Passive revolution

Passive revolution is a term coined by Italian politician and philosopher Antonio Gramsci during the interwar period in Italy. Gramsci coined the term to refer to a significant change that is not a rupturous one, but a slow and gradual metamorphosis which could take years or generations to accomplish.[1]

Gramsci uses “passive revolution” in a variety of contexts with slightly different meanings. The primary usage is to contrast the passive transformation of bourgeois society in nineteenth-century Italy with the active revolutionary process of the bourgeoisie in France. However, Gramsci also associates Italian fascism with the notion of passive revolution.[2]

Passive revolution is a transformation of the political and institutional structures without strong social processes. Also he uses the term for the mutations of the structures of capitalist economic production that he recognizes primarily in the development of the U.S. factory system of the 1920s and 1930s.

But besides this usage of the term “passive revolution” as a descriptive tool of historical analysis, Gramsci seems to employ it like a suggestion as path for struggle. In a society subsumed within capital, the only way Gramsci can see to make a revolution is a relatively “passive” one through the institutions of civil society.[3]

1 Tactics

Gramsci outlines several main tactics to carry out a passive revolution. These tactics all worked in tandem to gradually and organically change a society in such a way that met the demands of the ruling class. This is the concept of “organic change”, change that appears to be self-starting and natural in the evolution of a society.[2] Gramsci analyzed movements such as reformism and fascism, as well as the ‘scientific management’ and assembly line methods of Frederick Taylor and Henry Ford respectively as examples of passive revolution initiated by the bourgeoisie.

1.1 Education

Gramsci theorized that to transform a society, one had to be in firm control of the minds of children, as their world view has yet to be formed. Thus, he supported mandatory nationalized education, so that every child would learn and adopt the values, morals, and world views that they were taught. This ensures that future generations will have a thought background in the revolutionary principles, ethos, and logos. As well as giving the controlling party the ability to address the next generation directly, thus bypassing the discerning filter of the individual’s parents.[4]

1.2 Language

Gramsci’s theories revolved around the idea of creating a new cultural hegemony in society. One key aspect of how the new hegemony was to come into being was the control of language. By controlling, and influencing the language of a society, the new hegemon could control how society speaks, and thus eventually how they begin to think. This largely begins in the schools, but must be repeated in many outlets of society. When one controls the way in which language is used, it can serve to influence how people think about any number of topics, based on what is socially permissible to say or not say.[5]

1.3 Religion

Gramsci looked at the Roman Catholic Church as a powerful force in Italian society, and was amazed by its ability to influence the hearts and minds of men. As a result, the
Catholic Church became a rival hegemon in his theoretical passive revolution. Thus, Gramsci theorized that the Church had to be silenced as a rival hegemon in society. This could be eventually done by force, but a more successful strategy would be to infiltrate it with the revolutionary sense of morals, ethics, and logic. This could not be an active measure, but a gradual shift, as the other tactics of revolution are implemented. Control or infiltration of religion would be of crucial importance. Religion must echo the “organic change” in society; it must serve to assist the new hegemony. Religion is an excellent means to this end because, by its very nature, people are willing to believe what comes from the pulpit, as being objectively good.\[^6\]

1.4 Media

The media is the lynchpin in Gramsci’s model. The media must be used smartly to repeat organically, edify, and buttress the revolutionary values and morals that are being disseminated throughout society (through education, language, and religion). The media ties together Gramsci’s other tactics, and fills any gaps that they might leave. It must echo revolutionary morals, and further the social views of language, education, religion, and societal values. The media has a great control over the opinions of people, and this must be utilized, and not be allowed to influence in contrast to the revolution.\[^7\]

2 References


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