

ANTONIO GRAMSCI: AN INTRODUCTION TO HIS 'NOTEBOOK' LEGACY¹

DEBBIE HILL

*Education Studies Department
University of Waikato*

ABSTRACT *Despite the abundance of material available to those educationists intent upon acquainting themselves with the Gramscian legacy, there exists a singular deficiency within the literature of any concise overview of Gramsci combining detail of the man, his times and the significant theoretical developments associated with his pre-'Notebook' era. This paper therefore attempts to address this omission by presenting the reader with a concise, yet theoretically rigorous, overview of the historical, political and cultural context against which any reading of Gramsci's 'Notebooks' must necessarily be located. 'Education for liberation' is the predominant theme of Gramsci's lifetime commitment. To ignore this theme, as many educationists have done previously,² is to deny the 'Leitmotiv' or rhythm of thought which was so integral to the Gramscian project itself.*

ORIGINS

Antonio Gramsci was born at Ales in Sardinia (Italy) on 22 January 1891, the fourth of seven children. His father was a minor local administrator in the Land Registry Office, a position which ensured that the family was comfortable financially. After the family moved to another Sardinian town of Ghilarza, however, Gramsci's father made the mistake of defending a losing candidate in the elections of 1897. Later, 'administrative irregularities' were found in his work, and despite only circumstantial evidence he was sent to prison for almost six years. The consequence of this upheaval was that Antonio was forced to leave school when he was only eleven, to work ten hours a day 'dragging registers about' in the Registry Office with his brother, Gennaro. Antonio was not physically strong, having been deformed by a fall in his childhood which left him a hunchback. This necessity to leave school and begin work at an early age aggravated his physical ill-health, bringing him into contact with hardship and poverty.

As the incident with his father illustrates, petty rivalries were rife in Sardinian local politics because of its predominantly feudal structure. Feudalism was symptomatic of what was known as the *problema del Mezzogiorno*, which embodied the social, political and economic inadequacies in Southern and insular Italy (Davidson 1968 p. 3). Land owned by feudal and often absentee landlords (*latifundia*) tilled by peasants for centuries had become decreasingly productive, resulting in an increase in food prices with a corresponding decrease in wages. This inevitably meant increased malnutrition and disease, high infant mortality, and a lowering of the life expectancy rate within the population. Aggravated by the economic downturn and physical isolation of the island companies found little attraction in this clime, and those that did, notably the mining companies, accentuated rather than alleviated the situation by their profiteering enterprises. Desperate times brought desperate measures, and criminal sub-cultures

flourished. This was arguably the only form of social protest possible in a land where political parties were the instruments of the personally privileged, and voting only the right of the literate. Legal protest was thus restricted to a mere ten percent of the Sardinian population, if the literacy figure in Ghilarza was at all representative of the wider population.³ It was this desperation that was later to prepare the way for socialism and win Antonio Gramsci over to its cause.

SCHOOL YEARS

Gramsci's school years were also formative ones. After two years of work the family was able to send him to a *ginnasio* (junior high school) in Santa Lussurgia, eighteen kilometres from Ghilarza where he boarded during the week and returned home in the weekends. Inept teachers, unhygienic surroundings, and a miserable *pensione*⁴ forced Gramsci's health to decline still further as he sold whatever food the family gave him to buy books and newspapers, a habit which he continued into his university career.

After attaining the secondary school leaving certificate in 1908 despite his condition, Gramsci moved once more, this time to Cagliari, the capital of the island, to attend the *liceo* (senior high school). Here he stayed with his brother Gennaro, who was by this time an active follower of the local Socialist Movement. Because both were trying to survive on one salary, life again was difficult, and Gramsci's 'short drain-pipe trousers and undersized jacket' made winters in Cagliari a cold and miserable experience. But again, Gramsci's powers of recovery against setback saw him endure these storms and improve his grades at school. Gramsci was to study here until 1911 when the result of his hard work saw him finally awarded one of the 39 scholarships being offered that year to study at the University of Turin on the mainland.

THE SOUTHERN QUESTION

It was in Cagliari, however, that Gramsci's political opinions began to form, influenced on the one hand by Gennaro and the Socialist newspapers he bought - *La Voce del Popolo* ('The Cry of the People') and *Avanti!* ('Onward!') - and on the other by what later became known as the 'Southern Question'. The period 1906 to 1910 had been a time of crisis in the South when conflicts began to erupt. Protest became more organised and disciplined. Unions were established and a newspaper campaign was waged for the autonomy of Sardinia from the Central Italian Government. The military was sent to quell the disorder, but the violence and imprisonments that followed only strengthened the national fervour of the Islanders. It was against this background that Gramsci first revealed his political leanings in an essay he wrote on colonialism and oppression. With what could be interpreted as having clearly Marxist overtones he wrote:

The French Revolution destroyed many privileges, it relieved many of the oppressed; but it did no more than replace the power of one class with that of another. Hence the great lesson to be drawn from it: that privileges and social differences are products not of nature but of society, and so can be transcended. Humanity needs another bloody cleansing to rid it of many of these injustices....

(Cited in Fiori 1970 p. 68)

THE TURIN YEARS

Gramsci's move to Turin in 1911 again resulted in hardship. The scholarship he had won allowed him barely enough money to survive, forcing him to further deprive himself of clothes, food and spending money in order to be able to pay the course fees and to purchase one or two of the many books he needed. In the course of these years he was to suffer greatly from his financial poverty. Gramsci's weakened physical condition brought about by malnutrition caused him to regularly miss lectures and eventually forced him to abandon his university studies at the end of 1915.

The Turin years were undoubtedly the years of intellectual adventure which were to inspire his mature thoughts. For Turin at the time of Gramsci's stay as a student was what one writer has described as the 'red capital of Italy' (Hoare and Nowell Smith 1971 p. xxv). It was at the very centre of the economic and cultural crisis that was compromising both the wealthy capitalist industrialists and the Liberal State itself. Dominated industrially by advanced manufacturing complexes (notably the FIAT car company), Turin was characterised by a high percentage of industrial workers. Industry at this time was undergoing a technical revolution, brought about by a prolonged shortage of skilled labour coupled with increasing costs incurred by the country's war exploits. Taylorism, or Americanism as it came to be called,⁵ was capital rather than labour intensive, and allowed manufacturers to maintain reasonably high rates of productivity whilst at the same time avoiding industrial strife. The corresponding loss of bargaining power by the workers, coupled with the increasing economic hardship from the high cost of the war involvement, inevitably had political repercussions for the proletariat, who consequently became more receptive to party politics and, as expected, more vocal against both the employers and the Government alike.

GRAMSCI'S POLITICAL INVOLVEMENT

The move towards serious party politics took place from 1911 to 1912 when for the first time illiterate citizens were allowed to vote. The 1913 elections had confirmed dissatisfaction with Government policy, but a lack of leadership and organisation among the challenging parties still returned the Government to power. This put the Liberal State in a compromised position. Forced to avoid antagonising its allies and supporters, particularly the wealthy industrialists of the North, it had to balance this alliance against the forces which now represented an equal danger. The inevitable outcome was that it came to please neither side. The Government's ineptitude in dealing with striking workers on the one hand, coupled with its half-hearted concessions to the masses on the other, resulted in a short-lived administration. The question naturally arose, what would succeed it?

Gramsci's university involvement made him intensely aware of the delicate equilibrium which kept the Government in power. For if Turin was the 'red capital', Turin University itself was the outpost of socialism. The language and ideas of Marx were being diffused by teachers, either active or sympathetic to socialism. Gramsci's fellow students, among them Angelo Tasca, Umberto Terracini and Palmiro Togliatti,⁶ were active among the Young Socialist Movement. Documentary evidence exists that Gramsci attended a course of lectures on Marx in 1914 to 1915 and wrote a thesis on 'The Marxist Theory of Capitalist Concentration.' It is therefore somewhat surprising that Gramsci took several

years to adopt the socialism which surrounded him, although his reticence may be explained by his later writings:

The ideology diffused everywhere among the Northern masses by bourgeois propagandists is very familiar: the Messogiorno is nothing but a ball-and-chain impeding the more rapid and civilised development of Italy; Southerners are biologically inferior... if the South is backward, this is not the fault of the capitalist system or any other historical factor; it is caused by the Southern nature which makes them all slackers, incompetents, criminals, savages.... The Socialist Party was the main vehicle for diffusing this bourgeois ideology among the workers of the North.

(Cited in Fiori 1970 pp. 78-79)

From this account, it is probable that Gramsci was disinclined to commit himself in these early years because he considered the North and the Socialist Party to be oppressors. It is perhaps ironic that it was the same nationalistic fervour which impeded Gramsci's move to socialism which later led to his most significant contribution to the cause. For it was this constant and critical reflection on the 'Southern Question' which made him appreciate more clearly that the 'wicked egoist' who had destroyed the fertility of his homeland was not the worker or the industrialist of the North but the indigenous Sardinian ruling class. This awareness that 'the evil' was to be found at home, far removed from the Northern oppressor, enabled socialism to become more palatable to Gramsci.

ANTI-POSITIVISM

Within the University of Turin itself, the battle was primarily one of ideas. The struggle constituted a war against the "stifling oppression of the positivist era" (Fiori 1971 p. 75), which was the "conception of history claiming to relate the 'facts' as objectively and scientifically validated for all time" (Lumley 1977 p. 3). What this actually implied was that man's⁷ knowledge consists of *reflections* of actual objects and processes in the world; that there exists a world of given things 'out there' independent of man's consciousness. What this theory entails is a denial of the *active contribution of man* within history: man cannot *change* the world but merely *discover* what is already there. Positivism thus reduces all knowledge and consciousness to matter which is given ontological priority. Because matter is subject to physical laws, knowledge of the physical world becomes the sole determinant of all valid knowledge (Femia 1981 pp. 67-69).

Positivism too had a political form which underpinned the Socialist Movement as much as it did any other field of intellectual life at that time. It manifested itself politically in a set of views that could summarily be defined as reformist or gradualist. Briefly, reformism was the policy within the Socialist Party where the sole objective was to achieve social and political reforms *within* the present political structure, with no concern for challenging the actual *form* of that political structure. Gradualism, by comparison, was simply the ultimate expression of this form of challenge - the gradual overthrow of the Liberal State by socialism via *existing political channels*. Such thinking only necessitated the replacement of one governing party by another. Both reformism and gradualism were characterised by an *economist* form of thought. It was via economic struggle

that the masses would join this political battle, eventually to vote the Socialist Party into power. It would therefore be an *economic crisis* that would initiate a socialist victory once the Liberal State toppled under the weight of its own contradictions. Socialism would gain ascendancy through the perceived weaknesses of the capitalist system.

Positivism within socialism, as Gramsci was later to criticise, implied a mechanistic, fatalistic victory for socialism via *determined economic conditions*. It assumed that all one could do was to wait for the right economic conditions to appear and socialism would inevitably emerge out of this organic moment. Socialism need do nothing other than hover in the wings *passively* until the curtains closed on the Liberal State, ushering a new political scenario *spontaneously* from the old, dying order.

Positivism, too, had a paradoxical effect. While the socialist vision was one involving the unification of society, positivism aggravated the conflicts and divisions by promoting a *sectarian vision* within the Party, appealing, as it did, mainly to the working class. The ensuing emphasis of struggle to vindicate workers' rights through a purely economic solution thus served to create factions. The result was the negation of the Party's appeal as a *national party* promoting the needs and interests of *all* Italians.

Gramsci was drawn increasingly into the anti-positivism debate, notably by his friendship and subsequent discussions with Umberto Cosmo, a teacher of Italian literature at the University. Cosmo had also taught Gramsci at Cagliari. It was to be an intellectually stimulating association for Gramsci, as he noted later:

...it seemed to me that I and Cosmo, and many other intellectuals at this time ...occupied a certain common ground: we were all to some degree part of the movement of moral and intellectual reform which in Italy stemmed from Benedetto Croce, and whose first premise was that modern man can and should live without the help of religion - I mean of course, without revealed religion, positivist religion, mythological religion, or whatever brand one cares to name.

(Cited in Fiori 1970 p. 74)

CROCE'S ANTI-POSITIVISM

Indeed, Benedetto Croce was to play a key role in Gramsci's intellectual development: by his intense study of Crocean philosophy in his youth, and in his later life as the subsequent dialogue with Croce turned to critique. Croce's rejection of positivism via Hegelian philosophy allowed him to argue that man's thoughts existed independently from science yet were still related practically to life (Gramsci 1973 p. 18). Disillusioned with Marxism, which merely reduced thought to a mechanically conditioned product of economics, considered as 'material fact' (and the source of positivism within socialism), Croce argued that history was the history of the 'human spirit' rather than a simple evolution of material conditions alone. Croce was therefore arguing that man has an active part to play in history and is a dynamic agent of social change - an agent of cause and effect in history. His was a much more 'man-centred' view of life which minimised the existence of forces operating externally on the historical process. This is clearly an 'immanentist' vision - a liberal view in which *all forces* are considered equally legitimate in the historical process, particularly man's *rational*

consciousness as the sculptor of the external environment. It was by such form of argumentation that Croce became the chief antagonist of both positivism and Marxist socialism.

The abandonment of positivism, by admitting that man had a hand in making his own history, led the young Gramsci back to both Hegel and Marx not only as a result of Croce's criticisms of the latter, but also, more significantly, because Croce was the philosopher of the Liberal democratic order which Gramsci himself was so much against. Moreover, he disliked Croce's total separation of philosophy from politics, a move Gramsci saw as constituting a 'speculative' form of thinking. For Gramsci, Marxism could not be anything but both a philosophy and a practical activity - a '*philosophy of praxis*'. In his struggle to turn Marxism into this practical philosophy, Gramsci felt it necessary to critically question just how it was that ideas become practical forces. Despite his criticisms of Croce, it was this notion of history in Crocean philosophy which provided both the key to, and the subsequent theoretical basis of, Gramsci's own '*philosophy of praxis*' - its *historical materialist* ideology.

GRAMSCI'S HISTORICAL MATERIALISM

It was this anti-positivistic point of view that facilitated Gramsci's allegiance to a particular type of socialism. His friendship with his fellow Sardinian, Palmiro Togliatti, was evidence of this, with long debates taking place between the two of them "on the eternal subject of human history, matrix of all that men know or will ever know" (Fiori 1970 p. 77).

The realisation that man is a maker of his own history - past, present, and future - brought with it the understanding that if the peasants from Gramsci's homeland or the Northern working classes were to be freed from their impoverished lot they had to take an active part in their own liberation. "It was a question", he wrote "of leading the workers to overcome their inverted provincialism with its 'ball and chain' ideas, deeply rooted in the Socialist movement's reformist and corporative traditions" (Fiori 1970 p. 94). Gramsci saw that the struggle could not be fought on a purely economic-corporative level - the struggle for wages and economic concessions. The struggle must be fought on a higher level, a *cultural level*, he maintained. This notion was implicit in the idea that the Socialist Revolution was not to better the worker's lot; rather, in bettering him, to *change* him (Davidson 1968 p. 3).

It is uncertain when Gramsci officially joined the *Partito Socialista Italiano* (the Italian Socialist Party - PSI), but this occurred probably in 1914. That year also saw the outbreak of the First World War, a war in which Italy initially took a neutral stand. It was a year of battles for Gramsci as well. His poor health and intense activity were responsible for his absence at all but one examination, which put his scholarship tenure in jeopardy. After a successful appeal was made on his behalf by one of his professors to resit the examinations, Gramsci's scholarship was suspended for four months. He could not hope to study, much less survive, without any income. Forced to work when he most needed to rest, his physical and mental condition deteriorated. Gramsci sat the last examination he would ever take in April 1915. His scholarship was finally revoked. From that moment Gramsci withdrew from the world, lapsing into a state of severe depression.

GRAMSCI'S JOURNALISTIC INVOLVEMENT

Gramsci's academic interests soon gave way to political involvement and his increasing appetite for journalism. His comments began appearing regularly in *Il Grido del Popolo* and *Avanti!* and other Torinese journals and newspapers. Not only did Gramsci write about political events but crimes, conferences, and theatrical performances also received his attention. His was a brand of integral journalism which combined theory with practice and revolution with cultural activity. Such was Gramsci's strategy for a revolution towards Enlightenment, founded on "an intense labour of social criticism, of cultural penetration and diffusion" (Fiori 1970 p. 103). Using this definition, Gramsci went on to suggest that fostering revolution was essentially a task of education. Writing in *Avanti!* he argued that "the problem of education is the most important class problem", and concluded that "the first step in emancipating oneself from political and social slavery is that of freeing the mind" (Lumley 1977 p. 4).

The Bolshevik Revolution in Russia in March 1917 inspired many Italian socialists to attempt to create an Italian Revolution. The threat of insurrection led to strikes and anarchy. One group, the maximalists (so-called because their maximum goal was the conquest of power as opposed to the minimum goals of the gradualists and reformists) led this strategy, which was also termed anarchosyndicalism. In the retaliatory moves that followed over the next five months, however, virtually all the socialist leaders were arrested. The result was that Gramsci was left the acting editor of *Il Grido*.

By now it was becoming all too apparent that he neither supported the reformists nor the militants. A publication entitled *La Citta Futura* ("City of the Future" - mostly Gramsci's own work) released in February 1917, had distinguished his two lines of thought (Davidson 1968 p. 11). The first was the rejection of the evolutionary interpretations of Marxist theory (economism). The second was his advocacy of the notion of consciousness and the will in creating the revolutionary situation.

The Russian Revolution in some ways contradicted these ideas, particularly Gramsci's conclusion that revolution could occur *only* by educating the masses. Victory had been won in a backward country peopled by predominantly illiterate peasants who possessed little political knowledge. At this time Lenin's works were not known in Italy, so Gramsci had no way of knowing that it was Lenin's anti-positivistic, non-evolutionary doctrines that had achieved the victory. This successful revolution therefore convinced Gramsci that revolution could be achieved by the will of men, even if not through the consciousness of *all* men; the essential thing was to gain power wherever and whenever possible. Gramsci's thought took on what could best be termed 'voluntarist' leanings - emphasis was placed on subjective forces determining situations (hence the willed intervention of elites in the historical process) rather than on objective material ones (such as economic forces where political leaders play an essentially passive role) (Gramsci 1973 p. 23). This was yet another rejection of determinism in the 'positivistic sense' in favour of man's will being the decisive element in human activity (Fiori 1970 p. 112).

L'ORDINE NUOVO AND 'THE RED YEARS'

In May 1919 the first issue of *L'Ordine Nuovo* ('The New Order') was published. It was intended to be a 'weekly review of Socialist culture', with Gramsci, Tasca, Terracini and Togliatti agreeing to share its editorship. Gramsci, however, clearly assumed a dominant role. Soon established with a substantial circulation, *L'Ordine Nuovo* began tackling general problems inherent in Marxist ideology with questions being posed about leadership and general Party strategy. Gramsci was vigorous in his criticisms of Italian political decisions. He looked towards the Russian successes which had happened against all odds, and then concluded that Italian socialism could well benefit from this living example of a successful political strategy. Gramsci therefore carefully studied what soon became known as the 'Russian Experiment.' Because of the spontaneity of the Revolution, the task of political organisation and education was now the legacy of the Russian victory. It was this particular aspect of the Revolution to which Gramsci now turned in order to develop his own ideas for cultural education. Gramsci's examination of the workings of the Russian 'Soviets' (factory and farm councils into which the peasants and workers organised themselves) later earned *L'Ordine Nuovo* the reputation of being 'the paper of the Factory Councils'.

Gramsci observed that "There does exist in Italy, in Turin, an embryonic form of worker government: the internal committees" (Fiori 1970 p. 119). Such committees existed in the factories, and were made up of elected representatives from different sections of a trade designed to safeguard worker rights. What Gramsci envisaged was for these committees to *extend* their powers of representation and become the watchdog of *all interests*, not just those of the trade union members. In short, they were to be institutions of the whole proletariat. Similarly, he maintained that the *function* of these factory councils (*consigli di fabbrica*) should not simply be to struggle for wages or better working conditions. These were the corporative tendencies Gramsci was opposing so vehemently. Instead, he reasoned, their task was to *control* rather than *bargain* - they were to epitomise democracy from the 'ground up' (Gramsci 1973 p. 24). These factory councils were to provide a framework for a future society:

The Factory Council is the model of the proletarian state. All the problems which are inherent in the organisation of the proletarian state are inherent in the organisation of the Councils.

(SPW1 1910-20⁸ p. 100)

Gramsci's desire to experiment with Factory Councils therefore grew out of his concern for the liberation of all Italians. Theory eventually became practice, and *consigli* were established within the Turin factories. *L'Ordine Nuovo*, not surprisingly, became totally concerned with raising the consciousness and cultural level of the workers. It meant getting the workers to think for themselves, a task which could neither be indoctrinatory nor dogmatic. Writing on this very point in 1918 Gramsci stated that "...the truth must never be presented in a dogmatic and absolute form, as if it were already mature and perfect" (Joll 1977 p. 32). This statement illustrates Gramsci's rejection of both the positivistic notion of 'objective truth' and the dogmatic certainty of the Marxists. Again, the prediction that men's will could be the decisive force in bringing about change was exemplified by Gramsci's call for a disciplined, well-organised, and dedicated force:

These disorderly and chaotic energies must be given a permanent form and discipline. They must be absorbed, organised and strengthened. The proletarian and semi-proletarian class must be transformed into an organised society that can educate itself, gain experience and acquire a responsible consciousness of the obligations that fall to classes achieving State power.

(SPW2 1921-26 p. 66)

This statement reflects Gramsci's thinking that a new and higher culture presupposes efficient organisation being achieved through education; education not only of one's 'self' but also one's obligations and responsibilities as a member of a ruling class. The educative task therefore involved knowledge of what one 'is' in order to 'become.'

Gramsci's belief in the need for solidarity widened to include anarchists, Papists and even the police and military forces whose ranks comprised mainly peasants. Rather than advocating that peasants fight peasants, Gramsci preferred to support an alliance which could cut across occupational or religious ranks to unite the proletarian mass. He maintained that it was even more essential for the Party to be united. The influence of Gramsci and *L'Ordine Nuovo* remained local however, and the 'Turin Experiment' in fact resulted in more divisions and greater disunity within the revolutionary factions. Amadeo Bordiga⁹ in 1912 had already been critical of the strategy of the intellectuals because of their stress on education. He saw the Factory Councils' Movement as being an attempt by the working class to win emancipation at the level of economic interests, without concentrating on altering the power structure of capitalism itself. For the next five or six years it was Bordiga who was to be Gramsci's main rival within the radical wing of the Party. With the failure of Gramsci's factory councils Bordiga intensified his opposition and calls for 'pure' revolutionaries. It was to take more than just Gramsci's 'communist education group'¹⁰ to bridge the gulf between these opposing factions.

TOWARDS FASCISM: THE REACTION

The present phase of the class struggle in Italy is the phase that precedes: either the conquest of power by the revolutionary proletariat for the transition to new modes of distribution which will produce a recovery in production - or a tremendous reaction on the part of the governing class. No violence will be left untried in order to reduce the industrial and agricultural proletariat to slave labour: they will try inexorably to shatter the organism of political struggle of the working class (Socialist Party) and to incorporate the organs of economic resistance (trade unions and co-operatives) into the machinery of the bourgeois State.

(SPW1 1910-20 p. 191)

The 'tremendous reaction' came in April 1920 when the employers became aggravated by the 'dual power' operating within the factories. A spate of strikes throughout Turin that followed did not achieve the nationally desired effect of demonstrating proletarian solidarity, and the Turin section of the Party was forced to make its stand alone. Thus, with internal rivalries blocking the energies

of the entire revolutionary movement, coupled with the huge show of force the State was prepared to invoke to break up the strikers, Gramsci realised that the Party did not have the most favourable conditions in which to make a stand. There could be nothing for it but compromise, and the resulting agreement bore testament to the truth of Gramsci's predications that opposition would be assimilated passively. Resistance was indeed domesticated by the bourgeois State machinery, as trade unionism again became the only legal form of organisation. Control and power were again reduced to the economic-corporative level where bargaining again took place solely over peripheral concerns, notably bargaining over *material capital* rather than the essential concerns of cultural and ideological goods. In short, what could be termed, '*cultural capital*'.

Over the next few months Gramsci also drew away from Togliatti and Terracini, a move which further accentuated the paralysis evident within the Party. At this time too (July 1920) the Second Congress of the Third International was meeting in Moscow. The Italian delegates ranged from the 'pure' revolutionarists such as Bordiga, to a reformist trade-union delegation. The Congress discussions mainly centred on this rift. It came somewhat as a surprise to find that Lenin was more inclined to the politics of *L'Ordine Nuovo*, which was not even represented at the Congress, than either those of Bordiga or the reformists. Lenin chose to launch a bitter attack on Bordiga, in which his personal politics came under close scrutiny.

How can you make clear the true character of parliament to these masses who are being deceived and kept in ignorance by the bourgeoisie? How can you denounce this and that parliamentary manoeuvre, the position taken up by this or that party, if you do not enter parliament, if you remain outside it? For the present, parliament too, must remain an arena of the class struggle.

(Cited in Fiori 1970 p. 136)

What this statement emphasised was the reality that there must be destruction, but, at the same time, *construction: a dialectical unity* whereby the new form arises naturally from the old, rather than revolution being simply a destructive process. Lenin was also stressing that the future proceeds through the present order, and that 'knowing' rather than 'denying' one's enemy should be the primary aim of socialism. This was in keeping with Gramsci's concern to '*educate*' in order to '*liberate*'.

The August 1920 issue of *L'Ordine Nuovo* reflected Gramsci's ideological victory, and this made him continue his fight for the Factory Councils, although against enormous odds. A bourgeois counter-offensive quickly followed the October-November elections after firm public support was evident for the PSI. The Government obviously found itself with no alternative but to head off its parliamentary defeat by using more authoritarian tactics. With the fragmentation of the Party and the lack of any united resistance against this attack, the PSI simply invited defeat. The official Party split at its National Conference at Livorno in 1921, and was followed by the establishment of the new Communist Party of Italy (*Partito Comunista d'Italia*, or *PCI*) under Bordiga's leadership. Undoubtedly, it was this move which assured the final defeat of the Party, by automatically purging the large reformist element. While Gramsci was not excluded from the PCI he was, predictably, a minority voice. Under Bordiga's

rule, a strategy for the destruction of the State assumed priority, and the Party subsequently narrowed to form a combative vanguard.

THE PCI AND FASCISM

Gramsci at first played an oppositional role within the PCI, challenging Bordiga's sectarian strategy and his underestimation of the very real Fascist threat.¹¹ Although Gramsci abstained from any public criticism of Bordiga's position, he continued expressing his own views, particularly the need for an alliance with non-Communists, Catholics workers and intellectuals. By July 1921, it was clear that the onslaught of Fascism demanded a 'common front'. By this time it was obvious that the PCI had been unable to attract to itself the majority of Italian Socialists. It was this growing necessity to defend liberties already held and the failure of the PCI to sustain itself against the bourgeois counter-offensive that finally led a majority within the PCI to concede that the immediate objective of the working class could no longer be to strive to seize power and effect a proletarian dictatorship. It was the subsequent shift from an offensive to a defensive position which took Gramsci to a leadership position within the Party, and he left for Moscow in May 1922 as the PCI's representative on the Comintern's executive committee.

Although the predictions were correct and the Liberal State was to collapse, in 1921 and 1922 it no longer seemed inevitable that Socialism would be its replacement. The Fascist seizure of power in October 1922 confirmed this. The call for a 'common front', therefore, had come too late.

Gramsci was in Moscow until December 1923. In addition to his distress at having witnessed the Fascist victory during these months he had to contend with physical agony, and the resultant anxiety and tensions finally reduced him to a state of acute depression and nervous exhaustion. Although the discomfort of physical ill health took only six months to depart - Gramsci meeting Giulia, his wife-to-be during this time - the Fascist force continued to advance, revealing itself as no mere transitory phenomenon but, as Gramsci had predicted, a sophisticated and efficient organisation. Indeed, the debate between Gramsci and Bordiga concerning the nature of the PCI essentially revolved around each other's understanding of the nature of Fascism and the ways to resist it (Joll 1977 p. 54). For Bordiga, Fascism simply represented a natural continuation of the previous bourgeois democracy. In one respect, this was correct, but Fascism was for Gramsci 'the illegal aspect of capitalist violence'. Gramsci rejected Bordiga's reductionistic thinking, as it implied that the strategies employed in the pre-Fascist era would be equally effective against Fascism itself. Gramsci, by contrast, knew that Fascism was different from the Liberal bourgeois order - it was in fact an extreme reaction to a crisis. It was this crisis itself which undermined any continuity between the Liberal State and Fascism, and the continuity in Party strategy as assault rather than defence.

While recognising that Fascist politics were part of an efficient and complex organisation, Gramsci was not immediately aware of its likely permanence. In an address to the Central Committee of the Party in 1924 he said,

The general crisis of the capitalist system has not been arrested by the Fascist regime ...Fascism has simply slowed down the proletarian revolution, which after the Fascist experience will be truly popular.

(*L'Ordine Nuovo*, 1 Sept. 1924)

It was this belief in particular that inspired Gramsci's work during his time abroad, as is evident in his contributions to the Party press and the birth of his new publication, *L'Unita* ('Unity'). It was not until May of that year that he returned to enter into personal combat with Fascism. His success as a parliamentary candidate in the April elections won him immunity to return, seemingly exempt from intimidation or arrest.¹²

Upon his return Gramsci saw that Fascist activities had effectively paralysed the Party.¹³ While Bordiga remained firm in his sectarian vision, Gramsci continued campaigning for popular support rather than appealing to a purist minority. He was still convinced that there was a chance to weaken Fascist power when the Matteotti affair exploded. This involved the brutal murder of the reformist Socialist Deputy, Giacomo Matteotti, no doubt in retaliation for his anti-Fascist remarks after winning his seat, despite Fascist intimidation and brutality. Although the incident certainly alarmed the public, it posed no great danger to Fascism. In Parliament the only protest involved a withdrawal of the opposition parties to a separate venue at Aventine, a move which merely served to further entrench Fascism politically. Indeed, the only outcome of the Matteotti incident was a temporary slackening of the Regime's repression.

THE LYONS THESES AND THE SOUTHERN QUESTION REVISITED

Gramsci's thoughts in the period 1924-26 are elaborated in two key documents. The first, the *Lyons Theses* (a draft adopted by the PCI in January 1926), outlines the principles around which Gramsci had reorganised the Party upon assuming its leadership in 1924. The second, an essay again on the Southern Question, alludes to themes which were taken up later in the *Prison Notebooks*. These relate to the role of the intellectuals, the role of the proletariat and the Party, and witness the introduction of Gramsci's concept of *hegemony*.

In the former document Gramsci repudiated the Socialist strategy prior to Livorno, and proceeded to stress the novelty and significance of the Leninist Revolution. Gramsci's reaffirmation of the need for a proletarian revolution to overthrow capitalism is tempered, however, by the emphasis he places on achieving an alliance between the Northern proletariat and the Southern peasantry. His analysis of Fascism and his belief in its imminent collapse led him to argue that the revolutionary alliance of workers and peasants had to be successful so that that a 'new order' could be formed immediately following this Fascist interregnum - a new order based on the Factory Council model but adapted to the changed social circumstances. What this meant was the corresponding rejection of any post-Fascist democratic phase and a reassertion of the notion that revolution could be successful only with superior organisation and a *superior understanding* of the objective situation (Joll 1977 pp. 67-68). The Theses concluded:

All the particular struggles led by the Party, and its activities on every front to mobilise and unite the forces of the working class, must come

together and be synthesized in a political formula which can be easily understood by the masses, and which has the greatest possible agitational value for them. This formula is the "workers' and peasants' government". It indicates even to the most backward masses the need to win power in order to solve the vital problems which interest them; and it provides the means to transport them onto the terrain of the more advanced proletarian vanguard (struggle for the dictatorship of the proletariat)...

(SPW2 1921-26 p. 375)

HEGEMONY AND THE ROLE OF THE INTELLECTUALS

The above reference to 'vital problems' again emanates from Gramsci's concern with the *problema del Mezzogiorno* ('The Southern Question') which frames the second document. In this work, the themes which Gramsci had considered in his youth take on a more theoretical dimension. It is here that Gramsci introduces his most celebrated concept of hegemony, but hegemony as characterising *proletarian struggle* at this stage rather than *bourgeois control*, as in the *Prison Notebooks*:

The Turin Communists posed concretely the question of the 'hegemony of the proletariat': i.e. of the social basis of the proletarian dictatorship and of the workers' State. The proletariat can become the leading [*dirigente*] and the dominant class to the extent that it succeeds in creating a system of class alliances which allows it to mobilise the majority of the working population against capitalism and the bourgeois State....

(SPW2 1921-26 p. 443)

It can be seen, therefore, that hegemony is thought of in terms of a class alliance where the function of the Party must be to *understand* the class demands of the peasant initially and then to *incorporate* these demands into the Party's revolutionary strategy. Gramsci appears to hold a distinctly Leninist view of hegemony, defined in terms of the leadership of the proletariat over the peasantry. But, at the same time, it is also clear from Gramsci's past advocacy of a politico-ethical (rather than simply an economic-corporative) reform that while demands of the mass must necessarily be incorporated into Party strategy, Party strategy should in no way be *reduced* to these essentially economic demands alone. While not explicit in the above statement, it is clear that Gramsci was advocating hegemonic control via class alliance. He saw this to be a prerequisite for a Socialist victory - a precondition but not the *essence* of the victory itself. Evidence that this view is correct can be found in his earlier writings which stress that the struggle was to be fought on the vital level - the level of *ideas and culture* rather than the level of economic concerns alone.

In the same document, Gramsci continues to confirm indirectly the necessity that the struggle will ultimately be *ideological* by his discussion of the role and function of intellectuals within the Party. He emphasises the paucity of organizing elements within the proletarian class while at the same time asserts that this very asset has belonged historically to the intellectuals. While proposing that the proletariat lead the masses, the point is also made that unless the

proletariat prove themselves to be capable leaders no good will come of this alliance. What is therefore required are the services of intellectuals. He writes,

...It is certainly important and useful for the proletariat that one or more intellectuals, individually, should adopt its programme and ideas; should merge into the proletariat, becoming and feeling themselves to be an integral part of it.

(SPW2 1921-26 p. 462)

What we see here is undoubtedly a scepticism which grew from Gramsci's earlier political experience, and which essentially evolved from an awareness of the severe limitations of what he later termed '*common sense*' thinking. This is a theme which is developed substantially in the *Notebooks*, and which until that point remains only implicit, expressed primarily in Gramsci's concern about the ease with which Marxism had become 'vulgarised'. The reformists characterised a group displaying the reductionism of 'common sense', for they 'vulgarised' Marxist philosophy by portraying the Socialist Party as being solely a political entity, democratic in orientation in the capitalist sense. To Gramsci, however, the liberation goals of Marxism could (and should) never be reduced to the capitalist concept of 'democracy'. It is this 'common sense' reductionist tendency that Gramsci grew to realise was the Party's greatest obstacle to its political success. This tendency to frame the struggle within *capitalist definitions and values* tended to prematurely end the struggle in economic compromise, instead of extending beyond the immediate to the important long-term goals. It was during this struggle that Gramsci came to develop his conception of the Party with its necessary core of intellectuals. It was this intellectual core which was responsible primarily for the education of the masses, their role being to transform the 'spontaneity' into 'consciousness', the 'compromise' into 'revolution':¹⁴

The element of 'spontaneity' is not sufficient for revolutionary struggle; it never leads the working class beyond the limits of the existing bourgeois democracy. The element of consciousness is needed, the 'ideological' element: in other words, an understanding of the conditions of the struggle, the social relations in which the worker lives, the fundamental tendencies at work in the system of those relations, and the process of development which society undergoes as a result of the existence within it of insoluble antagonisms, etc.

(SPW2 1921-26 p. 288)

BEYOND REDUCTIONISM

What these two key documents also indirectly show is that Gramsci moves beyond a definition of the Socialist Revolution as being simply a *proletarian revolution*. The continuing appeal to alliance and solidarity as the prerequisite for the necessary transition from capitalism to socialism at the same time broadens the base of socialism to represent a *nationally unifying movement*. In this way, Gramsci extends the struggle for 'democracy' from a *class* to a *national* level. An international level can also be seen potentially in this expansive tendency, given the way in which Gramsci redefines 'democracy' in socialist terms in the *Prison Notebooks* as a *humanistic* rather than simply a *parliamentary political term*. By a shift

from sectarianism to humanism, the Party struggle also shifts from the economic-corporative to the ethico-political, which embodies a move from the 'quantitative' to the 'qualitative' dimension.

Events in Russia in 1926 did not see Gramsci's position extend beyond the national level, however, a reflection of his concern that socialism at first had to be consolidated at the national level before any extension to an international sphere. The event which prompted this conclusion was a bitter factional feud between the Stalin-Bukharin group and the leftist Trotsy-Kamenev-Zinoviev faction, a feud which Gramsci viewed as a direct threat to socialism. He argued that while there was discussion and disagreement within the Party this should always be based on personal loyalty and conviction. An open split such as the one which leftist agitation proposed, by definition, went beyond the bounds of Party solidarity. Writing with this concern to the fore, Gramsci's appeal for unity identified the central issue which he saw as jeopardising the Revolution itself. 'Common sense' reductionist tendencies were perceived as being once again the major obstacle to true socialism.

...the proletariat cannot become a ruling class if it is not willing to sacrifice its corporative interests in order to overcome the contradiction. It cannot maintain its hegemony if it does not continue to sacrifice such immediate interests for the sake of the general, permanent interests of its class, even after it has assumed power.... Here is the source of the errors of the left opposition group, and of the dangers inherent in its activities. In its ideology and practice there is a full return to the traditions of social democracy and trade unionism, to those very factors which have so far prevented the western proletariat from organising itself into a ruling class.

(SPW2 1921-26 pp. 431-432)

By the end of 1926, however, even a return to the traditions of social democracy and trade unionism was no longer an option open to Italian socialism because the Fascists systematically legislated against the last remnants of their opposition. The inevitability of Gramsci's arrest neither alluded nor deterred him. As his earlier thoughts on the nature of Fascism revealed, Gramsci remained optimistic that Fascism, despite appearances to the contrary, was founded on precarious 'tactical agreements and compromise'. Indeed, Gramsci almost certainly believed that internal contradictions within this patchwork alliance would make it unlikely that authoritarianism would grow to such an extent that the 'legislator' could conceivably be devoured by his own 'legislation'. He was convinced that if any party within the Fascist alliance later chose to withdraw their allegiance to the regime, then Fascism would topple. Gramsci's arrest on 8 November 1926 was therefore itself testimony to the intense durability of the adversary he was up against, an adversary which he would challenge continuously in the next eleven years of his confinement until his death on 27 April, 1937.

GRAMSCI'S LEGACY

It is against this background that Gramsci's legacy has grown to represent a vital contribution to those theorists intent upon developing a critical, open-ended, non-bureaucratic curriculum and pedagogy for social change.¹⁵ What Gramsci's

analysis provides is essentially a framework for a sophisticated critique of *cultural learning*. Relationships, ideas and values are *learnt* relationships, ideas and values. Social evolution is therefore no less than a learning process. It is this reality which underlies Gramsci's entire analysis of State power and his analysis of the revolutionary struggle correspondingly. In our own times, this message has no less currency.

FOOTNOTES

1. Gramsci produced thirty-three 'notebooks' while he was in prison between 1929 and 1935. Covering all manner of subjects from Italian history to general problems of Marxism the *Quaderni del carcere*, as they have come to be called, represent Gramsci's comprehensive attempts to define the central tenets of a Marxism based on the link between theory and practice, thought and action. See the Preface of Hoare and Nowell Smith (1971) for a detailed background to this Notebook legacy.
2. The least convincing account of Gramsci's educational writings is arguably that offered by Harold Entwistle (1978; 1979). Although Entwistle has been quoted subsequently as an authority on Gramsci's work (e.g. Mercer 1980; Morgan 1987; Partington 1981), this writer cautions against an uncritical reading of this particular rendition of Gramsci's educational thoughts.
3. Lawner in Gramsci (1973 p. 9) reveals that in Ghilarza, only 200 out of the 2000 inhabitants could read and write.
4. The scholarship which Gramsci had won entitled him to receive a monthly sum of around seventy lire, an amount which he records as being 'absolutely insufficient'. See Gramsci in Fiori (1970) pp. 72-73.
5. American developments in productive methods were advanced most notably by the principles of Frederick Taylor whose ideas on the "Scientific Management" within industry were adopted widely and enthusiastically.
6. Together with Gramsci, Tasca, Terracini, and Togliatti founded the *Ordine Nuovo* movement. When in 1921 a schism occurred within the Party, Tasca became the leader of the right wing of the newly established Italian Communist Party. After Gramsci's arrest in 1926, Togliatti took over the headship of the Party (Gramsci 1973 p. 13).
7. My use of masculine references are reproduced solely for convenience.
8. This is the usual abbreviation for material taken from Gramsci's *Selections from Political Writings*, of which there are two key volumes: Volume 1 (1910-20) and Volume 2 (1921-26).
9. Amadeo Bordiga, according to Hoare and Nowell Smith (1971 pp. xxviii-xxix), was the son of an agricultural economist who grew up in the 'intellectual milieu of Naples'. Noted for his 'immense energy', Gramsci described Bordiga as being capable of doing the work of three others put together. It was undoubtedly this reserve which ensured his dominance in the Party, Bordiga and Gramsci often disagreeing as a result of Bordiga's adherence to orthodox Marxist theory.
10. This reference is to the work which Gramsci and his friends (Tasca, Terracini, and Togliatti) had initiated through their journalistic endeavours.
11. Fascist party politics proved attractive to many of the Italian bourgeoisie following the war because of their fear of socialism gaining the ascendancy.

- Both tacit and financial approval was given to the Fascists who eventually embarked upon a brutal campaign of counter-resistance against the PCI.
12. One of the privileges of a parliamentary post was that each elected 'deputy' was granted political immunity.
 13. A vast wave of repression had followed the Fascist seizure of power. In particular, the press and the parties they represented bore the brunt of this assault:
 The Fascist offensive to secure complete control developed three lines of attack simultaneously: legislative controls, party intimidation and agreement with the newspaper proprietors over the heads of editors and journalists. These methods were complementary; when the positive inducement of the regime's friendship was insufficient, the proprietors were pressured into submission by threats of forcible closure and the destruction of their property, while the struggle with official censorship became increasingly futile and costly. (Lyttleton 1987 p. 396)
 14. It is this facet of education which has occupied the attention of key contemporary educationists - Paulo Freire being one of the most familiar figures - in an attempt to utilise Gramscian theory to devise a more theoretically rigorous concept of education.
 15. In his book, *We Make the Road by Walking* (Horton 1990 p. 36) Freire acknowledges his debt to Gramsci.

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