

1 Antonio Gramsci and the Problem of Fatalism

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Introduction

We will help to dissipate the dark cloudbanks of heavy pessimism which are today oppressing even the most experienced and responsible militants, and which represent a great danger—perhaps the gravest at the present moment—because of the political passivity, the intellectual torpor and the scepticism towards the future which they produce.

(Gramsci 1978, 213)

The disillusionment that can ensue from past political defeats is a major problem for emancipatory politics. In this chapter, I turn to Antonio Gramsci as a useful resource for theorizing the relationship between defeat and disillusion through his work on fatalism. A major feature of an absence of revolutionary hope is therefore political fatalism, i.e. a belief in the conviction that revolution, emancipation, or social transformation is not possible. This problem constitutes one of the morbid symptoms of the major crises today—in the face of climate catastrophe, a resurgence of far-right and neo-fascist movements, and spiralling global inequality and intensifying economic imperialism.

Although Gramsci's most famous quote, usually streamlined into the need for "pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will", gives a good distillation of his overall approach to the question of fatalism, theorists have called for departing from this soundbite. Anne Showstack Sassoon, for example, pleads for moving "beyond the pessimism of the intellect" (2000). In particular, during the heyday of the alter-globalization movement anarchists like Richard F. Day professed about the death of Gramscianism *tout court* (2005). In contrast to such claims, this chapter argues that it is precisely in the contemporary moment of widespread simultaneous revolutionary appetite and impasse that Gramsci's thought can help push forward the emancipatory task of theory.

I turn to Gramsci's work to sketch an account of how fatalist resignation functions on a theoretical and practical level, as well as its implications for changing the world. Rather than providing solutions, I mainly focus on the *diagnostic* of

fatalism. First, I reconstruct the context within which he can be considered a thinker of disillusion. Second, I then move specifically to his thoughts on fatalism, an aspect of his work that has not received sufficient attention in the literature yet has wide-ranging relevance for theorizing revolutionary hope in a time of crisis. Third, I turn to the possibility of excavating solutions within Gramsci's own work, focusing in particular on his thinking around faith and affect, specifically for theorists and intellectuals. I then conclude with a brief recap of my argument and the challenges ahead. Two major concerns thus guide this chapter: what Gramsci can teach about the relationship between political disillusion and emancipatory politics, and what the role of theorists and intellectuals in combating such disillusion is.

Gramsci and the Politics of Disillusion

In 1924, just months before taking over the leadership of the Italian Communist Party, Gramsci specified one of the key tasks of the revolutionary movement as the need to dispel pessimism. If pessimism indeed leads to passivity, torpor, and scepticism towards the future, then pessimism stands in the way of emancipation. Later, Gramsci turns specifically to the problem of fatalism, issuing a warning against the “danger of historical defeatism, i.e. of indifferentism, since the whole way of posing the question may induce a belief in some kind of fatalism” (1971, 114). Since a major part of Gramsci's work deals with the complex relationship between motivation and action, as well as the affective and cognitive dimensions of emancipatory politics, he is an ideal starting point for concretizing more abstract discussions of fatalism.

Indeed, Gramsci can be read as a theorist of revolutionary disappointment. There is a particular cypher through which to understand his relevance for theorizing past disappointment and how it bears on present emancipatory closure. The preceding claim of the famous pessimism line specifies that “the challenge of modernity is to live without illusions and without becoming disillusioned”. This refers concretely to the difficulty of finding hope after the wave of secularization flooding Europe and the forward march of the dialectic of Enlightenment. Without religion, a crucial glue that holds together the social fabric of a community and society is gone. While the “illusions” of religion function as ideology, insofar as they maintain dominant social structures and institutions, they also bring comfort and meaning to a world characterized by domination and exploitation. They therefore function *both* as ideology and comfort. Gramsci continues: “the deterministic, fatalistic and mechanistic element has been a direct ideological ‘aroma’ emanating from the philosophy of praxis, rather like religion or drugs (in their stupefying effect)” (1971, 336). Religion is here considered a kind of tranquilizer that clouds the judgement of people by tying them to a comforting yet ultimately false belief. In a way, religion precludes a proper reckoning with the disappointment of the difficulty of emancipation because it might gradually

crowd out a desire and demand for such emancipation altogether. Religion can thereby become a status quo-abetting force.

Yet crude forms of the atheistic-idealist view that religion is what stands in the way of human emancipation come under strain upon closer materialist inspection. There are plenty of strands of religion enthusiastically committed to emancipation, e.g. liberation theology in Latin America. Today, secular forms of fatalism are a larger issue. Once secularism dominates both society writ large and revolutionary politics, disillusionment becomes a major problem for emancipatory politics. Fatalistic worldviews generated from past failures are a key reason for despair about the ability of revolutionary and emancipatory politics to radically reshape the world for the better. Consequently, gaining an understanding of how such past failures generate fatalism is crucial.

Revolutionary politics of the organized communist party as well as the electoral route of representative politics seem unable to generate a clear path to emancipation today. While social movements stand as a promising necessary component for those committed to radically changing society, they, too, run up against limits of implementation, durability, and legitimacy. Because of the quotidian and quixotic character of many social movements, occasionally appearing only to disappear again at the blink of an eye, the problem of fatalism is all the more pressing. In a tightly organized revolutionary party organization, commitment can be more structured and grounded in a highly specific, explicit strategy that seeks a particular goal and is underpinned by both discipline and a strong theoretical political belief, which is better at weathering the storm of disappointment after defeats. The more spontaneous, horizontal, and leaderless social movements which have mostly overtaken communist and cognate parties over the past half-century do not have the institutional capacity to ground their disappointment in a longer vision unmoved by momentary defeats.

While it is dangerous to reify disappointment and fatalism by romanticizing the long tendency of left-wing defeats or by seeking solace in a nostalgic commitment to long-gone modes of organizing and mobilizing, it is equally dangerous to seek recourse in the unbridled naive optimism of the politics of resistance as a panacea for the misery of the present. The rare but important sober cynicism of warning against uncritically embracing resistance and activism takes on an all the more important function in an age of performative digital activism. Adorno warned of such “actionism”, i.e. activism as an action for action’s sake (1982, 262). The weary warning calls of Adorno might be too strong even today, but must be reckoned with by those tempted to see a couple of shared infographics or donations separated from a meaningful praxis of solidarity as important to the cause of emancipation today.

Even if theorists should generally applaud action and praxis, uncritically embracing any kind of action without sufficient judgement of its promise must be avoided: “The error of the primacy of praxis as it is exercised today appears clearly in the privilege accorded to tactics over everything else” (Adorno 1982,

268). A fixation on actionism presents a danger in its insurrectionism and immediatism and can lead to political inertia and hopelessness after major defeats. An important task for the theorist is therefore to warn against the dangers of actionism and cruel optimism (Berlant 2011), i.e. attachment to something that in fact is an impediment to a larger goal, without succumbing to a fatalistic strategy of action paralysis in which nothing can change. Rather than affirming a determinate conception of emancipation, the critical theorist can therefore rather warn against fatalism. Such a view then leads to the idea that the theorist is legitimating struggles as opposed to hatching, controlling, or restricting them. The relationship between theory and movement must instead be one of mutual reinforcement. Rather than choosing between a mutually exclusive duality of theory and practice, a philosophy of praxis can and must unify these in a politics that is simultaneously theoretical and practical, or “a philosophy which is also a politics and a politics which is also a philosophy” (Gramsci 1971, 45). A philosophy of praxis can reckon with fatalism by locating and understanding the origins of such despair about the future.

Fatalism in Gramsci

Fatalism refers to the conviction that the structure of society either precludes the possibility of emancipation or makes such emancipation inevitable. The former is the view of a particularly economicist Marxism, the latter is the view of the reformists and revisionists who turned to social democracy. Gramsci engages explicitly and directly with this problem, even if the Anglophone secondary literature has paid scant attention to this dimension of his thought. According to him, the most prominent iteration of it takes the character of

the sweet illusion that events cannot fail to unfold according to a fixed line of development (the one foreseen by us [the party]), in which they [the working masses] will inevitably find the system of dykes and canals which we have prepared for them, be channelled by this system and take historical form and power in it.

(Gramsci 1994, 256)

He thus defines fatalism as “events unfold[ing] according to a fixed line of development”, in other words, a teleological view of history that eschews a central role of collective human agency.

Gramsci is keen to point out that this is, in fact, merely an “illusion”, which underscores that he is writing *against* such fatalism. It is not an accurate reflection of the possibility of emancipation, rather, it obscures the real movement of history as in part directed by collective human agency. Yet by calling it a “sweet illusion”, he acknowledges the comforting character that such a conviction can hold, by providing cognitive and affective stability to a person’s worldview.

This is a direct nod to Marx's understanding of religion, in which religion is "at one and the same time, the *expression* of real suffering and a *protest* against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions" (Marx 1994, 57). Likewise, political fatalism can both be an expression and a protest against the status quo. Yet what frequently happens is that, if it is impossible to transform the world, fatalism offers a chance to make peace with the status quo and (even if reticently) accept it as a given. The danger of passivity that can emerge from fatalism is a major problem to reckon with.

Broadly speaking, there are two types of fatalism: the fatalism of impossibility and of inevitability. Whereas the former holds that emancipation cannot come about and the latter holds that it will necessarily come about. Gramsci is concerned with both. In the first quarter of the 20th century, the possibility of communist revolutions to bring about human emancipation was real, and to some, it was inevitable. On the most economic, mechanistic, and deterministic strands of Marxist thinking, even if often caricatured strawmen, the revolution was inevitable across the globe due to the internal contradictions of capitalism producing its own gravediggers. A key problem for Gramsci was he witnessed and grappled seriously with the dramatic failures of the German communist movement in the interwar period. Thus, the failures of the 1919 Spartacist Uprising and the 1921 March Action, both cases of revolutionary communists being crushed by the state, weakened the plausibility of revolution in the most industrially advanced parts of Europe, which were predicted to be the major locus of revolutionary potential.

The March Action played a major role in Gramsci's turn towards a broad united front strategy. This was a proletarian revolutionary uprising in Saxony, Germany, containing a large number of mine and factory workers. After the German state aggressively cracked down on strikes and protests by inserting police on the ground to crush the workers, the German Communist Party called for a general strike, using the suppression of striking workers as the launchpad. Quickly, the strike turned into a general rebellion against the state, with workers blowing up railway lines, robbing banks, torching buildings, and barricading inside factories. President Friedrich Ebert called a state of emergency, cracking down on the waning movement—yet the Communist Party nevertheless called for a renewed general strike, which failed spectacularly. The March Action marks a turning point and the beginning of the end for the German communist movement, a damning indictment of adventurist ultra-leftism compared to the more promising avenue of a united front with other leftist parties and forces such as the social democrats. This is precisely why Gramsci focused on the need for long-term and broad strategy of a war of position over the narrow spontaneist action by a small vanguard as a war of manoeuvre (Gramsci 1971, 120).

The lessons of the failed March Action bear significantly on the problem of fatalism because it serves as a good example of how a weak movement can be

tempted to turn to an over-simplified wanton spontaneism during times of weakness. For the contemporary moment, the fatalism of impossibility is a particular problem because the more mechanistic visions of inevitable change no longer have a firm grip on emancipatory social forces in the way they did in certain parts of the organized left in the first half of the 20th century. Instead, a major debilitating motivational problem confronting emancipatory political actors is that of the fatalism of impossibility. Given the real threat of impending climate catastrophe and the possibility of a mass extinction event, such fatalism may seem quite measured and reasonable. Yet the problem is its discouragement or even ruling out of political action, lending itself well to passivity, which in turn abets the status quo. To think that it is impossible to defeat the far right or to overthrow capitalism can become a sweet illusion that justifies inaction.

Where does such fatalism emerge from? Gramsci offers ample resources for theorizing its origins.

He is at pains to contextualize such fatalism, its position as contingent becoming abundantly clear from his writings: “One should emphasise how fatalism is nothing other than the clothing worn by real and active will when in a weak position” (Gramsci 1971, 337). Here, he emphasizes the centrality of political agency and claims that this is merely subdued during particular moments of perceived closure. Fatalism looms in the background of any movement or organization and surfaces at particular moments of weakness. If it really is a perennial danger, this means that emancipatory agents should develop strategies for coping with and dispelling it, even during times of success and victory.

At the same time, fatalism can also come about through the lack of commitment on the part of emancipatory agents. Indeed, Gramsci claims that “very often optimism is nothing more than a defense of one’s laziness, one’s irresponsibility, the will to do nothing. It is also a form of fatalism and mechanicism” (Gramsci 1975, 12). Thus, optimism can be a naive complacency that wrongly legitimizes inaction because if change is coming about regardless of (in)action, then all that is left to do is sit back and wait for the world to perish and in its place a new one to emerge. This disregards the crucial role of concerted action, through collective organization, that will be required both to topple and replace dominant power.

Occasionally it is through a sober-headed pessimism, the idea that redemption will never come without a long, hard, and arduous struggle, that people are impelled to resist. Such pessimism should be accompanied by “the only justifiable enthusiasm” possible, namely “intelligent will, intelligent activity, the inventive richness of concrete initiatives which change existing reality” (Gramsci 1975, 12). It is through concrete action, rather than merely discursive articulation or moralizing sermons, that transformation is attempted. Crucially, when “mechanical determinism . . . is adopted as a thought-out and coherent philosophy on the part of the intellectuals, it becomes a cause of passivity, of idiotic self-sufficiency” (Gramsci 1971, 337). This kind of self-reproduction of intellectuals can foster scholasticism or, worse, outright inaction. He objects to the “fatalistic

and mechanistic conception of history” (Gramsci 1971, 224) that allowed fascism to flourish in Italy by virtue of the belief that the inevitability of a progressive, teleological course of history would obtain. Political progress is the result of arduous struggle, of tireless organization, and of resistance.

This comes through in Gramsci’s discussion of Marx’s dual claim in the Preface to the *Critique of Political Economy* that it is not until the forces of production are fettered by the relations of production that a social order perishes and that new relations of production do not appear until they have materially matured within the old set of relations. Gramsci demands that these two claims must be “purged of every residue of mechanicism and fatalism” (Gramsci 1971, 106–7). Rejecting the mechanistic economism of parts of the overly hopeful Second International and the pessimistic fatalism of the Austro-Marxists, he wants to expand the scope of thinking beyond a naive faith in the irresistible, unavoidable, and inevitable march of historical materialism.

In this way, Gramsci seeks to eviscerate the teleology of “historical necessity”, substituting it with political action (Gramsci 1971, 249). Such departure from rigid teleology carves out a space for will, voluntarism, and activity by sowing doubts about the economism he has been at pains to reject. He likens this mechanistic determinism as akin to religious faith in redemption (Gramsci 1971, 337). Thus, it is clear that he does not pursue a wanton optimism but one rooted in a *political* and materialist account of society, centred on the practice of social relations. Instead, Gramsci claims, it is necessary to take a dialectical view of social transformation and emancipation (Gramsci 1971, 337). This is where intellectuals enter the picture, functioning to elaborate and clarify the conditions of struggle for the mass of people who, in his view, are likely to believe in impending redemption—because they rely on a crude optimism of the will without an associated pessimism.

Gramscian Faith vis-à-vis Fatalism

This provokes one of the central questions emanating from a Gramscian account of motivation: precisely how to navigate the fraught space of a pessimism that impels will against an optimism that breeds complacency. One of the keys to resolving this is by shifting attention to his formulation of faith, and the novel way in which he secularizes religious faith into a *political* conception of faith. Gramsci thereby liberates both Marx proper as well as pre-Gramscian Marxism from the straitjacket of an overly mechanistic philosophy of history. In this way, the interpretation and existence of fatalism are both crucial for a Gramscian account of resistance. Fatalism impairs action and fosters inertia and despair, either in the face of complacent determinism or hopeless pessimism. The solution for how to break out of these twin deadlocks is through a particular account of faith that can help overcome the dangers of fatalistic conceptions of the world and of political action.

An account of political faith as an antidote to fatalism offers a promising conceptual inventory for pushing the political potential of action, and its necessary connection with thought. Gramsci juxtaposes faith with fatalism, understanding both as future-oriented conceptions of politics. The difficulty of maintaining faith in emancipation, given the proliferation of far-right and fascist politics and impending climate catastrophe, contributes to the difficulty of imagining alternate futures, and the central role faith plays in such imagination. Yet at the same time, the relationship of such faith to fatalism is fraught, tense, and crucial to theorize. Faith offers a solution to the problematic of fatalism whereby social agents either feel confronted with a debilitating paralysis of the pointlessness of political action or a complacency of the superfluous, overdetermined, or supererogatory status of political action. In other words, activists might think that action is not going to make a difference, either because change is closed off or because it is going to happen without the intervention of activists: for instance, through technological innovation, religious millenarian redemption, mechanistic economic determinism, or simply sheer chance. Faith is one way out of fatalism.

Those concerned with affecting emancipation—both theorists and grassroots political actors—can learn a lot both from religious forms of faith and their political manifestations, as well as the secular forms of materialist faith found, e.g. in the Marxist tradition, chiefly Gramsci (Slothuus 2021). Such faith can engender practical engagement against the social forces that stand in the way of a better world—the exploitation and domination of the capitalist mode of production, in its various iterations. Needless to say, while faith can contribute to dispelling fatalism for social movements and political actors, it cannot serve as a panacea in this regard. Such faith must be anchored in a materialist analysis of society and channelled in a productive direction in order for it to have any bearing on the conditions of the real world. Thus, although faith can serve emancipatory functions, it can also be co-opted or even mobilized by reactionary forces, for instance, far-right movements. Finally, such faith as anti-fatalism is not just a hope but a strategy: by placing faith in the possibility rather than impossibility of emancipation, placing faith in change might in itself contribute to its possibility. Winning requires at least an attempt. Faith is crucial for sustaining the confidence in such emancipatory political action, against mechanistic visions of social change.

A good example of such a mechanistic vision is found in Gramsci's critique of the Italian maximalist faction of the communist movement, which he scorns for their fatalism of inevitability. Ventriloquizing such fatalists, Gramsci says "it would be pointless to act and struggle day after day" since the fatalist "is only waiting for the great day": "The masses", the fatalist insists, "cannot but come to us, because the objective situation is driving them to the revolution. And so let's wait, without all these stories about tactical maneuvers and like expedients" (Gramsci [1925] 2008). In other words, because "the great day" is bound to come, there is no point in struggle. Indeed, Gramsci spends a significant portion

of the *Prison Notebooks* attacking such mechanistic economism, which he sees as a pernicious and misguided interpretation and application of Marxism. Scorning the more insurrectionary and actionist Maximalists, Gramsci warns against an overly voluntarist Marxism.

The problem here is that the Maximalists were merely

passively waiting for the “great day” that would “naturally” be brought about by the evolution of capitalism. In the meantime, the issue was to avoid any compromise with the current order, directing all forces to radical and intransigent propaganda.

(Coutinho 2012, 6)

In the view of Gramsci, however, such ultra-leftism eschews the need for active participation in political processes through collective organizing and building alliances with broader forces. Theorists play a key role in avoiding wanton actionism because they can establish longer-term perspectives and assess from a grounded perspective the prospects for success. Gramsci outlines the reason for active involvement in politics by sardonically ridiculing the maximalists’ fatalism of inevitability:

The red flag will triumph because it is fated and ineluctable that the proletariat will win. Marx said it, and he is our kind and gentle teacher. It is pointless for us to act: what is the good of acting and fighting if victory is fated and ineluctable?

(Gramsci [1925] 2008)

Thus, to him, “maximalism is a fatalistic and mechanical conception of Marx’s doctrine” (Gramsci [1925] 2008). This problem can be alleviated by the conscious efforts of theorists to know, understand, and feel the concerns of ordinary people.

Importantly, Gramsci draws a parallel between the thought–action distinction and a distinction between propaganda and agitation (Gramsci 1971, 227). Given the central role of the party, and intellectuals within it, around which political struggle is centred, “thought” is primarily expressed in the form of propaganda whereas “action” is expressed through agitation. This calls for mediation between not just thought and action but *organization* and praxis, which is a key role for political theorists to play. Indeed,

if it is true that parties are only the nomenclature for classes, it is also true that parties are not simply a mechanical and passive expression of those classes, but react energetically upon them in order to develop, solidify, and universalise them.

(Gramsci 1971, 227)

The party gives voice to a particular section of society that it represents, and its role is to propagandize and agitate in the appropriate balance given the concrete context within which it finds itself. Even without a concrete revolutionary party, any kind of emancipatory social organization of collective action can contribute to such tasks. Most importantly, whatever the shape of the emancipatory vehicle, whether party or movement or otherwise, a major problem is a lack of momentum and the experience of defeats.

A lack of momentum serves as a mental barrier to action and resistance. Coupled with the fatalism of the view that “I have been defeated for the moment, but the tide of history is working for me in the long term”, this is a dangerous cocktail of both complacency (because redemption is inevitable) and defeatism (because there is nothing to be done, nothing to act on). Indeed,

when you don't have the initiative in the struggle and the struggle itself comes eventually to be identified with a series of defeats, mechanical determinism becomes a tremendous force of moral resistance, of cohesion and of patient and obstinate perseverance.

(Gramsci 1971, 227)

In such situations,

real will takes on the garments of an act of faith in a certain rationality of history and in a primitive and empirical form of impassioned finalism which appears in the role of a substitute for the Predestination or Providence of confessional religions.

(Gramsci 1971, 336)

Echoing this, Gramsci further argues that the role of fatalism “could really be compared with that of the theory of predestination and grace for the beginnings of the modern world” (Gramsci 1971, 342). It should thus be clear that he sees a clear parallel between religious and secular forms of fatalism, insofar as both are committed to a kind of salvation beyond the present, and both rely on a teleological agent who will be responsible for bringing such salvation about—whether it be God or the proletariat.

The problem with appealing solely to a logical reasoned defence of why fatalism is unwarranted is that this does not account for how affective commitments play a crucial role in the maintenance of fatalism. Just because “the man of the people . . . cannot impose himself in a bout of argument” (Gramsci 1971, 339) does not mean he or she will robotically adopt the viewpoint of the sophisticatedly superior intellectual or theorist. Targeting the heart as much as the mind, employing a non-condescending morality instrumentally, and speaking to the traditions, histories, cultures, and practices of people are more significant in such opinion formation. Such a recalibration has important consequences for the kind of

agitation and propaganda necessary and suitable for both theorists and intellectuals more broadly. Thus, once the “funeral oration” of the “fatalistic conception” of Marxism has been completed by philosophical labour and political agency, it is possible for the kind of political interventions that can give rise to radical social change and transformation to emerge (Gramsci 1971, 342). Drawing another parallel to religion for his secular argument, “the mechanistic conception has been a *religion* of the subaltern” (Gramsci 1971, 337), and “the fading away of ‘fatalism’ and ‘mechanicism’ marks a great historical turning-point” (Gramsci 1971, 343n). What is needed instead is propagating and instilling a political faith that motivates people to act, in short, a praxis of resistance. The challenge is to find ways to activate this latent social force.

Hence, the debilitating function of fatalism is intimately bound up with a problematic perspective on time, the future, and urgency. Although spontaneous action is both understandable and possibly politically efficacious, the danger of immediatism obscures the often invisible legwork of foot soldiers. Otto Bauer famously claimed:

It is not the grand geological catastrophes that have changed the world but the small revolutions in the unnoticeable, the atoms that cannot even be studied with a microscope, that change the world, they amass the power with which they one day release in a geological catastrophe. The small, the unnoticeable, that which we call legwork [*Kleinarbeit*], that is the truly revolutionary.

(Bauer 1980)

This revolutionary legwork—the arduous-yet-subterranean struggle of teachers, social workers, pastors, mothers, community organizers, and countless others—paves the way for eruptions of mass political action of resistance. By forgetting this legwork, the fetishism of violence, confrontation, and spectacle—often embodied in forms of masculine domination—risks overpowering a plausible and strategic account of future emancipation. Thus, it becomes crucial to negotiate the space between a cataclysmic eschatology such as the new millenarianism of insurrectionary anarchism or ultra-leftism and a debilitating resignation of social democracy that began with the Second International’s reformist and revisionist sections.

By not relying on the debilitating fatalism of mechanistic economism, carefully organized resistance offers a register to prefigure the kinds of social transformation its participants want to effectuate. While John Berger warns that “the delay between the rehearsals and the real performance may be very long” (Berger 1968), just like how James Scott emphasizes the “quiet prehistory of revolt” (Scott 1992), Gramsci reminds us that “there is a deep gulf between peacetime preparation and wartime reality” (Gramsci 1971, 218). Yet theorists should be better attuned not just to the event, the spectacle, acts of disobedience, or the eruption of divine violence in the mass strike, but the vast amount of legwork,

footwork, and manoeuvring that makes the possible social transformation. In other words, such action can “express political ambitions before the political means to realise them have been created” (Berger 1968). The nexus between faith, hope, and action is crucial for understanding how to dispel fatalism and drive forward the potential of emancipatory movements.

Conclusion

I have used the intellectual resources of Gramsci to develop an argument for the need for an emancipatory imperative to combat the problem of fatalistic inclinations in non-revolutionary situations. Gramsci traces how fatalism emerges after repeated defeats and thus is an affective response to adversity—this implies that concerted political organizational work can help combat such a response, since it is not necessarily rooted in the given objective and material conditions at hand. Collective politics play a key role in dispelling fatalism, and importance must be afforded to reckoning with the affective-material dimension of such collective politics.

In short, fatalism is a deterministic, closed interpretation of the possibility of human political action that sees such agency as either non-existent or futile. Fatalism of impossibility is of the defeatist kind, whereby action is impotent because the future is marked by total closure: impending apocalypse or catastrophe becomes so unavoidable that it is pointless to try to do anything. Such fatalism is a form of political paralysis and defeatism that not only forecloses any action but does so in the shape of resignation because little or nothing can be done to avert it. An alternative variant of this fatalism is one that does not depend on an eschatology of catastrophe but either a past or a present of catastrophe. Overcoming this debilitating fatalism, as Gramsci warns, is a key task for critical theorists even, or perhaps especially, today.

Political theory and political theorists can play an active role in dispelling fatalism, helping to break the hegemonic conditions which work hard to proliferate such fatalistic visions of the impossibility of change. This can be done while circumventing the allure of an “economism, syndicalism, [and] spontaneism”, which lends theorists to a cruel optimism whereby change is inevitable and therefore the most radical and extreme short-term actions can be justified in order to speed up the process (Gramsci 1971, 123). Crucially, therefore, it is insufficient to know and understand what stands in the way of emancipation; these components must be complemented with a connection to the feelings of people and the real motivations and worries on the ground.

In the contemporary moment, where revolutionary forces are weak and reactionary forces strong across most of the globe, fatalism is a major problem to be dispelled. Yet one of the challenges with achieving this is the dialectical relationship between theory and practice, such that—as Gramsci teaches us—the successive failures of action can imprint themselves on the minds of radicals and become theoretically lodged. If movements keep failing, they can internalize

defeat and turn it into a fatalistic worldview in which there is no possibility of victory—the fatalism of impossibility. Yet by not even attempting to win, e.g. by passivity and inaction, fatalism of inevitability can creep in instead, convincing radicals that their action is superfluous because eventually the movement will triumph. Through careful consideration of the particular contexts in which movements find themselves, fatalism can be dispelled by theorists and intellectuals, without these succumbing to delusion or naive optimism. This is one of the prime tasks of emancipatory theory today.

Andreas Malm emphasizes that it is “better to die blowing up a pipeline than to burn impassively—but we shall hope, of course, that it never comes to this. If we resist fatalism, it might not” (Malm 2021, 151). Fatalism is thus a crucial problem to defeat for emancipatory forces. Gramsci reminds us that Marxists cannot simply sit around and wait for the contradictions of capitalism to play themselves out. He reminds us that

in order to defeat our class enemy, who is strong, who has many means and reserves at his disposal, we must exploit every crack in his front and must use every possible ally, even if he is uncertain, vacillating or provisional.

(Gramsci [1925] 2008)

The best way to do that is to chip away with small emboldening victories and to keep faith in the struggle.

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