary institutions that pervade everyday life ('civil society') - the political parties, the trade unions, the churches, the mass media. The repressive state apparatus is only one among many defences of capitalist society. (Harman, 1983: 16)

This explains the fact that the bourgeois class in the West is able to maintain its hegemony through the enlargement of the state and the "private network" at all levels and through the neutralization of contending social forces. Seen from this view, a solid socialist hegemony is determined by whether such an ideology is able to occupy all positions throughout the society and control the whole process of social reproduction. The ex-socialist states obviously failed in capturing and consolidating socialism in what Gramsci called the "war of position."

In many of the former socialist countries including China, statolatry was probably the source of their political problems. Although statolatry can be necessary in the phase of gaining state power and in the transformation of the production relations, it tended to become "theoretical fanaticism" and to be held as "perpetual" in the way that the bureaucracy was perceived as the "whole state" (Vacca, 1982: 52-53). Although a state with a totalitarian party system can assume mass dimension, the masses are marginalized as they "have no other political function than a generic loyalty, of a military kind, to a visible or invisible political centre," and they are used simply for "manoeuvre," and are "kept happy by means of moralising sermons, emotional stimuli, and messianic myths of an awaited golden age, ..." (Gramsci, 1971: 150). Hence, totalitarianism and statolatry "must be criticized, precisely in order to develop and produce new forms of state life, in which the initiative of individuals and groups will have a 'state' character, even if it is not due to the 'government of the functionaries'" (ibid.: 268-9).

At this point, Gramsci added a new perspective to traditional Marxism - the concept of the "integral state," with which he identified the modern capitalist state: the integration of political society and civil society. This "integral state" posed a challenge to orthodox Marxist historical and economic determinism and revealed new patterns of relationship in the theory of politics which institute a new form of relation among masses, state and politics. These

enlightenments of Gramsci's political thought are essential to understand the survival of capitalism and the setback of socialism.

Class and ideology

The relationship between class and ideology is closely connected. In the debate between Marxist and non-Marxist schools, the argument is centred on whether ideology is embedded in the notion of class interest. For example, does the capitalist class adopt a particular ideology because of its class interest? From a Marxist perspective, there are two causal links between ideology and class: First, in class societies such as capitalism, ideologies are promoted to comply with class interest. In this sense, ideology refers to the concepts of a dominant class ideology and false consciousness (Abercrombie, 1994: 207); second, the superstructure (ideology) is a reflection of the economic base which is determined by the position of a class in the relations of production.

The problematic of the Marxist conception of ideology is argued to be class reductionist and economic determinist. As Mouffe points out, "This leads to the consideration of all contradictions as moments in the development of a single contradiction - the class contradiction - which as a consequence leads one to attribute a class character to all political and ideological elements" (Mouffe, 1979: 171). Gramsci viewed critically the base-superstructure model with its emphasis on a causal primacy of one over the other. He preferred to see these two spheres as mutually interdependent.

It can be argued that the post-revolutionary Chinese Communist Party in many respects simplified societal complexities by reducing the multiple levels of social relations into the single dimension of class struggle. This was done despite the fact that Mao himself had shown awareness about the different nature of the various social contradictions. Although the reduction of politics to class relations aimed at enabling a political practice and raising popular consciousness, and although the strategy of using compressed political practice to hold social complexity at arm's length was successful under the "united front" course during the armed revolution period, the question was whether such a complexity could be encompassed in this simplified manner in post-revolutionary society. It has been argued that the CCP's failure to establish "a new hegemony around the concept of class at the levels of language, social relations, political and economic practice, consciousness, and even morality" can be explained by factors at both the theoretical and practical levels:

At the level of theory, they were trapped both by their conceptual tools (such as class categories), which quickly lost much relevance to shifting material reality, and by their inability to develop new ones. At the level of practice they allowed themselves, in the midst of the sharp political conflicts they fostered, to lose the capacity for flexibility, the self-critical spirit, and the keen sense of the necessity of a protracted struggle, which they had shown during the revolution. (Blecher, 1989: 7)

Gramsci provided insightful theoretical and practical approaches to questions of political and organizational formation in which he developed an unique awareness and sensitivity of the need for revolutionary theory to account both ideologically and substantively for the social complexity and reality without falling into any single standard of rationality. Other rationalities, such as culture, religion, tradition (Max Weber) can be as important as class consciousness. Rather than being natural products of historical development (classical Marxism), Gramsci regarded the formation of class consciousness, in relation to the emergence of socialist political culture, as a multi-level and complex task involving contingent social construction.

Gramsci tried to arrive at the source of the weakness of Marxism-Leninism: the weakness of conceptualizing the nature of class and role of ideology. As Blecher points out, in Gramsci's view, class should not be just seen as

a category of social and political action, but also as the central organizing principle of the language, semiology, epistemology and, indeed, ontology of the socialist state and the Communist Party that founded and led it, as well as of significant segments of civil society that followed and were influenced by them. (ibid.: 15)

A true class alliance must be based on both epistemological and ontological levels. have knowledge of the external world assumptions about reality

Gramsci's concept of ideology has gone through a process of evolution and developed into two connotations: political leadership and universal representation. The former is not distant from the Leninist conception of ideological hegemony which implies the *leadership* of the working class over the peasantry entailing the strategy of a *class alliance*, whereas the latter is further developed into a wider and more comprehensive conception going beyond the idea of class leadership and alliance. Moreover, universal representation is regarded not only as the revolutionary strategy of the proletarian class, but also as the practice of any ruling class including the bourgeoisie.

It was through his studies of the French Revolution, in which the Jacobins were able to overcome its own class corporatist nature and become a hegemonic class by widening the notion of class interests and taking into consideration those interests which it shared with the popular sectors that Gramsci began to understand that the bourgeoisie was also aware of the need for the popular support; and he realized that the proletarian political struggle was far more complex than a simple confrontation between antagonistic classes (Mouffe, 1979: 179-180).

In his analysis of the evolutionary process behind the formation of political ideology Gramsci discussed three phases in the development of class consciousness: (1) in the primitive economic stage the consciousness of a group's interests is expressed but not as those of a social class; (2) in the political economic stage the consciousness of class interests is expressed, but only at an economic level; (3) in the hegemonic stage, a class is able to transcend its corporate and economic interests and to represent the interests of other subordinate groups (ibid.: 180). In the last stage, a hegemonic class is one that is able to go beyond its corporatist conception and genuinely acknowledge the interests of all other subordinate classes. In this sense, it presupposes a combination of both protection of interests as well as a willingness towards compromises. Based on the above process, it can be argued that the miscarriage of contemporary socialism is largely due to weakness in the third stage.

As mentioned, Gramsci distanced himself from classical Marxism which viewed ideology as system of ideas or false consciousness. He maintained that since human subjectivity is the product of social practice, it implies that ideology has a material existence. In other words, ideology is not only materialized but also reinforced in the process of practice. In return ideology influences and organizes human action. A person's ideology or worldview (common sense) is the expression of a mixed complexity: the family, everyday life, the social environment, the political institutions (state) and private institutions (civil society), etc. Here, Gramsci regarded civil society as the *ideological superstructure*, i.e. the institutions and technical instrument for creating and diffusing modes of thought (Femia, 1981: 26). It is through these individuals form their consciousness. This is further explained by Gitlin in the following way:

Hegemony is a ruling class's (or alliance's) domination of subordinate classes and groups through the elaboration and penetration of ideology (ideas and assumptions) into their common sense and everyday practice; it is the systematic (but not

necessarily or even usually deliberate) engineering of mass consent to the established order. (Gitlin in Tuchman, 1988: 608)

Gramsci's amendment to traditional Marxist conception of ideology can be deduced from two observations: A) the definition of ideology as a practice which produces consciousness. In his words, it is "a conception of the world implicitly manifest in art, in law, in economic activity, in all individual and collective manifestations of life" (Gramsci 1971: 328); B) ideology is highly influenced not only by the economic structure but also by multi-faceted material and institutional structures such as churches, media and civil society.

Gramsci's theory of ideological hegemony attempts to find answers to the question: how does the bourgeois social order survive? His messages are two folds: analytically, consensus over values and beliefs is the major source of cohesion in bourgeois society; empirically, the existing capitalist societies do exhibit consensual integration (Femia, 1981: 219). They are helpful to understand the present-day phenomenon of the salient features of human consciousness in industrialized societies where socialist ideology and communist parties are still a voice in the distance.

Laitin also argues that people's consciousness, particularly among the subordinate classes or social groups, is not strictly false or true. This denotes a mixture of complex and contradictory elements: "The lower strata should not be seen as merely sharing a dominant ideology with the ruling strata but, instead, as being in simultaneous possession of ideas that support and challenge political authority in their society" (Laitin, 1977: 106).

According to the research findings of Almond and Verba, the "democratic myth" in Britain and the USA translates into the belief that political decisions and outcomes are responsive to the claims of each and every citizen (*ibid.*: 221). In contemporary Western capitalist societies there exists widespread cohesion to certain values, cognition and symbols which are supportive of the existing political system. In the United States, result of investigations shows that the great majority of people accept the official myths about the opportunity structure; and American and British workers generally hold a benevolent image of their sociopolitical systems (*ibid.*: 222).

These realities coincide with Gramsci's conception of human ideological consciousness. His conception asserts that consciousness is a multi-dimensional (cultural, psychological, political and economic) complexity entailing a multiplicity of dispersed wills

rather than the basic principle of historical materialism that social existence determines ideology. This is an amendment to neo-Marxist interpretations which view members of the Western subordinate classes as one-dimensional pseudo-beings who are the victims of an indoctrinated “false consciousness.”

As discussed previously, Gramsci’s notion of ideology with its key concept of hegemony is applied in order to emphasize the magnitude of a world outlook which any class or social group must have if it is to win and maintain leadership position. In this respect, what Gramsci highlights is that, “although proletarian hegemony is quite different in *content* to bourgeois hegemony, the two are very similar in *form*” (Ransome, 1992: 128). This is also why he provides a comprehensive conceptual analysis of the process by which bourgeois hegemony is constructed and sustained. The emphasis on the importance of a *total conception* of the bourgeois social structure which encompasses not only the inequalities of capitalist society in its material economic manifestations but also other aspects of social, political and ideological practices is meant by Gramsci “to transcend the assumption that social change is affected only by purely structural considerations” (ibid.: 129).

Based on this understanding, a social crisis including economic or ideological crisis does not signify, for Gramsci, a total breakdown of the society if it is controlled at a certain level⁸. Under such conditions, crisis implies a necessity to reorganize society. In other words, a revolutionary breakthrough to establish a new society is not necessarily the result of the complete collapse of the old one, rather, it is an outcome of social reorganization by a political force. Social reorganization can be realized through passive revolution in which the survival of an economic order (capitalism) going through crisis is made possible by the absorption of contradictions which are not resolved but contained in the new forms of relations. It can also be achieved through transformative revolution, such as the Chinese revolution, in which the contradictions and problems cannot be resolved without a revolutionary transformation of social, political and economic relations.

In the ex-socialist states, how to deal with the relationship between the old and new ideologies was problematic and unsuccessful. This relationship, for Gramsci, is not a matter

⁸ Jürgen Habermas identifies crisis as comprising several levels: a crisis of efficiency and rationality on the level of the system; a crisis of legitimacy on the socio-cultural level, and a crisis of motivation on the individual level (Habermas, 1976).

of building an entirely new ideological system, rather, it is a process of criticism, transformation and rearrangement of the existing one:

This criticism makes possible a process of differentiation and change in the relative weight that the elements of the old ideologies used to possess. What was previously secondary and subordinate, or even incidental, is now taken to be primary – becomes the nucleus of a new ideological and theoretical complex. The old collective will dissolve into its contradictory elements since the subordinate ones develop socially, etc. (Gramsci, 1971: 195)

Based on this thinking, a hegemonic class does not have to supersede the old ideological systems, it can rearrange and preserve some of the most durable elements and combine them into the new ideological system around a new nucleus or central principle. It is of high importance to assimilate the cultural achievements of past generations because if some elements of the old ideology is really popular, they need to be retained in the new system even if their relative strength and content is changed.

In the case of China, the difficulty for the regime after the revolution was how to maintain the equilibrium between the past ideology (Confucianism) and the new socialist ideology. In many respects these two ideologies are contradictory: the former is a conservative ideology emphasizing stability, harmony and order, while the latter is a revolutionary one advocating transformation and progress. This contradiction indicates the delicate issue of how to make compromises and how to conduct ideological struggles after the Chinese Communist Party has achieved the leadership position. Seen from a Gramsci's perspective, a proper way to deal with this problematic is to see struggle as

a process of transformation in which some of the elements are rearranged and combined in a different way with a new nucleus or central principle. A process of this kind is necessary because, if the old ideological system was genuinely popular one, then the elements (or at least some of them) to which this popularity was due, need to be preserved in the new system even if their relative weight and some of their content is changed. The unity of the new ideological system will stem from its nucleus or central unifying principle. (Simon, 1982: 61-62)

For example, Confucianism as a Chinese ideology and philosophy, which is now widely seen as the underpinning for East Asia's economic dynamism with its qualities of flexibility, adaptability, thriftiness, work ethics, and self-discipline, faced a fundamental challenge both from inside and outside in the early part of this century. After the 1911 Revolution, Confucian ideology as an analytical framework was finally discarded because it

obviously proved to have lost its viability during a time when China urgently needed a new analytical framework to examine the new social structure after the overthrow of the imperial system.

Following the establishment of the People's Republic in 1949, instead of abandoning Confucianism as an antagonistic force, China's socialist ideology should have incorporated some of the Confucian elements which may not have had a clear class character in contradiction with the new socialist values. This directly relates to Gramsci's notion of ideological hegemony whose goal should not be reduced to the level of an instrument of a class to dominate others, but should be extended to represent a universal acceptance.⁷ However, both Mao and the Communist Party maintained that post-revolutionary China could break with the past cultural traditions and ideological constraints; and human beings including the exploiting classes and criminals were considered to possess *educability* and they could be converted into becoming socialist "new men" through labor and ideological remolding.

As has been discussed, consciousness involves complexities which can neither be determined to be false nor true. The question arises then: whether human mind and ideology can really be created through education and remolding and whether socialist consciousness can in reality be indoctrinated? This question is not meant to deny the very existence of the socialist ideology in ex-socialist China but to point out the fact that it later transformed into a class ideology for class struggle and state power. The socialist ideology became a spiritual worldview and lost its material existence: "all individual and collective manifestations of life." Socialism as a development strategy both accomplished great economic and social successes and experienced immense sacrifices and disasters. But socialism as a system of social values had not become the universal will of the whole society and of all people. The rapid restoration of capitalist practice through the on-going process of marketization perhaps explains the fact that the socialist ideology had only reached the stage of reflecting the economic base as expressed by the socialist transformation of the means of production and class relations, but had not developed into a solid cohesion of values, cognition supportive of the socialist political and economic system.

Another important aspect with regard to Gramsci's thought on ideology is that a human "common concept" (Gramsci, 1971: 349) of the world should not merely be a monopoly capitalism representing the world outlook of the bourgeoisie; neither should it necessarily be a total socialist system of thought which characterizes the world outlook of the

working class. The “common concept” is rooted in themes in relation to the original and unique history of each country, and these themes must be included in the process of struggle for ideological hegemony.

The fall of socialism and China’s rapid restoration of capitalism explain that the political and ideological leadership which the proletarian class exercised over the whole post-revolutionary society was an incomplete hegemony. This is not only because the previous spirit of the “united front” gradually ceased to function since the power of the Communist Party was solidly established but also because the notion of hegemony later became a strategy for further class struggle and continuous revolution. This kind of hegemony lost the quality of being a concept of *relation* between classes and other social forces.

Summary remarks

If the history of Chinese socialism, depending on one’s assessment of its successes and failures, can be viewed as an extraordinary period characterized by a historically unique attempt to transform Chinese society and by the struggle of its people in search for a new alternative of development which defied the established political and ideological norms shaped by capitalist world system, it can also be understood, in Gramsci’s sense, as an endeavour to construct a counter-hegemonic project to capitalism. To be more concrete, it was an attempt to “construct a new hegemony around the concept of class at the levels of language, social relations, political and practice, consciousness, and even morality” (Blecher, 1989: 7).

Such a project not only involved arenas at political, economic and ideological levels but also took place at the levels of epistemology and ontology which Mao struggled to transform during his life time. For Gramsci and Mao, the struggle to build such a project represented an extremely difficult and complex task in which many obstacles lay on the realm of culture and ideology involving interactions between various relationships, such as politics, state, civil society, class etc. The importance of studying the Gramscian hegemony approach is that it problematizes the state-society relations under state socialism and brings to light some of its complexities. In this sense, by careful reviewing Gramsci’s political thought and theoretical concepts as well as their implications we can reach a somewhat better understanding of the crisis of Maoism as well as socialism in general.

Firstly, Gramsci's political thought and theoretical ideas add a new degree of flexibility and adaptability to Marxism. His theory enables us to read Marx in the conditions of modern Western capitalism as well as of the experiences of socialist experiment. Gramsci's non-determinist approach offers a way to analyze relation between crisis and revolution, which tries to escape any interpretation of historical development and of social transition from one mode of production to another purely in terms of the development productive forces. If Marxism and Maoism are applied along with Gramsci's theoretical frame, we can perhaps reach a better understanding of the historical and theoretical significance of modern socialism as well as the limits of that experience. Especially, this approach facilitates the conceptualization of the factors behind the setback of socialism, including the Chinese experience. Such a concrete historical development requires a new dimension as the basis to comprehend the revolutionary theory and thought as well as the social, political and economic relations displayed in ex-socialist societies.

Secondly, Gramsci's theoretical and political contributions provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the more complex and deeper social dimensions of class culture. It contributes a new perspective on the formation of a *universal* rather than a class-based hegemony entailing compromise and democratic solidarity throughout society in order to reach the goal of revolution or radical social changes.

Thirdly, Gramscian materialism which is extensively based on Marxist historical materialism provides a horizon of analysis for ideology and politics that escapes any simple causal explanations. It teaches us to comprehend a multi-faceted reality and material conditions which are full of contradictions and possibilities. Many of Gramsci's key concepts help us "to analyze contemporary society... to ask the right questions about what is new in social, political, and economic development, about the contradictory effects of the historical process, about the implications and consequences of specific forms of institutional and social relations in different countries" (Sassoon, 1987: xviii).

Fourthly, Gramsci's importance for Marxist theory lies, according to Bobbio, in his double inversions in relation to the Marxist tradition: 1) the primacy of the ideological superstructures over the economic structure; 2) the primacy of civil society over political society, in other words, consensus over coercion (Bobbio in Mouffe, 1979: 3). The weakness of Marxism, in Luporini's opinion, resides in two diverse and non-unified conceptual "couples" which Marx had not managed to conceptually integrate: "On the one hand the

structure/superstructure couple in the analysis of the mode of production in *Capital* and on the other hand the state/civil society couple in the historical and political analyses (i.e. at the level of the social formation)” (Luporini in Mouffe, *ibid.*: 9). Although Marx had certain remarks on the relationship between state and civil society, and party, class and ideology, he had not analyzed it at the same conceptual and analytical level as he did in the analysis of the capitalist mode of production. And it is in this relationship which Gramsci tried to emphasize that the foundations of social hegemonies are constructed and which he sought to find the theoretical solutions to the unresolved questions of Marxism, and to conceptually integrate the above mentioned couples:

Gramsci’s great originality, therefore, lies in his attempt to answer these questions and to conceptually unify Marx’s two oppositional couples by establishing a link between “politics - class - state” and “people - nation - state”, thereby recuperating within Marxist theory a whole series of elements which has been excluded from it. (Mouffe, *ibid.*: 9)

Consequently, this approach attempts to enforce, by examining the reality, the link between theory and practice which has been weakened by the limitation of the Marxist emphasis on economic interpretations.

Fifthly, Gramsci’s concept of hegemony - his views on the problem and conquest of power, the role of the party, the relationship between ideology and class, state and civil society - requires a whole set of democratic relationships within the hegemonic system. Perhaps he attempts to provide a socialist alternative or a more just and freer society. And perhaps he aims at contributing, at least on a new basis, a strategy of democratic transition to socialism which escapes both Stalinism and the bourgeois passive revolution. What is more important is that “Gramsci has left us much more than a theory of politics: in fact his legacy to us is a new conception of socialism” (*ibid.*: 15).

Finally, although the Marxist determinism of historical materialism has been challenged since its prediction has not come true, it is necessary to bear in mind that the failure of the socialist experiments in the 20th century should not be exclusively seen as the waning of Marxism. There has been no existing socialist experiment which fits into the conceptualization of Marxist socialism. It is wrong to blame Marx for the malfunctioning of the existing socialist experiments which disqualify the theoretical scheme. In addition, the crisis of socialism does not mean the end of the search for development alternatives. In this sense, socialism is and will continue to be counter-ideology vis-à-vis the established ideology

of capitalist development. Efforts to theorize on the possibilities of social change and transition alternatives as Marx did, and on untested development strategies as Mao did, should continue to be made by later generations. If such efforts reoccur in the future, it is most likely that the Gramscian heritage will remain influential and valuable.

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