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Gramsci, the relativity of the integral state-society, and the COVID-19 interregnum

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Abstract
Gramscian scholars have engaged with Gramsci’s *leitmotif* (‘rhythm of thought’) and the ‘*stato integrale*’ (integral state), a concept he introduced in the Autumn of 1930. This represents remarkable progress in the Marxist community. But what requires further attention is the interconnection between an integral state and a totalitarian one, two of the three expressions of state-society formations that Perry Anderson identified as Gramsci’s antinomies. This article argues that the integral state is fragile but hegemonic if it can be sustained. Otherwise, it can degenerate into a totalitarian state. The article refigures the ‘integral state’ as the ‘integral state-society’. It exists relatively, depending on whether the ‘integral momentum’ or the ‘totalitarian tendency’ prevails in a dynamic interaction between radical Left, Far Right, and those currents in between. Identifying this relativity helps to formulate a deeper understanding of Gramsci’s thought and show how his legacy supports a class struggle perspective on the COVID-19 interregnum.

Keywords
Gramsci, political sociology, COVID-19 interregnum, state, integral state-society, integral momentum, Far Right, totalitarian tendency

Introduction
In the Autumn of 1930, Gramsci introduced the concept of *stato integrale* (integral state) in his *Prison Notebooks* (hereafter *Notebooks*). The concept of the integral state, which caught the attention of Buci-Glucksmann and Francioni, has become more prominent since Thomas published *The Gramscian Moment: Philosophy, Hegemony, and Marxism* (hereafter, *Gramscian Moment*) in 2009. This represents remarkable progress in Gramscian scholarship because the concept of integral state augments the concept of hegemony that has gained overwhelming traction since the late 1970s (Liguori, 2015). Interestingly, Tamburrano (1958: 277) once lamented in the mid-50s that the concept of hegemony was not sufficiently studied. Since the 1980s, the opposite has been true – there is an overemphasis and inevitably overstretching of the concept of hegemony. In response to this, Bosteels (2014: 48) argued that Thomas’ *Gramscian Moment* portrayed Gramsci as ‘a philosopher of the integral state, not hegemony – at least not in the way in which Gramsci’s thought is frequently summarised’. On the other hand, I find it too crude to replace the concept of hegemony with the concept of the integral state altogether. Both should be understood as mutually reinforcing concepts – any state is hegemonic only if it functions in an ‘integral’ sense.

Re-visited the concept of the integral state is crucial to the current political conjuncture. The COVID-19 pandemic (hereafter COVID-19) has precipitated crises beyond extreme economic inequality and social polarisation, so the last days of capitalism might seem to be in sight. Still, such optimism may overlook the entrenchment and transnationality of Far Right politics (Stewart, 2020; Caiani, 2018; Rydgren, 2007) as well as the self-healing power of what Gowan calls ‘neoliberal cosmopolitanism’ (Gowan, 2001). The current critical moment resonates so well with Gramsci’s definition of crisis – ‘the old is dying, and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum, a great variety of morbid symptoms appear’ (Gramsci, 1971: 276). Gramsci was among the few who understood the difficulty of breaking with the past (Martin, 2015: 34) because he considered a capitalist quagmire an opportunity to foster global resistance.
He attempted to explain what is – the socio-political context of Italy in his time contextualized in American and Western European histories – and also to envisage what ought to be – a transformation towards socialism (Fontana, 1993: 6). He also acknowledged how global and local developments intertwined in different periods of capitalist history (Bieler, Bruff, and Morton, 2015: 152).

Reading Gramsci always presents three challenges.

First, his thirty-three notebooks cover topics beyond the confines of any single discipline, so misinterpretation arises when one knows little about specific topics (Morera, 1990: 3–4).

Second, in Gramsci’s own words, the notebooks were cryptic – ‘quick prompts pro memoria...’ to be ‘revised and checked’ and any ‘...imprecisions, false connexions, anachronisms’ to be ‘radically corrected’ (Gramsci, 1975: 1365).

Third, scholars across a broad spectrum (see Fontana, 1993: 2–3) have selectively appropriated Gramsci’s texts (Thomas, 2009: 139–140) for various reasons.

A conceptual discussion of the integral state has brought some clarity. However, it is imperative to have this concept defined against its antithesis. Anderson (1976) identified in his well-known article ‘The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci’ (Antinomies) three oscillatory but ‘antinomian’ state-society formulations in Gramsci’s notebooks. Two of these antinomies are valid expressions of complex realities that Gramsci had captured through reflection.

The present article contributes to this analytical work by introducing three concepts: the integral state-society, the integral momentum, and the totalitarian tendency. Following a brief historical review of the Gramscian scholarship, the article will argue that the integral state is fragile because the oscillatory motion between its rise and decay never ceases. For the integral state to be hegemonic, it needs to be sustained in a sense that I will specify. Thus, I will refigure the integral state as ‘integral state-society’, in order to specify its relativity to the totalitarian state, and to introduce concepts of the ‘integral momentum’ and the ‘totalitarian tendency’. An integral state-society or a totalitarian state may appear at any moment, depending on the collective agency and what Gramsci calls relations of forces.

Gramsci distinguished three relations of forces: (1) the objective social relations of forces – a rebellious reality presented independently of agents’ wills; (2) the political relations of forces that are further distinguished in three registers, namely, corporate-economic, class identity, and hegemonic alliance; and (3) the military relations of forces that are the decisive technical/military and political/military moments (e.g., the seizure of the Winter Palace in St Petersburg in 1917) (Maso, 2016; Gramsci, 2007: 258–259).

There are three caveats.

First, there is a general tendency to interpret these relations of forces as various levels of a hegemonic transformation. Such an interpretation suggests that the path to socialism is a development from a totalitarian/capitalist state to an integral state-society. However, such a stagiest reading finds no support in Gramsci. One should instead view the relations of forces as a dialectical totality because, in practice, all these phenomena can occur simultaneously within a single social movement. Whether or not this conjuncture produces the integral state-society depends on which level predominates at which moment.

Second, the word relativity does not imply relativism because the integral state-society and the totalitarian state are distinguishable through an analysis of the context and situation. This claim is predicated upon the philosophy of praxis, especially the dialectical loops, which I shall discuss in detail. In other words, the integral state-society depends on the constant opposition between the ‘integral momentum’ and the ‘totalitarian tendency’. The former is the catalyst for transformation, and the latter is the obstacle to it. When the ‘totalitarian tendency’ dominates, the ‘integral momentum’ fades, and the integral state-society becomes unsustainable. It can then degenerate into a totalitarian state.
Finally, I understand that questions may be raised about whether a totalitarian state still. It seems that any state’s coercive practices are nothing more than authoritarian. Indeed, authoritarianism is not quite the same as totalitarianism. Nevertheless, it can be argued that the severity of COVID-19 has triggered harsh state responses that may be seen as part of totalitarian surveillance (Cawthorn et al., 2021). Besides, there are other totalitarian tendencies and conditions for the integral momentum to emerge, which will be identified in the fifth section before the conclusion.

This article presents a novel reading of Gramsci’s state-society formulations and the integral state concept. Thus, neither will it engage with the conceptual debate between authoritarianism and totalitarianism nor with a full empirical investigation of the authoritarian/totalitarian tendency in COVID-19. For clarity and simplicity, the totalitarian tendency is equivalent to the authoritarian tendency. This conflation invites critiques that I welcome. In addition, not only does the article aim to advance Gramscian scholarship, but it also paves the way for a more detailed reflection of COVID-19 and global capitalism through a Gramscian lens.

**Shifting from hegemony to the integral state**

The concept of the integral state fine-tunes Gramsci’s theory of hegemony (Liguori, 2015: 2). He introduced the concept to help formulate an understanding of (1) the relationship between politics and economics, and (2) the new relationship he proposed between civil society and political society.

Early interpreters did not know about the integral state due to the limited availability of Gramsci’s notebooks. Bobbio (1979: 37) argued in 1955 that Gramsci gave primacy to ideological superstructures over the economic base. Within the superstructures, Bobbio stressed civil society over political society to stimulate its transformation to a ‘progressive’ historic bloc.

Countering Bobbio in the 1960s, Texier (1979: 51–52) defended Gramsci on three grounds: (1) Gramsci viewed the base-superstructure model as a dialectical unity; (2) he divided the superstructure into two spheres for analytical purposes, following the thesis-antithesis-synthesis dialectic, and (3) he considered human activities to be the driver of the processes of change.

The 1970s witnessed a qualitative leap in Gramscian scholarship. But it was not immune to internal politics in Italy. In 1973, Berlinguer, the General Secretary of the Communist Party of Italy (PCI) then proposed the ‘Historic Compromise’. The PCI established an alliance with Christian Democracy (DC). This caused the split between the PCI and the USSR, and thus the emergence of Eurocommunism. In February, the leader of the PCI’s trade union wing told workers that they must establish the National Solidarity government while making economic sacrifices. The PCI-DC alliance made the PCI unpopular among the younger generation.

Since Italy must deal with its own acute Cold War dynamics, Berlinguer saw that the PCI could not rule by cobbling together a coalition with 51 percent of seats, so he had the PCI integrated into a coalition led by the DC to push for reforms while seeking a position in republican institutions (Broder, 2018). The PCI defended its support for National Solidarity as thoroughly Gramscian and as a revolt against the new radical left. To obstruct the PCI-DC pact, the Red Brigades, an armed left group, kidnapped Aldo Moro, the Secretary of the DC in March 1978 and killed him in May. The year ended with the DC taking votes away from the Communists and yielding nothing in return. The following year ushered in the PCI’s slow descent towards its dissolution (Anderson, 2017).
The ins and outs of the historic compromise were not Gramscian in any sense. Gramsci himself had not suggested any form of reformism/gradualism as an alternative to the proletarian revolution. To view the turn as Gramscian would deny Gramsci’s connexion with Bolshevism.

Once Gerratana’s critical edition of Gramsci’s notebooks entitled Quaderni del carcere (1975) became available, Buci-Glcksmann, in her book Gramsci and the State, argued that Gramsci had reconfigured hegemony as ‘hegemonic apparatuses’ that cover economic and politico-cultural dimensions (Buci-Glcksmann, 1980: 70). She also identified the integral state as an expanded state, a justification for Eurocommunism (Maso, 2021: 2; Anderson, 2017a, 8) because stato allargato had never appeared in the Notebooks.

To refute Buci-Glcksmann, Anderson wrote his ‘Antinomies’, identifying three state-society formulations as antithetical.

The first formulation – the State (Political society) contrasts with Civil Society came from Gramsci’s ‘East-West’ passage (see Gramsci, 2007: 169). Civil society, for Gramsci, is a complex nexus or totality between ‘commercial and industrial life’ and ‘the public services needed to maintain order within them’ (Femia, 1981: 2). Political society is a Weberian state (Weber, 1968: 56; see also Dusza, 1989: 75–76), including civil courts and police. Hegemony is ‘a type of inverted Hobbesianism’ (Thomas, 2013: 22) that covers only the formation of consent in civil society. Dictatorship achieved by coercion occurs only within the state (Anderson, 1976: 26) or political society.

But the second formulation – State (Political Society) encompasses Civil Society defines the state as only an ‘outer surface’ of civil society, with its coercive elements withering away by degrees since ever more regulated society allows coercion to be diffused. Hegemony is ‘protected by the armor of coercion’ (Gramsci, 1971: 262–63), or by a synthesis of consent and coercion (Anderson, 1976: 22). Liberals identify this as the ‘nightwatchman’ state that extends its apparatuses and absorbs society. They viewed the British state as predicated on the principle of laissez-faire and adherence to economic liberalism and free competition (Gramsci, 1994: 22–23).

Yet, the third formulation – State is identical to Civil society – is a radicalization of the second one (Anderson, 1976: 33). Hegemony includes historically developed private forces – ‘civil society which is...the State itself’ (Gramsci, 1971: 261).

The second formulation which suggests that coercion ‘withers away’ in advanced capitalism overlooks the pervasiveness of state coercion and undermines workers’ agitation against it. For Anderson, Gramsci has valorized civil society and thus perceived hegemony as merely ‘cultural’ rather than ‘political’ (Anderson, 1976: 41).

However, Anderson’s antinomies drew vehement criticism in Francioni’s work, L’Officina Gramsciana (1984). Francioni (1984: 161) criticized Anderson for misconstruing Gramsci’s concept of the state as a ‘destination’ rather than a ‘starting point’. Furthermore, Anderson mistook the civil society-political society fusion in his third formulation as Gramsci’s, whereas Gramsci contested this fusion which he had found in Gentile’s work (Thomas, 2009: 69). Thus, Francioni (1984: 197) argued that the concept of the integral state, introduced by Gramsci in autumn 1930, allows him to distinguish political society (i.e., the state in a narrow sense) from the integral state and use it with civil society freely. Accepting Francioni’s criticisms of Anderson, Liguori pointed out that Anderson had failed to consider the diachronic structure of the Notebooks and to grasp the way that Gramsci’s reasoning plays out (Liguori, 2015: 184). Anderson thus mistakenly assumed a theoretical contradiction at the heart of Gramsci’s prison elaborations (Liguori, 2015: 184).

Contrasting readings from Anderson and Francioni have fuelled an ongoing debate. During the 1980s-1990s, International Relations (IR) scholars used Gramsci’s thought to analyze the interplay between the national and the international currents. This gave rise to Neo-

In 2009, Thomas’s *Gramscian Moment* presents the most comprehensive rebuttal of Anderson’s antinomies undertaken in the last decade. Anderson then defended his position in his new edition of the Antinomies (Anderson, 2017), following the NLR’s 40th-anniversary celebration of his ‘antinomies’ article in November 2016. However, in that book, Anderson finally accepted Gramsci as a revolutionary thinker and differentiated him from his ‘heirs’ (Maso, 2021: 38).

Most Gramscian scholars today call for a careful appraisal of Gramsci’s *leitmotif*, ‘rhythm of thought’ because the fragmentary nature of the Notebooks does not allow us to conclude based on one passage or the other (see Cospito, 2016; Crehan, 2016; Ekers et al., 2013; Liguori, 2015; Schwarzmantel, 2015; Thomas, 2009; Tosel, 2021). Gramsci wrote directly to his readers and the different situations he encountered while being constantly self-reflective. Given this, Thomas provided an alternative typology of hegemony which identifies a ‘dialectical chain’ that integrates four related moments of hegemony: social and political leadership, political project, hegemonic apparatus, and hegemony of workers’ social and political movements (Thomas, 2013: 24–25). That dialectical chain helps us to identify Gramsci’s ‘general theory of hegemony’ (Gerratana, 1997: 122).

This article focuses on the fourth moment of hegemony and identifies through sustained analysis of the fragility of the integral state and the relativity of what I call ‘integral state-society’. My discussion also adds a cautionary note to activists engaging in class struggles in the light of the current political conjuncture, with a particular reference to COVID-19.

**Sustaining a fragile integral state**

In 1932, Gramsci stated that consensus expressed in public opinion (Gramsci, 1971: 80) should unite allies while coercion should target enemies. However, both have ‘moments within each other’ combined in a political-hegemonic project – the *doppia prospettiva* or dual perspectives (Thomas, 2009: 167). Hegemony relies on consent formation being dominant, but it legitimizes coercion. The dual perspective also explains the relationship between the war of position and the war of movement. Unlike the Tsarist regime in pre-revolutionary Russia, bourgeois democracies in Western Europe have ‘trenches’ that consist of complex civil society and state organizations (Gramsci, 1971: 243). So, a war of movement resembles an artillery attack that destroys the ‘outer perimeter’ (Gramsci, 1971: 235). Instead, a war of position is a more viable revolutionary strategy. This compromise enables the capitalist forces to ‘tame’ (Femia, 1981: 156) workers and thus compromise proletarian solidarity.

Nevertheless, the war of position is not passive because it involves ‘rapid fire power of cannons...concentrated at a particular spot’ with ‘the abundance of supplies’ (Gramsci, 1971: 234) and requires arduous ‘sacrifices by infinite masses of people as well as leaders’ patience, inventiveness, and skilfulness (Gramsci, 1971: 238–39). Comparing this to Engels, Lenin, and Trotsky, we might think that Gramsci is being unclear about what kind of ‘war’ would be decisive. This ambiguity can lead to defeat, deflection, and absorption of radical social movements and political strategy (Egan, 2014: 536).

However, Gramsci gave concrete examples. Between February and March 1930, he considered Gandhi’s political struggle against the English war of position that ‘becomes a war of movement at certain moments and an underground war at others: the boycott is a war of position, strikes are a war of movement, the clandestine gathering of arms and of assault combat groups is underground war’ (Gramsci, 1992: 219). The war of position presupposes the war of movement but considers the ‘longer process of political and political-military struggle’ (Maso, 2021: 36).
Moments of these strategies flow across civil society and political society. Therefore, the East-West distinction is not geographical and dichotomous but is dialectical, deduced from the thesis of the united front (Thomas, 2009: 219–220).

The third state-society formulation thus becomes: Integral state balances civil society (state) and political society in disequilibrium. Political society is the narrow form of ‘state’. Countering Texier, the civil society-political society distinction is also an organic one, though they are interconnected terrains. Certain elements within civil society oppose elements of state planning in the economy introduced by political society (state). But civil society and political society ‘can swap their respective functions as earthworks or fortresses and front lines’ (Tosel, 2021: 115).

The integral state concept relates to Gramsci’s reading of Engels and Hegel. In line with Engels, any state is a ‘product of society at a certain stage of development’ and a ‘power seemingly standing above society that would alleviate the conflict’ between classes and ‘keep it within the bounds of “order”’ (Engels, 2004: 157). Gramsci took Hegel’s ‘ethical state’, emphasizing its capability to ‘raise the great mass of the population to a particular cultural and moral level...which corresponds to the needs of the productive forces for development and hence to the interests of the ruling classes’ (Gramsci, 1971: 258). Indeed, Gramsci believed that since the French Revolution the bourgeoisie has created an integral state for themselves. The integral state as an ‘educator’ (Gramsci 1975: 937; Gramsci 1971: 260) performs a ‘positive educative function’ through its schools but also a ‘negative education function’ through its courts (Schwarzmantel, 2015: 195–196).

Contemporary interpreters have accentuated the harmonizing element of the integral state. Schwarzmantel (2015: 197–198) viewed a proletarian integral state as a new ‘genuinely ethical state’, the outcome of the communist or socialist movement. Thus, it is a kind of ‘non-state’ or a stateless and classless society. But before then, the state continues to use ‘coercive and non-coercive methods’ (Schwarzmantel, 2015: 196). His reading of Gramsci implies that the bourgeoisie’s integral state is not ‘genuinely ethical’ if we follow Hegel’s definition that an ethical state represents the entire population. Indeed, the bourgeois integral state will disintegrate over time as its internal contradictions (class antagonisms) intensify. Yet, on the one hand, the bourgeois integral state retains class division in order to curb the emergence of direct democracy (Maso, 2021: 15); but on the other hand, the bourgeois state continues to behave as if it represents the interests of all classes. This is the bourgeois imaginary sold to the working class. Echoing such lies consoles the bourgeoisie and sharpens the sting of class antagonisms in society.

However, Schwarzmantel’s reading also suggests that only the proletariat can build a truly ‘ethical state’ in the Hegelian sense. That is a slippage because, unlike Hegel, Gramsci (2007: 338) argued that ‘only the social group whose declared aspiration...can create an ethical state’. Schwarzmantel should be forgiven because Gramsci did claim that ‘every State is ethical...’ (Gramsci, 1971: 258). But he never thought of a class-neutral ethical state. Thus, we can only argue that the integral state is ethical because it contains certain elements that a Hegelian ethical state would share. The integral state like all states acquires a life of its own (Durst, 2005). It encapsulates the potential disjuncture between civil society and political society (Martin, 2015: 44). Thus, the integral state is not equivalent to the ethical state.

Humphrys’ reading is clearer: Gramsci’s concept of the integral state unites civil society and political society, which counterposes the constant antagonism between the state and civil society in Marx’s early writings (Humphrys, 2018: 30). But if the integral state is understood as ‘always necessarily unstable’ (Humphrys, 2018: 42), it can be used to bridge the tension between the positions of Marx and Gramsci. Nonetheless, there is no such tension at all because all previous elaborations suggest that neither did Marx and Engels reject the state’s capability
of reconciling societal conflicts momentarily nor did Gramsci think that the integral state resolves class antagonisms indefinitely.

In my view, the integral state is always ‘fragile’ in capitalism and socialism. I do not use the word ‘instability’, because I argue that it can be a stable hegemony if it is sustained and strengthened by different agents and strategies. However, it would be mistaken to think that the integral state could be hegemonic and linger indefinitely. It is fragile, as socialists take it to be a point of departure, not a finale. Since late 2019, we have witnessed how COVID-19 has brought to light deep-seated structural inequalities (Saad-Filho, 2020: 482) in health, wealth, and individual and collective security (Lohmeyer and Taylor, 2021: 626). To sustain hegemony, the bourgeois (integral) states have imposed lockdowns and travel restrictions to varying degrees and have distributed vaccines (though discriminatingly at the expense of developing regions) in order to reduce widespread transmission of the virus. Yet the dilemma is certainly visible because lockdowns hit businesses and thus disrupt the global value chain. This is something that could also have been achieved by workers’ systematic industrial action and rolling back collectively on consumption. In reality, many transnational corporations have reaped huge profits from the global health crisis (see Braithwaite, 2020) while workers could not survive on furlough schemes that were farfetched in the face of massive unemployment and precarity. Every bourgeois state may appear integral, but then unexpectedly fragile and dysfunctional when facing the COVID-19 crisis. Even the success stories in Asia may not last if the recent Omicron variant continues to spread and mutate. The rapid spreading of Omicron continues to test China’s alternative ‘zero tolerance’ approach to its limit.

The integral state concept helps to explain the hegemonic process that requires civil society to predominate over political society and thus requires the constant rebalancing of the two dialectical moments. The integral state provides the centrality of hegemony but is as bendy as a ‘plastic’ (Tosel, 2021: 115) rather than being rigid and brittle. The creation of the integral state is a hegemonic process starting from resistance, as shown in Gramsci’s famous statement: ‘even before attaining power a class can (and must) “lead”; when it is in power, it becomes dominant but continues to “lead” as well...’ (Gramsci, 1992: 136–37). The proletariat must firstly be conscious of several (contradictory) articulations of the bourgeois ideology legitimized by the capitalist order (Gramsci, 1994: 22–23), so inevitably proletarians must ‘at least directly engage the legacies of an earlier hegemony’ instead of withdrawing from state politics or embracing the free-market consensus uncritically (Martin, 2015: 48). Humphrys (2018: 42) coined this ‘anti-politics’ which is understood in these terms: ‘a new moment underpinned by the structural features of the capitalist mode of production.’ Revolutionaries must pursue equality and justice based on the juridical maxim of the proletariat – ‘all citizens should be able to develop their...personality to the full’ (Gramsci, 1994: 25). A class is only ready to challenge the existing hegemony if it possesses the state-building goal (Liguori, 2015: 12).

Although a general theory of hegemony is present, Gramsci did not ask proletarians to emulate the bourgeois model, because ‘the class referent of hegemony changes’ and so do the ‘instruments and institutions – in a word, the apparatus of hegemony itself’ (Gerratana, 1977: 43–45). Both Humphreys’ reading and mine identify hegemony as an ‘integration of polarities in a dynamic theory of political transformation’ (Thomas, 2013: 23), altering a misreading that emerged ‘in the light of the primacy of stability over instability’ (Frosini, 2008: 667) and alongside Eurocommunism and the PCI’s belated valorization of passive revolution (Thomas, 2013: 23).

Towards the relativity of the integral state-society
The above discussion counters the liberal dichotomy between the state and society. Thus, it is sensible to give the integral state a new name – the ‘integral state-society’ – that captures the
role of civil society in shaping it. The integral state-society relates to its antithesis – the first formulation: State (Political society) contrasts with Civil Society – a ‘primitive’ state that relies predominantly on coercion (Schecter, 2015: 180). In Gramsci’s times, the Italian state was ‘primitive’ because its nationalists and liberals failed to integrate their disjointed ideological forms (Gramsci, 1994: 22–23; see also Filippini, 2017: 13). In principle, the socialists’ historical task was to provide an organic order for Italy (Martin, 2015: 38). But its ‘primitiveness’ led to the rise of fascism which is a form of ‘totalitarianism’, as stated in The Doctrine of Fascism (which Gentile and Mussolini wrote in 1932):

For the Fascist, everything is in the state, and nothing human or spiritual exists, much less has value, outside the state...the Fascist State, the synthesis and unity of all values, interprets, develops and gives strength to the whole life of the people (Lyttelton, 1973: 42).

Gramsci understood totalitarian politics as the process through which citizens seek all their satisfactions in ‘a system in which the party is all the regulator’ (Gramsci, 1975: 800). This passage alerted Pellicani (1981: 86–87), who then labelled Gramsci a ‘totalitarian’. But before that passage, Gramsci said that ‘individual persons belong to...associations which are objectively in contrast among themselves’ (Gramsci, 1975: 800). So, he did not advocate the subjugation of individuals’ rights and lives. Instead, Gramsci called for creating a solid conception of the world as a kind of totality (Wainwright, 2010: 519) which makes individuals’ social interactions more coherent (Finocchiaro, 1984: 136). He also criticized ‘statolatry’ and foresaw a dangerous megatrend – the totalitarian drift of the twentieth-century states emerging from the masses’ organizations in liberal-democratic states and also in the communist movement to which Gramsci himself belonged (see Liguori, 2015: 21–22). Gramsci was not a totalitarian in a pejorative sense (Finocchiaro, 1984: 137).

An integral state-society is not synonymous with a totalitarian state. The relativity of the integral state-society is predicated upon the philosophy of praxis (hereafter praxis), a notion proposed by Labriola. Praxis is not a ‘new’ philosophy per se but a ‘refoundation of philosophy in a new form’ (Thomas, 2015: 105) and a dialectical loop between philosophy and politics (Gramsci, 1971: 395; Gramsci, 2007: 355). Thus, it substantiates Marx’s eleventh thesis: ‘The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it’ (Marx and Engels, 1969: 15).

Praxis unpins other dialectical loops scattered in the Notebooks. First, Gramsci’s material-ideology loop suggests that he followed Labriola’s critical communist stance (Gramsci, 1971: 386–88). Nevertheless, Gramsci vacillated between ‘critical’ and ‘empathic’ attitudes toward ideology, evident in how he metaphorized ‘ideology’ as the ‘skin’ growing out of the ‘skeleton’, the material base. But without the skin, one is an unpleasant ‘flayed person’ (Gramsci, 1996: 157). A speculative ideology, albeit an error, is ‘not completely useless’ (Gramsci, 1971: 377), but a signal to change.

Second, Gramsci did not posit philosophy and ideology as ‘truth’ versus ‘non-truth’ but rather as the interaction of levels of practical organization that ratifies the ‘historically true’ (Thomas, 2015: 106). Ideology is assessed by its (im)possibility (Filippini, 2017: 10) for weaving together a historic bloc.

A proletarian ideology is ‘historically true’ because it forges its national-popular will and unites the widest social group (proletariat). Thus, ideology becomes the mass aspect of philosophy (Gramsci, 1995: 383), so philosophy is a broad ‘conception of the world’. The same logic describes Gramsci’s quantity-quality loop (see Gramsci, 1971: 363), which also relates to a more often cited loop between commune senso (‘common sense’) and buon senso (‘good sense’). Common sense is a ‘rugged and jagged’ (Gramsci, 1971: 343) crystallization of a ‘chaotic aggregation’ (Gramsci, 1971: 422) of ‘popular religions, beliefs, superstitions...’
Every social class has its common sense (Gramsci, 1985: 420) which contains epistemologically nuggets of good sense as the ‘healthy nucleus’ (Gramsci, 1971: 328). But, unlike plant seeds, common sense does not contain the genes to grow good sense (Crehan, 2016: 48–49). Good sense – a theory-will unity (Gramsci, 1971: 333) – must be fostered through constant dialogues between revolutionaries and masses. Once good sense is amassed quantitatively, its internal contradictions become severe again, leading to a qualitative change – a ‘new’ common sense (Gramsci, 1971: 360). A ‘new’ good sense will emerge again from the new common sense.

All these loops demonstrate a never-ending process of incoherence/disintegration and unity/organicity (Filippini, 2017: 13). The bourgeoisie has exacerbated class division as they struggle to strengthen their integral state-society and safeguard their privileges. But that provides opportunities for the proletariat to produce good sense collectively from existing common sense. The process is a ‘struggle between two hegemonies’ (Gramsci, 1975: 1084), and the state is the ultimate site for such a struggle (Liguori, 2015: 18).

This dynamic explains Gramsci’s rhythm of thought and the relativity of the integral state-society. The integral state-society is hegemonic and only relative to a totalitarian state. Even the latter’s bureaucrats formulate the consensus that ‘everything belongs to the State’ and convince the masses that they can hand over their individuality to the state. Gramsci defined fascism (between mid-April and mid-May of 1932) as a war of position undertaken practically in Italy and ideologically in Europe from March 1921. A war of movement had started in Russia in March 1917. Likewise, a war of position occurred from 1815 to 1870 after the French Revolution, a war of movement beginning in 1789 (Gramsci, 1971: 120). So, the fascists’ ‘war of position’ brings the masses into ‘the orbit of the State’ in order to prevent the October 1917 revolutionary wave from expanding (Maso, 2021: 32).¹¹

The integral state-society retains individual characters. Within society, there are the ‘integral momentum’ and the ‘totalitarian tendency’. Whichever prevails depends on how the counter-hegemonic forces combine in the war of movement and war of position, how they then practise consent formation and coercion (in varying degrees) in order to sustain their hegemonic power, and how the hegemonic forces deal with the spatial-temporal presence of civil society and political society. The historically organic truth remains identifiable upon rigorous appraisal and is thus not a ‘relativism’. We can best assess whether one state is more integral-totalitarian or less so, measured against its history, by making a ‘vertical’ comparison prior to any generalization.

Any totalitarian state produces the condition for the integral momentum of revolts to grow. But any established integral state-society may degenerate into a totalitarian state if it becomes bureaucratic and overly coercive. The rise of fascism and so of Gramsci’s imprisonment reflected this tragic reality, as did the subsequent rise of Stalinism. The relativity of the integral state-society only makes sense if we turn to the relations between class forces and collective agency in the material world that relativize the onset of hegemony (Maso, 2021: 21).

Gramsci’s three-level model of relations of forces (proposed in May 1932 and early 1934) are as follows: (1) the objective social relations of forces – a rebellious reality presented independently of agents’ wills; (2) the political relations of forces that are further distinguished in three registers, namely, corporate-economic, class identity, and hegemonic alliance; and (3) the military relations of forces that are the decisive technical/military and political/military moments (e.g., the seizure of the Winter Palace in St Petersburg in 1917) (Gramsci, 2007: 258–259; Maso, 2016). The third level is precisely when the war of movement finally replaces the war of position. By the third level, the leading class is hegemonic because it has persuaded the proletariat to move beyond the pursuit of material interests by creating an ideology that covers their cultural interests (Sau, 2021: 11). In practice, these relations of forces are interwoven.
Whether they come to create the integral momentum depends on which level predominates at which moment in time.

The question of crises and ‘spontaneity’ then arises. Gramsci drew lessons from the French Revolution (1789–1870) and the Jacobins, and he restudied Marx’s Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy (see Gramsci, 1971: 177). Gramsci (1971: 196) argued that pure spontaneity does not exist in history, just as there is no pure ‘mechanicity’. The objective social relations of forces signal the crisis of capitalism and the possibility of spontaneity but reaching the political and the military requires agents to organize themselves. The proletariat changes their own circumstances (see Marx and Engels, 1969: 13). Anyway, for the integral momentum to emerge, what is necessary is a class formation that produces new intellectuals who are actively engaged in politics. However, all this must be weighed against the practical situation. Thus, I advance the discussion by placing COVID-19 firmly in the foreground to show the significance of theorizing in Gramsci’s terms, that is, the concept of the integral state-society, taking in the tension between the integral momentum and the totalitarian tendency.

The integral momentum and the totalitarian tendency in the COVID-19 interregnum

In this section, I use the Gramscian lens to provide an exploratory analysis rather than a substantial empirical study of the current COVID-19 crisis.

Recall Gramsci’s definition of crisis stated in the introduction. The two keywords are ‘morbid symptoms’ (fenomeni morbosi) and ‘interregnum’. Morbid symptoms are various social ills. Interregnum coins the temporal–spatial gap between ‘the normality is the problem but fading’ and ‘the alternative is arriving but not yet here’. The bourgeois integral state-societies are suffering collateral damages. In theory, once the integral state-society begins to degenerate, it will become a totalitarian state. We have not witnessed a totalitarian state emerging. Despite this, the crisis of authority and growing distrust are visible in advanced capitalist states such as the UK, USA, Germany, France, and Italy (Schomberg and Addison, 2020). For the proletariat, capitalism is shaking but there is no proletarian integral state-society. The interregnum demonstrates that a crisis is not static but rather dynamic and the opportunity for revolution. The Chinese word ‘crisis’ (weiji) also embodies two dialectical moments: ‘dangerous and critical’. When ji combines with another character for ‘meet’ (hui), we have ‘meeting at the critical point’ or ‘opportunity’ (jihui).

Gramsci distinguished between ‘conjunctural’ and ‘organic’ crises. Conjunctural crisis happens when political-ideological forces fight the underlying conflicts within the relations of production, which ignites only minor political criticism; the latter occurs when the economic base is subject to reorganization when classes (wider social groups) acquire their essential identity and interests (Callinicos, 1985), which triggers socio-historical criticism (Gramsci, 1971: 177–178). The latter is the crisis of authority (Gramsci, 1996: 32). At the organic moment, masses have nothing to lose or everything to gain (Callinicos, 2006: 74–75), so their revolutionary politics grows without further ado (Adamson, 1980: 627–628). On this basis, Gramsci countered both ‘economism’ (overestimation of mechanical causes that produce revolutionary outcomes) and ‘ideologism’ (exaggeration of voluntarist political intervention), calling for the analysis of every situation (regression or progression) dialectically (Gramsci, 1971: 178).

Murji and Picker (2021: S312) argued that while COVID-19 has brought public attention to institutional racism towards Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME) healthcare workers, that is prone to political circularity and obfuscation. Murji and Picker’s concept of ‘political morbidities’ encapsulates a simultaneous process of racialization and post-racialization. In short, at one level, there is widespread discussion and number of inquiries into COVID-19 related morbidities and race/ethnicity, but at another level, the UK government’s commitment
to a Race Equality Audit in 2017 has led to little discernible progress, because staff members responsible for collating and acting on the data are unclear about its purpose and how to effect change (Afridi and Murji, 2019). So, what remains is an uneasy balance between ‘old’, ‘new’, and still ‘evolving’ or emerging forms of racial orders (Murji and Picker, 2021: S315).

That uneasy balance is the hotbed for the totalitarian tendency and the integral momentum to emerge concurrently. Moreover, the two moments are engaging in an increasingly ferocious tug of war. But how are these phenomena manifested?

In the UK, for example, although *laissez-faire* regarding herd immunity, which is founded upon complacency lasted way beyond the golden hours for preventing COVID-19 from spreading, the state ruled by the Tories has intervened instantly and applied draconian measures incompatible with their ideological principles of fiscal austerity and limited public spending and policy. This turnaround also happened at a global level. Whether capitalist states are neoliberal or not, they tend to retreat to a ‘half-baked Keynesianism’ when their economies tank (Saad-Filho, 2020: 487). From a political angle, these states have chosen ‘totalitarian surveillance’ over ‘citizen empowerment’, and ‘national isolation’ over ‘global solidarity’ (Harari, 2020). The push for vaccination can arguably be totalitarian; the distribution and hoarding of vaccines demonstrate national-capitalist thinking, while big pharmaceutical corporations continue to reap ludicrous profits. In general, ‘adaptive management’ approaches are replaced with ‘command-and-control’ tactics (Cawthorn et al, 2021: 812–813). Totalitarian responses also include widespread closures of ‘wet markets’ and blanket prohibitions on wildlife use (hunting, trading, consumption) in China as well as Malawi and Gabon (Pinnock, 2020).

However, adaptive management frameworks best address the root causes of complex problems (Gunderson et al., 2008). Cawthorn et al (2021: 812) argued that heavy-handed bans risk unintended consequences, and clash with people’s value of freedom, so they fail when they are illegitimate. Moreover, reactive and myopic strategies view the pandemic as a stand-alone crisis and overlook the complex interplay of nature and society through which zoonotic diseases originate. As Cawthorn et al (2021: 817-818) argued, ‘it will not be sensible to go back to “business as usual” with just a few minimal changes.’

But can the worldwide practice of command-and-control be the totalitarian tendency? Not necessarily. Orenstein (2021: 1761) argued that the closure of wildlife markets actually reflected citizen empowerment. Many respondents from Wuhan and Shanghai supported the permanent closure of wildlife markets. Such measures are not just ad hoc remedies as they reduce the likelihood of a similar outbreak in the future (Orenstein, 2021: 1760). What about lockdown measures and harsh facemask penalties? Donald Trump and Boris Johnson have always placed businesses and profit above civilians and essential workers. They were not keen to impose lockdowns in the beginning. Boris Johnson and Rishi Sunak’s ‘eat out to help out’ policy and incremental (tier-based) lockdown arrangements demonstrate their indecisiveness but also the dilemma that the Tory government encounters. Johnson does not want to appear ‘totalitarian’, so he stresses that the lockdown is a ‘last resort’ measure, while blaming anti-lockdown protestors and disobedient citizens for prolonging the lockdown. Ironically, when the COVID-19 virus broke out in China, mainstream media in Europe (including the UK) were quick to criticize the lockdown measures imposed by the Communist Party of China (CPC) for being an ‘exclusively authoritarian’ measure. However, once COVID-19 spread to Europe, the narrative began to change. Facemasks were also culturally unpopular in the west. Bear in mind that, since the rise of Trump, the west has been engaged in a propaganda war with China.

Nonetheless, if we consider lockdowns or/and severe facemask penalties the totalitarian tendency, then we risk accepting those anti-lockdown / anti-face mask protestors, COVID-19 deniers, and anti-vaxxers as representatives of the integral momentum. Clearly, this is a vain attempt to apply Gramsci’s thought. On the face of it, anti-lockdown, anti-vaxxers, and covid-
deniers of the Far Right are confronting the establishment, but in essence, they join in order to coerce and oppress the poor and vulnerable as well as the working class. In this sense, the totalitarian tendency does not come solely from Johnson’s cabinet nor does the integral momentum come from the Far Right. In fact, the former gives birth to the latter, so it is their very clash that is the ‘genuine’ totalitarian tendency.

Despite various manifestations, bourgeois integral state-societies share common traits. First, they have dis-embedded the market from society but also created a market-society in which bourgeois themselves are also victims of rationalization and commodification. These processes have brought increasing alienation, making ways of life, social norms and conduct, and behaviours egoistic and inhumane.

Second, they are forged through consensus building that not only legitimizes but also ‘structuralizes’ violence (Walby, 2013). Propagandists ‘celebrate a narcissistic hyper-individualism that borders on the pathological, destroy social protections, and promote a massive shift towards a punitive state that criminalises’ any person who thinks critically and resists systemic exploitation (Giroux, 2013: 258). Over time, this eradicates compassion and blames victims for their social problem and position.

In a global crisis, such as COVID-19, part of crisis management is to cement the integral state-society. The general narrative is created by these rhetorical strategies.

First, preaching an ethos of hyper-individualism, the bourgeois integral state-society gives no credit to the essential workers as a collective but rather celebrates them as individual heroes (Garcia, 2020). Frontline workers become ‘pandemic heroes’, capitalism’s ‘preferred selves’ (McGuigan, 2014: 224). Clapping for UK’s National Health Services (NHS) is a typical example. The hero rhetoric directs our attention to individual healthcare workers while deliberately undermining structural inequalities (Lohmeyer and Taylor, 2021: 635). It also disguises a barely surviving NHS system left behind after years of pre-COVID-19 austerities measures introduced by the Conservative Party-led coalition government in 2010 (Siddique, 2020).

Second, alongside the hero rhetoric is the glorification of individual sacrifice. The mainstream media repeatedly tell us that health workers are ‘putting their lives on the line’ for the ‘rest of us’. The divide and conquer game undermine any collective resistance to unnecessary sacrifice resulting from bad governance and consequential structural problems. Any resistance will be seen as wasting health workers’ sacrifice, and as immoral, antisocial. Criticisms are thus reduced to arbitrary whining.

Third, although hyper-individualism, unlike statism, cannot be the totalitarian tendency, there is more here than meets the eye. If health workers are sacrificing for us, for whom do we sacrifice? As Berdayes and Murphy (2016: 4) noted, once ‘personal sacrifice to the economy…comes to be expected as the only rational option, the care of persons accordingly takes a backseat…’. But the individualist ideology is a fraud because no personal solutions to a global crisis are available (Saad-Filho, 2020: 481). The bourgeois integral state-society intervenes in society by manufacturing consent while portraying the media as a free, impartial, and anti-government entity. In the UK, the initial ‘herd immunity’ policy is paradigmatic of this intervention because it lays bare the inhumanity of capitalism. But in order to gather public support, without mentioning the word ‘collective’, the integral state-society uses war metaphors to legitimize violence and sacrifice. In the US, Trump egregiously considered himself a ‘war-time president’ (Barron, 2020). In the UK, Johnson launched a ‘war plan’ to beat COVID-19 (Wright, 2020). War metaphors invoke a comparison between frontline workers’ sacrifice and the standing afforded to military service while trivializing frontline workers’ actual professions and ignoring the callous abandonment of the vulnerable (Lohmeyer and Taylor, 2021: 634). Putting profits before lives can be seen in the remarks of Dan Patrick13 – ‘Don’t sacrifice the country’ (Beckett, 2020: np) by staying home and letting the economy
fail. This normalizes the idea that sacrifice to keep a healthy economy is laudable (Lohmeyer and Taylor, 2021: 631). The totalitarian tendency comes from the war and sacrifices rhetoric used to place a constraint on civil society and social forces. The collective social forces have disappeared but so has the genuine individual too.

All these rhetorical strategies have ironically co-opted the public into thinking that sacrifice is mandatory. If citizens object to the lockdown, they may be judged as trying to abuse healthcare workers’ sacrifice. If citizens support the lockdown, they may be condemned for not sacrificing to maintain the country’s economy. But there are no criticisms of the structural issues of the bourgeois integral state-society. The prospect of fostering proletarian integral momentum to resist the totalitarian tendency lies with identifying the root causes of COVID-19 (which has nothing to do with any laboratory or bat), and then with identifying poor governance with structural inequalities and injustice in capitalism. Good sense, using Gramsci’s terminology, comes from the dynamic interaction of forces in the integral state-society.

Of course, agents have played an important role in dynamic interaction. For Gramsci, the intellectuals’ identities are crucial. The inherited myth is that intellectuals are rational *homo sapiens* who have studied aspects of the social universe (Ransome, 1992: 186) whereas the masses are instinctual *homo faber* who merely perform mechanical work. The demarcation between the two, or between knowledge and feeling, creates blind passion (Gramsci, 1971: 418) and exacerbates class division. Even Marxist intellectuals do not necessarily feel ‘the same flesh and blood’ as the proletariat does (Karabel, 1976: 123). Thus, at any moment the proletariat (including revolutionaries) must stay vigilant for the totalitarian tendency growing within their own associations alongside counterrevolutionaries and reactionaries, but also seize every opportunity to produce the integral momentum.

Gramsci made two propositions on intellectuals’ identities.

First, he took Croce’s proposition that ‘all men are philosophers’ (Gramsci, 1971: 422). He saw that all people are intellectuals ‘in the sense of having an intellect and using it’ (Gramsci, 1971: 3). Even in mundane work, cognitive and mental activities exist. Gramsci refuted any criteria that distinguish intellectuals by ‘the intrinsic nature of intellectual activities’ (Gramsci, 1971: 8). But he did not say that ‘all are intellectuals in the same way’ because there are those who ‘have had the privilege of being able to develop their personal intellectual capacities’ (Liguori, 2015: 87). Therefore, though one can speak of intellectuals, non-intellectuals do not exist (Gramsci, 1971: 9).

Second, he held that intellectuals are not an autonomous social group, but ‘every social group...creates...one or more strata of intellectuals...’ (Gramsci, 1971: 5; see also Simon, 1991: 92). Gramsci introduced the traditional-organic dialectic (Jones, 2006: 84). The traditional intellectuals are the ‘men of letters’ (philosophers, artists, teachers etc.) or ‘sediments’ of the previous (feudal) system (Gramsci, 1971: 14, 87), who though pretend to be neutral, safeguard bourgeois institutions through schools, churches, etc. The organic intellectuals develop a ‘homogeneity and an awareness of [their] function...in the economic...social and political fields’ (Gramsci, 1971: 5). They are ‘deputies’ of their class, assimilating ‘ideologically’ traditional intellectuals when directing, organising, and educating in all spheres of society.

The proletariat must create a group of ‘independent intellectuals’ from ‘within’ (Gramsci, 1977: 1860–1861). Intellectuals’ social position is a dynamic combination between traditional and organic elements (Olsaretti, 2014: 3–4, 6–9). A class’s ‘own group of independent intellectuals’ cannot all be organic intellectuals. In reality, the proletariat must create a mechanism that allows intellectuals to acquire elements of ‘good sense’ from the masses (Olsaretti, 2016: 350). Class origin does not determine intellectuals’ organic character, because the class formation is fluid. Gramsci’s intellectuals-masses dialectic is another vital loop that
extends Marx’s third thesis – ‘...educate the educator himself’ (Marx and Engels 1969, 13). This long-term process is full of contradictions (Crehan, 2016: 26).

Gramsci focused on the ‘collective’, not on the ‘individual’ (Crehan, 2016: 35). The leap towards a new breadth and complexity of the intellectual stratum relies on the masses to raise themselves to higher culture levels and to extend their influence towards intellectuals (see Gramsci, 1971: 334–335). The word ‘group’ can only be a ‘stratum’, not a ‘class’. The proletariat builds their integral momentum by fostering ‘collective’ intellectuals. They together become the leading class; the bourgeoisie becomes the ‘new led’ and exists as traditional intellectuals. All this further suggests that the proletarian integral state-society will also be inherently fragile and relative. But the proletarian integral state-society always reinvents themselves and receives new blood, especially when it faces bottleneck/quagmire situations. A political revolution does not necessarily lead to a social revolution (Marfleet, 2016).18

The COVID-19 interregnum produces favourable conditions for a coherent integral momentum to emerge. One is racial violence. Trump’s racist label ‘Chinese/Wuhan virus’ (Murji and Picker, 2021: 311) has turned the US into the epicentre of Sinophobia (Cabral, 2021). Sinophobia has inflicted a sharp increase in anti-Asian hate crimes in North America and Europe and become the pretext for starting a new Cold War. The integral momentum is emerging from Asians’ resistance worldwide. Inspired by Black Lives Matter (BLM), Asians struggle under the new banner – #Stop Asian Hate (SAH). The SAH movement has the potential to carry the torch of solidarity from the movement ‘Yellow Peril supports Black Power’ which emerged more than five decades ago.

The SAH movement does not have their own proletarian organic intellectuals. But it is a vibrant movement in which participants come from all walks of life. There are three welcoming messages.

First, the SAH movement has made the organic connection between Sinophobia today and the history of the Chinese diaspora in American/western societies. This has revitalized critical discussion of Chinese and Asian identities and has unravelled long-forgotten entrenched racism that stems from notions that ‘coolies’ are replacing ‘black slaves’ and from the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act. The Asian American and Pacific Islander Community (AAPI) is at the forefront of the SAH movement.

Second, the SAH movement has gained traction from Chinatown workers across the world, so it has all the potential to build its own working-class base. The question is whether they will begin to problematize this as a class-based issue while considering intersectionality, rather than a singular ‘identity politics’. One challenge which is worth taking is to unite Chinatown workers (who are among the older generation) and their younger generation. The latter are progressive university students and workers in other sectors.

And third, the SAH is not simply a tit-for-tat that discourages integration. To exercise integration, the SAH movement can foster their organic intellectuals and assimilate traditional intellectuals through various forms of association and organization. All forms of association and other general intermediate bodies work together as collective organisms (Filippini, 2017: 43). There is no reason to reject the possibility of establishing a Party when the condition is ripe.19 Gramsci uses Machiavelli’s Prince to metaphorize the Party – ‘the new Prince could not in the modern epoch be an individual hero, but only the political party’ (Gramsci, 1971: 417).

But the SAH movement does not need to rely exclusively on the Party either. Although Gramsci argued that the Party must be superior to parliamentarianism, he shared with Lenin that it can become a ‘talking shop’ (e.g., Lenin, 1977: 48). In general, Gramsci (1971: 12) argued that the party structure must be constructed ‘from the bottom to the top (from the structural base upwards)’. Anyway, the article is not a mandate of the SAH movement.
Conclusion
The article has sought to identify the organic interconnection between an integral state and its antithesis, a totalitarian state. To achieve this, I have refigured the integral state as the integral state-society and introduced two crucial concepts: the integral momentum and the totalitarian tendency. The integral state-society in either capitalism or socialism has the following properties:

1. It is fragile but becomes hegemonic if it is sustained. And vice versa, any hegemony requires a sustainable integral state-society.
2. It only exists relatively, not absolutely, which depends on the action and will of the collective agency and the dynamic moments within relations of forces.
3. It also depends on the tug of war between the integral momentum and the totalitarian tendency. The former is the catalyst, and the latter is the obstacle. It can degenerate into a totalitarian state if the totalitarian tendency prevails.

All this facilitates us to trace the path to hegemony and its decline and places Gramsci’s rhythm of thought at the centre.

This article also paves the way for future research on ‘myriad and ever-changing forms of national and international relations of forces’ (Cospito, 2016: 34) in the transition to socialism. There are some general observations are as follows.

First, the bourgeoisie safeguards their fragile integral state-society through crisis management (without reconciling class division) at the national level and the division of labour (imperial expansion and colonial domination) at the global level. However, they as a class never embrace a ‘stateless’ internationalism. Instead, they cling to methodological individualism and methodological nationalism. Their integral state-society will decay or degenerate into a totalitarian state when the civil society faces the full force of the state apparatuses. Once nothing avails it, the proletariat will establish the military relations of forces, making a strategic shift from the war of position to the war of movement.

Despite no totalitarian state found in the COVID-19 interregnum, the integral state-societies in global capitalism are suffering collateral damages and showing their totalitarian tendencies. In domestic politics, they use hero rhetoric and war metaphors to legitimize sacrifice in society and restore authority. Globally, they resort to vaccine nationalism rather than dismiss global solidarity in the first instance. Advanced capitalist states crowd out poorer ones in vaccine access. Hoarding and the uneven distribution of vaccines is a manifestation of global capitalism in crisis.

Second, on the contrary, the proletariat establishes their integral state-society through ‘an accurate reconnaissance on a national scale’ (Gramsci, 1971: 169) in ‘accordance with the international perspective’ (Gramsci, 1971: 240). The proletariat understands that the ‘principal terrain for shifts in the relations of forces is...a national one’ (Vacca 1999a: 245–246) but the ‘consolidation of politics-hegemony’ is a ‘supranational and global horizon’ (Vacca, 1991: 36). Thus, the proletarian integral state-society has the ideological space (the international perspective) available to mitigate the risk of its decay and degeneration into a totalitarian state. Thus, any proletarian integral state-society must allow windows for foreign comrades lest we stifle society. Sadly, national/local proletarians tend to reject a universal reading from comrades elsewhere. Yet, national/local proletarians are still the leaders rather than the ‘foreign revolutionary experts’, though the latter tend to superimpose their will on the former. The balance is not easy to achieve, depending on the concrete situation. But the proletarian integral state-society is a transitional moment to communism, in which marginalized reactionaries will always attempt to obstruct the integral momentum within and across levels of relations of forces at a different pace. Global solidarity further strengthens the national-level integral momentum.
Moreover, the article lays the foundation for constructing a (Gramscian) theory of socialist society. The concept of the integral state-society reminds us that the vision of a socialist state is crucial but insufficient without envisaging a proletarian society. In socialism, various associations, including the Party, govern the proletarian integral state-society. A socialist Party is self-governed by the ‘associated producers’ to coerce and assimilate the bourgeois (traditional intellectuals) in socialism and prevent fragmentation. Nevertheless, it does not replace the class as the subject of hegemony (Liguori, 2015: 183). Otherwise, a proletarian integral state-society may become fixated in a path of passive revolution. The *Modus operandi* is establishing a class hegemony based on praxis. Praxis is the expression of subaltern classes who educate themselves in the art of government, seek ‘all truths, even the unpleasant ones’, and avoid ‘the (impossible) deceptions of the upper class and – even more – their own’ (Gramsci, 1995: 395–396).

The article’s exploratory analysis of the COVID-19 interregnum invites a more detailed empirical/retrospective study of COVID-19 in the future, focusing on class struggles and pluralistic identity politics and the functions of contemporary capitalist societies in the (post-) COVID-19 era. This is because the article offers a new class struggle perspective that transcends simplistic dichotomies and caricatures circulated by politicians and the media, whichever side they purport to be on. The integral state-society, the integral momentum, and the totalitarian tendency are vital concepts that can be used to analyze capitalist governance and processes in the COVID-19 interregnum. As identified, the totalitarian tendencies are the clash between the bourgeois’ fragile integral state-society and the Far Right as well as the rhetorical strategies (hyper-individualism, essential workers’ heroism, personal sacrifice, and war) that have co-opted the public. Indeed, the messy reality is that reactionaries tend to sequester their real intention by cosplaying revolutionaries. We find it easier through social media to call for international solidarity, but what impedes us from establishing a united front remains to be sectarian tendencies within any movement, propaganda by omission, and conspiracy theories. However, both the BLM and SAH are already global movements with grassroots characteristics. The latter has to some extent, often gathered marginalized and poor workers in Chinatown. They may collectively produce the integral momentum.

Finally, the article demonstrates that we shall allow space for keeping Gramsci’s theory ‘open-ended’. After all, Gramsci’s Notebooks are provisional in nature. The article hopes to reactivate Marxism as an unfinished ‘kaleidoscope’ involving a ‘long arch of democratic struggles’ (Thomas, 2015: 112) rather than a monolith of any orthodoxy. A ‘plausible political proposal’ for today rests upon the ‘double refusal of a speculative attitude and determinism...which reduces the world to one’ (Filippini, 2012: 647). Carrying Gramsci’s legacy and constructing a proletarian integral state-society requires the works of many, not the few.

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**Notes**

1. COVID-19 has triggered the deepest and sharpest economic contradiction in the history of global capitalism (see Roubini, 2020). Tens of millions of workers were almost immediately out of job and millions of businesses lost their employees, customers, suppliers, and credit lines. COVID-19 also tracked the global circuits of capital (Moody, 2020).
2. Neoliberalism is a controversial term that will not be used in this article. In fact, according to Slobodian, neoliberalism can be defined as (1) a period in world history following the Nixon Shock in 1971, (2) a policy package of liberalisation, privatisation, and deregulation, (3) the Mont Pèlerin Society since 1947, and (4) a worldview that directs us to perceive ourselves as accumulable and leverageable assets. The mix and collapse of these definitions cause more confusion than clarity. So Slobodian himself defines neoliberalism as a form of governmentality which preserves free markets through state legislations and institutions (see Slobodian, 2018).


5. The term does not imply the ‘withering’ of the (integral) state

6. It often lacks developed parliamentary institutions, an independent public sphere, and organized political parties.

7. A totalitarian regime ‘claims to transform the human species into an active unfailing carrier of a law to which human beings otherwise would only passively and reluctantly be subjected’ (Arendt, 1962: 462).

8. In notebook 7, Gramsci adopted the notion for the first time.


10. Indeed, senso commune (common sense) and buon senso (good sense) have different Italian and English connotations (see Crehan, 2016: 43). In this paper, I use the English terms but keep the Italian connotation.

11. Paxton identified fascism as a complex political phenomenon in five stages rather than a coherent ideology and doctrine like socialism or communism (see Paxton 1998, 2004).

12. Since the COVID-19 outbreak, there have been several crucial works on the relationship between capitalism and pandemic (e.g., Blakeley, 2020; Davis, 2020; Wallace, 2020).

13. Lieutenant Governor of Texas (2015 –)

14. Croce ranked the philosophers above the ‘simple’ people (political activists) as if the particular remains ‘immersed within its...objectivity’, and the universal remains an ‘abstract entity’ (Fontana, 1993: 8–9).

15. The intellectuals’ specificity is threefold: class, the conditions of life and work, and the politics of truth in societies (Foucault 1976: 12).

16. Likewise, Foucault distinguishes between ‘specific’ and ‘universal’ intellectuals. Specific ones are closer to the masses because they struggle with real material matters and confront the same adversaries such as multinationals and state apparatuses (Foucault 1976: 12).

17. Gramsci was the son of a petty bureaucrat (Crehan, 2016: 32).


19. On 1 April 1925, Gramsci wrote in L’Ordine Nuovo, ‘...without the Party, there is no possibility of victory’ (Gramsci, 1994: 267), which was reinforced in Gramsci and Togliatti’s ‘Lyons Theses’ in January 1926 (see also Gramsci, 1977: 333; Gramsci, 1978: 364–375).

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