Between 1982 and 1988, Terence K. Hopkins, Immanuel Wallerstein and I wrote a series of essays on antisystemic movements that were reprinted in a book published the very year of the fall of the Berlin Wall (Arrighi et al 1989). Three years later we published an article that interpreted the events of 1989-1991 as a continuation of the main tendencies highlighted in that book (Arrighi et al 1992). The purpose of this paper is threefold. First, it aims at assessing to what extent the arguments advanced in these writings remain valid. Second, it will use Antonio Gramsci’s notions of “Piedmontese function” and “passive revolution” to amend some of the shortcomings of those arguments. Finally, it shows how world hegemonies can be conceived as consisting of passive revolutions in Gramsci’s sense.

I. The Great Rehearsal.

The thesis advanced in Antisystemic Movements can be summed up in five propositions. First, opposition to oppression has been a constant of the modern world-system. Nevertheless, before the middle of the nineteenth century this opposition was short-term and “spontaneous,” and as such largely ineffectual at the level of the system. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in contrast, opposition to oppression became organized in relatively permanent institutions with short- and long-term political objectives. This innovation had important repercussions on the dynamic of the world capitalist system, as specified by the second and third propositions below (Arrighi et al 1989: 29-30).

Second, as instituted in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, antisystemic movements were of two main varieties: movements that defined oppression in class terms and aimed at replacing capitalism with socialism (social movements); and movements that defined oppression in ethno-national terms and aimed at self-determination (national liberation movements). In spite of differences in their definition of the problem and in the
social basis of their support, both kinds of movements saw the attainment of state power as the primary, mid-term objective in the pursuit of their respective long-term objectives of ending class and ethno-national oppression. And both kinds of movements tended to split over whether to seek state power through the legal path of political persuasion or the illegal path of insurrectionary force. This tendency was particularly strong in the social(ist) movement, which during and after the First World War split into two increasingly antagonistic factions--a Social-Democratic and a Communist faction (Arrighi et al 1989: 30-32).

Third, divisions and antagonisms notwithstanding, this “family” of movements was eminently successful in attaining the intermediate objective of obtaining state power. Social-democratic parties came to power in a relatively large number of core countries, communist parties in a significant number of semiperipheral and peripheral countries, and nationalist parties in most peripheral countries. Antisystemic movements thus became collectively an increasingly consequential element in world politics. At the same time, however, they were distinctly less successful in moving towards their ultimate objectives. They did wrest many “concessions” from the world’s ruling strata. But they failed in lessening inequalities between classes and ethno-nations. Worse still they often turned their institutional underpinnings into new instruments of class and/or ethno-national oppression (Arrighi et al 1989: 33-34, 100-2).

Fourth, the new “family” of antisystemic movements that shook the world around 1968 was simultaneously a reaction against the recuperative powers of prosystemic forces under US hegemony and a reaction against the poor, even negative, performance of the world’s old left movements--their “weakness, corruption, connivance, neglect and arrogance.” The explosion was a major contributing factor of the systemic crisis of the 1970’s. Although the movements were soon checked everywhere, the changes in power relations effected by the movements were not reversed. Four main changes in particular persisted: (a) a reduced capacity of First and Second World states to police the Third World; (b) a reduced capacity of dominant status groups in core countries (older generations, males, “majorities”) to exploit/exclude subordinate status-groups (younger generations, females, “minorities”); (c) a reduced capacity of managerial strata to enforce labor discipline in the workplace and associated global search for “safe heavens” of such discipline; (d) a reduced capacity of states to control their respective civil societies and associated crisis of “bourgeois” and “proletarian” dictatorships alike (Arrighi et al 1989:103-6).

Finally, these changes in power relations in favor of subordinate groups and classes did not result in an
improvement in the material welfare of the majority of each subordinate group. On the contrary, since the reproduction of material welfare under capitalism is premised upon the political and social subordination of the actual or potential laboring masses, the lessening of this subordination tended to reduce material welfare. This tendency, we suggested, probably underlay the cultural and political backlash of the late 1970's and of the 1980's against everything 1968 had stood for (Arrighi et al 1989: 107-8).

Looking beyond this backlash, and having drawn a parallel between 1848 and 1968 as “great rehearsals,” we had a hard time answering the question “1968, rehearsal for what?” We projected probable realignments in the alliances of the interstate system, increased economic turbulence, a geographical widened class struggle, an increasing inability of states to control civil societies, and a persistent reinforcement of the claims to equality by all disadvantaged status-groups. But we concluded the last essay in the series with a frank admission and a warning.

We have no answer to the question: 1968, rehearsal for what? In a sense, the answers depend on the ways in which the worldwide family of antisystemic movements will rethink its middle-range strategy in the ten or twenty years to come.... The risks of drifting are very clear. The tenants of the status quo have not given up, however much their position is weakened structurally and ideologically. They still have enormous power and are using it to reconstruct a new inequalitarian world order. They could succeed. Or the world could disintegrate, from a nuclear or ecological catastrophe. Or it could be reconstructed in the way people hoped, in 1848, in 1968. (Arrighi et al 1989: 115).

II. 1989, The Continuation of 1968

These theses were advanced before 1989. When in 1989 the Soviet Empire began to unravel leading to the collapse of the USSR and of the Second World, we had little difficulty in fitting the event in our scheme of things as “the continuation of 1968.” Indeed, we redefined 1968 as only the beginning of a rehearsal that continued until 1989. In the double rejection that 1968 represented--of the present world-system and of the old left antisystemic movements--the forces of the 1968 upheaval still persisted in holding on to two illusions of the old left: the idea that the collapse of the system was imminent and that “there existed some alternative policy, easy at hand, which if adopted and pursued by the ‘movement’ would bring about ‘revolution’ and therewith true and full ‘national development’.... The two decades between 1968 and 1989 swept away these remaining illusions” (Arrighi et al 1992: 237).

In that sense the 1989 finale of the 1968 world revolutionary rehearsal was far worse than the initial outburst, but also far better for the world’s antisystemic forces. It was far worse because it lacked the incredible degree of joy and optimism that suffused the revolutionaries of 1968.... But it was better too, in that the last vestiges of the old left illusions seemed shattered, leaving space to reconstruct. No doubt the reconstruction would require that not only the old ideological scaffolding but its debris (the blather about the market as magic) had to be cleared away. Still, it had at least become possible to do so. (Arrighi et al 1992: 238)
Once again, however, we had very little to say about the “what,” “who” and “how” of the possible reconstruction. We reiterated the challenges and opportunities that the decline of the states as significant organizing centers of the global economy’s development posed to antisystemic forces. We pointed out that “What movements and social groups expect in terms of democracy, human rights, equality, and quality of life has become extraordinarily high, just as the states find it increasingly difficult to meet these demands. This is the crunch the world-system is facing as the twentieth century comes to an end” (Arrighi et al 1992: 232-6). And we again underscored that “The key problem for putative antisystemic movements in the 1990's is the search for a new or renewed ideology, that is, a set of strategies that offers some reasonable prospect for fundamental social transformation” (Arrighi et al 1992: 239).

But all we had to say about this “set of strategies” is that they were absent and that their absence translated into an embarrassing silence of antisystemic movements North and South, concerning the three spontaneous claims of oppressed persons and groups: the right to total otherness; the right of power confrontation other than as part of a social project; and the right of instant egalitarianism. The old antisystemic movements had contested these claims on the ground that they were the bearers of a viable and much more efficacious alternative. But once the new antisystemic movements had rejected this alternative as neither viable nor efficacious without putting anything in its place, the old antisytemic movements found it extremely difficult to deal with the spontaneous claims that came once more to the fore.

We illustrated these difficulties with the ambiguity with which antisystemic militants confronted three political situations “which may well serve as prototypes for the forms of struggles of the next 30 years”: the Iranian revolution as the incarnation of the right to total otherness; the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait as the incarnation of the right of power confrontation; and the massive unauthorized migration from South to North as the incarnation of the right to instant egalitarianism. In the face of this ambiguity, we concluded with a rhetorical question and a warning very similar to that uttered on the eve of 1989: “where is... a new strategy for transformation in the direction of a democratic, egalitarian world, the erstwhile objective of the antisystemic movements? The dilemmas of the antisystemic movements seem to be even more profound than those of the dominant forces of the world-system. In any case, without a strategy, there is no good reason to believe there is any invisible hand that will guarantee
transformation in a good direction, even when and if the capitalist world-economy falls apart” (Arrighi et al 1992: 242)

III. The Great Rehearsal Revisited

Looking back at these utterances and silences ten years later three main critical considerations come to mind, inspired as much by the observation of trends and events as by the results of new research on the dynamic of the modern world system (see especially Arrighi and Silver et al 1999). The first consideration concerns the nature and significance of the neo-liberal counterrevolution that occurred between 1979 and 1982. The counterrevolution had a financial, a military and a political aspect. The financial aspect consisted of the US-driven escalation of interstate competition for mobile capital. The military aspect consisted of a simultaneous escalation of the armament race with the USSR and the replacement of direct involvement on the ground with wars by proxy through the instrumental use of Third World conflicts. And the political aspect consisted of the ideological and practical appropriation by the US of the anti-authoritarian and anti-statist thrust of 1968. 1989 was as much the result of this counterrevolution as it was the continuation of 1968. In retrospect, it seems to me that we underestimated and in key respects missed altogether what all this meant for antisystemic movements.

More specifically, the neo-liberal counterrevolution did not just result in the destruction of the illusions of the older family of antisystemic movements as we pointed out. As we do not seem to have realized, it had also a profoundly corrupting and divisive impact on the 1968 family of antisystemic movements. In the North in general and in the US in particular, the corruption of antisystemic forces has primarily taken the form of an acritical acceptance of the benefits of financial expansion and of the conversion of dominant groups to the anti-authoritarian and anti-statist thrust of 1968. In the South, it has taken the form of an equally acritical acceptance of the neo-liberal or some other religious creed as a prop or a substitute for the discredited ideology and practice of national emancipation. In themselves these trajectories of corruption have divided and increasingly alienated from one another antisystemic forces within the South and between North and South. But underlying the division and mutual alienation of antisystemic forces was the success of the neo-liberal counterrevolution in shifting competitive pressures from North to South. Corruption and divisions have not prevented antisystemic forces from resisting with some success further advances of the counterrevolution—from Seattle, through the formation and consolidation of the Social Forum, to the anti-war movement of 2003. But it remains unclear whether this resistance can produce an
agency capable of promoting change in the direction of a more egalitarian and democratic world (see Silver and Arrighi 2001).

The second critical consideration concerns our failure to foresee, as we could have with a different understanding of the long-term dynamic of the modern world system, the short- and middle-term impact of the counterrevolution and underlying financial expansion, not just on the antisystemic movements of 1968, but on the world capitalist system as instituted under US hegemony. We failed to foresee, first, the reflation of US world power that occurred in the 1990's and, second, the mid-term de-stabilization and possible systemic breakdown that seems to have begun in the early 2000's. Breakdowns of this kind have been typical of past hegemonic transitions and one may well be on the verge of occurring in the present transition as well (Arrighi and Silver 2001). But whether it does or not, the fact that in the present as in previous transitions pro-systemic forces have unwittingly played a leading role in creating the conditions of the breakdown makes the very concept of antystemic forces and movements problematic. It blurs the distinction between pro- and anti-systemic forces, because nominally pro-systemic forces engage in activities that de-stabilize the system, while nominally anti-systemic forces engage in activities that have the opposite effect. The difficulties we face today in drawing such a distinction are not altogether different from those we still face in interpreting the 1930's and 1940's, when fascism and colonial imperialism were de-stabilizing forces and communism emerged as a stabilizing force.

Last but not least, looking beyond the belle epoque of the 1990's and the incipient systemic chaos, we failed to appreciate the world-historical significance of the rise of East Asia as the new epicenter of the global economy. East Asia, most notably Vietnam and China, were the true epicenters of the world revolution of 1968. Whether there is any connection between this fact and the subsequent regional economic renaissance--with Japan, the Four Tigers and the PRC as its successive protagonists--largely remains an open question. But the more important and equally open question is whether and how the relocation of the epicenter of the global economy from North America to East Asia will be affected economically, politically and culturally by the incipient systemic chaos. More specifically, will the East Asian economic Renaissance be overwhelmed by systemic chaos or will it be transformed into a political and cultural Renaissance capable of leading the continuing “revolt against the West” towards the formation of a more egalitarian and democratic world order?
IV. Gramsci’s Piedmontese Function

It is in this connection that Gramsci’s notion of a “Piedmontese function” becomes relevant to understanding the past and imagining the future of the “active” and “passive” revolutions of the world capitalist system. Gramsci (1971: 104-106) introduced the concept with reference to the fact that in the Italian Risorgimento a state (Piedmont) exercised the function of a “ruling class,” that is, that a state replaced social groups in leading a struggle of renewal.

The function of Piedmont in the Italian Risorgimento is that of a “ruling class”. In reality, what was involved was not that throughout the peninsula there existed nuclei of a homogeneous ruling class whose irresistible tendency to unite determined the formation of the new Italian national State. These nuclei existed, indubitably, but their tendency to unite was extremely problematic; also, more importantly, they... were not “leading”.... They... wanted a new force, independent of every compromise and condition, to become the arbiter of the Nation: this force was Piedmont.... Thus Piedmont had a function which can from certain aspects, be compared to that of a party, i.e. of the leading personnel of a social group (and in fact people always spoke of the “Piedmont party”): with the additional feature that it was in fact a State, with an army, a diplomatic service, etc. (Gramsci 1971: 104-5)

As Gramsci underscored, this substitution of a state for a class in leading a struggle for renewal was not a specifically Italian phenomenon. Thus, he mentioned Serbia before the First World War as the unsuccessful “Piedmont of the Balkans”. More important for our present purposes, he pointed out that the substitution was not merely a national phenomenon. Thus, in Gramsci’s view, France after 1789 up to the coup d’état of Louis Napoleon acted as the “Piedmont of Europe” (Gramsci 1971: 105, 115-20). Whether at the national or at the international level, Gramsci saw a close connection between the exercise of a Piedmontese function and the unfolding of what (following Vincenzo Cuoco) he called “passive revolution”. As Quintin Hoare points out in an editorial note, Gramsci used the expression “passive revolution” in two distinct and sometimes inconsistent ways. On the one hand, he used it to designate major social and political transformations that occur without mass participation under the impact of outside forces. On the other hand, he used it to designate “molecular” social transformations that occur behind the back and against the declared intentions of conservative/reactionary political regimes (Gramsci 1971: 46-7). These two kinds of transformations may happen (and historically have often happened) concurrently, strengthening one another. Conceptually, however, they are distinct processes that may occur and historically have occurred independently of, or in opposition to one another.

Bearing this in mind, Gramsci’s discussion of nineteenth century European history as a passive revolution provides us with some insights into the possible uses of his notion of the Piedmontese function in understanding the past and imagining the future of struggles for the renewal of the world social system. In this discussion, Gramsci
maintains that the “[h]istorical relationship between the modern French state created by Revolution and the other modern states of continental Europe” created through passive revolutions is one of the most vital aspects of nineteenth century European history. He then goes on to list four elements on which the study of the relationship should be based.

1. revolutionary explosion in France with radical and violent transformation of social and political relations; 2. European opposition to the French Revolution and to any extension of it along class lines; 3. war between France, under the Republic and Napoleon, and the rest of Europe--initially, in order to avoid being stifled at birth, and subsequently with the aim of establishing a permanent French hegemony tending towards the creation of a universal empire; 4. national revolts against French hegemony, and birth of the modern European states by successive small waves of reform rather than by revolutionary explosions like the original French one. The “successive waves” were made up of a combination of social struggles, interventions from above of the enlightened monarchy type, and national wars--with the two latter phenomena predominating. (Gramsci 1971: 114-15)

In proposing these four processes as objects of study, Gramsci insisted on their fundamental unity and took to task Benedetto Croce for starting his narrative of European history in 1815. By so doing, Croce excluded “the moment of struggle; the moment in which the conflicting forces are formed, are assembled and take up their position; ... the moment in which one system of social relations disintegrates and another arises and asserts itself.” As a result, Croce produced only “a fragment of history” that focused exclusively on the “passive” aspects of the longer revolutionary process that “started in France in 1789 and... spilled over into the rest of Europe with the republican and Napoleonic armies” (1971: 119).

Gramsci’s main interest in reconstructing France’s Piedmontese function in the nineteenth century renewal of European states was to gain some insights into a process that in his view was tending to recur in the wake of the Russian Revolution. As he explicitly asked,

Does the conception of the “passive revolution” have a “present” significance? Are we in a period of “restoration-revolution” to be permanently consolidated, to be organized ideologically, to be exalted lyrically? Does Italy have the same relation vis-a-vis the USSR that the Germany (and Europe) of Kant and Hegel had vis-a-vis the France of Robespierre and Napoleon? (Gramsci 1971: 118)

Gramsci never answered these questions explicitly, and an analysis of his implicit answers falls beyond the scope of this paper. All I can do is to conclude with a few observations concerning the world-historical significance of Gramsci’s twin conceptions of passive revolution and Piedmontese function.
V. World Hegemonies as Passive Revolutions

As Beverly Silver (2003) has shown, major explosions of social conflicts were crucial components of past hegemonic transitions. Not only were they a factor in the destruction of the old hegemonic world order. In addition, they contributed to defining the social contents of the emerging hegemonic world order by bringing to the forefront demands and aspirations of subordinate groups that the new dominant bloc, under the leadership of the rising hegemonic state, selectively repressed and accommodated.

There is a close resemblance between the “repression-accommodation” process through which successive hegemonic powers have increased the social inclusiveness of the world capitalist system and the “restoration-revolution” process that characterizes Gramsci’s passive revolutions. Indeed, we may well say that each successive hegemony of world capitalism has been characterized by a particular passive revolution, in the course of which the hegemonic state exercised a Piedmontese function vis-a-vis the world capitalist system as a whole. The central question of the twenty-first century is whether the renewal/transformation of the world social system towards greater equality and democracy still requires the exercise of a Piedmontese function and, if it does, which state or coalition of states will actually have the capabilities and dispositions necessary to exercise it.

A proliferating literature on the crisis of national states and the formation of a transnational capitalist class and world proletariat implicitly or explicitly rules out both the need and the possibility of such a function. Some advocate the formation of a purely class-based “world party” as the most likely agency of the egalitarian and democratic renewal of world society (e.g. Boswell and Chase-Dunn 1999). Others see a rebellious and mobile world proletariat (or “multitude”) as already poised to attain instant egalitarianism through massive unauthorized migration from South to North (e.g. Hardt and Negri 2000).

These assessments of the present and future of antisystemic forces, like some of our own assessments in Antisystemic Movements, miss the significance of the US-led neo-liberal counterrevolution of the 1980’s and 1990’s in reflating US world power through an accommodation of the anti-authoritarian and anti-statist aspirations of 1968 and a simultaneous repression of its egalitarian aspirations. The result of this new passive revolution has been a general crisis of dictatorships and a sharp increase in between-state and within-state inequality--an increase that belies the idea of increasing equality under the impact of massive migration and makes extremely problematic the idea of a purely class-based “world party.”
From this standpoint, the East Asian economic renaissance has had a major contradictory impact. On the one hand, it has been the single most important force counteracting the tendency towards greater inequality among countries and world regions. On the other hand, it has contributed to growing inequality within countries (Arrighi et al 2003). As a result of these contrasting tendencies and the growing industrial, commercial and financial weight of the region in the global economy, East Asia in general and China in particular have emerged as the arbiter of the egalitarian and inegalitarian tendencies that confront one another in the ongoing hegemonic transition to a yet unknown destination.

At the present stage of the confrontation, it is impossible to tell which tendency will eventually prevail. The outcome largely depends on the kind of social conflicts that will emerge out of the growing inequality within countries and on the kind of regional order/disorder that will emerge out of these conflicts. Whatever the outcome, however, it is hard to believe that states will not actively intervene in the struggles not just in support of particular social groups but also as their substitutes, thereby exercising some kind of Piedmontese function. It is unlikely that in exercising this function any individual East Asian state can become hegemonic globally. But it is not just possible but likely that individually or collectively East Asian states will play a decisive role in shaping the social contents of any future world order.

References


