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Gramsci and the Challenge of Praxis in Cuba: An Interview with Luis Emilio Aybar

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Francesco: Luis Emilio, we are talking amidst the Fourth Latin American and Caribbean Workshop-School on Gramscian Studies, 'The Impact of Gramscian Thought in Latin America and Its Influence in the World', which is being hosted in May 2025 in Havana by the Juan Marinello Cuban Institute of Cultural Research, a symbolic place for Cuban cultural research, of which you are the current director. This space seems to have a visceral connection with the thought of Antonio Gramsci, as demonstrated by the very existence of a 'Gramsci Chair' within it. Can you tell us how this relationship began and why

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the Marinello Institute became the beating heart of Gramscian studies in Cuba?

Luis Emilio: The presence of the Gramsci Chair within the Marinello Institute is not accidental but the result of a historical necessity to reconstruct critical thought in Cuba. The Chair emerged in the late 1990s after a debate took place among Cuban intellectuals about the relevance of the concept of civil society in our country. This debate was initiated by Rafael Hernández and culminated with the intervention of Armando Hart, a figure of enormous political weight, who argued for the need to recover and rethink the Gramscian perspective in relation to the specificities of the Cuban context. Hart is in fact the honorary president of the Chair. Fernando Martínez Heredia was its president and Jorge Luis Acanda its vice president.

Fernando's contributions in the 1990s were preceded by the work carried out through two institutions he directed in the 1960s: the Department of Philosophy at the University of Havana and the journal *Pensamiento Crítico*, which published and disseminated Gramsci's thought as a way of bringing his contributions into the process of the Cuban Revolution. This work was later curtailed with the closure of both institutions in 1971 and the strong Sovietisation of Cuban Marxism that took place in the 1970s and 1990s.

Returning to the 1990s, the Marinello Institute became a vital space for Martínez Heredia after the ideologically motivated closure of the Center for the Study of the Americas in 1996. The Marinello Institute helped ensure that his voice and Gramscian-inspired critical thought could reach new generations of researchers and students. In 2009 Fernando became the general director of the Cuban Institute of Cultural Research, a position he held until his death in 2017. From its beginnings, the Chair did not limit itself to the study of Gramsci but promoted the dissemination of important Marxist thinkers, organising events on Rosa Luxemburg, Mariátegui, Lenin and the great revolutions of the last century. Our function is one of continuous training, both theoretical and political, aimed at preventing Marxism from becoming merely a 'job position' or an academic subject emptied of meaning.

Francesco: In this process, the figure of Fernando Martínez Heredia emerges as particularly significant—a central reference point. What was specific about his interpretation of Gramsci?

Luis Emilio: Fernando's approach to Gramsci was connected to a militant praxis aimed at advancing the Cuban Revolution. It soon became clear that the political and economic dimensions, taken narrowly, were insufficient to

guide the process of transformation and to tackle the challenges of a socialist transition. Gramsci allowed for a deeper perspective. We can connect his viewpoint with developments of our own, such as those of Che Guevara, another author whom Martínez Heredia studied intensively, because of the centrality given to consciousness, subjectivities and the active role of subjects in the process of transition.

Francesco: Turning to the analysis of contemporary Cuban society, which Gramscian categories allow us to better understand the current tensions between the state, civil society and hegemony in Cuba?

Luis Emilio: Without a doubt, the categories of hegemony and civil society are the most important, provided one does not use the bourgeois concept of civil society as an autonomous sphere separate from the state. For us, following Gramsci, civil society is the dimension of the state in which people do things because they believe in them and not only because they receive an order or payment. It is the dimension of human will and conviction.

In this sense, in Cuba even institutions such as the Ministry of Education or the press form part of civil society, because they are organised spaces for the construction of consensus. The Cuban state is configured by controlling not only the material means of production but also the spiritual means. However, here lies today's problem of hegemony: our civil society appears weakened. Mass organisations, which should be the space par excellence of popular participation, often act as vertical transmission belts for directives coming from above.

This vertical configuration, while granting the revolution an extraordinary capacity for mobilisation, also produces passive subjects or spectators who wait for instructions, instead of recreating their own consciousness through practice. There is an organisational dimension to this weakening, but also a dimension related to the narrowing of consensus and the capture of common sense by capitalist hegemony. And hegemony cannot be measured purely on the discursive and symbolic level, through posters in the streets or official communication, but must be assessed in everyday praxis. If discourse does not connect with reality and with the resolution of problems, hegemony weakens and, with it, revolutionary civil society.

Francesco: In some of the discussions during the Workshop-School, you mentioned the risks of the current phase in Cuba. Could you elaborate on this point?

Luis Emilio: This is a crucial point. A sudden victory of the traditional right is unlikely in Cuba; the real danger is what Gramsci called 'passive revolution' or 'revolution-restoration'. A capitalist transition could take place in which the ruling class, partly driven by international pressures, allows the entry of logics that weaken the original project until the country becomes something different, without it being clear at what moment the direction was lost.

Such a transition would be compelled to integrate part of the imaginary and the heritage of the revolution to maintain power, because that heritage is still alive among the people and it would not be easy to convince them otherwise. It is a process in which the external form of revolutionary discourse is maintained while the content of praxis is hollowed out.

Today, for things to function in Cuba, there is an increasing reliance either on command directives (as in the military, which is the sector that works best) or on market formulas (which are advancing alongside the economic crisis). In contrast, the Gramscian and Guevarian proposal for socialism aims at making political and moral incentives prevail; that is, doing things because we believe in them, not because we are paid or given orders. The construction of hegemony must connect with a renewed revolutionary practice and real popular participation.

Francesco: Finally, what future do you see for Marxism and for Gramsci's legacy in Cuba? Is a revitalisation of his theory–praxis nexus possible?

Luis Emilio: The revitalisation of Gramsci must necessarily be part of a revitalisation of socialism itself in Cuba; otherwise, Marxism will continue to be only the intellectual pastime of a few. We must be clear: revolutionary hegemony in Cuba still exists, as shown by the widespread population participation on May Day, but we cannot think that it will last forever without profound change. The institutional framework still retains a certain degree of ascendancy over the people because it retains the anti-imperialist, socialist, humanist, patriotic and social justice imaginary. But to stop the reflux, an effective struggle against existing problems is needed, along with a sincere appeal to popular strength to solve them.

Our revolutionary position today must be articulated in three ways: defending what has been conquered; recovering what was lost along the way; and launching the revolution toward the future with the lessons learned in Cuba and the world. Gramsci teaches us that it is not enough to occupy the government; one must build a collective will imbued with radical aspirations and win the battle of common sense and praxis in all spheres relevant to human emancipation.