

An inquiry of Gramsci's concept of passive revolution in South Africa: reclaiming its value for organisational perspectives

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ABSTRACT

South African scholarship has engaged with Antonio Gramsci's category of passive revolution as a historical analytical framework for analysing the transformation of post-apartheid society. Many of these interpretations characterise passive revolution as a top-down process of state formation, capital restructuring and governance mechanisms. This article engages with various interpretations of passive revolution by investigating this concept in Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* and exploring three key debates: the scope of passive revolution, its relation to hegemony, and its dialectic nature. The paper emphasises the concept's dialectic nature and reclaims its value for strategic debates for movements and organisations, utilising the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) and the FeesMustFall movement as vantage points from which to demonstrate its utility. It argues that passive revolution, framed within Gramsci's philosophy of praxis, offers a framework for reflecting on movements' tactics and strategies in specific conjunctures, placing the possibilities for transformations and alternative societies at the centre of analysis.

KEYWORDS

Antonio Gramsci; passive revolution; South Africa; social movements; hegemony; NUMSA; FeesMustFall

Introduction

'It is better to die moving forward than die standing still' (Q15, §12, 1769; author's translation)¹ is a principle that Antonio Gramsci attributes to 'Zulu wisdom', which he read in an English magazine and transcribed in his notebook while imprisoned in a fascist jail. Despite limited access to newspapers during his incarceration, Gramsci maintained a voracious interest in international experiences of resistance and progress, including the resistance against British colonialism in South Africa. This brief note appears in Notebook 15 immediately after a reflection on the dialectic nature of passive revolution, embedded into

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a critique of the inability of the most progressive organisation in the struggle for Italian unification to achieve a real breakthrough, to ‘throw into the struggle all its political and moral “resources”’ (Q15, §11, 1768; SPN, 109). Produced in the periphery of Europe in the early 1900s, Gramsci’s reflections have since been absorbed and developed across the world, bolstering and informing political struggles.

Across disciplines and continents there has been a recent revival of engagement with Gramsci’s writings. Several concepts from his theoretical legacy have gained prominence, including hegemony, modern prince, subaltern, organic crisis, organic intellectual and passive revolution. The latter, seldom at the centre of discussions before the 2000s, has flooded debates in the past two decades, acquiring a unique centrality in Gramsci’s prison writings for many scholars who have recognised the concept’s utility to analyse specific historical conjunctures, processes of state formations and transformation.

Since the early 2000s, South African scholars have deployed passive revolution to discuss the transition from apartheid to the new democratic South Africa and then to analyse the unfolding dynamics of governance. The peculiar characteristics of this historical process, where significant institutional changes and the establishment of a formal democracy have not been followed by wealth and land redistribution or significant material improvements for most of the population, have resonated with Gramsci’s use of this category. Passive revolution is used as an instrument of interpretation and analysis of how capital and ruling elites responded to the economic and social crises that emerged within the apartheid regime and effectively preserved their economic power in the post-apartheid era, in a context where the African National Congress (ANC) gained governmental control. This entailed the absorption and co-optation of key political actors, along with some of their progressive demands, into a dominant political project, while marginalising and repressing the most radical sections of the liberation movement. Scholars’ wide range of interpretations of this concept have nevertheless moved away – sometimes expanding, sometimes diverging – from Gramsci’s original formulation.

Gramsci uses the category of passive revolution several times in his *Prison Notebooks* between 1930 to 1935 to describe processes of transformation in which the elites derail and absorb some of the subalterns’ instances – thus undertaking forms of ‘progress’ for society – to retain power firmly in their hands and to maintain the oppressed in a position of subalternity. Recent philological studies offer essential insights for the interpretation of this concept, highlighting its diachronic and contextual development throughout the *Prison Notebooks*, its organic connection with other categories in Gramsci’s thought, and its contribution to the strategic debates of the Marxist tradition of his time (see, for instance, Thomas 2009; Frosini 2017; Modonesi 2020; Cospito, Francioni, and Frosini 2021).² Nonetheless, the nature of Gramsci’s carceral writings as an unfinished project and the extensive use of the concept of passive revolution have favoured the emergence of various interpretations and criticisms. Limited access to the original text in Italian has contributed to the emergence of a wide range of linguistic and conceptual interpretations of Gramsci’s thought. Scholars often neglected to apply the concept of passive revolution contextually and adapt it to each historical and spatial conjuncture characterised by distinct socio-political and economic contexts (Kipfer and Hart 2013). Philological analyses and a consideration of Gramsci’s political aims offer essential guidance for understanding its original formulation and for informing its uses.

This article reviews engagements with passive revolution in South African literature and offers an alternative interpretive perspective, reclaiming its value for organisational and

political action in specific conjunctures.³ The article first traces the concept's emergence in the *Prison Notebooks*, placing it within the fundamental logic and drive of Gramsci's thought. It then explores how the concept has been engaged with in the South African context, and outlines three key debates that highlight the diverse interpretations and uses of the concept across disciplines. Finally, the article offers an alternative perspective on the concept of passive revolution, showing how it can contribute and advance the analysis of two movements in a specific conjuncture: the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) and the FeesMustFall movement. The article argues that rigorous engagement with Gramsci's work can offer valuable insights for social movements and political theory, informing the practices and theories of movements that share Gramsci's urgency to organise, educate and agitate for a better society.

A brief overview of passive revolution in the *Prison Notebooks*

Scholars and activists have engaged with passive revolution as a criterion of historical analysis for crucial shifts in several societies across the world.⁴ The diverse uses of passive revolution internationally reflect the appeal, vitality and – to a certain extent – the pliability of Gramscian thought. The lack of a unified interpretation originates from at least two key factors: the unfinished nature of the *Prison Notebooks*, and Gramsci's own extensive use of the term.

It is often overlooked that the *Notebooks* constitute 'a collection of preparatory materials' (Gramsci 1975, XXVI, see also Q4, §16, 438; Q8, §1, 935), a set of notes which were not designed to be published in the raw form that we received. In a reader-unfriendly way, they trace the studies, reflections and constant development of Gramsci's thought. Their incomplete nature, however, does not hinder the exploration of Gramsci's use of passive revolution and the logic in which his reflections operate. Often, interpretations of *Prison Notebooks* are employed to strengthen specific arguments or political agendas without subjecting Gramsci's concepts to rigorous contextualisation and analysis.⁵ As Gramsci himself warns, rigorous analysis must consider the leitmotiv of a particular author's work, their 'rhythm of the thought [being] more important than single, isolated quotations' (Q4, §1, 419; B., 137).

The first step in an analysis of passive revolution in the *Prison Notebooks* is to consider the primary objectives of Gramsci's reflections. As an international communist and leader of the Italian Communist Party (PCd'I, *Partito Comunista d'Italia*), Gramsci analyses social phenomena characterising the specific historical conjuncture in which he and his organisation were operating politically (Capuzzo and Pons 2019). It is possible to argue that his analysis engages with a particular line of inquiry: 'how does historical movement arise on the structural base?' (Q11, §22, 1422; SPN, 431). Gramsci was investigating the reasons why, despite the revolutionary wave culminating with and propagated by the 1917 Russian revolution, similar revolutions in Italy and Europe had not occurred, and how existing revolutionary forces could organise themselves to overcome defeat. Gramsci formulates the concept of passive revolution within his broader engagements with debates about the revolutionary process in his contemporary historical conditions, with the explicit objective of individuating the most effective political praxis, seeking efficient ways to

foster a revolution. I argue that it is necessary to share Gramsci's starting point to understand how the concept of passive revolution has an intrinsic political organisational value that stems from its inherent dialectical nature. Passive revolution is not merely a process directed by the ruling classes to reform the status quo under their leadership, but when the organic intellectual identifies it as such, it becomes a political and analytical tool to analyse the balance of power in a particular conjuncture, to understand the effectiveness or otherwise of subaltern activities and theories promoting alternative projects, and to propose more effective political strategies.

In Gramsci's conceptualisation of passive revolution, 'revolution' describes a transformative and progressive process – led by the ruling classes – that provides real historical transformations within a society, while 'passive' indicates that the ruling class pursues such transformations without the participation of the popular masses, whose actual interests are not at the centre of the process. Passive revolution occurs in the context of a crisis, by assimilating some of the subalterns' demands into the ruling classes' political project, while repressing those who are not assimilable. Gramsci considers the outcome of passive revolution to be a progressive transformative process, where progress refers to the societal capacity for making advancements for a whole society in terms of the satisfaction of fundamental needs. A crucial aspect of this process is its connection with the international environment: when the 'push for progress' does not come from an immediate necessity for local economic development, it is a reflection of international changes (Q1, §150, 132; B., 229).

Passive revolution in Gramsci's reflections presents local specificities and is considered a process – moving beyond idealism and economicism – unfolding in a rearticulation of hegemonic relations based on the ruling classes' capacity to direct through complex superstructures 'and sturdy fortresses and emplacements' (Q7, §16, 866; B., 169) and to unfold mechanisms through which the popular masses can be tamed, co-opted or repressed.

While many studies engaging with passive revolution have focused on the ways in which the ruling class have been able to 'produce socio-political transformations of significance, conserving power, initiative and hegemony securely in its own hands' (Losurdo 1997, 155), very rarely has scholarship highlighted the relevance and influence of the practices and theories of the subaltern classes in the dialectical relation of class struggle. To harness the full analytical power of this concept, the initiative of the bourgeoisie must be framed in constant relation to the actions of subaltern groups, where each is urged on by the other's activities and potentialities. The dialectic relation between the needs of capital and ruling classes, and the threats produced by the mobilisation of the oppressed, is central to the concept. Gramsci's passive revolution is not only an analytical tool to interpret historical processes but also a perspective to envisage the room for manoeuvre of the political action of the subalterns.

Gramsci's reflections were directed by his aspiration to intervene politically. His attention to passive revolution was focused on the exploration of 'an active revolution' (Francioni 1984, 215) and its possible antidote (Thomas 2013) – a political subject able to disrupt it. In other words, his focus was on elaborating a theory of political subjectivity and on how a 'collective will' of the organised subalterns (a modern prince) could find expression and negate the dynamics of passive revolution, developing into a 'vigorous' and unstoppable *progressive* antithesis (Q15, §62, 1827; SPN, 114). From this

outline, as we will elaborate in the paper, passive revolution shows clear interconnections with concepts such as hegemony and the modern prince, assuming a central place within Gramsci's thought.

Defeated hope and the flourishing of passive revolution in South African scholarship

The use of Gramsci's work as living thought, capable of addressing contemporary political and social challenges, emerges in the engagement with different categories and concepts at different times in South Africa's history (Ortu and Pontarelli 2022). The first democratic elections in 1994 and the victory of the anti-apartheid movement marked a crucial historical turning point which heralded significant consequences in the use of Gramsci's work. The establishment of the ANC government with the election of Nelson Mandela as the nation's first black president triggered a remarkable level of euphoria among the masses. Nonetheless, this excitement – over the formal end of the apartheid regime, a ruling party with moral authority acquired by its role in the liberation struggle, and the trust invested in the new democratic state – resulted in a process of deep political and social demobilisation. The formation of South Africa's democratic institutions required broad-based support and a 'democratic' shift from the main anti-apartheid organisations who had advocated a socialist approach. Key leaders' endorsement of the democratic project and the production of narratives of a better and democratic future gathered the hopes of most South Africans, with these narratives becoming hegemonic in the first phase of the post-apartheid state.

Despite these narratives and the important – but limited – achievements for the black working class in terms of material redistribution and civil and political rights, the political project behind the new South Africa unveiled its nature by adopting a series of economic policies that maintained and then deepened the existing levels of high inequality and structural marginalisation (Bond 2000). The government's embrace of neoliberalism and its consequences – increased inequality – resulted in widespread contestations and in a new wave of social movements in the late 1990s to early 2000s (Seddon and Zeilig 2005).

The high levels of unrest which continue to characterise South Africa today are connected to the ongoing dispossession and marginalisation, with increasingly high unemployment rates and uneven wealth distribution. South Africa holds the record for world inequality as well as the label of the world's protest capital (Alexander 2012; Sulla and Zikhali 2018). In the first two decades of its democracy, the major ideological narratives used by the ruling alliance, the 'rainbow nation' and the 'national democratic revolution', have increasingly lost their capacity to lead, becoming progressively less credible in relation to the daily experiences of the population.

Despite the weakening of the ideological underpinning of democratic South Africa, no political alternative has managed to reach a level of organisation and capacity able to threaten the ruling government. It is in this context that scholars have analysed the transition phase and the unfolding dynamics of governance in post-apartheid South Africa as a passive revolution. South African academic and activist debates around forms of government, processes of transformation, and the role of political actors have seen the concept of passive revolution gaining significant traction to explain the 'art of neoliberalism' and

the ‘development impasse’ of South African democracy (Pons-Vignon and Segatti 2013), highlighting the role of neoliberalism in sustained high levels of inequality and wealth concentration, offering new angles on the role of the state, the relation between structure and superstructure and the political projects of working-class organisations.

South African scholarship engaged with the concept of passive revolution more substantially in the second half of the 2000s, with the increasing criticisms about the transition period and attempts to describe its complex dynamics.⁶ The application of the concept to South Africa primarily focuses on the projects and initiatives of capital and ruling elites. Passive revolution is used in the context of the transition period to describe the ‘formative action’ of capital that permitted the restructuring of capitalism under the political leadership of the ANC (Bassett 2008), and to interpret the neoliberal shift and the process of transnationalisation of domestic capital (Satgar 2008). Since the early 2010s, there has been broader use of the concept, including investigation of state–civil society relations and participatory processes, considered as mechanisms to incorporate civil society demands (Nash 2013). Scholarship on passive revolution arguably experienced a turning point when the concept became more grounded in Gramsci’s thought, connected to dialectics and expanded with Fanon’s warning about anti- and post-colonial nationalisms and their entanglements with racial oppression and racialised dispossession (Hart 2014).

Since the more extensive use of the concept, there have been several new interpretations and uses of passive revolution. Some build upon the work done by Hart and important advancements in debates and philological studies reaching anglophone academia (Thomas 2009), while others maintain a limited use. Passive revolution is employed to describe the negotiation dynamics between major firms, state actors and established agricultural trade unions within global value chains (GVCs) and global production networks (GPNs) (Alford 2020) as well as delimited political process of statecraft, for instance what is defined as Jacob Zuma’s ‘developmental state’ approach and its effects on the state apparatus (Reboredo 2021). Only recently has a different approach emerged, where the concept is used to investigate the activities of popular struggles (Paret 2021, 2022), presenting a clear argument about its utility for analysing the limits and potential of movements and working-class organisations, as in the example of NUMSA and the FeesMustFall movement (Pontarelli 2019).

Diverse interpretations in South African academia reflect passive revolution’s extensive international deployment and inherit some of their associated limitations. The following section engages with three key debates that serve as the foundation for the argument regarding the organisational perspective of passive revolution. This perspective addresses a significant oversight in previous interpretations, envisioning its relevance in relation to subaltern organisations and movements.

Three debates on passive revolution: scope, hegemony and dialectics

This section outlines three debates that represent the main dividing lines among different interpretations of the concept of passive revolution: its scope, its relation to hegemony, and its dialectical nature. First, what is the scope – in space and time – of a passive revolution? The concept has been used to analyse both macro processes that define a general

historical period and micro processes of specific, shorter-term cases. Second, what is the role and nature of the ruling classes' hegemony during passive revolution? Third, it stresses the fundamental dialectical nature of passive revolution. The analysis of these debates offers an important compass for understanding the diverse interpretations of the concept and for highlighting how they diverge – to different degrees – from Gramsci's own work. This review contributes to considering the extent to which those interpretations advance or curtail the political and critical utility of passive revolution as an analytical and organisational category.

The scale and scope of passive revolution

The first debate regards the utility of the concept to investigate both macro and micro processes and different historical times and geographical spaces. At the micro level, scholars have used the concept to analyse delimited events, specific social phenomena and struggles, and at the macro level, entire historical phases. Examples of macro-level analysis using passive revolution include the building of the welfare state in European social democracies (Buci-Glucksmann and Therborn 1981), the cycle of progressive Latin American governments in the twenty-first century (Modonesi 2017) and even the whole of capitalist modernity (Morton 2010). Passive revolution at a micro level has been used to analyse specific case studies, like the form of governmentality in the Cambodian garment production network and how the International Labour Organization Better Factories programme reinforces the neoliberal project by adopting a technicist conceptualisation of labour rights, thereby moving away from labour politics and class relations (Arnold and Hess 2017); or analysis of the EU Recovery Plan and Green Deal as part of a process of passive revolution in the EU responding to geopolitical pressure and issues around the legitimation of Germany's dominant power bloc (Ryner 2023).

Many South African scholars have used the concept of passive revolution to argue that the macro phase of the transition period (Bassett 2008; Gibson 2008, 2011; Satgar 2008) with the establishment of the democratic South Africa can be characterised as a 'revolution without a revolution' – a process that modernised institutional settings while leaving the uneven distribution of wealth and the operating principles of the economic system largely intact. More recently, the ongoing unfolding of democratic South Africa beyond the transition has been analysed as a passive revolution (Hart 2014; Paret 2022), seen as a particular form of governance useful for maintaining power in the hands of the ruling elite, while entrenching historical racial oppression and dispossession, contested by widespread protests from subaltern groups. This interpretation highlights how new forms of governance can advance through the constant restructuring of dynamics of incorporation, marginalisation and/or repression of alternative voices. The concept has also been used on a national level within a specific time frame to analyse the Zuma government's implementation of a 'developmental state' and its effects (Reboredo 2021). Scholars have used it to analyse narrower spatio-temporal and political scopes, such as the dynamics of governance in capital–labour relations (Alford 2020) and in participatory strategies in the relationship between eThekweni communities and the municipality (Nash 2013).

Since passive revolution has been applied to interpret such a wide range of situations and processes, it is worth considering the consequences of this pliability on its analytical value. If the intention is to uphold Gramsci's conceptualisation, then scale is not the primary concern, since Gramsci uses the category for national, international and transnational

environments. In moving between scales, he maintains a focus on the specific dominant processes and failures of the progressive forces struggling for deeper changes. The interpretation promoted in this article disagrees with scholarship that criticises Gramsci's own work as 'stretching' the concept and which similarly critiques scholars using the concept for contemporary processes (Callinicos 2010). This argument neglects the main tension of Gramsci's work and the internationalist scope he applied since his first engagement with the concept (Thomas 2009).

This debate on the scale of the concept's application questions the translatability of Gramsci's reflections. Nevertheless, its scope hardly changes the concept's utility as long as it is conceived as a lens not only to expose the dynamism and flexibility of organisational forms that promote and are directed by capitalist values, but also to understand the status, failures and advances made by organisations that position themselves as an antithesis to the status quo. In this view, there is an organic, not exclusionary, relationship between the macro and micro perspectives; in this organic relationship lies the capacity of passive revolution to inform and provide effective tools for understanding and action in the framework of dynamic class struggles.

The role of hegemony in passive revolution

The second debate emerges around the relationship of hegemony to passive revolution. There are two distinct interpretations: the first emphasises the ruling classes' lack of hegemony, focusing on their dominance and use of coercion over the subalterns. The second considers passive revolution as a process enabled by the presence of the ongoing hegemonic capacity of the ruling classes to absorb parts of the dissenting subalterns, displacing their demands to retain the dominant hegemony amid its contestation.

This major divergence may stem from the English-speaking world's reception of note §59 in Notebook 15. This is the only time within the *Prison Notebooks*, in a note titled 'the function of Piedmont', that there is a reference to passive revolution as a 'dictatorship without hegemony' (Q15, §59, 1823; SPN, 106).⁷ Here, Gramsci refers to the process of renovation that led to the unification of Italy, and specifically to the capacity of Piedmont – as a state – to lead this unification by becoming hegemonic over a wider social group outside its territory, accomplishing this by providing 'an army and a politico-diplomatic strength' at the disposal of the elite (SPN, 105). This reference can easily be misleading because Gramsci refers to the domination of Piedmont not in relation to 'Italian' society as a whole, but rather in relation to the other elite classes in the rest of Italy.

The absence of hegemony thus refers to the balance of forces within different sections of the elite classes that led the process of unification. The inclusion of this note in *Selection of Prison Notebooks*, the most widespread English-language publication of Gramsci's *Notebooks*, might have facilitated the spread of this interpretation. The conceptualisation of passive revolution as dictatorship without hegemony took hold especially in contexts where the ruling classes have resorted much more to coercion and where large sections of the population have little access to political and social power; most scholars who have used this interpretation are based in post-colonial societies (Chatterjee 1993b; Guha 1997). Such perspectives conceptualise passive revolution as a top-down process, in which the political project of the ruling classes is considered in isolation from, not as a response or reaction to, the activity of the subalterns. Here passive revolution is understood as a ruling strategy relying primarily on coercion rather than consent, to ensure the

complete exclusion of any opposition. This approach thus assumes an interpretation of hegemony that emphasises consent but does not take into account the constantly contested nature of hegemony – one of its key characteristics in Gramsci’s conceptualisation. For Gramsci, the capacity of an historic bloc to lead the masses never unfolds in the absence of contradictions and the constant threat of – and when necessary, the use of – violence and repression. These ‘non-hegemonic’ approaches to passive revolution are thus often combined with a conceptualisation of state political apparatus as distinct and isolated from the activities of civil society. This departs from Gramsci’s concept of the integral state, in which the state and society cannot be considered as separate realms but where an organic relation exists between state apparatuses and civil society (Hart 2015). This has consequences when informing organisations’ political strategy.

The close connection between ruling class hegemony and passive revolution emerges in the *Prison Notebooks*. Their first interaction appears in note §44 of Notebook 1, where Gramsci analyses how the moderates in the Italian *Risorgimento* achieved Italian unification because they were able to both lead their allied classes and dominate their enemy classes politically and intellectually. Here passive revolution is a process that unfolds in the presence of a threat to the hegemony of the ruling classes; its aim is to restructure and provide the terrain for re-establishing this class hegemony. Authors who consider Gramsci’s thought as a holistic system have considered these two concepts as developing organically within Gramsci’s work, where passive revolution is a ‘historiographical complement’ to the concept of hegemony (Vacca 2017). Their intertwined and inseparable nature is crucial to his creation of a theory of and for revolutionary practice and initiative. Hegemony is arguably the form of governmentality explored by Gramsci in his research on power and society. Passive revolution is a particular dynamic in historically determinate contexts where the hegemonic power of the ruling classes is contested by a viable or potentially viable alternative.

Within South African scholarship, the use of passive revolution and its relation to hegemony can be divided into two major approaches: the first associates passive revolution with the logic of domination and coercion, while the second emphasises consent as a crucial feature of the hegemonic power of the ruling classes, essential for the functioning of passive revolution dynamics. In the first approach, a clear contraposition emerges between hegemony and passive revolution. Satgar (2008) defines passive revolution as ‘a non-hegemonic form of class rule’ through which an Afro-neoliberal class has effectively restructured the South African economy according to their interests, and Bassett argues that ‘the ANC has been forced to rely upon “domination”, more than “hegemony”, to consolidate the new economic order’ (2008, 185).

The second approach engages with the ruling classes’ hegemonic power, focusing on the persistence and restructuring of this hegemony during passive revolution processes. Gibson, for instance, argues that the post-apartheid development of a black middle class has strengthened the socio-political and institutional framework of the class structure, maintaining the condition of subalternity for the wide majority of the black population – the marginalised ‘damned of the earth’ (Gibson 2011, 110). Hart (2014) offers an articulated analysis of South African society, arguing that processes of denationalisation and renationalisation throughout the post-apartheid period allowed the creation of mass support for hegemonic narratives. The work of Alford and Reboredo, focusing on specific timeframes, considers the governance of GVCs/GPNs during Zuma’s government,

where passive revolution is sustained and carried out by the hegemonic power of ruling classes.

There are also scholars, such as Nash (2013) and Paret (2022), who do not neatly fit into either approach and rather navigate across the two. Nash describes the presence in South Africa of two forms of passive revolution, one defined as a ‘revolution from above’ where state-led initiatives ensure the dominance of capital that is otherwise too weak to lead; and the other where processes of passive revolution unfold to reinforce consent in the hegemonic system during periods of weakness, partly by incorporating subaltern demands. Paret’s position remains unclear. His recent work explores how passive revolution has shaped popular struggles since the end of apartheid, using Gramsci’s definition of passive revolution as ‘dictatorship without hegemony’ to index ‘ineffective political leadership’ (Paret 2022, 9). Paret considers passive revolution as a method of governance in peripheral – and post-colonial – zones of the global economy, but whether this governance relies on dominance rather than consent is unclear. In the same work, he refers to the relevance of ‘the ANC [as] armed with the ideology of national democratic revolution to facilitate a passive revolution that undermined the radical potential of popular resistance’ (*ibid.*, 22), and analyses the widespread local protests with the suggestion that ‘at least in the short term, local protests reinforced capitalist hegemony’ (*ibid.*, 139). This suggests the dominance of hegemonic narrative and structure which manages to lead not only the classes benefiting from the new socio-political post-apartheid settings, but also those who challenge this dominance. However, in the article’s conclusion, Paret states that racial inclusion – defined by Winant’s concept of ‘racial hegemony’ – ‘represents one form of passive revolution, or the absence of hegemony’ (*ibid.*, 142). This oscillation between interpretations of passive revolution is conceivable only with an understanding of hegemony that overlooks its constantly contested nature, wherein its capacity to lead is always accompanied by the threat and/or use of repressive force towards those who resist it.

This article argues for an interpretation that aligns closely with Gramsci’s conceptualisation of hegemony in processes of passive revolution. It posits that hegemonic rule maintains its power in ideological and material forms by combining the threat of repressive force with the partial inclusion of subaltern opposition, redistributive activities, and ‘modernising’ forms of institutional restructuring.

The dialectic nature of passive revolution

The third debate concerns the dialectical nature of passive revolution. In Gramsci’s system of thought, dialectics represents both a methodology and a conceptual keystone in his understanding of history. Prestipino (2004) argues that Gramsci offers new meanings for dialectics in his development of hegemony and passive revolution as analytical categories. In the note titled ‘Machiavelli’, Gramsci identifies dialectics – and its capacity to comprehend historical processes – as the arena for a definition of passive revolution (Q15, §11). For Gramsci, drawing from Hegel and Marxist traditions, history unfolds through the dialectic opposition of *thesis* (the ruling classes’ project and the logic of capital accumulation) and *antithesis* (the subaltern’s project and their alternative visions of the world). This results in a *synthesis* that can be either revolutionary (the overcoming of the thesis by the antithesis) or reformist (the incorporation of the antithesis by the thesis). In specific historical contexts and with the presence of a vigorous antithesis, the latter reformist process neutralises the possible revolutionary perspectives of the antithesis while nevertheless

incorporating some of its innovative and progressive urges into a conservative project; it is this process that Gramsci identifies as passive revolution.

A wide range of scholarship overlooks this dialectical nature of passive revolution by neglecting the presence and function of the opposition to the dominant ruling class projects or, in Gramsci's words, the 'sporadic and incoherent rebelliousness of the popular masses' (Q8, §25, 957; B., 252), or the organised 'vigorous antithesis' (Q15, §62, 1827; SPN, 114). When analyses do not account for the dialectical nature of passive revolution, their focus inevitably rests on the practices of the ruling classes, disregarding the role of the popular masses as powerful actors. This blind spot reduces the concept's analytical scope by obscuring the activities of subaltern organisations, theories and actions.

Gramsci insists on the importance of subaltern agency. While he writes that 'subaltern classes are subject to the initiatives of the dominant class, even when they rebel', he notes that 'they are in a state of alarmed defence' (Q3, §14, 300; B., 21).⁸ For him, subaltern rebelliousness is the principal engine of the ruling classes' reactions, and subaltern 'autonomous initiatives' (Q3, §14, 300; B., 21) are an essential threat to the dynamics of passive revolution.

These dialectical characteristics form the foundation of this article's later engagement with passive revolution in its organisational dimension. The article argues that passive revolution, unfolding in the absence of an *effective* vigorous antithesis, can be a theoretical lens to investigate the limits and potentialities of popular organisations as antitheses striving to overcome the thesis.

Adopting a dialectical interpretation of passive revolution to analyse South African transition and the post-apartheid period provides a more comprehensive perspective on political actors and institutions. It explains not only the capacity of capital and the ruling elite to advance their project, coopting and repressing when necessary, but also the political decisions made by subaltern organisations – whether to align with the elite project or to strive for the promotion of alternative social relations. The dialectical approach helps us understand the demobilisation of certain sections of the anti-apartheid movement, sheds light on the victories and partial achievements that improved the living conditions of the majority, and provides insight into the emergence and disappearance of new social movements and contestations.

South African literature contains two strands of interpretations on the dialectic nature of passive revolution. One group of authors focuses on the ruling classes, neglecting relational dynamics with other social groups. This interpretation presumes a rigid and abstract dichotomy – the isolation of the ruling classes from subaltern groups – reading passive revolution as a top-down process. Satgar (2008) and Bassett (2008) exemplify this perspective. Satgar argues that post-apartheid ruling classes have advanced an Afro-neoliberal project which has deepened South Africa's passive revolution 'through a technocratic, elitist and top-down approach to economic reform' (Satgar 2008, 42). If there is widespread agreement on the effects of the post-apartheid project – as disabling, curbing and co-opting the mass forces of the anti-apartheid struggle – describing this process as unilateral leaves scant space for the agency of working-class organisations and for an analysis of their mistakes or potentialities, losing an important part of the concept's analytical capacity. Similarly, Bassett's work views passive revolution as change from above (Bassett 2008, 186). While she recognises capital's need to acquire legitimacy from the majority towards neoliberal restructuring, she depicts this majority as largely passive to

capital's initiatives. Recent literature like Reboredo (2021) continues this approach, using passive revolution as a theoretical label for the ANC's technique of statecraft. Here as well, the concept loses its capacity to show and understand relational dynamics and the balance of power between oppositional forces in society.

A second group of authors, including Alford, Paret, Gibson and Hart, offer a different orientation towards passive revolution. While Alford and Paret do not mention dialectics, they nevertheless consider working-class organisations as a crucial element in their analyses. Alford deploys passive revolution to interpret a dialectical process of governance⁹ among various actors in the production and export of fruit. He considers governance in this context as a 'dynamic process of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic tensions in which ongoing conflict within and between private, public and civil society actors, which is neither static nor secure, [occurring] in the broader context of continually contested hegemonic order' (Alford 2020, 44). Alford identifies passive revolution as unfolding in the contested space of negotiation and struggle. For the little that the concept is investigated in his work, its dialectical nature and the benefits of this approach are clearly highlighted.

Paret (2021, 2022) is one of few who engage with passive revolution to investigate the political complexity and limitations of struggles of working-class organisations. He focuses on the 'dynamic interaction between class struggles from above and class struggles from below within the process of democratisation and racial inclusion' (Paret 2021, 3). Despite not being expressed within an explicitly dialectical framework, Paret's use of passive revolution emphasises the ruling classes' response to popular mobilisation. His work has a clear commitment to investigating the weaknesses and precariousness of working-class movements. However, the absence of an explicit conceptualisation of dialectics curtails the analytical potential of passive revolution, contributing to its uncertain definition. Furthermore, the rigid duality established between 'from the bottom' and 'from the top' that runs throughout Paret's work hinders a fuller conceptualisation of dialectical dynamics within class struggle.

Among the authors who have engaged with dialectics in South Africa, Gibson and Hart have done so most thoroughly. As a dialectical process, passive revolution fits well into Gibson's analysis of the transition period to discuss not only the capacity of the establishment to render the anti-apartheid revolutionary forces ineffective, but also to explore the problem of the 'absence of a liberation ideology' and the left's capitulation to neoliberal policies (Gibson 2011). In this way, passive revolution allows the problematisation of the so-called 'there is no alternative' paradigm. Gibson criticises the hegemonic discourse of the transition period because of its focus on the achievement of a bourgeois democracy, representing an 'end of the dialectic' dynamic. Indirectly, Gibson is suggesting that, during the transition, passive revolution was taken up as a programme¹⁰ by the dominant forces and by political organisations which capitulated to the hegemonic project. With this lens, the supposed top-down process is portrayed not as inescapable, but rather as the result of a struggle that was lost in part by the weakness of the progressive anti-apartheid movements.

With an explicit dialectical approach, Hart offers one of the most inspiring developments of the concept of passive revolution, and of Gramsci's thought more broadly, in her analyses of the South African context. At the core of Hart's method is a conceptualisation of passive revolution defined as the 'dialectical relations of' simultaneous processes

of ‘de-nationalisation and re-nationalisation’ (Hart 2014, 9). By drawing connections between the work of Gramsci, Fanon and Lefebvre, Hart sheds light on essential and interconnected spatial, economic, political and social dynamics, presenting new angles and a greater degree of complexity for understanding the making and remaking of the democratic ‘new South Africa’.

Hart highlights the value of a dialectical conceptualisation of passive revolution in line with Gramsci’s theoretical framework, in which the relation between structure and super-structure is freed from a rigidly deterministic unidirectionality, and where dialectics is conceived as a method of comprehending historical development. Dialectics and a dialectical interpretation of passive revolution provide a framework for understanding the complex and often contradictory power dynamics at play in the broader landscape of social change. A dialectical approach can highlight the nuances of resistance and struggle for hegemony in ways that traditional theories of power often overlook. It is also a critical tool for identifying and analysing the weaknesses and potentialities of organisations advancing alternative projects. When retaining Gramsci’s emphasis on the dialectical nature of passive revolution, the concept is a powerful lens for understanding the complex nature of power and resistance in South Africa and beyond.

The organisational perspective of passive revolution: FeesMustFall and NUMSA

The three key debates outlined above inform an alternative approach to passive revolution: for it to express its full analytical and political value, passive revolution needs to be grounded in a *translation* of Gramsci’s conceptualisation embedded in the historical context of the analysis, while remaining rooted in the dialectical method, the broader theoretical framework, and the leitmotiv of Gramsci’s revolutionary theory and practice.

The translation of Gramsci’s conceptualisation of passive revolution into a South African context is a strong element of Hart’s work, which frames passive revolution in the historical and geographical specificities of South African racial capitalism and their interactions with the international environment. Hart charges that:

any effort to translate passive revolution has to be situated within an understanding of the spatially uneven dynamics of global capitalism and must be attentive to specificities as well as to interconnections; to the ongoing reverberations of colonial histories and changing forms of imperialism; and to the constitutive articulations of race, ethnicity, gender and sexuality with class and nationalism. (Hart 2014, 224)

While Hart’s interpretation aligns with and expands key aspects of Gramsci’s work, passive revolution should be also brought back to his work’s fundamental ‘tension’: that is, it must be considered part and parcel of an analytical method that was tightly connected to Gramsci’s philosophy of praxis.

In Gramsci’s approach, passive revolution was not simply an analytical lens to investigate historical processes, but also an organisational perspective able to highlight the limits and potentialities of political subjects and provide elements for strategic political thinking and interventions. While the dialectical enquiry into processes of transformation brought about by passive revolution – in which ‘vigorous antitheses’ were tamed,

repressed and partially incorporated into dominant structures and narratives – is valuable for investigating the political projects of the ruling classes, the concept and enquiry were largely intended for understanding both the shortcomings and strategic opportunities of oppressed subaltern organisations in relation to projects of the ruling classes. This is ultimately at the centre of Gramsci's 'what is to be done'. In this light, passive revolution is presented both as a lens to perceive the balance of power among classes in specific conjunctures and as a pedagogical tool for the oppressed.

In Gramsci's holistic reflections on society in the *Prison Notebooks*, the conceptualisation of passive revolution is organically connected to the concepts of hegemony, and thus to the struggle for hegemony, but also to the concept of the modern prince, the myth-prince, and 'the becoming concrete [and operative] of a collective will' (Q8, §21, 951; B., 246–7). Gramsci's conceptualisation of passive revolution is also directly connected to his interest in political subjects, their organisations and their strategies to avoid the position of subalternity within the ruling elite's projects and to build the capacity to organise a historicised 'collective will' through alternative hegemonic projects.

This article has argued that the concept of passive revolution offers its greatest analytical and organisational potential when it is deployed into an organic relation with ongoing social movements, to address their requirements, to reflect on their activities and to support strategic intervention in specific conjunctures. While the primary objective is to provide a theoretical compass to explore the uses of the concept in South African scholarship, this section offers an insight in its utility, briefly engaging passive revolution in relation to two movements in a specific historical political opening which has elapsed: NUMSA, during its initiative to restructure the labour movement in the aftermath of the massacre of Marikana in 2012; and the unity between workers and students during FeesMustFall, which emerged in 2015 as the widest post-apartheid movement in South African higher education institutions (HEIs).

As an analytical framework, passive revolution offers at least three vantage points. First, within a holistic approach of Gramsci's thought and methods, it frames the movements in their political and social context and in the conjuncture in which they operate. Second, as a dialectical method, it provides a lens to observe the continuous interplay between the activities of elites and of movements from a relational perspective. Third, by framing movements' activities as the antithesis to hegemonic institutions, it allows for analysis of the connection between their potential alternative hegemonic *visions of the world* and their power to convert these into practice. This approach highlights both movements' limits and potential to drive processes of social change and disrupt the dynamics of passive revolution.

Both movements – each with its distinct nature – positioned themselves as a potential antithesis to the power structures that organise and regulate social relations in South African post-apartheid democracy. NUMSA, as a self-proclaimed independent, revolutionary, militant trade union (NUMSA 2014), with significant organisational and structural power in society, can be considered an organisation with the potential to foster alternative forms of working-class subjectivity and articulate a coherent and alternative revolutionary political project.

What was optimistically referred to as the 'NUMSA moment' (Ashman and Pons-Vignon 2014) conveyed hope for a renovation of the political landscape with the initiation of three major projects: a new trade union federation, launched in 2017 under the name

of South African Federation of Trade Unions (SAFTU); the United Front (UF), aimed at uniting the struggles of workers and communities; and an alternative workers' party, established in 2018 as the Socialist Revolutionary Workers Party (SRWP) (NUMSA 2013).

Around the same period significant unrest emerged in HEIs, initially with the RhodesMustFall movement which originated at the University of Cape Town, addressing the need for a deep ideological restructuring of the educational sector (Naidoo 2020). Subsequently, the FeesMustFall mass movement involved thousands of students, workers, academics, community members and political activists across the country. Its demands included free, quality, decolonised public education and an end of outsourcing labour relations for workers on campuses. These movements ignited vigorous debates about the state of South Africa's democracy and attracted widespread hope and interest from various sections of society.

In the context of the ANC's weakening hegemony, scholars have increasingly resorted to the concept of passive revolution. In a climate marked by high levels of inequality and sustained unrest, events such as the massacre of mineworkers in Marikana seemed to be able to spark a wider political mobilisation aimed at restructuring the social contract and catalysing broader political processes. It is not a coincidence that it was in this period that NUMSA decided to break away from the tripartite alliance and withdraw its support for the ANC, envisioning a process of political and social renewal. Similarly, mass students' movements gained momentum, criticising the colonial and classist ideological and material underpinnings of HEIs. This conjuncture represented an historical opening and those movements considered themselves, to some extent, as potential bearers of solutions to the economic and social crisis.

NUMSA as a contributor to a potential passive revolution antidote can be analysed in three key areas: reimagining the role of the union beyond the confines imposed by a corporatist national framework; the radical narrative constructed by its ideological references, including Marxism-Leninism and the concept of workers' control; and building political and organisational leverage in society through the development of organisations like SAFTU, UF and SRWP.

While a detailed breakdown of these areas is beyond the scope of this article, these dimensions reveal weaknesses in NUMSA's articulation of theoretical references into practical political and social projects. An analysis of the conceptualisation of workers' control, a crucial concept in the history of the organisation (Forrest 2011), shows how this has been notably reduced in scope, becoming a synonym for internal democracy rather than serving as a conduit to alternative social relations of production (Pontarelli 2019, 125–128). The difficulties in promoting an alternative politics are illustrated by the limited results of the UF, which failed to become a nationwide catalyst for working-class struggles; by the limited progress of SAFTU due to its inability to provide a unifying political agenda capable of leading all its constituencies; and by the electoral outcomes of the SRWP – in the 2019 elections it received only 24,439 votes. However, these failures need to be considered within the context of passive revolution dynamics, which fragment and weaken subaltern organisations. In the face of significant external and internal pressures from the state and capital, NUMSA demonstrated a strong organisational capacity in maintaining its structure. This indicates that, even though it has thus far been unable to lead various sections of society and to put alternative political projects into practice, this does not negate its potential to do so in the future.

A different analysis is required for the FeesMustFall movement and the unity of workers and students in South African universities like the University of Witwatersrand and University of Johannesburg. As a heterogeneous mass movement, it encompasses a wide spectrum of ideologies and narratives. An inquiry into the movement's limitations and potentialities within a system of governance based on dynamics of co-optation, repression and concessions must investigate the extent to which a fundamental critique of the status quo is present, the emergence of perspectives towards alternative futures and their potential to become hegemonic within the movement, and the movement's ability to align its practices with these perspectives.

One of the most interesting aspects of the movement was the unity in action between students and outsourced workers, built upon a connection between the resurgence of Black Consciousness and the students' and workers' shared experiences of marginalisation and oppression within HEIs. Through this unity, the movement exhibited the capacity to question the nature of post-apartheid society, reject its dominant ideological projects, and provide practical glimpses of alternative social relations (Pontarelli 2021). This was exemplified by the movement's rejection of institutional procedures and boundaries, including its refusal to delegate their struggles to the student representative structures and workers' unions, and by the wide range of disruptive protests such as tools-down and marches, which allowed the movement to amass significant political leverage and take the institutions off guard. The disruptive potential of the movement also stemmed from its capacity to move from dramatic demands that attracted the attention of the majority of South African population – such as access to tertiary education and dignified working conditions – to more radical perspectives reclaiming the creation of a free, quality, decolonised public education system for all and an end to outsourcing relations (Gillespie and Naidoo 2019).

Within the framework of passive revolution, the movement's unprecedented success in ending outsourcing in universities like those of Cape Town, Witwatersrand and Johannesburg can be considered a response to the potential threat posed by the movement and the necessity for the governance system to weaken and divide its components. However, despite significant victories, the movement struggled to withstand the dynamics of repression and co-optation unleashed by the state and universities. This was due in part to the absence of a wider political project capable of establishing organisational power, forging solid connections with other sections of society, and resisting compromises aimed at marginalising the more radical ideological elements and their transformative potential.

Compared to the analysis of NUMSA, the unity between students and workers was notably effective in using the conjuncture entrenched in the specificities of the South African context to gather popular will towards a struggle for a better future, articulated in practical terms, with a critique of the continuation of the past into the present. The student-worker unity broke the spontaneous consent to the post-apartheid governance in HEIs (an example of tacit agreement on which passive revolution dynamics are based) by stressing the contradictions between common-sense expectations and the material reality. However, due to the absence of a structure and a clear project, they could only offer glimpses of potential hegemonic alternatives, allowing dominant institutions to regain legitimacy and absorb the movement's disruptive potential.

This brief note on two significant movements in South Africa sheds light on both some of the causes for their setbacks and the potential that emerged from these initiatives. It

emphasises the principles, values and alternative visions of the world promoted by the movements, able to move beyond the dominant thesis, as well as the organisational structure that demonstrated resilience in the face of harsh repression and co-optation. However, the initial excitement and debates sparked by NUMSA and FeesMustFall have given way to disillusionment. NUMSA's projects, over the course of a few years, lost their propulsive thrust and failed to achieve the desired outcomes, while the student and worker movement in HEIs faced repression and co-optation, and the legacy of its threat to the establishment is increased securitisation of campuses (Duncan 2022) and the advancement of HEIs' business-driven model.

The passive revolution approach in the South African context offers a doorway into analysing not only the inadequate historical choices made by the anti-apartheid organisations which embraced the transition phase by conceding on fundamental economic principles, but also the practices and theoretical horizons of organisations and movements that aim to overcome the status quo. Analytical investigations into the political visions, principles, values and daily activities of unions, collectives and movements which position themselves as drivers of transformative processes can contribute to strategic debates and to assessments of what is compatible or antagonistic with the current oppressive societal context. Within the dynamics of passive revolution, this analysis is crucial for identifying elements that are vulnerable to co-optation into a hegemonic project and for building alternative visions of collective life.

Conclusions

This article has reviewed different trends within the widespread use of Antonio Gramsci's concept of passive revolution in international and South African academic literature over the past two decades, proposing a more rigorous understanding of the concept that returns to Gramsci's original emphasis on the dialectical nature of passive revolution and the importance of it being rooted in his philosophy of praxis, aimed at informing political strategy. The concept of passive revolution must be inscribed in the dialectical relation among classes and deployed within a holistic approach to Gramsci's wider theoretical framework, in connection with other Gramscian categories.

This approach calls for a repoliticisation of Gramsci's thought and of the concepts he proposed. Too often his work and categories have been uprooted from the philosophy of praxis that is foundational to Gramsci's thought, which was embedded in his political role as an organic intellectual of the oppressed, aiming to secure ideals of justice that, in his time and space, were embraced by the Communist International and articulated by the Italian Communist Party of which he was the leader. When we read the *Notebooks* not as a series of reflections but as an attempt to investigate society to transform it, the concept of passive revolution emerges in its organisational dimension and is particularly useful for identifying and analysing the shortcomings and strategic opportunities of progressive organisations, unions and social movements in specific conjunctures.

The organisational dimension of passive revolution in the South African context opens horizons for politically engaged research. Investigating historical processes of transformation, such as the transition to the democratic South Africa, or political and social movements like FeesMustFall and NUMSA, through the lens of passive revolution can

unveil the contradictions of the narratives and practices of the dominant elites but also the limitations of progressive organisations that have not broken out from a position of subalternity. This approach, that goes beyond the borders of academia, may offer fresh and useful insights to organisations navigating our current contradictory and violent societies and provide new avenues for imagining alternative futures and political strategies. There might be a limited time to learn from these debates. In today's South Africa, the dangerous intersection of aggravated economic crisis, the resurgence of vicious forms of xenophobic nationalism and the increased weakening of ANC hegemony could potentially lead the country from a phase of passive revolution to more authoritarian horizons. In such a scenario, organisational processes that promote an alternative hegemonic political project capable of overcoming the dynamics of co-optation and fragmentation of the left become increasingly indispensable and urgent.

Notes

1. In this article, references to Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* follow the internationally established standard of notebook number (Q), the number of the note (§), followed by page reference to the Italian critical edition edited by V. Gerratana (Gramsci 1975). For translation purposes, the article relies on the editions edited by J. Buttigieg (Gramsci 2007, 2011a, 2011b), for the first eight notebooks (B.), and Q. Hoare and G. Nowell Smith (Gramsci 1971) (SPN). If the text is not available in the mentioned publications, the author's translation is employed.
2. There is a significant break in his use of the concept between 1930 and 1932.
3. For more insights on Gramsci's analysis of the conjuncture, see Portantiero (1981) and Hart (2023).
4. For insights into the global use of passive revolution, see, for example, for India (Chatterjee 1993a); Turkey (Tuğal 2009); Zimbabwe (Raftopoulos 2010); Mexico (Morton 2011; Fusaro 2019); Brazil (Del Roio 2012); West Bengal (Samāddāra 2013), post-apartheid South Africa (Hart 2014); Egypt after the Arab revolutions (De Smet 2016); Malawi (Brooks and Loftus 2016); Latin America (Modonesi 2017); Pakistan (Mallick 2017); China (Hui 2018); and Japan (Carroll 2022).
5. For a history of interpretations and debates on Gramsci, see Liguori (2022).
6. Earlier engagements are rare and sporadic. See attempts to link an application of passive revolution to the genesis of postcolonial states in Africa (Bayart 1993) and to the formation of democratic South Africa (Taylor 2000).
7. The note reads (Q15, §59, 1823-24; SPN, 106): 'The important thing is to analyse more profoundly the significance of a "Piedmont"-type function in passive revolutions – i.e. the fact that a State replaces the local social groups in leading a struggle of renewal. It is one of the cases in which these groups have the function of "domination" without that of "leadership": dictatorship without hegemony. The hegemony will be exercised by a part of the social group over the entire group, and not by the latter over other forces in order to give power to the movement, radicalise it, etc. on the "Jacobin" model.'
8. The original version of the note states 'difesa allarmata', which can be literally translated as 'alarmed defence' instead of 'anxious defence' as translated by

Buttigieg (2011b). I argue that the origin of the word ‘alarmed’, from late Middle English as an exclamation meaning ‘to arms!’, better reflects Gramsci’s thought.

9. Alford draws from emerging neo-Gramscian analysis within the GVC/GPN domain that investigate governance as a politically contested process (Bair and Palpacuer 2015; see Levy 2008).
10. Gramsci warns progressive organisations of the risks in taking up passive revolution as a political programme (Q15, §62, 1827; SPN, 114); rather he advocates that an alternative progressive project, the antithesis, has to ‘throw into the struggle all its political and moral “resources”’ in order to overcome the thesis (Q15, §11, 1768; SPN, 109).

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