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On the Nature of Gramsci's "Conceptions of the World"

Joel Wainwright

1

Antonio Gramsci once wrote a methodological guideline on the way to study the "conception of the world" of a philosopher who has left behind an unsystematized corpus:

> If one wishes to study the birth of a conception of the world which has never been systematically expounded by its founder (and one furthermore whose essential coherence is to be sought not in each individual writing or series of writings but in the whole development of the multiform intellectual work in which the elements of the conception are implicit) some preliminary detailed philological work has to be done. This has to be carried out with the most scrupulous accuracy, scientific honesty and intellectual loyalty and without any preconceptions, apriorism or *parti pris*. (Q16, §2; SPN 382)

This dense passage introduces the two matters at the heart of this chapter. The first concerns its implied *subject*. As a consequence of his imprisonment by Mussolini, Gramsci became just such a philosopher, one without the means to carefully and systematically expound his ideas. At the time he wrote these lines, he was all too aware of his life-work's profound limitations. This suggests that this passage may have been intended as a biographical key, one Gramsci left for us to unlock some of the puzzles in his *Notebooks*. If so, this "key" points away from this particular fragment (or indeed any note in the *Notebooks*), since what is essential must be found "not in each individual writing" but "in the whole development of the multiform intellectual work" – a stark warning against selectively

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picking at the corpse of Gramsci's oeuvre. I cannot do justice to Gramsci's proposed interpretive standard in this chapter (in this respect at least, what follows is not "Gramscian"). Nevertheless I intend to clarify aspects of Gramsci's conception of the world.

For that is, after all, the *object* of this particular methodological remark: a "conception of the world" of a given thinker. I contend that Gramsci could be described as a Marxist philosopher who investigated "conceptions of the world" (*concezione del mondo*). This expression, which Gramsci used sparingly before 1930 and more frequently after, is woven like a red thread through his *Prison Notebooks*, appearing in discussions of all their major themes – and often where it matters most.[1] Notwithstanding its frequent appearance and close relation to Gramsci's analyses of hegemony, "conception of the world" has received very little emphasis in the literature on Gramsci in English. Though mentioned in numerous secondary works – Gramsci's use of "conceptions of the world" is taken up by Finocchiaro (1988), Robinson (2005), Green and Ives (2009), Liguori (2009), and Thomas (2009), among others – none of these studies examines the concept thematically.[2] Nor does Jessop, for instance, include this concept in his study of "spatial metaphors" in Gramsci (2005: 423).

This chapter aims to contribute to the correction of this lacuna (see also Wainwright 2010a), arguing that "conceptions of the world" represents one of the most creative and radical elements of Gramsci's thought. What is at stake here is more than rectifying geography's reading of Gramsci. The underlying question is one implicitly raised by Gramsci with this concept: how might we conceptualize ourselves and the world to enable their mutual transformation? As David Harvey recently noted, one of the fundamental requirements for building a radically different world is to transform our "mental conceptions of the world" (2010: 237). He asks, "What might these [new conceptions] be and who will produce them, given both the sociological and intellectual malaise that hangs over knowledge production ...?" This is indeed a fundamental question today. In posing it, Harvey almost literally repeats lines from Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*. It is therefore lamentable that, for all the recent interest among geographers in Gramsci (Harvey included), little attention has been paid to the way that Gramsci himself pursues these questions.

Gramsci's use of "conceptions of the world" conveys several meanings.[3] As a starting point, we can say that Gramsci uses this concept to refer to practical, relational approaches to being-in-the-world. Moreover they are *relational* insofar as they reflect the social relations that define the existence of particular social groups. And they express something fundamental about the way that we are what we are. In other words, they are conceptions *of the world* – not of just anything in particular – because

they concern the worldliness of our existence. Finally, Gramsci consistently treats these conceptions as *plural*. Everyone has a conception of the world, and they are not all fundamentally the same. For instance, they vary *geographically*: "The conceptions of the world ... against which the bourgeois spirit had to struggle in Italy are not like those that existed in France" (Q8, §3; SCW 249). This is not to open the door to pluralism, however, as if to say, "Well, you have your conception of the world and I have mine." Indeed, Gramsci's "conceptions of the world" condemns such pluralism.

"Conceptions of the world" therefore should be seen as central to Gramsci's political philosophy and his celebrated worldliness. Buttigieg writes: "Gramsci never aspired to the privileged position of the 'objective' (i.e. disinterested) spectator, he never ceased being political, he never lost sight of the worldliness of his task" (1983[1982]: 25). I think Buttigieg is right, but we should add: one of Gramsci's key tactics to avoid slipping into the privileged position of the "objective" spectator was to problematize "the worldliness of his task" by questioning conceptions of the world, including his own. If we fail to see this, we miss a key to his *Prison Notebooks*.

2

Let's turn to a particularly important note, Q11, §12, "Some preliminary points of reference [for the study of philosophy]," where Gramsci provides guidelines for conducting Marxist criticism (Q11, §12; SPN 323; QC 1375–1395). This is an especially significant note in his *Notebooks*, since it initiates a series of notes on the foundational principles for Marxist philosophy. Gramsci begins by defining criticism as the movement from a precritical (dogmatic and mechanical) conception of the world to one that is *conscious*. He asks:

> [I]s it better to take part in a conception of the world mechanically imposed by the ... environment, i.e. by one of the many social groups in which everyone is automatically involved from the moment of his [*sic*] entry into the conscious world ...? Or ... is it better to work out consciously and critically one's own conception of the world and thus, in connection with the labours of one's own brain, choose one's sphere of activity, take an active part in the creation of the history of the world, be one's own guide, refusing to accept passively and supinely from outside the moulding of one's personality? (Q11, §12; SPN 323–324)

In this second rhetorical question, Gramsci provides a powerful definition of the task of criticism: to "work out consciously and critically one's

own conception of the world." This may sound like idealism. Yet Gramsci wrote these lines while reflecting upon the concrete failure of communist revolution in Italy. Rosengarten (1984: 65) reminds us that "it should always be remembered that, for Gramsci, the study of how we understand phenomena and of how and why particular conceptions of the world ... filter down into the consciousness of the masses was part of a larger enterprise whose aim was the socialist restructuring of capitalist society." Gramsci not only contends that "the choice and criticism of a conception of the world is itself a political fact" (Q11, §12; MPW 61). He argues that political transformation requires grasping how particular conceptions of the world become effective.

Gramsci's appeal to apply "the labours of one's own brain" and thereby participate "in the creation in the history of the world" stands at the head of Q11, §12. We then encounter four notes on the relationship between criticism and conceptions of the world. All four emphasize the necessity of strengthening one's conception of the world. The first note begins:

> For his own conception of the world a man [*sic*] always belongs to a certain grouping ... When his conception of the world is not critical and coherent but haphazard and disconnected he belongs simultaneously to a multiplicity of men-masses ... Criticizing one's own conception of the world means, therefore, to make it coherent and unified ... one cannot be a philosopher, that is, have a critically coherent conception of the world, without being aware of its history. (Q11, §12; MPW 58–59)

And this is why, as Gramsci concludes this note, "the starting-point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is, and is 'knowing thyself' as a product of the historical process ... which ha[s] deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory" (Q11, §12; SPN 324). This infinity of traces shapes one's conception of the world. Thus the first step of Marxist criticism is to "compile such an inventory" and thereby produce a critical, coherent conception of the world:

> In the most immediate and relevant sense, one cannot be a philosopher, by which I mean have a critical and coherent conception of the world, without having a consciousness of its historicity ... and of the fact that it contradicts other conceptions or elements of other conceptions. One's conception of the world is a response to certain specific problems posed by reality. (Q11, §12; SPN 324)

Gramsci therefore equates Marxist criticism, and indeed philosophy itself, with the formation of a coherent conception of the world. This, he contends, is the essence of Marxist philosophy: the critical historicizing of one's conception of the world.

This is a collective political project that centers upon a doubting "I," a questioning "one," who is always already an historical, social being. For Gramsci insists that "philosophy" is not a rarified activity executed only by traditional intellectuals. Rather, he writes that "everyone is a philosopher, even if in his [*sic*] own way, unconsciously (because even in the smallest manifestation of any intellectual activity – 'language' – is contained a definite conception of the world)" (Q11, §12; MPW 58; cf. SPN 323). This may seem paradoxical. On one hand, Gramsci argues that everyone is always already a philosopher (albeit unconsciously), to the extent that language, folklore,[4] common sense,[5] religion, and so forth provide everyone with some conception of the world; thus, everyone is a philosopher because the *potential* for critical reflection is inherent. Yet for Gramsci, the achievement of a coherent conception of the world involves the critical *transformation* of the prevailing common sense, folklore, and so forth. And Gramsci contends that this inherent capacity is everywhere lacking. Everyone has a philosophy qua conception of the world, yet only "unconsciously" (here Gramsci's Marxism seems to be a question of making the unconscious conscious).[6] Gramsci addresses this paradox through the (potentially revolutionary and potentially limitless) process of deepening the criticism of our conceptions of the world. This is what Gramsci means when he defines philosophy as criticism of one's conception of the world: Marxism is a means to enact this critical labor. Thus "conception of the world" functions in the *Prison Notebooks* as both an analytical/descriptive and a moral/political concept.

3

Suppose we accept Gramsci's contention that the task of Marxism is to criticize conceptions of the world. On what basis do we *evaluate* these distinct conceptions? Gramsci offers three answers in the *Prison Notebooks*.

We have already seen the first, *coherence*: "Criticizing one's own conception of the world means ... to make it coherent and unified" (Q11, §12; MPW 59). Relative coherence measures the self-consistency and cohesiveness of a particular conception of the world. Here we should remember that, for Gramsci, such "coherence" is not solely analytical. A coherent conception of the world is one that not only makes sense, intellectually, but can be lived, practically and politically (see Fontana 1993: ch. 2; Thomas 2009: ch. 8).[7]

Gramsci's second standard is *historicism*. A conception of the world will be strong to the extent that it is integral to its historical conditions of becoming and able to consciously account for these. Gramsci

frequently represents the intervention of Marxism into the history of philosophy as the historicizing of thought such that it may become an integral conception of the world. Consider his note on "'Creative' philosophy":

> Classical German philosophy introduced the concept of "creativity" of thought, but in an idealistic and speculative sense. It seems that the philosophy of praxis alone has been able to take philosophy a step forward, basing itself on classical German philosophy but avoiding any tendency towards solipsism, and historicizing thought in that it assumes it in the form of a conception of the world ... and diffused in such a way as to convert itself into an active norm of conduct. (Q11 §59; SPN 346)

In this passage we can see Gramsci joining the first two standards. For Gramsci the possibility of dialectical unity of thought and practice – where they become rigorously diffused through "an active norm of conduct" – is possible only through "historicizing thought in that it assumes it in the form of a conception of the world."

The third standard is *self-sufficiency*. By this I refer to Gramsci's argument that conceptions of the world should be evaluated for their capacity to integrate (*integrazione*) other conceptions of the world.[8] Gramsci explains:

> A prime criterion for judging ... conceptions of the world ... is the following: can the conception of the world ... be conceived of as "isolated," "independent," bearing entire responsibility for the collective life? Or is that impossible, and must it be conceived of as "integration" [*integrazione*] or perfecting of – or counterweight to – another conception of the world ...? (Q15, §6; SPN 157; QC 1759–1761)

In other words, Gramsci demands that we evaluate the precise degree to which a given conception of the world is historically responsible to the "collective life" from which it is derived. A conception of the world should be measured for its capacity to represent and ultimately transform the world of the very social group from which it derives. A powerful conception of the world is capable of a high degree of self-determination, that is, may unify other fragmentary conceptions.

Taken together, Gramsci's three standards can help us evaluate the relative strengths and capacities of distinct conceptions of the world. His point is that Marxists must struggle to make communism effective – in this triple sense – as a conception of the world. For a conception of the world to achieve hegemony literally means that it becomes a leading conception of the world, a world-shaping, practical body of thought.

Gramsci's model here is, indubitably, the world-shaping thought and practice of Marx and Lenin:

> Surely what Marx wanted to indicate was the historical function of his philosophy ...? With Ilich [Lenin] this really came about in a particular territory. I have referred elsewhere to the philosophical importance of the concept and the fact of hegemony, for which Ilich is responsible. Hegemony realised means the real critique of a philosophy, its real dialectic. Compare here what Graziadei writes ...: he puts forward Marx as a unit in a series of great men of science. Fundamental error: none of the others has produced an original and integral conception of the world. Marx initiates intellectually an historical epoch which will last in all probability for centuries, that is, until the disappearance of political society and the coming of a regulated society. (Q7, §33; SPN 381–382)

The implication is clear: Marx alone "produced an original and integral conception of the world," albeit one that was not *realized* until the 1917 revolution (cf. Saccarelli 2008). His accomplishment was to produce a conception of the world with potentially profound coherence.

4

Among geographers, part of Gramsci's attraction stems from his examination of the relationship between nature and society (see especially Mann 2009). We should note, therefore, that Gramsci's arguments about nature and society are tightly related to his analysis of conceptions of the world. To be sure, "nature" and "world" – though often interrelated concepts for geographers – are clearly not the same for Gramsci. By calling for a critical conception of the world he is not proposing meditation on nature. What then is their relation in Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*?

A preliminary answer is provided by Fontana, who argues that for Gramsci nature–society relations are always implicated in the making of "conceptions of the world":

> In Gramsci ... nature *qua* nature is an empty category, without value, purpose, or direction. To acquire meaning and content nature can only be – or must become – history. And history ... is, for Gramsci, politics. For to act and to struggle within history is to engage in the transformation of the present reality, a process which ... involves the formation and proliferation of a way of life and a way of thinking – that is, a conception of the world. (1996: 223)[9]

Fontana correctly notes that Gramsci does not equate nature with the world, and that the mediation of nature and society will require the production of a Marxist conception of the world. But why and how?

To answer these questions, we should consider Q10, §54, "What is man?" – arguably the key note concerning nature and humanity in the *Prison Notebooks*.[10] Gramsci begins by observing that the question "What is man?" is "the primary and principal question that philosophy asks" (SPN 351).[11] Gramsci responds to this problem by immediately rebutting any attempt to look for a definition of "humanity" in the existence of any individual: "But we are not interested in what every individual man is." We must instead establish some means to query humanity ontologically. And this is what Gramsci, in a series of lapidary questions, proceeds to do: "Reflecting on it, we can see that in putting the question 'What is man?' what we mean is: what can man become? That is, can man dominate his own destiny, can he 'make himself,' can he create his own life [*dominare il proprio destino, può "farsi," può crearsi una vita*]?" (SPN 351). Gramsci answers these questions in two ways. First, he defines "man" as "the process of his actions" (Q10, §54; SPN 351). Narrowly interpreted, this means that humanity is *praxis*, nature in its practical form as living labor. But Gramsci stresses that this should be conceptualized not so much as a statement about the work of "man" upon "the world," but rather about how we *make ourselves* as beings of the world: "we want to know," Gramsci writes, "what we are and what we can become; whether we really are, and if so to what extent, "makers of our own selves," of our life, and of our destiny. And we want to know this "today," in the given conditions of today, the conditions of our daily life" (SPN 351).

Gramsci claims that the result of this demand is a conception of the world. In other words, the "origin" of every conception of the world lies in the questioning, by actual human beings, about our lives and the world. Gramsci affirms the universality of this questioning as a potential source of transcendence, while also criticizing metaphysics and lamenting the general weakness of popular philosophical thought. For unfortunately, this questioning is typically short-circuited by religion – and specifically in Italy by Catholicism, which provided the dominant answers to these questions in the 1930s (and made it fundamental to fascist hegemony). Thus he writes: "when we ask ourselves 'what is man?,' what importance do his will and his concrete activity have in creating himself and the life he lives? what we mean is: *is Catholicism a correct conception of the world* ... ?" (SPN 351; emphasis added). For Gramsci, of course, it is not. But that is not all. It is not so simple for a Marxist to "prove" that Catholicism is an incorrect conception of the world. First of all, as we have seen, conceptions of the world are not simply right or wrong; they are differentially coherent, historicized, and self-sufficient. Second, Gramsci knows that Catholics would reply to an argument that tried to show the "incorrectness" of Catholicism by

observing that "no other conception [of the world] is followed punctiliously either," and, Gramsci adds, "they would be right. But all this shows is that there does not exist, historically, a way of seeing things and of acting which is equal for all men, no more no less" (SPN 351–352). This is why we cannot answer the question "what is man?" by discovering what any "individual man" *is*. There is no essence with which to answer this question.

I noted earlier that Gramsci offers two distinct answers to the question "What is man?" First, he defines "man" via the process of his action, or *praxis*. His second answer is to define humanity *relationally*. This is why it is impossible to understand humanity on the basis of a study, however exhaustive, of an individual. Gramsci argues that "man" must be examined on three horizons: the individual; the relations with others; and the relations with nature. This inherent relationality of "man" binds each of these three dimensions to the others:

> all hitherto existing philosophies [before Marxism] ... reproduce this position of Catholicism, that they conceive of man as an individual ... It is on this point that it is necessary to reform the concept of man. I mean that one must conceive of man as a series of active relationships (a process) in which individuality ... is not ... the only element to be taken into account. The humanity which is reflected in each [individual] is composed of ...: 1. the individual; 2. other men; 3. the natural world. (Q10, §54; SPN 352)

Two things should be stressed about this critique of the conventional conception of humanity as a mass of individuals. First, Gramsci proposes that each individual is "composed of ... other men." Thus the *other* is constitutive for Gramsci. Second, humanity is "composed of ... the natural world." Humanity *is* world. Gramsci elaborates:

> Man does not enter into relations with the natural world just by being himself part of the natural world, but actively, by means of work and technique. Further: these relations are not mechanical. They are active and conscious. They correspond to the greater or lesser degree of understanding that each man has of them. So one could say that each one of us changes himself, modifies himself to the extent that he changes and modifies the complex relations of which he is the hub. In this sense the real philosopher is ... the politician, the active man who modifies the environment, understanding by environment the *ensemble* of relations which each of us enters to take part in. (SPN 352)

In this brilliant passage, Gramsci recapitulates Marx's approach to nature and society. Gramsci argues that "nature" and "society" are to be understood as inseparable, active relations. Although his argument

is derivative of Marx, what I find especially noteworthy is that for Gramsci nature–society relations are inseparably related to the problem of forging critical conceptions of the world. They are joined through the struggles of distinct social groups.

There is some tendency to conceptualize nature as an effect of discursive practices or "culture" *sui generis*. Gramsci provides a noteworthy counterpoint to such thinking, since in his *Notebooks* we find (as with most political ecologists) a recognition of the complexities in the way that natural processes come to life in social struggles. But against a conventional reading, Gramsci's descriptions of the social relations that produce a given conception of the world are not thematized as "culture."[12] A key passage written before his imprisonment helps to clarify how Gramsci interprets the relationship between culture, nature, and historical transformation:

> Culture is ... organization, discipline of one's inner self, it is ownership of one's own personality, is the attainment of a superior conscience, through which one's own historical worth, one's role in life, one's rights and duties become understood. However, all of the above cannot occur by spontaneous evolution, by actions and reactions independent of one's will ... Man is above all spirit, that is, historical creation; it is not nature. Otherwise, it would be difficult to explain why, the exploited and the exploiter and the creator of wealth and its egotistic consumers having always existed, socialism has not been realized yet. The fact is that only gradually – layer upon layer – has mankind become aware of its worth and has conquered the right to live independently of the planning and the rights of minorities that have asserted themselves in prior times. And this conscience has been shaped not through the brutal sting of physiological necessities, but through intelligent reflection ... about the best methods to convert a state of vassalage into a state of rebellion and social reconstruction ... every revolution has been preceded by ... intense critical activity. (Gramsci *c.* 1916, cited in Santucci 2010[2005]: 35)

Note that Gramsci defines "culture" in the opening line cited here as a form of organization and discipline that may facilitate "the attainment of a superior conscience," through which one can appreciate "one's own historical worth" and "role in life." This is a long way from the standard anthropological conception (which is too often read into Gramsci's references to culture). Rather, in this passage Gramsci provides an early glimpse of his mature analysis of conceptions of the world. His appeal to the "discipline of one's inner self ... ownership of one's own personality... the attainment of a superior conscience" would become an argument for seeing Marxism as a uniquely powerful conception of the world.

Gramsci argues in a fashion that may strike us as idealist: "man is above all spirit, that is, historical creation ... not nature." But as in "What is man?" Gramsci is in no way denying the naturalness or worldliness of human life; on the contrary, he insists, humanity is composed of natural as well as social relations. His point here is that there is nothing natural – in the sense of pregiven or predestined – about the hegemony of a given social order, including its prevailing conception of the world. This conception of the world is the result of earlier historical struggles which have laid down, "layer upon layer," the consciousness of "the right to live independently of the planning and the rights of minorities": that is, of the rights of elites to plunder subaltern social groups. And this expansion of the horizon of our conception of rights has been won, Gramsci asserts, through "intelligent reflection, at first by a few and then by an entire social class," that is the proletariat. Gramsci conceptualizes the transformation of our world as a historical process involving "intelligent reflection" as an integral element in fomenting rebellion and reconstruction. Later, Gramsci's own self-reflection on the qualities of this "intelligent reflection" would give rise to his notes on conceptions of the world and his argument that the transformation of the world and the critique of one's conception of the world form a dialectical unity – to be achieved in worldly praxis.

5

To conclude, we should consider how Gramsci's conception of the world is related to his Marx-inspired approach to nature. At the outset of Chapter 7 of *Capital*, Marx opens his analysis of the valorization of labor by defining labor as "a process between man and nature," an exchange relation (1976[1867]: 283). While human labor is inherently a work of nature, Marx insists, it is also essentially social and distinctively human (Marx says he presupposes "labour in a form which ... is ... exclusively human": 1976: 284). This raises a thorny question. If labor is a process through which humanity metabolically transforms nature, what distinguishes the changes wrought by human labor from all the other changes that are constantly occurring through natural processes? What, if anything, defines the essentially *human* element of this socionatural process? Marx answers:

> [W]hat distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is that the architect builds the cell in his mind before he constructs it in wax. At the end of every labour process, a result emerges which had already been

> conceived by the worker at the beginning, and hence already existed ideally. Man not only effects a change of form in the materials of nature; he also realizes [*verklicht*] his own purposes in those materials. And this is a purpose he is conscious of, it determines the mode of his activity with the rigidity of a law, and he must subordinate his will to it. This subordination is no mere momentary act. Apart from the exertion of the working organs, a purposeful will is required for the entire duration of the work. This means close attention. (1976: 284)

Three elements align here which define Marx's conception of nature and social life: the practice of labor, the worker's conception of the object, the realization of will (i.e., consciousness). Stated otherwise, it is the unity of practice–consciousness–will which distinguishes *human* laboring as a socionatural process.

Gramsci was more than familiar with these lines, and their ethos is clearly apparent in his writings on nature–society relations. Upon reflection it is striking how Gramsci's writings on "conceptions of the world" repeat these themes. Marx, confronting the challenge of specifying the distinctly human, emphasizes the conscious willfulness ("a purposeful will is required") within human labor that remains, essentially, worldly exchange, transformation within socionature. In this light, Gramsci's emphasis on the necessity of transforming one's conception of the world reflects a faithful Marxist attempt to conceptualize the task of a communist as a peculiar sort of labor. Changing the world, Gramsci argues, requires the labor of transforming our conception of the world. This labor, no less than any other, entails some sort of metabolic transformation of socionature (hence Gramsci's emphasis on the transformation of the nervous system!). Yet this change does not come "naturally," for it requires the subordination of a will – specifically to undo one's precritical conception of the world. Just as Marx's laborer realizes her essential purpose in the conscious transformation of "the materials of nature" (Marx 1976: 284), Gramsci's communist realizes her aims by "consciously" reshaping her "conception of the world ... with the labours of [her] own brain" in order to "take an active part in the creation of the history of the world" (Q11, §12; SPN 323).

Gramsci emphasizes his debts to Marx. Consider Q12, §2, which reveals Gramsci's understanding of how Marx's conception of nature and society allows him to imagine the production of a stronger conception of the world:

> [Marx's] discovery that the relations between the social and natural orders are mediated by ... theoretical and practical activity, creates the first elements of an intuition of the world free from all magic and superstition. It provides a basis for the subsequent development of an historical, 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. (Q12, §2; SPN 34–35)

What exactly does this "historical, dialectical conception of the world" comprise? I will conclude with two remarks on this question.

First, this is not the "constantly shifting dialectic between society and land-based resources" (Blaikie & Brookfield 1987: 17) that sometimes defines the object of political ecology (and which often seems to mean little more than "nature and society are all mixed up together").[13] That is because, as Gramsci argues in "What is man?" we cannot presuppose the very distinction between nature and society:

> One must study the position of Professor Lukács towards the philosophy of praxis. It would appear that Lukács maintains that one can speak of the dialectic only for the history of men and not for nature. He might be right and he might be wrong. If his assertion presupposes a dualism between nature and man he is wrong because he is falling into a conception of nature proper to religion and to Graeco-Christian philosophy and also to idealism which does not in reality succeed in unifying and relating man and nature to each other except verbally. But if human history should be conceived also as the history of nature ... how can the dialectic be separated from nature? (Q10, §54; SPN 448)

Nothing would be more undialectical than to presume that nature and society are distinct and to imagine sorting out the myriad ways that they combine.

Second, Gramsci's dialectical conception of the world differs from Engels' *Dialectic of Nature*. For Gramsci, there is no dialectic *in* nature. Dialectic may be "natural" insofar as its movement cannot be separated from humanity's own natural history, but it is not inherent in nature (Finocchiaro 1988: 159–162; Amparán 1991: 125). To quote Fontana again, nothing is inherent in nature for Gramsci. Indeed, Gramsci's use of the concepts "nature" and "world" undermines the capacity to treat them as mere entities. We could say of Gramsci what Sartre once said of the work of Marx: "we never find entities. Totalities ... are living; they furnish their own definitions within the framework of the research" (1968[1960]: 26). And what provides the framework of Gramsci's research into conceptions of the world, of course, is the struggle for communism. Thus while his conceptions of nature and human nature were fundamentally indebted to Marx, Gramsci's analysis of "conceptions of the world" decisively extends the Marxist tradition.

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Notes

1 The earliest use I have found is November 1, 1923. From 1930, see especially Q4, §1 (May 1930), Q4, §13 (June 1930), and Q6, §10 (December 1930) (dates estimated from Buttigieg's notes in PNII and PNIII).

2 Apparently Guido Liguori discusses this concept in a subsection in *Sentieri gramsciani* (2006), but my attempts to locate this book have been fruitless.

3 Gramsci suggests that "conceptions of the world" is a term developed by Croce and also discussed by Gentile (cf. Q10II, §1; Q10I, §10). I suspect Gentile and Gramsci adapted the term from Croce (see Thomas 2009) – yet regardless of the precise genealogy, Gramsci develops his own original uses of it, much as he does with Lenin's "hegemony."

4 "Folklore should ... be studied as a 'conception of the world and life' implicit to a large extent in determinate ... strata of society and in opposition ... to 'official' conceptions of the world" (Q27, §1; SCW 189).

5 Gramsci begins Q11, §13 with a scathing critique of Bukharin, arguing that any effort to popularize Marxism must begin by transforming common sense: "A work like the *Popular Manual* ... should have taken as its starting point a critical analysis of the philosophy of common sense, which is the 'philosophy of non-philosophers,' or in other words the conception of the world which is uncritically absorbed by the various social and cultural environments in which the moral individuality of the average man is developed. Common sense is ... the 'folklore' of philosophy, and, like folklore, it takes countless different forms. Its most fundamental characteristic is that it is a conception which ... is fragmentary, incoherent and inconsequential, in conformity with the social and cultural position of those masses whose philosophy it is" (SPN 419).

6 One of the ambiguities of Gramsci's "conceptions of the world" concerns his theory of consciousness. The ambiguity can be ascertained in a fluctuation in Gramsci's treatment of the task of changing "conceptions of the world." At times it seems as if he sees this task as ontological; at other times he seems to treat the transformation of conceptions of the world as the result of conscious labor. A reason for this ambiguity, I suggest, is the lack of an explicit theory of consciousness in the *Prison Notebooks*. I have tried to do justice to this fluctuation by not fixing it.

7 The concept emerges in the *Notebooks* for practical political reasons. Reflecting upon the failures of Marxism in Italy and "the West" – which did not enjoy Lenin's circumstances – Gramsci concludes that it would not be enough for the proletariat to simply seize the state, since the capitalist state was an ensemble of social relations, woven through the entire fabric of society, that would be defended by civil society. From this he derives the argument that the achievement of communism in "the West" would require a new conception of the world.

8 In a commentary on an earlier version of this chapter, Finocchiaro writes: "Gramsci talks of *integrazione* (i.e., integration), but with this word he means to convey a point which is the opposite of that of organic wholeness [as I had mistakenly interpreted it – JDW] ... Gramsci is saying that a conception of the world is inadequate insofar as it needs to be integrated into or with another, that is, insofar as it needs such 'integration'" (2009: 8). I concede this point. However, the matter is complex. With regard to the second standard, Gramsci seems in fact to be pointing to the fact that a powerful conception of the world may potentially serve as a kind of *totality*; for instance, the Catholic conception of the world provides a totalizing system for incorporating morality, history, and so on. Finocchiaro elaborates: "To be linguistically faithful to Gramsci, one should use the term 'totalitarian,' and speak of totalitarianism as a criterion of adequacy of conceptions of the world. Gramsci's term totalitarianism means pertaining to totality, that is, self-sufficiency and universality. However, the use of the term totalitarian would be problematic, to say the least, because of its pejorative connotations ... So it might be best to speak simply of self-sufficiency."

9 Fontana shows that Gramsci uses "nature" in five distinct ways in the *Prison Notebooks*: (1) nature as undifferentiated matter; (2) nature as "second nature"; (3) nature as the irrational, instinct; (4) nature as chaos and disorder; (5) nature as "(potential) overcoming of the domination and conquest of nature" (Fontana 1996: 221). (Fontana overemphasizes the first and fifth points, in my view.)

10 Note the gendered language typical of Gramsci. To avoid taxing my reader's patience I will not insert '*sic*' after each "man."

11 This note is found at QC 1343–1346, Gerratana's 1975 Italian edition of the *Prison Notebooks*; MPW 76–81, Marks's 1957 translation; and SPN 351–357, Hoare and Nowell-Smith's 1971 translation. The complexities of reading Gramsci's *Notebooks* can be gleaned from the fact that the number of paragraphs that make up "What is man?" varies in each: Gerratana (3); Marks (12); Hoare and Nowell-Smith (13). As the concordance tables at the IGS website note, the Hoare and Nowell-Smith (1971) version of this note is forged from the unity of two different notes: Q10II, §54 = SPN 351–354 (up to "every man is a man of science, etc."); Q7, §35 = SPN 354–357 (at http://www.internationalgramscisociety.org/resources/concordance_table/anthologies.html, accessed May 25, 2012). I focus on Q10II, §54.

12 On the origins of Gramsci qua culture theorist, see Saccarelli 2008: 40–42. Since Gramsci's "cultural" side is frequently overstated, let me stress that his analyses of conceptions of the world are rooted in Marxist political economy (see Thomas 2009: §8.5; Wainwright 2010b).
13 Compare Mann 2007: 205 n. 62.

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