Solidarity without Borders

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## Gramscian Perspectives on Migration and Civil Society Alliances

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# Introduction

# 1

# Solidarity without Borders: Gramscian Perspectives on Migration and Civil Society Alliances

*Óscar García Agustín and Martin Bak Jørgensen*

12 September 2015 marked an important day for an emerging solidarity movement. In more than 85 cities in 30 countries across Europe hundreds of thousands of protesters marched under banners of 'Refugees Welcome' and 'Europe Says Welcome'. Citizens participated in marches, demonstrations and other events during the day of action. The message was very clear: refugees are welcome here. In London the newly elected leader of the Labour Party, Jeremy Corbyn, spoke to more than 100,000 people joining the Refugees Welcome Here event. This can be read as an act of solidarity; but support for the message goes beyond participating in a single march and reflects the need for a new politics of migration in which civil society speaks out and opens new spaces of cooperation and of rethinking social identities.

During the months following the refugee crisis in Europe, we witnessed a popular mobilisation. The solidarity actions included a wide range of participants, from veteran activists and leftist militants to people who approached the issue from a humanitarian perspective. All of them agreed on the need for elaborating new migration policies, very different from the existing ones, which were considered inhumane and restrictive. In different countries initiatives have sprung up developing new forms of everyday politics and acts of solidarity. In Austria 2,200 drivers joined a campaign to pick up refugees stranded in Budapest. In Germany, Denmark and Sweden locals have organised support for arriving refugees, donating food, water, clothes and other supplies to those in need, sometimes using civil disobedience by smuggling refugees to neighbouring countries or sheltering refugees privately. In Iceland more than 11,000 Icelanders (out of a total population of approximately 323,000 people) offered to accommodate Syrian refugees in their private homes and pay their costs as a response to the government suggesting that it would accept 50 Syrian refugees. These are citizens' initiatives

which all express a solidarity that is more than a symbolic support, but that constitutes a genuine attempt to spur social and political change and to demonstrate solidarity beyond borders in practice.

The emerging solidarity manifests itself not just from below however; cracks are also opening up in the established political system. In Barcelona the newly elected mayor Ada Colau challenged the Spanish government and proposed creating a network of refugee cities, following up the proposal with the suggestion that 10 million euros of surplus funds from 2015 be allocated for this purpose. In the United Kingdom the prime minister, David Cameron, arguably bowed to the pressure from the popular mobilisations taking place over the previous months and agreed that Britain should take in another 100,000 refugees. On an even larger scale, German chancellor Angela Merkel took the decision on 4 September to suspend European asylum rules and allow tens of thousands of refugees stranded in Hungary to enter Germany via Austria. The consequences of this decision are enormous, both in terms of the numbers of refugees involved and, even more significantly, for the future of the European asylum system.

How can these emerging solidarities between civil society and refugees be explained? It would clearly be insufficient to reduce them (as well as the social and political power they imply) to the political moment. Without denying the importance of that moment and its strong impact on European public opinion, the different kinds of solidarity that have been forged during the years prior to the refugee crisis must not be ignored. The actions of solidarity, many of them developed under unfavourable circumstances, have been carried out in different manners as a rejection of hegemonic migration politics. In this regard, we find it necessary to consider all those alliances and shaping of spaces of resistance which have enhanced a different way of understanding migration politics, produced within the civil society sphere. To account for those solidarities and their effects we find it intriguing to return to the ideas expressed by Antonio Gramsci and place them in dialogue with the current political and social context. The main reason for this choice is that 90 years ago Gramsci was already reflecting upon the potential of such popular mobilisations and the power of alliance building in expanding a conflict and bringing about social and political transformation.

## GRAMSCIAN PERSPECTIVES

In 'Some Aspects of the Southern Question' (1926), Antonio Gramsci traces a geographical model (Said 1995) to explain the division of Italy into two regions, North and South, intertwined in a relation of

exploitation between the industrialising North and the dependent South with its economy based on agriculture. The bourgeois democracy strengthened this asymmetry and the dominance of the North, using state power to reinforce the industrial development of the North and increasing the South's dependence. The bourgeoisie in the North and landowners in the South took advantage of this division and the lack of a common response by proletariat and peasants.

Indeed, Gramsci's main message in the 'Southern Question' is that proletariat and peasants should form a new alliance to change the hegemonic order. Solidarity between the subaltern groups (here subjects on the margins of history, immersed in the autonomous space of their own historicity; see Mellino in this volume) should be beneficial for both proletariat and peasants and enable them to transform social and economic relations and eliminate exploitation and dependence. Gramsci assigns to the proletariat the role of the leading class against capitalism that might attract other popular classes and incorporate the claims of the peasants into a unified struggle.

Today, Gramsci's reflections on the 'Southern Question' (and his work in general) are as relevant as they were then. The economic crisis which began in 2008 revealed a structural crisis of capitalism which was not limited to the financial or economic arenas. It turned into an *organic crisis* (i.e. a rupturing of the structure and superstructure) as political consensus dissolved and the ruling class was incapable of leading society forward. Especially in 2011, citizens mobilised, became politically active and rebelled against the capitalist system in the name of democracy. In 2015 we have seen citizens mobilising under paroles of humanitarian obligations and solidarity. However, it is unclear if these contestations will be constituted as a new *historical bloc* (i.e. a unity of structure and superstructure) with an alternative hegemonic system (i.e. hegemony obtained by a fundamental class exercising the intellectual, political and moral role of leadership as well as monopolising the 'common sense' within the system) (Mouffe 2014). Gramsci proposed an alliance between proletariat and peasants to form a new historical bloc. Nowadays it is still unclear who the social and political actors involved should be. In Gramsci's words, 'the old is dying but the new cannot [yet] be born' (Gramsci 1971: 275–6, Q3§34).[1] However, it is certain that the terrain of civil society has become the terrain for hegemonic struggles in which political society can only use coercion and not persuasion. We add the 'yet' in Gramsci's famous statement and investigate, in the contributions of this book, civil society alliances in historical and especially contemporary perspectives, reflecting on their potential to challenge the hegemonic system.

In recent years, there has been a growing literature on what can be characterised as Gramscian and neo-Gramscian perspectives on transnational solidarities in the era of neoliberalism (e.g. Bieler 2014; Bieler and Morton 2004; Featherstone 2012; Morton 2007). Approaches in this literature include case studies on the (transnational) labour movement, alliances between unions and social movements, subaltern class struggles, the global justice movement, anti-colonial struggles and lately anti-austerity struggles. They underline the fact that exploitation and resistance to exploitation cannot be reduced to material aspects, but include amongst others ethnic, nationalist, religious and gender-based identities, which are all engaged in struggles (Bieler and Morton 2004; Cox 1987). Despite a theoretical openness to diversifying struggles, there has been little focus on migrants. Our objective with this book is to analyse alliances in civil society comprising immigrants and non-immigrant actors that challenge the hegemonic order and undo the political closure which, in the form of consensus, has allowed the implementation of restrictive and exclusionary immigration and integration policies. The contributions offer long historical perspectives as well as case studies on contemporary issues. Their common focus is that they analyse alliances in civil society through Gramscian and neo-Gramscian perspectives.

The category of the migrant is characterised by heterogeneity. The same can be said for the analysis of migrants as political subjects. The chapters conceptualise migrant subjects from four angles: labour mobility, migration (both economic and political), colonialism and transnational relations. We here understand processes of subjectivisation as being produced by mechanisms of social and cultural exclusion, division of labour and ethnicisation in a context of global capitalism. Figures such as the numbers of precarious workers, refugees, undocumented migrants and labour migrants are analysed. Furthermore, we consider the multidimensional conception of migration in the dynamics of global capitalism necessary to understand how new alliances and relations of solidarity, with other members of civil society who are exposed to similar processes of precarisation, can emerge. In our opinion, this scenario makes it particularly relevant to rethink Gramsci in relation to migration.

Following Edward Said's and later Adam David Morton's (2013) approach, we read Gramsci's framework as a 'travelling theory'. Solidarity struggles are situated in place and space and on a hierarchy of scales. Gramsci's 'Some Aspects of the Southern Question' establishes the framework for understanding how new alliances are composed and their potential to change the capitalist system by different degrees and at different levels. We thus speak against more recent contributions like that of Richard Day (2005), who claims that 'Gramsci is dead' because he

does not capture the demands of the latest social movements. We argue that Gramsci's analysis of alliances and solidarities is very much alive in the dynamics of subaltern political activism and the generative character of political struggle (Featherstone 2013). Consider for instance the emerging refugee solidarity movement *Venligboerne* (literally 'friendly inhabitants') in Denmark: its membership now numbers thousands of people across the country. This is not primarily an urban phenomenon; it started in the countryside and spread from there. Its activities include legal aid, practical help, medical support, language training, job-seeking assistance and everyday donations as well as engagement in political protest against what is believed to be a xenophobic policy. Rethinking 'Some Aspects of the Southern Question' entails addressing four important topics in order to understand the relation between immigration and civil society as resistance against the current hegemonic policies and political consensus:

1. The heterogeneity of political actors
2. Solidarity and alliances across and around borders
3. Avoiding misplaced alliances
4. Spaces of resistance

We consider these four dimensions, which correspond to the four parts of this book, useful for explaining the potential (as well as the limits) of civil society as spaces of resistance offering alternatives to the political closure on migration and integration policies.

## THE HETEROGENEITY OF POLITICAL ACTORS

Gramsci supports the idea of the proletariat as the class that would propose and lead a new hegemony and defeat capitalism. He explains how Turin communists furthered their cause by including the Southern question on the agenda. Despite their vanguard role, workers could not lead social change without establishing new alliances, especially with the peasants in the South, in order to mobilise the working population. One social class cannot challenge the hegemonic order without opening up to other social actors. This conclusion does not derive from a general reflection about working classes but from a historical and situated reflection that makes every development unique. We have to contextualise social struggles if we want to understand why specific alliances are formed and what possibilities they represent.

The proletariat can no longer be the only class leading a process of social change. Other popular classes must be taken into account as well.

As Hall (1986) points out, we cannot expect a homogenous class to be decisive when an organic crisis occurs. It is more reasonable to think that the class composition will be complex. Furthermore, 'though such a political and social force has its roots in the fundamental class division of society, the actual forms of the political struggle will have a *wider* social character' (Hall 1986). For instance, the Occupy Wall Street movement has tried to change the terms of social conflict by distinguishing between the 99 per cent (the people) and the 1 per cent (the representatives of the interests of capital). This reflects the effort of rethinking a more inclusive conception of class composition which is open to other groups, and not only the proletariat. In this sense, it is possible to move beyond the interests of those particular groups and identify common goals. Gramsci talked already about the need to overcome particularism as the only way to include different kinds of workers and peasants:

> [I]t is necessary – in order to win the trust and consent of the peasants and of some semiproletarian urban categories – to overcome certain prejudices and conquer certain forms of egoism which can and do subsist within the working class as such, even when craft particularism has disappeared. The metalworker, the joiner, the building-worker, etc., must not only think as proletarians, and no longer as metalworker, joiner, building-worker, etc.; they must also take a further step. They must think as workers who are members of a class which aims to lead the peasants and intellectuals. (Gramsci 1978: 448)

The heterogeneity of the political actors has to be included in and reflected by categories such as 'multitude' (Hardt and Negri 2004; Virno 2004) or 'depolarised pluralities' (de Sousa Santos 2006). However, it is not easy to account for the composition of this complex heterogeneity. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985) refer to the 'logic of difference and equivalence' to depict how a coalition of plural, quite diverse actors could lead to a new form of hegemony. The economic crisis has intensified the plurality of political subjectivities (Hardt and Negri 2012) and made the economic dimension of social inequalities, which are not necessarily linked only to the division of labour, more evident. All these elements must be taken into consideration to understand how the 'subaltern' becomes a subject of history in the constant shaping and reshaping of power relations (Capuzzo and Mezzadra 2012).

The plurality of subjectivities includes workers, the unemployed, different categories of immigrants (political and economic refugees, undocumented and documented immigrants, expatriates, etc.) and less obvious groups such as the indebted (Lazzarato 2012) or what has been

labelled as the 'precariat' (Standing 2011) and reflects the new economic and social divisions caused by capitalism. The configuration of the plurality of subjectivities should be reflected in a moment of organic crisis and solidarity must be constituted based on such a diversity in which it is difficult to imagine the working class playing a leading role, although it must clearly be included and be an active part of it.

Part I of the book includes three contributions on this topic. Ursula Apitzsch argues, in a historiographical reading of Gramsci, that his thoughts regarding the so-called 'subaltern social strata' supply a wealth of ideas relating to precisely the connection between migration and the Southern question: as a hegemonic framework in which dominated and subordinated cultures encounter each other. She further claims that it is necessary to reflect on the process by which the entire complex develops not only in the framework of the Italian nation state but also in the context of new European challenges. In the chapter by Nazlı Şenses and Kıvanç Özcan they employ a neo-Gramscian framework to challenge the now commonly accepted claim that the Gezi protests in Istanbul can be read as a middle-class phenomenon. They emphasise that the heterogeneity of the social composition of the protesters was a conjunction of diverse antagonisms in which different classes, ethnic and religious groups coalesced against the government. They focus on the role of internal migrants and minorities within Turkey and show how especially the Kurdish and Alevi minorities, who reside in migrant neighbourhoods, disturb the idea of homogeneous middle-class participation in the Gezi protests. Miguel Mellino offers a theoretical perspective from cultural and postcolonial studies. He argues that focusing on the anomalies of postcolonial translations of Gramsci's toolbox reveals the economic and political configuration of the contemporary world and of global (postcolonial) capitalism. He links the postcolonial reading of Gramsci to migration and citizenship struggles in Europe and argues that they constitute a privileged arena from which to regard the current neoliberal capitalism as postcolonial capitalism.

## SOLIDARITY AND ALLIANCES

It is made very clear in 'Some Aspects of the Southern Question' that the two main social forces, the proletariat and the peasants, must create an alliance in opposition to the hegemonic bloc. It is important to recognise that the resulting unity is not automatic and dependent on the position of the political actors in the mode of economic production but rather emerges due to a system of alliances (Hall 1986). The conformation of

alliances among civil society actors opposed to the hegemonic forces raises the question of solidarity:

> The Northern bourgeoisie has subjugated the South of Italy and the Islands, and reduced them to exploitable colonies; by emancipating itself from capitalist slavery, the Northern proletariat will emancipate the Southern peasant masses enslaved to the banks and the parasitic industry of the North. The economic and political regeneration of the peasants should not be sought in a division of uncultivated or poorly cultivated lands, but in the solidarity of the industrial proletariat. This in turn needs the solidarity of the peasantry and has an 'interest' in ensuring that capitalism is not reborn economically from landed property; that Southern Italy and the Islands do not become a military base for capitalist counterrevolution. (Gramsci 1978: 442)

Class alliances are necessary to fight the hegemonic system and they imply an understanding of how inequalities affect different classes and the responsibility of the ruling classes therein. The heterogeneity of political actors can only converge in a complex social composition if they manage to identify the diverse oppressive effects of the dominant order. This plurality generates a relation of solidarity that benefits all parties as the possibility of challenging the system is enhanced. Thus, solidarity becomes essential in promoting social change from civil society.

Solidarity cannot precede political actors nor can political actors impose their identities or interest upon others. The only way to ensure that solidarity is going to be in the 'interest' of all involved actors is that their positions are mutually constitutive, as in the case of peasants and industrial workers (Featherstone 2012). The practices that construct solidarity are transformative and allow us to focus on the importance of political organisation and interaction with other political actors. In other words, as emphasised by Featherstone (2012), solidarity as practice means that it is not only a matter of well-defined identities and ideas, but also an active process in which different political struggles are connected.

In Gramsci's words, ideas that 'organise human masses, and create the terrain on which men move, acquire consciousness of their position, struggle' are organic (Gramsci 1971: 376–7, Q7§19). Practices of solidarity revolve around such ideas: they can shatter the common sense and develop alternatives. Studies of the cooperation between the unions and social movements have shown how such alternatives can be developed (Bieler 2014; Bieler and Morton 2004; Munck 2002). Such studies entail focusing on the political formations – alliances – which the subaltern activists constitute and the way in which they set forward

claims or assert their autonomy of action within the prevailing hegemony (Morton 2007: 174). This coming-into-being as groups and as political subjects draws parallels with Sylvère Lotringer's analysis of autonomous struggles among the Italian working class in a setting of post-industrial social conflicts. In 'The Return of Politics', he captures some basic characteristics of autonomous struggles. Autonomy is a 'body without organs of politics, anti-hierarchic, anti-dialectic, anti-representative. It is not only a political project ..., it is a project for existence' (in Lotringer and Marazzi 1980: 8). Autonomous formations do not develop in a vacuum. They develop in a structural context, but the structures do not determine agency in the present. They can, as Bieler argues, 'prevent, constrain or enable agency' and may 'be changed by collective agency' (Bieler 2014: 116).

Concerning the new alliances between civil society and immigrants, the question is not an identitarian one but rather it is about how different political actors converge in ongoing social struggles in order to undo the political closure. As mentioned above, the plurality of actors involved in the fight for fairer immigration and integration policies must find a way to include this diversity and avoid the dominance of certain forms of particularism. This entails, among other things, equating ethnic struggles with class struggles, which implies combining the fight for emancipation with claims of economic redistribution. Immigrant struggles for rights can and must be connected to the anti-austerity struggles. The *International Coalition of Sans-Papiers and Migrants* organising alongside the European precarity movement is one such example. The Refugees Welcome campaign is another. Here it is evident that the way in which refugees and immigrants are treated can become a proxy for the rest of society. If immigrants can do without social benefits or rights so can native unemployed. If refugees are paid less for comparable work done by others, wages can be lowered in the future. Solidarities from below (Featherstone 2012), as practised in different settings and on different levels – from the local to the global – ensure the conformation and redefinition of political identities in defence of the common, but also as constituting a shared understanding of what the common is. In this sense, it is relevant to explore the relations among actors working with migrants, such as trade unions, NGOs, social movements, immigrants' organisations, local communities, etc., as well as the alliances they constitute through their practices.

Part II contains three chapters. Derek Boothman, like Apitzsch, takes a historiographical approach in outlining the importance of alliances in Gramsci's writings and for contemporary migration issues. More specifically, Boothman argues that possible lines of reconstructing