

The New Prince in a New Principality: OCAP and the Toronto Poor

Norman Feltes

Volume 48, 2001

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/ilt48cnt01>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (print)

1911-4842 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Feltes, N. (2001). The New Prince in a New Principality: OCAP and the Toronto Poor. *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 48, 125–156.

CONTROVERSY

The New Prince in a New Principality: OCAP and the Toronto Poor

Norman Feltes

[The philosophy of praxis] is consciousness full of contradictions, in which the philosopher himself, understood both individually and as an entire social group, not only grasps the contradictions, but posits himself as an element of the contradiction and elevates this element to a principle of knowledge and therefore of action.

Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, trans and eds.,
Quinton Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (London 1971), 405.

IN THIS PAPER, to understand the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty (OCAP) now, I shall begin by discussing “the philosopher himself” (not my habitual strategy) and my contradictory situation as a left intellectual within OCAP. While at the beginning I experienced that situation only in its immediacy and personality, I soon found that not only had the issues — “academicism” and “practical knowledge”— been thoroughly explored by Antonio Gramsci in prison, but that he had used these, so petty in my own original conception, to open up, again and again, the real issues for a revolutionary political group: the social formation and conjuncture, the issues of direction and leadership, ideology as a field of struggle, the tactics of the struggle, and the Party, which adapting Machiavelli, Gramsci called “the Modern Prince.” Moreover, as I read Gramsci and began to recognize the roots of Louis Althusser’s “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” essay (among other debts), I returned sympathetically to Althusser’s late essays in self-criticism and on Machiavelli, and further, believing that the Althusserian marxist tradition survives, to the work of

Norman Feltes, “The New Prince in a New Principality: OCAP and the Toronto Poor,” *Labour/Le Travail*, 48 (Fall 2001), 125-55.

Antonio Negri. Thus, a “whine” about academicism and practical knowledge had transformed itself into an extended reading of the larger situation, “academic” and “practical,” and the place in it of the Party, “the Modern Prince” (and also, in its rightful, lesser position, the place in all that of this “philosopher”). This paper retraces that progress, marking successive “discoveries,” attempting to display their significances for OCAP, the Party, now, at the end and at the margin of history. I begin with the “whine” and occasionally mention its distorted analysis thereafter only as an immediate, economical instance of some of the thinking that Gramsci was correcting in his day. As they say, “I stand corrected,” and see those early, misguided attempts only as a curiosity.

This paper thus began almost as an exercise in self-therapy. A new member of OCAP and excited by its collective practice of direct political action, on behalf of the poor and of individual poor people, I was prematurely elected to OCAP’s Executive. I had imagined my potential contribution to be my extensive training in critical analysis, and so at Executive meetings I attempted, from time to time and, I thought, with appropriate diffidence, to make suggestions from that perspective. These, I noticed, were increasingly rejected or ignored, and the word “academic” occasionally surfaced in what was, nevertheless, always a comradely exchange. What was the unspoken basis for these resistances was an antagonist generalization from “practical experience.” Instructed by Althusser, I had encountered the dread “empiricism” before, in theory and in episodes of a politically active career and indeed in the hegemonic ideology of my lifetime. I had not concealed my academic past, that I had never been a social worker, or myself homeless, but I had expected at least a hearing, not necessarily respectful, for my attempts to get beyond “empiricism.” This is as much as need be said of my first personal experience on the OCAP Executive.

Deluded into thinking my predicament unusual, I began to analyze in writing the OCAP Executive as a distinctive ideological formation. I initially distinguished from direct, concrete, practical knowledge itself what I labelled to myself “practical knowledge,” the *ideological valourizing* of direct experience as being not only the “best” but the *sole* teacher. This ideology had the usual characteristics of ideology, such as the circularity (“complacency”) which so frustrated me in the resistance to my contributions. “Debriefing meetings” after a large action or even the disruption of a welfare office, which was obstructing a welfare payment, often might become immersed in anecdote. The moment would pass and there would be no real attempt to generalize about our tactics or new techniques of bureaucratic evasion. This was, in general, a position characterized, as I have said, by theoretical empiricism — the belief that we can read off “meaning” directly from experience — but its other characteristic values were individualism, contemporaneity (often refined to immediacy and spontaneity), a satisfaction with quick decision-making by “consensus,” and a valuing of content over style. Over against this, in my early, simple-minded analysis, I set the advantages of what I thought to be “dialectical” knowledge, a

sense of the importance of history as well as the immediate “larger” picture, and an appreciation of ideological determinations, Ideological State Apparatuses, etc., as well as of the illusoriness and obscurantism of “consensus” in decision-making. I thought these to be more than merely “academic” considerations.

It was probably the banality of all this that first forced me beyond it. The “beyond” came with the recognition that my analysis of the situation was no less empiricist than the ideology of “practical knowledge” I was struggling against: I was simply reading off generalizations from my experience on the OCAP Executive. Yet I wanted to *theorize* my problem within the Marxist tradition, historicizing it within a larger perspective than I had yet imagined. That recognition pointed me to the only theorist of the place of intellectuals in popular movements that I knew of, Antonio Gramsci, whose *Prison Notebooks* I had last read thoroughly 25 years before. While not casting Gramsci as eternally “correct,” I was struck by the way his analysis of the Italian Communist Party in the early part of the 20th century resonated in my OCAP experience at this moment in Ontario history. His analysis of the struggle with capital and its servants in the early years of Italian fascism was exciting and strikingly suggestive to me, and without rushing to find “parallels” I wanted to examine the implications of his writings for OCAP in Ontario now.

My escape from empiricism came in starting to understand Gramsci’s dialectical re-writing of Machiavelli’s “Prince” — the Hero who alone in the early 16th century could unify and modify Italy — as the “Modern Prince,” the communist “party of praxis,” which alone could overthrow capitalist domination and exploitation, in fascist Italy and worldwide. Clearly, it seemed to me, OCAP in 2000 strives by collective intuition to be a “party of praxis” in Canada, in the New World Order. What was it, then, that characterized Gramsci’s re-casting of revolutionary direction and leadership in a Party, in a world (for only the first time) threatened by fascism? And how then must the Party be re-cast after the demise of “actually existing socialism,” as fascism is redefining its forms and institutions at “the End of History”? And what then, if OCAP were to be, in this Province of this Country, the “Newest Prince,” are the determinations of its strategy and tactics (and what, incidentally, is then the place of the left intellectual in that transformative struggle)?

For what I had cast while on the OCAP Executive as a matter of the status of an intellectual in a popular movement, Gramsci analyzes as issues of the *direction*, *domination*, and *leadership* of a movement in a particular conjuncture, using the middle years of Italian Fascism as his conjuncture. Direction, domination, and leadership within the Party are thus also determined dialectically by ideological formations of, say, “Caesarism” in the social formation as a whole (we shall explore this in Harris’s Ontario). Similarly, the “practical knowledge,” whose absolute value I had questioned in OCAP, surfaces as “common sense” in Gramsci’s Party, but ambiguously, as do “spontaneity” and anarchism. I want now to spend some time sounding out Gramsci’s use and critique of these concepts, moving towards my other theorists and OCAP’s situation at the present time.

Perhaps the best-known element of Gramsci's work is his distinction between "organic" and "traditional" intellectuals, the latter being what he calls elsewhere "a crystallized social group":

professional intellectuals, literary, scientific and so on, whose position in the interstices of society has a certain inter-class aura about it but derives ultimately from past and present class relations and conceals an attachment to various historical class formations.¹

This is clearly one source for Althusser's essay on "Ideological State Apparatuses," in one of which I had lived with varying degrees of "fit" for many years. In contrast to the situations of "traditional" intellectuals, "organic" intellectuals are "the thinking and organizing elements of a particular fundamental social class [a political prisoner's euphemism for 'the proletariat'] ... directing the ideas and aspirations of the class to which they organically belong"; in OCAP I could identify innumerable "organic intellectuals," more or less the entire cadre of activists. I shall return to "directing" (*dirigente, direttivo, direzione*, etc.) in another context later, but I want first to point to a reason for the deceptive familiarity of these two definitions. Traditional and organic — these seem the simplest of dialectical relations, a mere binary opposition, and so they have been most often seized upon, providing a surety which typefies essentialist ideology, allowing, for example, an easy dismissal of anyone judged not "organic." Ironically, Gramsci took great pains to discourage such reductionism, insisting on the multiple determining relations of the organic intellectual, for it characterizes the thought of *traditional* intellectuals in particular that they think of themselves as "independent, autonomous, endowed with a character of their own, etc." But, far from searching for "the intrinsic nature" of intellectual activities (as I had done in my initial analysis of relations on the OCAP Executive), Gramsci himself directed attention to "the ensemble of the system of relations in which these activities (and therefore the intellectual groups who personify them) have their place within the general complex of social relations." "All men are intellectuals," Gramsci writes — or "all men are 'philosophers'" — but he quickly diffuses the essentialism by the relational point, that "not all men have in society the function of intellectuals."

Gramsci's analysis of the *function* of what he calls "organicism" is far more important than any simple distinction between "organic" and "traditional" intellectuals. The activity of the organic intellectual is fundamentally social. Rather than being finally and triumphantly "correct," the organic intellectual must take the true weight even of opposing thought and dialectically incorporate it into his own:

¹ Antonio Gramsci, Quinton Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, trans. and ed., *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (London 1971), 452. Since all the quotations for the next several pages are from the *Selections*, I shall give the precise references in a note at the end of the discussion. I shall use the same procedure in Section III.

To understand and to evaluate realistically one's adversary's position and his reasons (and sometimes one's adversary is the whole of past thought) means precisely to be liberated from the prison of ideologies in the bad sense of the word — that of blind ideological fanaticism.

Sometimes also the organic intellectual's adversary is "common sense," to which I'll return, but in each adversarial struggle, the only fertile position or point of view is to be "critical," to achieve a dialectical responsiveness, which Gramsci stresses again and again. Thus, critical thought is not "creative" in the conventional Hegelian idealist or speculative individualist sense, but relational:

Creative, therefore, should be understood in the "relative" sense, as thought which modifies the way of feeling of the many and consequently *reality itself, which cannot be thought without this many.* (Emphasis added)

It is significant that Gramsci speaks here, not only of the "particular, fundamental social class," the proletariat, but of *the many*, a more vague and inclusive category. What he is emphasizing is *breadth*, or, as he calls it, "quantity," used in a special, non-arithmetical sense to indicate "greater or lesser degrees of 'homogeneity,' 'coherence,' 'logicality,' etc.; in other words, quantity of qualitative elements." Gramsci is addressing the fact that the widest possible "quantity," what we off-handedly speak of as "democracy," must guarantee the only real "quality": the best that has been known and thought, that is, the best *available*. This understanding obliterates not only the "quantity/quality" distinction, but the "academic"/"practical" distinction as well, treating them socially and relationally. And Gramsci's "quantity of qualitative elements" is precisely Marx's "'revolutionary,' 'practico-critical' activity," a dialectic of passion and understanding. As Gramsci wrote:

The intellectual's error consists in believing that one can know without understanding and even more without feeling and being impassioned ...: in other words that the intellectual can be an intellectual (and not a pure pedant) if distinct and separate from the people-nation, that is, without feeling the elementary passions of the people, understanding them and therefore explaining and justifying them in the particular historical situation and connecting them dialectically to the laws of history and to a superior conception of the world, scientifically and coherently elaborated — i.e. knowledge. One cannot make politics-history without this passion, without this sentimental connection between intellectuals and people-nation.

Rather than a ("traditional") caste or priesthood, then, intellectuals must engage in the "exchange of individual elements" between leaders and led, "the shared life ... which alone is a social force," insisting on the "sentimental connection."

Gramsci analyzes the functions of intellectuals, defined in this dialectical way, in their further relations within the Party and within a particular social formation. "That all members of a political party should be regarded as intellectuals," Gramsci writes, "is an affirmation that can easily lend itself to mockery and caricature." He

goes on: "What matters is the function, which is directive and organisational, i.e. educative, i.e. intellectual," and he explores, throughout the *Notebooks*, in the sections on "Education" and "The Philosophy of Praxis," as well as on "The Modern Prince," the educative, intellectual function in the Party. This emphasis forces our attention away from the relatively barren traditional/organic distinction and directs it to the "primordial, and ... irreducible fact" that, even in a popular democratic party, "there really do exist rulers and ruled, leaders and led." All members of society, all who eventually join the Party, are imbued with conceptions taught by various traditional social environments — family, church, etc., (Althusser's Ideological State Apparatuses) which Gramsci calls "folkloristic." The primary school, while yet another ISA, combats some of this "folklore," by replacing "tendencies towards individualistic and localistic barbarism" with instruction in civic rights and duties, fostering a more "historical and dialectical conception of the world, which understands movement and change, which appreciates the sum of effort and sacrifice which the present has cost the past and which the future is costing the present." But this primary instruction takes place in a "fossilized and anachronistic culture" and people arrive at adulthood not much beyond "folklore," as other ISAs, primarily the media and other forms of advertising, persuade them that only the "certain" (Vico's "obscurity of judgement backed only by authority") is the true. Hence the necessity for "practico-critical activity" in the Party:

The mode of being of the new intellectual can no longer consist in eloquence, ... but in active participation in practical life, as constructor, organizer, "permanent persuader," and not just a simple orator.

Besides "folklore," the other, more polemical term Gramsci uses as a prison code-word for "ideology" is "common sense," "the 'folklore' of philosophy": "the diffuse, unco-ordinated features of a generic form of thought common to a particular period and a particular popular environment." The most common-sensical and practical person, "dogmatic and eager for peremptory certainties," is the pragmatist, who takes complacent particularity to its "fragmentary, incoherent and inconsequential" extreme, judging all things "from immediate reality, often at the most vulgar level." However, it is precisely this common sense, "the spontaneous philosophy [shades of Althusser] of the multitude," which must always be the starting point for the educational, intellectual process of "permanent persuasion." I shall return to this dialectical necessity in a moment. In contrast to folkloristic common sense, the intellectual, as a function accessible "organically" to everybody, is subversive of complacent certainties, engaging in "an unyielding struggle not only against habits of dilettantism, of improvisation, of 'rhetorical' solutions or those proposed for effect."

Distinguishing "philosophy" from "common sense," Gramsci insists (while noting that every philosophy tends to become "the common sense ... of the intellectuals") that it must be "connected to and implicit in practical life." A

philosophy of praxis must present itself at the outset in a polemical and critical stance, “as superseding the existing mode of thinking and existing concrete thought,” a criticism of “common sense,” but it must base itself initially on that same common sense,

in order to demonstrate that “everyone” is a philosopher and that it is not a question of introducing from scratch a scientific form of thought into everyone’s individual life, but of renovating and making “critical” an already existing activity.

Then it must critique as well its own philosophical tradition, the philosophy of the intellectuals. And again, this relation between common sense and philosophy is assured by “politics,” by the concrete practice of class struggle.

It’s the particulars of that struggle I want to now examine. The ordinary, non-intellectual “active man-in-the-mass,” suggests Gramsci, “has no clear theoretical consciousness of his practical activity,” or rather, he has two, both common-sensical: one, which is “implicit in his activity” (“practical experience”), and one, “which he has inherited from the past and was uncritically absorbed.” Class-based, this second consciousness can be in contradiction with the first and with other ideological positions or “hegemonies” so as to prevent decision and action. But by rejecting moral and political passivity, by struggling through the contradiction along with comrades, an individual can arrive at a more political consciousness, the “first stage towards a further progressive self-consciousness in which theory and practice will finally be one”:

Thus the unity of theory and practice is not just a matter of mechanical fact, but a part of the historical process, whose elementary and primitive phase is to be found in the sense of being “different” and “apart,” in an instinctive feeling of independence, and which progresses to the level of real possession of a single and coherent conception of the world.

In the historical conjuncture Gramsci was living through, “the philosophy of praxis” had therefore two tasks to perform: “to combat modern ideologies in their most refined form [fascism], in order to be able to constitute its own group of independent intellectuals,” that is, to create a militant Party, and “to educate the popular masses, whose culture was medieval.” This second task is “fundamental.” The process, or struggle, must present itself from the start as radically polemical and critical. It first criticizes (while basing itself on) “common sense,” “renovating and making ‘critical’ an already existing activity”, but then it must critique the philosophy of the intellectuals, in our case marxism and the history of “marxisms.” Neither of these is an “academic” exercise, for the relation between the critique of common sense and the critique of marxist theory must be “politics,” that is concrete ideological struggle within the historical social formation. There is no intellectual critique, whether of common sense or of the theoretical tradition, independent of political struggle. Rather than the rationalistic, deductive abstract search for the “correct,”

a typical project for “pure” intellectuals (“pure asses,” Gramsci calls them), the process of intellectual struggle must pursue,

what is identical in seeming diversity of form and on the other hand of what is distinct and even opposed in apparent uniformity, in order to organize and interconnect closely that which is similar, *but in such a way that the organizing and the interconnecting appear to be a practical and “inductive” necessity, experimental.* (Emphasis added)

This “experimental” conception of intellectual struggle is the first indication in Gramsci of what has come to be called the “aleatory,” to which also I’ll return later. But just as the intellectual continuously attempts to discern, inductively and experimentally, the broadly “international” and the distinctively “unitary” elements in the contemporary “national and local reality,” so these must be sought in the tradition and in “common sense” in the same way. This is “true concrete political action, the sole activity productive of historical [and theoretical] progress.” Gramsci used the word *totalitari* not in the contemporary, bourgeois, Hannah Arendt sense, but to mean “all-embracing and unifying,” or “global.” The intellectual task is to make conscious the “global,” “all-embracing,” “international” (as in, but not only, “Third International”) character of the class struggle, as the process of struggle itself forces this awareness:

One may say that no real movement becomes aware of its global character all at once, but only gradually through experience — in other words, when it learns from the facts that nothing which exists is natural (in the non-habitual sense of the word), but rather exists because of the existence of certain conditions, whose disappearance cannot remain without consequences. Thus the movement perfects itself, loses its arbitrary, “symbiotic” [as in “natural”] traits, becomes truly independent, in the sense that in order to produce certain results it creates the necessary preconditions, and indeed devotes all its forces to the creation of these preconditions.

Gramsci discerns three “moments of collective political consciousness,” the first two of which correspond to Marx’s distinction between “a class *in* itself” and “a class *for* itself.” The process he describes is one of *bourgeois* class formation (perhaps to mislead the prison censors), but the description is in fact “an evaluation of the degree of homogeneity, self-awareness, and organisation attained by the various social classes.” The first and most elementary level is, in the bourgeois terms he affects, “the economic-corporate level”: “a tradesman *feels obliged* to stand by another tradesman ... but does not yet feel solidarity,” class “*in* itself.” The second moment is that in which “consciousness is reached of the solidarity of interests among all the members of a social class — but still in the purely economic field,” class “*for* itself.” The third, which attains the “global,” “international” breadth we have mentioned, is that in which “one becomes aware that one’s own corporate interests, in their present and future development, transcend the corporate

limits of the purely economic class, and can and must become the interests of other subordinate groups too”:

this is the most purely political phase, and marks the decisive passage from the [solely economic] structure to the sphere of the complex [ideological] superstructures; it is the phase in which previously germinated ideologies become “party.”

It is also the phase in which “community organizing” becomes, for the Party, *intellectual*, its struggle invading the ideological level and, comprehending present and future possibilities.

It is here, it seems to me, that Gramsci astutely examines by going beyond the problem I was faced with on the OCAP Executive, the relationship of “academic” to “practical knowledge.” The real problem, he sees, is to struggle against “the false heroisms and pseudo-aristocracies” of either position, testing each supposed “theoretical truth” in each new concrete historical situation as you move towards the necessary “global” understanding. For each truth,

the proof of its universality consists precisely; 1) in its becoming a stimulus to know better the concrete reality of a situation that is different from that in which it was discovered (this is the principal measure of its fecundity); 2) when it has stimulated and helped this better understanding of concrete reality, in its capacity to incorporate itself in that same reality as if it were originally an expression of it. It is in this incorporation that its real universality lies, and not simply in its logical or formal coherence, or in the fact that it is a useful polemical tool for confounding the enemy.

These, of course, are my motives for using Gramsci in this paper. “It can further be deduced” (and this too redirects Gramsci’s point directly at the likes of me):

that every truth, even if it is universal, and even if it can be expressed by an abstract formula of a mathematical kind (for the sake of theoreticians [viz. “m-c-m”]), owes its effectiveness to its being expressed in the language appropriate to specific concrete situations [viz. “the profit anticipated in the mega-development at Dundas and Yonge precludes subsidized housing”]. If it cannot be expressed in such specific terms, it is a byzantine and scholastic abstraction, good only for phrasemongers to toy with.

To incorporate a “truth” into concrete reality, literally to “express” it, is thus a complex process, not a mere “statement of opinion.” It can occur

when, and only when, in the process of elaborating a form of thought superior to “common sense” and coherent on a scientific plane, it never forgets to remain in contact with the “simple” and indeed finds in this contact the source of the problems it sets out to study and to resolve.

In "The Modern Prince," Gramsci describes three fundamental elements which together constitute the party of praxis: 1) *a mass element*, "composed of ordinary, average men, whose participation takes the form of discipline and loyalty, rather than any creative spirit or organisational ability"; 2) *the principal cohesive element*, "endowed with great cohesive, centralizing and disciplinary powers" and "the power of innovation (innovation, be it understood, in a certain direction, according to certain lines of force, certain perspectives, even certain premisses)"; and 3) *an intermediate element*, "which articulates the first element with the second and maintains contact between them, not only physically but also morally and intellectually." These "Elements" of the Party must not be seen as congruent with the three "moments of political consciousness" mentioned earlier; to do so would be Stalinist. I first want to look at the priority his analysis assigns to the Second, "principal cohesive" Element, for this is where the intellectual *function* first becomes important. The Second Element is absolutely necessary to the Party, Gramsci insists:

the iron conviction has to have been formed that a particular solution of the vital problems [what has been called "Revolution"] is necessary.... The criteria by which the second element should be judged are to be sought; 1. in what it actually does; 2. in what provision it makes for the eventuality of its own destruction.

Practice, therefore, is the first criterion for the effectiveness of this crucial element in a Party's formation, but a practice driven by an "iron conviction" which binds the leadership to the membership and is the main protection against the Party's destruction: a "heritage" or "ferment" from which, if this Second Element in the Party were destroyed, the Party itself might be recreated. And so, as Gramsci notes,

All history from 1815 onwards [the defeat of Napoleon and restoration of reactionary regimes] shows the efforts of the traditional classes to prevent the formation of a collective will of this kind, and to maintain "economic-corporate" power in an international system of passive equilibrium.

For this reason, "the modern prince, the myth-prince,"

cannot be a real person, a concrete individual. It can only be an organism, a complex element of society in which a collective will, which has already been recognized and has to some extent asserted itself in action, begins to take concrete form. History has already provided this organism, and it is the political party.

Thus, one meaning of what I have written so far, is the transformation of my original problem (the relation of an individual intellectual to a mass Party) to the recognition that that simple, individualized binary leads nowhere. My first task in OCAP is clearly to analyze the Party, its real, concrete elements and its political practice in the creation of a collective will. And so I want now to use the reading of Gramsci

that I have outlined above to examine the Second and Third Elements of OCAP's organization as a Party. Then I shall attempt to locate OCAP, so understood, both in the current historical situation, the Canadian (and international) "political winter" (to relocate Michel Pécheux's phrase), and as necessarily at "the margin" of the socio-political formation.²

II

I shall first describe the present conjuncture in Ontario, empirically but in something more than climatic terms, not to make a detour but as an initial insistence on the priority of *practice*: what follows, I am saying, is a description of the Ontario social formation, the terrain of OCAP's political practice. In a 1993 article on the emergence in the United States under Clinton of a "new neoliberal hegemony," a "new national common sense" about "welfare" and "welfare reform," Nancy Fraser suggested a way of contrasting that new "political imaginary" (what I shall call the "general ideology") with the very different set of controlling attitudes and assumptions, or different general ideology, that dominated the era of Reagan and Bush. I do not want to engage in that general discussion of "political imaginaries," since Ontario, frozen in its own version of the Reagan-Bush era, has not yet, for better or worse, experienced a Clintonoid neo-liberalism. I want merely to borrow Fraser's six analytical categories to analyze current Ontario neo-conservative attitudes towards social assistance. By "neo-conservative" I mean a fundamentalist political application of the logic of capital to all areas of human activity, public and private, over-riding or absorbing all alternative ideologies. And by "the logic of capital" I mean the relentless accumulation of all of society's surplus value as private capital; the ruthless division and re-division of all labour; the single-minded search for economies of scale; the insistent reduction of the turnover time of capital; the universal melting down, so to speak, of all things solid into air.

In two earlier, unpublished essays, I analyzed how the Keynesian, Fordist solution to capital's overaccumulation problem in mid-century had entailed a "social wage," so that workers could buy the goods they produced, and how this determined "neighbourhood" and class struggle in Dundas-Sherbourne in Toronto.³ In the 1990s, the neo-con ideology dominant in Ontario is one of (in Fraser's term) an "*anti-social wage*":

²Gramsci, *Selections*, 3, 8, 323, 9, 344, 346, 347, 418, 16, 144, 30, 34, 35n11, 10, 323n1, 419, 330n, 435, 419, 373, 421, 29, 330n, 330-331, 333, 392, 330-31, 189, 190, 147n33, 157n50, 158, 181, 204, 201, 330, 152-53, 132, 129, 220; Michel Pécheux, Harbans Nagpal, trans., *Language, Semiotics and Ideology: Stating the Obvious* (1975; London 1982), 220.

³Norm Feltes, "The Homeless, the Market, and Class Struggle at Sherbourne-Dundas," unpublished (Toronto 1998), 27pp.; Norm Feltes, "The Ideological Construction of 'Neighbourhood' in Sherbourne-Dundas," unpublished (Toronto 1998), 32 pp.

a reductive, economistic, commodified view of the standard of living as (merely) one's personal and/or familial cash income.

Moreover, neo-conservatives moved to *recommodify public functions*, and to resurrect the old, sharp *binary opposition between "contract" and "charity,"* between "exchanges of equivalents" and "gifts":

Common sense [holds] the insurance programs to be "contributory," hence legitimate; since people [seem] merely to "get back what they put in," the transaction [is] considered a contractual exchange and claimants' entitlements [are] secure. Public assistance programs, in contrast, [are] labelled "noncontributory," hence of dubious legitimacy; since recipients [seem] to "get something for nothing," the transaction [is] deemed a unilateral gift, undeserved, socially deviant, and possibly harmful.

Similarly, neo-cons have resurrected the old *ideological opposition between "independence" and "dependence."* This distinction coincidentally narrows the definition of "independent work," devaluing the unpaid domestic work of women. Another, related ideological tenet of Ontario's new conservatism, as in the US under Reagan and Bush, seeks to deny *entitlement*, insisting instead on "mutual obligations." Whereas previously certain features of welfare — basic subsistence, housing, health care, etc. — had been seen as "rights," in the new order in Ontario, this entitlement disappears into a welter of conditions, strings, and obligations. Finally, *personal responsibility* picks up on each of these, producing an ideology holding individuals responsible for — in the popular formulation, "the authors of" — their fate: "structural explanations of poverty receded from the political culture and moral explanations moved to center stage." These six particular ideological tenets — Fraser's outline of the "neoconservative imaginary" — seem to me succinctly to map the general ideology of Mike Harris's current "Common Sense Revolution" in Ontario.⁴

We can see how the distinctive features of the Ontario Tory programme, embedded in memorable events, reflect all the points of this general ideology (or "imaginary"). The assumptions of an individualist, personal, "*anti-social wage*" show in the Ontario government's promise and delivery of a major tax cut in their first term of office, by cutting welfare payments 21.6 per cent. They then *recommodified public services* by abandoning all support for new social and co-op housing and by cynically downloading as many services as possible to jurisdictions less able to fund them, ensuring their starvation and eventual disappearance. The Tories' resuscitation of the "*contract/charity opposition*," biased in favour of the former, guides, for example, their introduction of "workfare," where the poor work for agencies, first in the public and then in the private sector, for less than the

⁴Nancy Fraser, "Clintonism, Welfare, and the Anti-social Wage: The Emergence of a Neoliberal Political Imaginary," *Rethinking Marxism*, 6 (Spring 1993), 9, 11 and 10-12.

minimum wage (incidentally helping to drive down wages across the productive sector). To be preoccupied with welfare “fraud,” as the type of all sorts of inflated “frauds” by the poor and desperate (as well as by the recipients of student loans), is again symptomatic of the fetishizing of “*contractual obligations*.” The “*dependence/independence*” binary shows itself most clearly in the insistence on the social benefit of privatization, with “independence” to be ensured and given ever more exhilarating value by the rigours of “competition.” The Ontario Government has rewritten “entitlement” as “obligation” most evidently in its heavy-handed “restructuring” away from “universality” of those two most basic social needs, health care and education. Increasingly, as even the bourgeois press occasionally admits, “entitlement” takes a “two-tier” form, as some of the sick, or students, better placed to undertake a contractual obligation, negotiate a special status or private entitlement. Whereas in the past, for example, post-secondary education had at least gestured towards universal opportunity through a grant system, now the higher tuition fees are mostly to be met “independently” by (contractual) loans. Throughout this new/old ideological formation, *personal responsibility* is to be assumed (in both senses), not only in the ways I have mentioned but in the increasing emphasis on regular testing, measuring the outputs of all persons and agencies in the public sector, driven by an ever more intensive and malevolent suspicion of individual and organizational failings. All this at the very time that inspection and regulation of the *private sector*, especially where it concerns private exploitation of public resources, are lessened or removed, ostensibly to encourage the personal responsibility of entrepreneurs.

These are the lineaments of the neo-conservative Ontario ideological formation, visible in the 1990s in the Government’s attack on the practices of previous Governments — Liberal, New Democratic, and Progressive Conservative — over the last half-century, and on the poor. It is the ideological formation against which OCAP struggles to build an opposition, as it engages in particular campaigns against the welfare and immigration bureaucracy, exclusive bourgeois residents’ groups, land developers, and the Government which serves them so single-mindedly.

The contradictions in the ideological formation have from time to time been laid bare by particular happenings. The Ontario Government’s imposition of “megacity” on the federated metropolis of Toronto was one. This act by the Province was clearly necessary to gain the direct political control needed to implement their economic agenda against determined opposition. While John Sewell’s Citizens for Local Democracy failed to block Toronto’s amalgamation, its campaign revealed with impressive clarity the contradiction which was being worked through, the direct violation and diminution of democratic processes and beliefs (“Responsible Government”) which had structured Ontario politically for a century and a half. Also, the “crisis” which surfaced in the summer of 1998, as groups of “squeegee kids” brought to Toronto the practice in American cities of cleaning windshields at intersections, with or without invitation, for small cash.

Again, the contradictions inherent in the Tories' neo-con politics became vividly apparent to even their most committed BMW-driving supporters: youth made homeless by the practical effects of the neo-con theories were yet "independently" taking "personal responsibility" for their own private income, initiating a "contract" with a driver, and providing a service, instead of panhandling. These are instances of the stresses and strains brought about *within* the neo-con ideological formation, as it inflicts real and palpable hurt on the society it so brutally dominates.

For we must be very precise about the brutality of this Government. It is theoretically precise to describe the current Ontario Government, distinguishing it from its predecessors, as proto-fascist. By this I mean that it exhibits distinctive features of a nascent fascism: the atavistic invocation of an earlier, purer Ontario; the ruthless pursuit of the logic of capital that I have described; the increasing substitution of authoritarian violence for democratic process; the demonization of identifiable groups; and the massive complicity (I do not want to quibble over how complete) of the media. It is this proto-fascist political configuration, especially, which licences my attention to Gramsci's analysis from the 1920s and 1930s. More importantly, it is this also which explains as it defines OCAP's distinctive ideology, organization, and practice as the direct action Party of the poor. In its early years, OCAP's Toronto branch was known as "The Direct Action Committee of OCAP," and it has become increasingly clear that direct action is the necessary, almost the "mirror" political response to proto-fascism in Ontario, organizing those at a furthest margin of the social formation, not simply to "oppose" or "resist," but to "fight back" for tangible goals. Uniquely in Ontario, OCAP's actions "draw a line"; they reveal, despite the media cover-up, the real social issues as well as the authoritarianism, violence, and demonization with which the Government responds to its opponents. I shall arrive eventually at a concrete discussion of OCAP's tactics, but I want now to examine OCAP in the light of that analysis of the current situation in Ontario as the Party of the poor, using the Gramscian structure we have discussed and the attached (for the time being, somewhat static) diagram, "The Party at the Margin."

In my diagram, I attempt to indicate all OCAP's overdetermining relations in the current social formation; the line of Xs marking the class divide between Bourgeoisie and Proletariat elides of course, a long history, as well as stating an ideological position. The arrows, large and small, indicate the other relations as I understand them, OCAP's very broad base, for instance, among the poor, unemployed and homeless. But my main interest lies in the relations within the circle of OCAP itself, especially seen as instances of the Elements of a revolutionary Party as Gramsci discusses it. The diagram pictures the interchange and involvement between groups in OCAP, but the three Gramscian "Elements," marked by the brackets on the left, invite qualitative judgements. For instance, whereas the Executive and Activists are elected in the one case and self-selected in the other from among the Members, who meet to make decisions every other week, there is

not surprisingly a clear if informal distinction between the Executive/Activist/Staff triangle as “leaders” and the Members and other Supporters as “led.” That is the sort of distinction in a Party that Gramsci’s discussion of Elements (I, II, III) seeks to address.

Thus “Supporters” and Members (I) seem content to participate in OCAP’s activities in the form of “discipline and loyalty.” The Executive/Activist/Staff triangle (II) makes up, indeed, “the principal cohesive element,” showing not only cohesive, centralizing and, in a diffuse way, disciplinary powers, but also “the power of innovation,” understood always “in a certain direction, according to certain lines of force, certain perspectives, even certain premisses.” In OCAP, these tend to be generally theoretically anarchist, socialist, feminist, and radically conscious of sexuality and gender issues, although we have never been more explicit than Gramsci was in his prison code. It is the Third of Gramsci’s Elements (III) which is most difficult to locate in OCAP; I placed it, with some hesitation, in the relation between the Executive and Activists, on the one hand, and the Members on the other. Thinking through the functions and relation of II and III along the lines that Gramsci suggests raises important questions about OCAP’s organization as a Party.

For example, the Second Element — the leadership, in OCAP the Executive/Activists/Staff triangle — must determine the strategies and tactics through which its premisses can find their practice; it is to be judged by what it actually does. But, as Gramsci suggests, it is also to be judged by “what provision it makes for the eventuality of its own destruction”:

Since defeat in the struggle must always be envisaged, the preparation of one’s own successors is as important as what one does for victory.

This preparation is clearly not simply a matter of communicating to others the office routine; it is located in the *intellectual function* we have spoken of earlier. “It is essential,” says Gramsci, if the leadership is “destroyed,” or more likely, imprisoned, that “it should leave as its heritage a ferment from which it may be recreated.” The process is a diffuse, continuing “ferment,” but the function is *intellectual*, enlisting the leadership along with the Members in that amorphous Third or intermediate Element, whose task is, as we saw, to tie the First Element, the Members and Supporters, to the Second, the leadership, “not only physically but also morally and intellectually.” Here is located specifically *the intellectual as function*, contrasted, as we saw earlier, to *the intellectual as individual person* and the only meaning of “intellectual” relevant in a radical political Party. The Third Element articulates and disseminates a discourse which meets “common sense” without being reduced to it: this discourse is a “ferment” of “certain lines of force, certain perspectives, even certain premisses,” the basis for “the iron conviction that a particular solution of the vital problems is necessary.” If the Third Element

successfully performs its intellectual function, the Party can survive the destruction of its leadership cadre. I believe that it is urgent for OCAP to examine and plan the organization of its third Element as the embodiment of a continuing, necessary organic intellectual function.⁵

III

In the last section, I characterized the current Ontario Government as “proto-fascist.” A more precise intellectual move would be to insist on this not as a static label but one naming a dialectical process. In his own situation, Gramsci aimed at “capturing the analogies between the period which followed the fall of Napoleon and that which followed the end of the war of 1914-18,” and we are looking for further correspondences in the period following the fall of “actually existing socialism.” The labels Gramsci uses for the political forms in his time, “Caesarism” and “Passive Revolution,” are again in part devices to mislead the prison censors, but they have enough political point for us to continue to use them until more important historical designations arise. His (and our) interest in “Caesarism” is not in any great heroic individual — Caesar, Cromwell, Napoleon, Mussolini (certainly not Mike Harris) — who by himself “transforms” a society, but in the historical *situation* which those individuals “express”: “A Caesarist solution can exist even without a Caesar.” Thus the experience of Ontario in the 1990s that I described in the last section and the Tory Government’s proto-fascist programme express (that is, are not only functional practices but also imaginary representations of) that political situation which Gramsci labels, with slight differences of emphasis, “Caesarism” or “Passive Revolution”: “a situation in which the forces in conflict balance each other in a catastrophic manner.” The Tory programme is thus a *symptom* in Ontario of the much-discussed “crisis of Capital.” There are of course other empirical signs of this “catastrophic” political balance, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) for example, but politically in Ontario the most notable is the succession of minority governments since the 1960s — “every coalition government is a first stage of Caesarism” — followed by the Liberal defeat of a rural Tory rump Government, their defeat in turn by the NDP social democrats, and finally the construction of the current hegemonic rural/petty-bourgeois Caesarist Government of the Harris Tories. What is instructive in this (and central to Gramsci’s analysis of Caesarism) is the appearance over these decades of a real *balance* in the political process, a balance, that is a stand-off of class forces, as the bourgeoisie struggle to maintain their eternal myth of harmony, “law and order,” “a great, good place” with everyone in their place. Caesarism is an attempt to enforce this imaginary ideal by overcoming the actual balance of political, class forces. Caesarism always expresses

⁵Gramsci, *Selections*, 153.

the particular solution in which a great personality is entrusted with the task of [common sense] "arbitration" over a historico-political situation characterized by an equilibrium of forces heading towards catastrophe.

In Ontario, the imminent catastrophe was described variously as the Government deficit, the Provincial debt, "living beyond our means," "low productivity," etc., but the real underlying catastrophe envisaged was the possible overturn of bourgeois control of Ontario. My first point of correspondence, then, with Gramsci's scheme (itself an analogy) is that the Ontario political formation since the early 1970s should not be seen as simply "in turmoil" or "undecided" but precisely as *in balance*, a balance of political power between (in prison, Gramsci calls them "A" and "B") the bourgeoisie, driven by a logic or regime of accumulation, and the proletariat, driven by a regime of subsistence or basic need:

The generic schema of forces A and B in conflict with catastrophic prospects — i.e., with the prospect that neither A nor B will be victorious in the struggle to constitute (or reconstitute) an organic equilibrium, from which Caesarism is born (can be born) — is precisely a generic hypothesis, a sociological schema (convenient for the art of politics). It is a possible to render the hypothesis ever more concrete, to carry it to an ever greater degree of approximation to concrete historical reality, and this can be achieved by defining certain fundamental elements.

So far, my gloss of this generic schema is an attempt to show that what we have here in process (as an hypothesis) is an exemplary theoretical analysis awaiting its ever more concrete approximation to the situation of Ontario in the 1990s. In Ontario, the "catastrophic phase," the political crisis, was indeed "brought about by a 'momentary' political deficiency of the traditional dominant force," the seizure of control of the Conservative Party machinery first by the rural group led by Frank Miller and then by the Toronto group led by Larry Grossman; "the internal faction struggle was such as to make possible the advance of the rival force B (progressive) in a precocious form", first as Peterson's Liberals and then as the NDP. "However, the existing social form had not yet exhausted its possibilities for development, as subsequent history abundantly demonstrated"; witness the return, as "Caesarism," of Harris's neo-conservative Tories.

There are several kinds of "Caesarism." There is the Caesarism of Caesar and Napoleon I, expressing "a complete revolution," "the historical phase of passage from one type of State to another type." There is also the Caesarism of Napoleon III, in the mid-19th century, with no passage from one type of State to another, but only "an 'evolution' of the same type along unbroken lines." In the mature capitalist world of 2000, Caesarism is different from both of these; the originating balance of forces with catastrophic consequences, as we have seen, now occurs between modern political forces, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, which cannot unite, because capitalism is built upon the relation of exploitation between them. Most

importantly, modern Caesarism is distinguished by its manipulation of a “passive revolution,” what the Harris Tories have called a “common sense revolution.” My second point of correspondence to Gramsci’s schema, then, is that in Ontario we are in the midst of precisely that kind of passive revolution, and so Gramsci’s discussion of the concept leads us directly into strategic considerations for OCAP’s struggle in the 1990s.

Gramsci presents the “thesis of ‘the passive revolution’” as a “criterion of interpretation of every epoch characterized by complex historical upheavals.” The concept is a dialectical one — the joining of “passive” and “upheaval” indicates as much. Gramsci’s “ideological hypothesis” can be read as describing quite precisely the Tory “revolution” in Ontario in the 1990s:

there is a passive revolution involved in the fact that — through the legislative intervention of the State, and by means of the corporative organisation [the bureaucracy] — relatively far-reaching modifications are being introduced into the [Province’s] economic structure in order to accentuate the “plan of production” element [“the logic of capital”]; in other words, that socialization and co-operation in the sphere of production are being increased, without however touching (or at least not going beyond the regulation and control of) individual and group appropriation of profit.

Gramsci points out that this situation may create “a period of expectation and hope, especially in certain ... social groups such as the great mass of urban and rural petit bourgeois.” A “passive revolution” is thus 1) a conservative strategy for control of a period of balance between class forces, 2) operating through state intervention and modification to permanently change the relations of production in the interest of capital, 3) thus substituting for a “frontal” attack in the class struggle a “war of position.” In the passive revolution, “the superstructures of civil society are like the trench systems of [World War I] warfare.” As Gramsci’s editors summarize the argument, passive revolution is “a revolution without mass participation, ... a ‘molecular’ social transformation which takes place beneath the surface of society, in situations where the progressive class cannot advance openly.”

However, “it is upon this terrain that the forces of opposition organise,” and we must analyze that terrain more closely. The Tories’ passive revolution is, as we have seen, politically a war of position, indeed an attempt, given the balance of political forces and the particular strengths of capital, to establish “war of position” as the only mode of struggle: “hegemony” is precisely the effect of tactics of “position.” My “proto-fascist” labels the rigorous establishment of a hegemonic position, based always on the ideology announced as “common sense.” The Tories’ strategy and tactics of overwhelming power distinguish themselves from those of their immediate predecessors, in all parties, in that way. Their “common sense revolution” proclaims itself as ideological, and that ideological position then justifies what I have described earlier, their single-minded, arbitrary seizure and manipulation of the powers, institutions, and relations of government. Gramsci

describes how, in the balance of diverse forces of the Italian Risorgimento, the reactionary "Piedmont" Party took on a function "which can, from certain aspects, be compared to that of a party, i.e. of the leading personnel of a social group." There Gramsci explored historically what he meant by "hegemony," as we can see by the difficulty his translators had in translating the nuances of "*dirigente*," in its usual sense of "ruling," or when used in contrast to "*dominante*," to mean also "leading." The play of "ruling" and "leading" is crucial to political hegemony. In Ontario, the media presentation of Harris himself, even by "Opposition" papers ("we can at least say *this* for him," etc.), as forthright, plain-speaking, and openly purposeful, makes the case for "leadership" as opposed to the more familiar forms of "ruling." By "leadership," that is to say, with its "straightforward," arbitrary practices thus masked ideologically, a proto-fascist government establishes its hegemonic position and limits struggle to a war of position. "The war of position," Gramsci writes, "once won, is decisive definitively"; with an unprecedented concentration of hegemony, a more "interventionist" conservative, or fascist, government is possible, "which will take the offensive more openly against the oppositionists and organize permanently the 'impossibility' of internal disintegration — with controls of every kind, political, administrative, etc., reinforcing the hegemonic 'positions' of the dominant group." These are the tactics by which a war of position fulfills the strategy of a "passive revolution," and it is against those tactics or, more importantly, against that strategy, that the opposition must organize itself. The progressive Party is, at the very least, always at a disadvantage in a war of position; OCAP's still-born struggle against the imposition of "workfare" is a case in point. OCAP's struggle will not be easy — Gramsci's editors hold it to his credit that he refused any easy or unilateral formula for overthrowing fascism, "rejecting the twin, undialectical deviations of direct frontal attack and 'liquidationism,'" i.e., abandoning the revolutionary perspective. It might be thought that the motto for the Party of the poor in this late phase of the struggle must be Gramsci's (and Romain Rolland's) "pessimism of the intelligence, optimism of the will," but the hegemony in the present conjuncture so penetrates the social formation that I feel we must move beyond pessimism and optimism and consider an "aleatory marxism." OCAP's motto is "Whatever It Takes."⁶

IV

And so, in this section I want finally to "intervene." Using OCAP's political practice, as I understand it, as a sort of armature, I intend to comment on it critically, taking the responsibility for my own judgements, but at the same time drawing on the particular current in contemporary marxism deriving from Gramsci and developing through the work of Althusser and his colleagues and Antonio Negri. I mean this intervention to be not a theoretical critique by an individual intellectual supported

⁶Gramsci, *Selections*, 106, 219-20, 219, 221, 221-22, 222, 119-20, 120, 235, 46, 178, 105, 104n95, xiii-xiv, 239, 47, 107n101, 175n75.

by authorities, but the construction and insertion into OCAP's political practice of the impersonal intellectual element, Gramsci's Element III. What I intend is "the intellectual" *as function*, open and aleatory, addressing the situation I have described in Ontario — in particular, Toronto and Dundas/Sherbourne — in its "political winter." It is intended, of course, to be coherent, "but in such a way that the organizing and the interconnecting appear to be a practical and 'inductive' necessity, experimental," since, as we have seen,

the mode of being of the new intellectual can no longer consist in eloquence, ... but in active participation in practical life, as constructor, organizer, "permanent persuader," and not just a simple orator.

I shall return now to Dundas and Sherbourne and OCAP, to what I hope will be a level of productive abstraction which will be "a stimulus to know better the concrete reality of a situation that is different from that in which it was discovered."

I mentioned earlier that my diagram of "The Party at the Margin" was somewhat static. I want now to look critically at OCAP's dynamic structure, its controlling ideologies, and their practice in the Party at the Margin. To begin, certain of OCAP's ideologies are not articulated but are held consensually. For example, although the commitment is never articulated (and if it were it would take both idealist and materialist forms), OCAP's members are committed to the struggle of the poor for livelihood and for political rights. OCAP is agreed, again not explicitly, that the economic, social, and political "establishment" in Ontario (to stop there) exploits and persecutes the poor and that OCAP is working ultimately for some sort of unspecified but substantial change. We tacitly agree that OCAP's current "leaders," if we can pick them out, are by and large able and admirable, that OCAP is moving in the right direction, that its tactics are appropriate and effective, meeting the test of practice. We want as little structure and hierarchy in OCAP as is practical, settling all contentious issues in the general meetings. We welcome alliances with Left unions and other like-minded organizations. We do not pander to the media. While we are imprecise about the structural changes we want — there is nothing in OCAP's general ideology answering to Gramsci's notion of "an iron conviction that a particular solution to the vital problem is necessary" — we consider that we currently have enough practical demands to be getting on with.⁷

These ideological positions are part of the "dynamics" of OCAP; equally determinant is its particular pattern of political practice. While OCAP is not pacifist, it has not initiated violence, and at this moment in Ontario history, unlike elsewhere in the world, we face relatively restrained police violence, that which occurs only occasionally in a back alley or a jail cell, or in the excesses of a police "takedown" at a mass action. We have as yet suffered no baton charges, tear gas, or beatings by mounted police, although these resources are always threateningly present at our

⁷Gramsci, *Selections*, 189, 8, 201, 153

actions, and we were brutally sprayed with pepper on Parliament Hill in November 1999. This relative forbearance is a mark of the "hegemonic depth" of our political winter, to which I shall return. OCAP's actions are always directed to a concrete purpose — they are never a "media event" — and they take two complementary forms. Trained only "on the job," we undertake every week the "cases" of individual poor persons and we see them through the hostile bureaucracies of the welfare system, public housing, and the immigration process. We defend "squeegee kids," individuals, and groups, in the civil courts. OCAP wins most of these cases (immigration and refugee cases, a federal jurisdiction, are the most difficult) and, apart from the good achieved for particular claimants, the good achieved for OCAP among its supporters in the poor is considerable. Our cases, not only the victories, build our movement. Except among the court cases, OCAP's tactics in these actions follow a flexible sequence of escalation of pressure on the agency. Individual cases have been settled at each step of the process. We may begin by contacting the agency by phone or letter and then by the client visiting the official accompanied by an OCAP representative. If denied a satisfactory settlement (or perhaps even serious consideration) at this stage, we may follow with a group visit, passive intimidation, and a veiled threat. Faced with further denial or delay, we may picket and, finally, we may conduct a mass invasion and disruption of the office. Somewhere in this process the case is usually settled in our favour.

In general, our tactics have been influenced by the work of Richard Cloward and Frances Fox Piven. Played against the case-work, which builds the movement, OCAP mounts large collective actions, often with our union allies or the Mohawk warrior society of the Teyendanaga First Nation Reserve, around a specific economic issue such as the withdrawal of provincial and federal governments from public housing, or Toronto's policy, mimicking New York's, for the "social cleansing" of panhandlers and homeless from the downtown tourist areas. We have picketed and enforced semi-embargos on businesses investing in a redevelopment scheme which, by closing a hostel, threw homeless men back on the street. To enforce specific demands, we have instituted a campaign of continuing "economic disruption" — snake marches, demonstrations, mass panhandling — of bourgeois activities, fairs, festivals, and film shoots. And we have mobilized the larger actions I have referred to, challenging police power: in Ottawa, a march on Parliament Hill "to persuade the prime minister of the seriousness of the homelessness crisis," interrupted by arrests by the RCMP, whose line we broke; the occupation of a Toronto city park, designating it "safe" from police harassment for the homeless, and holding it for three days until we were violently removed, with arrests, by the police; and most recently, the second, more powerful march on Parliament in November 1999. Each of these was a small, but in our present situation, real victory.

These actions, as political practices, are determined by the ideologies I have listed earlier, and other, general, ideologies of practice, including the Cloward/Piven strategy of producing political crisis (another general ideology is

the purposeful, unusual, and effective interplay itself of case-work and mass action I have mentioned). Yet another, introduced by our anarchist comrades, is the process of collective planning for a mass action, leading to the informal election of *ad hoc* leaders, or as they are designated, "decision-makers," entrusted with the momentary tactical decisions, anticipated or not, arising in the course of the action. One comrade argued, during the planning of a tactic of economic disruption, that OCAP's actions are grounded in "fear," the bourgeoisie's fear of our capacity for violence. As the subsequent action clearly showed, this is not true. The presence of large numbers of police, plainclothes and uniformed, in riot gear and mounted, effectively demonstrated which side traded in fear. Indeed, the preoccupation with "fear," and force, distracts from the nature of the ideological struggle now, in our political winter.

For OCAP's actions are inevitably determined by the ideological hegemony described earlier. The Ontario Government and their supporters, as we have seen, have successfully imposed a neo-conservative general ideology (or "imaginary") on the struggle, leading liberal opponents, for instance, to think that the Tory restructuring is somehow cyclical and simply reversible, to be changed or "made human" at the next turn of the market or of the electoral wheel. This, I would say, is to take the metaphor, "political winter," too literally, and to look for "Spring." For we must recognize that the empirical details we listed, exemplifying Fraser's categories of "neo-con political imaginary," are in fact merely the symptomatic effects of capital's "war of position," what Marx called the "real subsumption of labour under capital," globally, which began in the early 1970s and became an unimpeded flood with the end of the Soviet Union, presented as the workings of "the market". The recommodification of public functions, the re-enforced distinction between "contract" and "charity" and its attendant moralisms, these articulate the new global division of labour, "the transformation of production by the conscious *use* of the sciences, of mechanics, chemistry, etc., for specific ends, technology, etc., and similarly, through the enormous increase of *scale* corresponding to such developments." All of this, "the development of the productive forces of *socialized* [i.e. collective] *labour* (in contrast to the more or less isolated labour of individuals), and together with it the *use of science* (the *general* product of social development), in the *immediate process of production*, takes the [ideological] form of the *productive power of capital*." Hence the hymns of praise in the captive media to Wal-Mart and Bill Gates.

My point, however, is that, far from being cyclical, these phenomena are the newest, most systematic installation of capitalist practice, capitalist modes of thought, world-wide, and in the deepest recesses of human activity. Marx foresaw Bill Gates and Wal-Mart, Nike, and the Gap. As we see daily, "with the real subsumption of labour under capital a complete (and constantly repeated) revolution takes place in the mode of production, in the productivity of workers and in the relations between workers and capitalists." "The *social forces of production* of

labour are now developed, and with large-scale production comes the direct application of science and technology." This particular historical development brings to bear the function and power of *mass* and *scale*, instead of the individual and the local, on the social or collective. For "it is precisely the productivity of [social] labour, the mass of production of population and of surplus population created by this mode of production that constantly calls new branches of industry into being once labour and capital have been set free" (Emphasis added).⁸ That is, it is not simply the application of science and technology which characterizes this new order, but the real subsumption of labour, its social scale and dimensions (pervasive and world-wide), redividing world labour into the population *and the surplus population* necessary to its continued expansion. On a world scale, capital "hurls such huge masses of people into industries as yet unsubjected, or creates such relative surplus population with them as are required to transform handicraft or small formally capitalist workshops into large-scale concerns." This extension of the logic of capital, "the rule of the independent *conditions of labour* over the worker," dictates that the "relative" surplus population — i.e., the unemployed, the homeless *in relation to* the working population — are necessary to the new order of real subsumption for its constant renewal.⁹ More could be said about the real subsumption of labour under capital in our time — it is presented here as the larger theoretical explanation for Fraser's "political imaginary" and the situation of "Harris's Ontario" — but I want to stay with the "necessary" surplus population and to explore its radical potential in this ideological climate, this situation.

First, I want briefly to recall in the light of this new situation some of the categories with which Gramsci analyzed the "dark night of fascism" in which he was imprisoned in the early 1930s. As we saw at the end of Section III, as Gramsci had indicated, the "unprecedented concentration of hegemony," with political and administrative controls of every kind, sets limits to the effectiveness of oppositional tactics in a "war of position" — the occupation of a park or vacant buildings, a "frontal assault" on the Parliament Buildings — even with very little police violence. And the New World Order, as I have sketched it, presents an even more pervasive and invasive hegemony than Gramsci could envisage in the 1930s. In the face of such an ideological hegemony, what possible iron conviction ("that a particular solution to the vital problem in our society is necessary") is conceivable in OCAP? Yet, following Gramsci, the intellectual function ("Element III" of the Party's real structure) must always be to express and diffuse that necessary unifying conviction, a conviction which is at once an open "ferment" and a guarantee of survival. Again, picking up Gramsci's analogy to modes of warfare, just as we can see how totalizing and penetrating is capital's new hegemonic position, so we can see how the oppositional Party's necessary, fundamental "iron conviction" must be

⁸Karl Marx, "Appendix: Results of the Immediate Process of Production," in Ben Fowkes, trans., *Capital, I* (Harmondsworth 1976), 1024-1035.

⁹Marx, *Capital*, 989.

a form of movement and manoeuvre. A new *kind* of conviction, in its way no less “iron,” must inform a new kind of solution to “the vital problem.” I would suggest that we must begin to see the new form of our revolutionary conviction as being what is called “aleatory” — “*alea*” means “chance,” and I shall explain the concept further in a moment. We can see, also, that the Party of this new “iron conviction” can only locate itself “on the margin,” that is, speaking concretely, in the “surplus population” which this new phase of capitalism inevitably creates. “It is necessary to think in extremes,” said Althusser in his 1975 essay, “Is It Simple to be a Marxist in Philosophy”; the New Prince must inhabit the margin and think its situation and conjuncture in a wholly new, aleatory way.

Althusser went on to define “thinking in extremes” in a way which neatly brings together the ideas on which I want to close. To “think in extremes,” he wrote then, is not only to be “open,” but to think within a position, from a situation, “from which one states borderline theses, or to make the thought possible, one occupies the position of the impossible.”¹⁰ “Borderline” and “impossible” are the terms we must open up here. In later works, Althusser re-phrased his position more precisely: “we must,” he said, “think *in* the conjuncture,” in its concept, he added later, “of an aleatory, singular case.” A conjuncture (what we have called up to now, with Gramsci, a “situation”) is “no mere summary of events, or enumeration of diverse circumstances,” no accumulation or succession of class-based governmental actions and police brutalities, “*but their contradictory system*, which poses the political problem and indicates its historical solution.”¹¹ For example, exploitation, as Etienne Balibar says, “is something *unbearable* for individuals and, above all, for collectivities.”¹² There is a human limit to the process of real subsumption under capital and this limit, this structural contradiction, is to be found with those whose situation in the conjuncture is unbearable, at the margins, what Balibar calls the “edges” of the social formation and the capitalist system. Thus in Ontario, we are again (always/already) in the conjuncture of the new, homeless margin, the everywhere-visible, everywhere-invisible contradiction in the capitalist system. What is this but “a class with *radical chains*, a class of civil society which is not a class of civil society, a class which is the dissolution of all classes, a sphere which has a universal character because of its universal suffering and which lays claim to no *particular right* because the wrong it suffers is not a particular wrong but *wrong in general*”? We could gloss again the particular rights and wrongs and the “wrong in general,” but I want to stay with the “*radical chains*,” the contradictory system, for this class “is not formed by *natural* poverty but by *artificially produced* poverty; it is formed not from the mass of people mechanically oppressed by the weight of

¹⁰Louis Althusser, “Is It Simple to be a Marxist in Philosophy?”, in Graham Lock, trans., *Essays in Self-Criticism* (1975; London 1976), 170.

¹¹Louis Althusser, *Machiavelli and Us*, Greg Elliott, trans. and ed. (London 1999), 18, 19.

¹²Etienne Balibar, “Structural Causality, Overdetermination and Antagonism,” in Antonio Callari and David Ruccio, ed., *Postmodern Marxism and the Future of Marxist Theory* (Hanover NH 1996), 117.

society but from the mass of people issuing from society's *acute disintegration*,"¹³ artificially produced as surplus population, "the excluded, — a world of hunger and desperation."¹⁴ To think this margin, in this conjuncture, is truly to think in extremes, that is, to think "within a position from which one states borderline [marginal] theses, or, to make the thought possible, one occupies the place of the impossible."¹⁵

Cloward and Piven's strategy for the poor of "disruptive protest" instead of "organizational pressure" is simply a way of grounding opposition on this contradiction, but in our current conjuncture the contradiction is extreme. In their analysis of the US industrial workers' movement in the mid-20th century, Cloward and Piven argue that ultimately the workers' movement had exerted sufficient political force to protect the *economic* force of a strike, and the workers thus were victorious "because a century-long accommodation between government and economic elites had been broken."¹⁶ The process of facing the contradiction, of ultimately generating a political force which fractures bourgeois control of the State is surely the process of a radical/revolutionary people's movement generally. But in Ontario in the 1990s the people on the margin, exploited to the limit, have no economic force that can be translated into political force sufficient to command the State. This, now, is the concrete historical situation of the "impossible" or "extreme." What "real solution," not to say "iron commitment," can inform an oppositional practice, in Toronto, in the extremity of the real subsumption of world labour under capital? I believe that the answer to this question cannot be simply Gramsci's "optimism of the will," as Antonio Negri sees, somewhat metaphorically:

we need optimism of reason as intelligence of the necessary resistance and of that inevitable antagonism that will arise again on this ... "path of the paths that lead nowhere" that nevertheless we insist on following without a program, "catching the train while it is moving," always setting out on the territory of unknown being.

"Now it is no longer at the margins nor at the interstices but at the extremity of an empty totality, at the limit, that theoretical practice must engage itself to construct the terrain of subversion." But how, practically, as a concrete political practice, (an "iron commitment"), do we raise power from such "negativity," the

¹³ Karl Marx, "A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right: Introduction," in Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton, trans. and ed., *Early Writings* (1843-44; Harmondsworth 1975), 256.

¹⁴ Antonio Negri, *The Politics of Subversion: A Manifesto for the Twenty-first Century* (Cambridge 1989), 109.

¹⁵ Althusser, "Is It Simple," 170.

¹⁶ Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward, *Poor People's Movements: Why They Succeed, How They Fail* (New York 1979), 279, 146.

political winter?¹⁷ Or, put in another way, what political subject (“which it would be advisable to replace by the term *agent*”¹⁸) is interpellated by this material revolutionary practice? To conclude, I shall address these questions.

The class struggle has shifted to the level of ideology in this dark night of proto-fascism: in a committed direct action movement of the poor such as OCAP, the task of Gramsci’s Third Element is the formation of an “iron commitment,” rejecting “optimism,” whether of “the will” or of “reason,” in favour of an ideological stance, a revolutionary subject-position more closely attuned to the concrete historical situation. Gramsci saw clearly the danger of fatalism:

When you don’t have the initiative in the struggle and the struggle itself comes eventually to be identified with a series of defeats, mechanical determinism becomes a tremendous force, of moral resistance, of cohesion and of patient and obstinate perseverance.

But this fatalism is only “the clothing worn by real and active will when in a weak position,” and its mechanically determinist futility must be resisted. Subordinated to such a faith, “consciousness” or “will” becomes contradictory and lacks critical unity. And so, in striving to reach “a historicist and not speculative-abstract conception of ‘rationality’ (and therefore irrationality) in history,” Gramsci began the meditation on what has become known as “aleatory marxism,” attempting to think through the interplay in materialist history of the concepts “*fortuna*” (“fortune” or “chance” — “the natural force of circumstances [i.e. the causal nexus] the chance concurrence of events, what providence is in the works of Vico”) and “*virtù*” (not “virtue,” but “capacity, ability, industriousness, individual strength, sensibility, intuition of opportunity and a measure of one’s own possibilities”).¹⁹ Some 40 years later, Althusser returned to Machiavelli, Gramsci’s source for these speculations, and continued the theorizing of this sort of aleatory Marxism. Machiavelli, exploring in the early 16th century the necessary political task of Italian unification, had needed to think the discrepancy “between a *necessary* political task and its conditions of realization, which are possible and conceivable, and yet at the same time, *impossible* and *inconceivable*, because aleatory.” “I deliberately say *to think*,” Althusser explains, “and not to imagine, to dream, or hit upon ideal solutions” in order to enforce a grounding in the real and concrete. Similarly, in 2000, on the local margin of the capitalist social formation, hegemonic world-wide, the “New Prince” such as OCAP must “think,” not imagine or dream, and inform its practical action with an aleatory iron commitment, possible/impossible, conceivable/inconceivable. This is indeed “an exceptional form of thought,” to attempt to think in such a way the encounter between *fortuna* and the Party’s *virtù* in the class struggle

¹⁷ Antonio Negri, “Notes on the Evolution of the Thought of the Later Althusser,” in Callari and Ruccio, ed., *Postmodern Marxism*, 58, 63, 64.

¹⁸ Althusser, *Machiavelli*, 20.

¹⁹ Gramsci, *Selections*, 336-37, 413-14.

now, “for it is not consciousness but the coincidence of fortune and *virtù*” that determines individual actions on the margin. As I’ve tried to demonstrate, with constant particular reference to Toronto and Ontario, this contradiction “is the presence of history and political practice in theory itself.”²⁰

The political practice I am referring to is OCAP’s, in the real world that I have described: proto-fascist, neo-conservative capitalist Ontario and its “irrationally conceived” other, the poor and homeless. We are looking for what Gramsci called, comparing yet opposing mechanical determinism,

a complex of intellectual acts and, as a product and consequence of these, a certain complex of overriding passions and feelings, overriding in the sense that they have the power to lead men to action “at any price.”²¹

These are theoretical forms that, in Althusser’s phrase, “prioritize political practice in person.”²² As Gramsci pointed out, these concepts, used as Machiavelli used them, “never have a metaphysical character ... but are simple and profound intuitions (and therefore philosophy!) of life.”²³ For OCAP now, in the imposed absence of any “security,” the coincidence of *fortuna* and *virtù* can only be “thought” as radical, extreme *risk*: risk, continuing to clarify the social contradiction; risk, breaking not only civil laws but economic “laws”; risk, subverting the laws which are ideologically entrenched by a “war of position.”

OCAP, as this New Prince, is thus faced with “a *necessary* task, whose concrete conditions of possibility are, however, *impossible* to define.”²⁴ Such indeterminacy, in practice, is risky. Of course, Cloward and Piven’s tactics of creating economic and political crises in the administration of welfare in the US in the 1960s and 1970s were also risky; to conventional community organizers at the time, their strategy amounted to asking the poor “to create a crisis and pray.” Cloward and Piven argued in response that “there were no gains for the poor without risks.”²⁵ And thirty-some years later, as we “think” crisis as radical indeterminacy on the margin of a new, hegemonic social formation (and in this country), “risk” seems not only inevitable but the political ideology of last resort. In the extremity of such *fortuna*, the only *virtù* would seem to be the capacity to undertake risk. OCAP’s motto, “Whatever It Takes,” implies just that political ideology of risk. That, the concrete and historical practice of a *virtù* of risk in this conjuncture, seems to me to be the significant absence in Antonio Negri’s analysis of politics on the margin. Later, in his discussion of the margin, “the only vital place” in this proto-fascist social formation,

²⁰ Althusser, *Machiavelli*, 52, 80, 122, 80.

²¹ Gramsci, *Selections*, 413.

²² Althusser, *Machiavelli*, 80.

²³ Gramsci, *Selections*, 414.

²⁴ Althusser, *Machiavelli*, 51.

²⁵ Piven and Cloward, *Poor People’s Movements*, 282, 283.

Negri loses himself in hortatory generalizations that reflect the impossibility of defining what he means by “a regrouping of the political,” “the throw into being,” “where the train of being leads them.” However, his effort to define the problem does allow us to “think” in this way the real situation of the class struggle in our time:

this postmodern society, compact and ideologically organized, the society at the end of history, is empty, meaningless, and entirely negative. The totalitarianism that holds it and shapes it is fragile. The ontological characteristic of this structure is aleatory. Beyond its limits, on its boundaries, only there does a new ontology of resistance and power develop.²⁶

But it is still necessary, as Gramsci insisted (and to pick up an earlier theme), “to avoid posing the problem in ‘intellectualistic’ rather than historic-political terms”:

naturally it is not disputed that intellectual “clairvoyance” of the terms of the struggle is indispensable. But this clairvoyance is a political value only in as much as it becomes disseminated passion, and in as much as it is the premiss for a strong will.

Amidst commonsensical, unforeseeing actuality, as Gramsci says elsewhere, “one can ‘scientifically’ foresee only the struggle”:

In reality one can “foresee” to the extent that one acts, to the extent that one applies a voluntary effort and therefore contributes concretely to creating the result “foreseen.”²⁷

As I suggested earlier, the current situation of the poor is especially, terminally, “chancy.” If OCAP’s strategy is to force a political crisis, to break the accommodation between government and elites on the Cloward and Piven model by substituting trials of combat and disruption for orderly procedures and organizational pressure, then our attempt to exert political force occurs only as the capacity for extreme risk.

To sum up: Machiavelli, the progenitor of this line of political thought, “foresaw” in his own conjuncture “an encounter between *fortuna* and an anonymous individual, who is not required to be a prince already, only to be capable of becoming such.” If “princely” *virtù* is to affect history, it is only in its encounter with chance:

virtù is not the *intrinsic essence* of individuality [or of a particular Party]; it is merely the reflection, as conscious and responsible as possible, of the objective conditions for accomplishment of the historical task of the hour in a Prince-individual.

Or, we are arguing, in a Prince/Party on the margin:

²⁶Negri, “Notes,” 66-67.

²⁷Gramsci, *Selections*, 113, 438.

The peculiarity of *virtù* is to master *fortuna*, even when it is favourable, and to transform the instant of *fortuna* into political duration, the *matter of fortuna* into political *form*, and thus to structure the material of the favourable local conjuncture politically by laying the foundations of the new state — that is to say by rooting itself (we know how) in the people.²⁸

In OCAP “we know how,” recognizing from our collective struggle what Piven and Cloward call “the force of belligerency.”²⁹ The very extremity of the situation of the people at the margin forces us onto a new aleatory ground. Unlike the American workers of the 1930s, even unlike the African Americans in Montgomery, Alabama in the 1960s, the Toronto homeless have no potential economic force and no consistent political support — these are among the meanings of “no fixed address.” But this very “chancey-ness,” as I called it earlier, can be transformed into political, material, *physical* risk. The question of violence will always be answered finally by the power of the State, with its security guards, police, and army. But Negri, in a footnote to his *Politics of Subversion*, discusses two meanings of “power” which are hard to distinguish in English. Other languages have two distinct words — *potestas / potentia, pouvoir / puissance*, etc., — but not English. Negri suggests that “this distinction marks the poles of the political dialectic”: *pouvoir*, “the totalizing and fixed dimension of social making” in a war of position controlled always by the State and its minions (and their masters), and *puissance*, “constitutive social activity,” the power of social movements in struggle.³⁰ In the current extremity, at the margin, the constitutive social activity of OCAP, its *puissance*, lies in its acquired, trained *capacity for risk*, the definitive rejection of “common sense” in practice. I might mention here that I am aware that the philosophical *oeuvre* of Jacques Derrida presents a sort of “ethico-political deconstruction” of “risk,” which is conceived as “a sort of readiness for the incalculable contradiction within the political system,” but I am writing now for (and from) the concrete practice of a direct action Party of the poor.³¹ To go back to the very beginning of this paper, the intellectual function (Element III) in OCAP, this Newest Prince, encompassing the task of any individual left intellectual, must be to develop, beyond “optimism of the will” and even “optimism of reason,” the Party’s awareness of the *risks*, then the challenge of risk and finally its own capacity to seize risks, to take risk, its only *puissance*. This must be the Party’s “iron commitment” and the individual’s *virtù*, until we can glimpse once again “the particular solution to the vital problem in our society that is necessary.”

²⁸ Althusser, *Machiavelli*, 77, 94, 75.

²⁹ Piven and Cloward, *Poor People’s Movements*, 267.

³⁰ Negri, *Politics*, 49n.

³¹ Leonard Lawlor, “Political Risks: On Derrida’s Notion of Différance,” *Research in Phenomenology*, 21 (1991), 92.

Norman Feltes was extremely grateful to Serena Nadir for her critical editing of this paper. The opinions expressed are neither hers nor OCAP's but solely his own.



The Canadian Historical Review

Your Source For Canadian History

Lively articles, comprehensive reviews, authoritative research and a strong editorial policy have made *THE CANADIAN HISTORICAL REVIEW* the finest quarterly journal covering the broad spectrum of Canada's history.

The *CHR*'s appeal lies in the variety of the subjects addressed in its articles. Topics of interest range from economics and political History to Science and Labour history. In addition, informative reviews of historical writings both popular and scholarly and an extensive bibliography of recent writings addressing Canadian history topics make *CHR* the journal that is paramount to the history enthusiast.

Make the CANADIAN HISTORICAL REVIEW your one stop Canadian history resource. Subscribe today!



**Canadian Historical Review
on the web!**

www.utpress.utoronto.ca/journal/jour5/chr_lev5.htm

*back issues subscriptions forthcoming articles
editorial information submissions*

Annual Individual Subscriptions \$42

For more information or to order your subscription, please contact:



The University of Toronto Press – Journals Division
5201 Dufferin Street Toronto, Ontario M3H 5T8
Tel: (416) 667-7810 Fax: (416) 667-7881 Toll Free Fax: (800) 221-9985
e-mail: journals@utpress.utoronto.ca
Visit our web site www.utpress.utoronto.ca/journal