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17. Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937)

Antonio Gramsci's significance in critical theory largely rests on *The Prison Notebooks*, which details the politics of culture from within a marxist framework, but one that escapes economic determinism and respects the complex, mobile and contradictory dynamics of social interaction. His writing is a fundamental touchstone for postwar left reconsiderations of culture, particularly those that reject high-low culture distinctions, but Gramsci's widespread influence has often come at the cost of abstracting his terminology from the larger context of his work and historical crises that impelled its shape. Gramsci is frequently called on to authorize new critical trajectories, but rarely comprehensively read in ways that think through the impetus for his work – proletarian revolution. Because *The Prison Notebooks* were written while Gramsci was isolated within a fascist jail, published posthumously and had to wait until 1971 for the first major English translation, this selective reading partly comes as a result of interpretations formed by the post-1960s retreat from class as an integral category and western revolution as a foreseeable outcome. But the degree to which critics quote or interpret Gramsci outside of, or in contravention to, his historical context and concern about the relation of the Communist Party to the disempowered is the extent to which these citations become either ornamental or self-aggrandising.

Born in rural Sardinia to an Albanian-Italian clerk and local mother, Gramsci grew up in poverty after his father was imprisoned for embezzlement. Moving to industrialized Turin on a university scholarship, Gramsci ended his study after ill health, financial distress and increasing involvement in socialist politics and journalism. As part of *L'Ordine Nuovo's* (*The New Order*) editorial collective, he focused on the labour militancy of the 1919–20 Turin Factory Councils, which organized workers by their workplace rather than trade, and seemed to be an Italian equivalent to the Soviets that helped catalyse the Russian Revolution. When management occupied the factories and the government intervened, the movement was defeated and the Italian Socialist Party split. On one side, Gramsci and others formed the Italian Communist Party (PCI), while, on the other, Mussolini organized the far right Fascist Party, which later occupied the government. During the early 1920s, Gramsci was sent to Moscow and Vienna to represent the PCI in the Communist International (Comintern), where he became actively involved in debates about international left strategy. Returning to Italy in 1924 as head of the PCI, he was elected senator during Mussolini's rise to dictatorship. Arrested shortly thereafter, Gramsci was given a political show trial and sentenced by a fascist judge to twenty years' imprisonment. In jail,

he began keeping notebooks on cultural and political issues, the work that his reputation largely depends on. This history is crucial to approaching Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*, since it contextualizes their motive and form.

Although university trained, Gramsci is perhaps unique among this encyclopaedia's subjects for not writing within or for the academy. Typical of the left autodidactic tradition, Gramsci's writing, in its journalistic and carceral phase, does not look to university debates, readers or protocols of presentation. *The Prison Notebooks* exist to reflect on severe political defeat, the crushed worker's movement that set the stage for the rise of Italian fascism amid an international containment of revolutionary movements. There is little in his writing about economics, since he takes the analysis of capitalism's physics as definitively stated by Marx. Instead, he investigates the relation of culture to politics in order to ask: why did not the revolution spread beyond Russia; what prevents the transition to global socialism; and how does Fascism maintain power? Gramsci's self-critical investigation into his own situated experience and commitment to a 'marxism without guarantees', which abandons the sureties of historical teleology, makes his work especially resonant for progressive critical theories that attempt to address the left's increasing marginalization amid the dominance of insurgent conservatism after the 1960s. Similarly, Gramsci influenced pre-1989 internal critiques of the Eastern Bloc's 'actually existing socialism', like DDR dissident Bahro's *The Alternative* (1981).

The conditions of *The Prison Notebooks'* production pose the challenge of triple encoding for contemporary readers. The foremost difficulty is that Gramsci often resorted to elliptic phrases to confound the prison censors who secured the journals. Sometimes it is easy to reconstitute Gramsci's intention, like the substitution of 'philosopher of action' for 'Marx', but, at other times, it is hard to discern when Gramsci is creating terms to stand in momentarily for traditional marxist concepts or when he is forging new terminology to flesh out concepts that were incompletely or poorly developed in previous marxist writings. A further hurdle is that Gramsci's signposting assumes a reader conversant with nineteenth-century left writings (not only marxist ones) and Comintern debates of the 1920s and 1930s, many of which were either narrowly circulated or never appeared in print form. Without some familiarity with these debates, it becomes harder to capture Gramsci's intentions and interventions. Finally, *The Prison Notebooks* are just that, draft notebooks. Because Gramsci functionally died in prison (he was released to a guarded hospital shortly before collapsing from a brain haemorrhage), he never came close to assembling an authoritative version for publication. While Gramsci was a precise writer who did redraft some sections, a number of his prescient breakthroughs, like the 'Americanism and Fordism' section that analyses modernization and sexuality, is little more than a sketch. Contemporary readers must almost train themselves to read Gramsci intuitively, a task that has frequently led students to rely on the mediation (and agendas) of secondary criticism. As if these hurdles were not enough, the Anglophone readership has only had a portion of the notebooks translated. Though the most frequently used edition, Hoare and Nowell-Smith's *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (1971), is masterful, it cannot act as a proper substitute for a complete edition, a project now thankfully underway. Despite these challenges to reading him, Gramsci's vocabulary and concepts ground projects like cultural materialism, 'history from the bottom up', Althusser, Balibar and Poulantzas's work on ideology and classes, Birmingham School Cultural Studies, postmarxism, economic debates about postindustrialism/postfordism, and postcolonialism, such as the writing of Said, Spivak and the Subaltern Studies group.

If one theme animates *The Prison Notebooks*, it is the redefinition of the term 'intellectual'. Gramsci rejects the notion that an intellectual is someone endowed with a greater capacity for thought and freedom from material relations. No one is 'unintelligent' in Gramsci's view because everyone has a 'particular conception of the world' and 'line of moral conduct' (Gramsci 1971, 9) even if this sensibility, what Gramsci calls 'common sense', is vague, incoherent or rife with contradictory attitudes. It is not mental brilliance that makes intellectuals, but how subjects achieve the social function of being an intellectual. 'Because it can happen that everyone at some time fries a couple of eggs or sews up a tear in a jacket, we do not necessarily say that everyone is a cook or tailor' (9). Indeed, Gramsci mainly uses *dirigente*, which is poorly translated as 'intellectual' and is better understood as conductor, organizer or, more simply, activist. A fashion magazine writer about cosmetics is no more or less an intellectual (*dirigente*), in Gramsci's sense, than a philosophy professor, since each promotes confidence in the prestige of their object (commodity beauty or abstract meditation). What distinguishes *dirigente* is their varying organic relation to social formations resulting from class, or class-faction, interests. Gramsci differentiates between what he calls 'traditional' and 'organic' *dirigente*, although his terminology is confusing, since both kinds are organic to their respective formations and the difference cannot simply be captured in terms of left-right categories. The traditional intellectual works out of an already existing institutional matrix and mode of social organization, while the organic intellectual emerges from new, oppositional ones. Marxist professors are not automatically organic intellectuals for Gramsci, despite their commitment to anti-bourgeois strategies, because, whatever the left academic's 'local' message, her or his prestige and authority to speak comes from their credentialization within a traditional structure, the university, that continues to aggravate social divisions through the mental/manual hierarchy created by the awarding of diplomas and academic promotion. If the same professor spoke within a 'people's university', which addressed non-dominant groups in ways that did not mimic the traditional university's values of 'excellence', then the scholar would be more 'organic'. One model might be Gramsci's own involvement with the *The New Order*, which provided the Turin Factory Councils with a forum. A 'traditional' journalist-intellectual writing on the strikes would invoke 'objectivity and neutral reportage', while not questioning the links between the newspaper and the factory's owners, but an organic journalist-intellectual would analyse current events in to help create labour confidence in their new modes of interaction. Gramsci's perception that the agents of knowledge emerge from material sites of truth-production is congruent here with Foucault's writings on discursive formations and the creation of disciplines. A second aspect of the organic-traditional distinction is that the more a set of intellectuals becomes embedded within traditional structures, the more they paradoxically believe themselves to be self-defining, even though their self-declared liberation from class (fraction) simply registers what might be called the secret of the 'intellectual-fetish'. Just as Marx began his analysis of capitalism's system of exploitation with the secret of the 'commodity-fetish', Gramsci uses the traditional intellectual's false autonomy to unpack the larger political economy of cultural power.

While Marx only offers a glimpse of what non-commodity relations might look like, Gramsci uses Machiavelli's *The Prince* to illustrate how an organic intellectual might act. Machiavelli's treatise on power is distinctive because 'it is not a systemic treatment, but a "live" work in which political ideology and political science are fused in the dramatic form of a "myth"' (125). Machiavelli broke from traditional formats by writing neither an

idealistic utopia nor dry scholastic review. Instead, he composed an advice notebook, but one for a feudal prince he knew was neither ignorant of power-dynamics nor capable of mastering them. Machiavelli's purpose was to publicize these manoeuvres for 'those not in the know' (135), the proto-bourgeoisie who were not yet capable of enacting these tactics but were beginning to confront a moribund feudal society. Machiavelli's representation of the prince was thus a 'concrete fantasy which acts on a dispersed and shattered people to arouse and organize its collective will', where the populace's spontaneous (unorganized) passions were guided to action. This dialectical exchange provides the example for the 'modern prince', which is no longer be an individual (the favoured subject of bourgeois liberalism) but a 'complex element of society' – the (communist) political party (129). Gramsci's trajectory is always from the individual to collective subjects, and the organic *dirigente* is really about groups, not an individual's choice. The party's role is twofold. First, its collective internal operations offer the first glimpses of potential social alternatives, it is a 'concrete fantasy'. Secondly, it engages with popular 'passions' so that the party does not 'traditionalize' itself through bureaucratic, rather than democratic, centralism, rather than the mass, where it could disastrously mistake itself as the historical agent of change and delegate itself as the gatekeeper for deciding the timing of political action. Gramsci believes the party's self-assured isolation was a major cause in the post-1918 revolutionary failures, and, in prison, he recalls Marx's thesis that the educator himself needs education (the *dirigente* must be directed from below).

The question of intellectuals opens the way to reconsider the relation between state and civil society. Gramsci's axiom is that politics is defined by the 'dual perspective' where power arises out of the varying, yet always present, ratio of coercion and consent, violence and persuasion. Gramsci never believes that liberal democracy excludes raw, physical violence (the police, army, punitive legislation) from its arsenal, it has merely become more economical in its use. Close to Weber's claim that the state has a monopoly of legitimate violence, Gramsci believes that rule by oppression is resource-draining and cannot sustain broad-based power over time. For power to be durable it must also be persuasive, educative and work to promote a consensus typified by the acceptance of a common sense, the implicit, unspoken assumption of the everyday and 'naturalness' of civil society and its hierarchies. Gramsci calls this consensus *hegemony*, which he sees as manifested through a three-phased process of group collectivization and strategic alliances. The first is the 'economic-corporate' moment when 'a tradesman feels *obliged* to stand by another tradesman, a manufacturer by another manufacturer, etc. but the tradesman does not yet feel solidarity with the manufacturer' (181). A second 'economic' step is when there is a 'solidarity of interests among all the members of a social class'. Until this point, rule still mainly relies on coercion, but consensual hegemony is achieved when groups 'transcend the corporate limits' of pure economic self-interest and move to an 'ethical-political' phase so that they 'become the interest of other subordinate groups'. When a class (or class fraction) incorporates other social elements so that subaltern common sense, or 'spontaneous philosophy', becomes protective of the leading class(es), hegemony is achieved. One kind of hegemony is nationalism, whereby the working class support the local bourgeoisie against the interests of far-away workers.

Hegemony does not 'destroy' antagonistic interests, but, in Raymond Williams's phrase, incorporates them, and the 'ethical-political' moment of hegemony is manifested by the rise of a 'historic bloc'. The historic bloc is more than a codeword for class; a bloc is the coalition of social groups, the networks of alliances that can cross class lines. The model

Gramsci draws from is the *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, where Marx described how the future Napoleon III constructed a historic bloc that enlisted the peasantry against their economic-corporate interests, within a regime that included their historic enemies, the Parisian underclass, and was dominated by financial interests. While one fraction usually dominates a bloc, it is also subject to intrinsic pressures arising from trying to keep the constellation of interests pacified. Blocs have these crises of *cultural capital* because their membership is always restless and internally competes for place of preference and right to command the resources that a bloc garners, but a bloc can protectively adapt to economic and political crises because, like parliamentary cabinet reshuffles, it can swiftly reorganize by rehierarchizing its constituent members, perhaps expelling some or including new ones, to respond to changed conditions.

There are immediate advantages of Gramsci's model of hegemony and historic blocs for cultural theory. First, it frees us from a negative model of ideology as false consciousness where dominated groups are simply overwhelmed by dominant ideology, a vertical suppression akin to what Foucault calls the repressive hypothesis. Because hegemony is the complex product of consensus and coercion, it allows us to understand culture as the product of multiple desires and sources of institutional pressures that are not always easily aligned. Since hegemony is as much about getting subjects not to say 'no' as it is for them to clearly say 'yes' to a historic bloc's rule, hegemony can draw in, or articulate, subjects based on aspects of their allegiances in non pre-determined and often highly ambiguous ways. A further advantage to Gramsci's open conception of culture is that hegemony can also describe the relation between intellectuals and the state, a problem that Althusser specifically followed.

Perry Anderson (1976–7) argues that Gramsci's use of *hegemony* is inconsistent throughout *The Prison Notebooks*, which sometimes seems to oppose civil society hegemony to state violence and then sometimes bundles hegemony as an ideological apparatus of the state's armament, to use Althusser's formula. The confusion arises only if one insists, against Gramsci's method, on a scheme of ahistorical, static binarization. Gramsci dissents from the classical view of the state as simply the instrument of the ruling class. Instead, he views the modern state as the 'unstable equilibria' (182) or field of contestation among classes, which is not simply monopolized by the bourgeoisie. Since the state 'integrates' competing interests, it prevents the expense of dominating through violence. Historically, the state was one of Hobbesian violence as the medieval nobility retained power on the basis of its economic-corporate interests. When a nascent group, like the bourgeoisie, achieved the advanced point of the 'ethical-political', it transformed the state into a hegemonic device by having it 'integrate' competing interests and regulate the historic bloc's internal tensions with the creation of a *dirigente* or *dirigente*, the civil servants who help determine what ought to be a bloc's composition.

The state can act as the bloc's glue because it offers various *dirigente* status by investing them with honorifics or licensing, an act that draws the *dirigente* toward the State as the latter increases the former's status within their original group by making it seem as if the *dirigente* are responsible for preserving a group's inclusion within the bloc, a mystification whereby 'political questions are disguised as cultural ones and as such become insoluble' (149). Because the historic bloc state has various kinds of preferment, it is able to lure a social group's *dirigente* away from their original allegiance by offering greater benefits of security and establishment. Gramsci calls this process *transformism* (or passive revolution), when a bloc reorients itself by fusing oppositional elements in order to contain the open

expression of class conflict. A recent example of transformism is the post-Thatcher/Reagan phenomenon of liberal opposition parties assuming governmental office only to further the political agenda of their conservative predecessors, a case where 'what is at stake is a rotation in governmental office . . . not the foundation and organization of a new political society' (160).

With the concepts of hegemony and historic blocs, Gramsci turns to discuss the kinds of counter-hegemonic tactics, such as the *war of movement* and the *war of position*. The *war of movement* is likened to a 'classic revolution', which uses a swift, decisive strike to topple the state. This kind of attack succeeded in Tsarist Russia because the obsolete state, lacking any compensatory civil society, quickly fell when faced with popular resistance. The situation is more complicated in the West, where states have more and more complex kinds of blocs to call on when faced with crisis. This situation calls on a *war of position*, or an attempt to create a counter-hegemony, like an alliance between the city (proletariat) and countryside (peasants) that would give it more organizational option. For these reason, Gramsci argues that cultural hegemony must exist alongside, but not necessarily before, political rule if a counter-hegemony is to last. Otherwise, any labouring-class rule will be short-lived because it can be easily outflanked like the Paris Commune. Worse yet, a precipitous defeat throws the defeated into the arms of charismatic forces who promise stability and protection. This is Gramsci's theory of the rise of fascism, a situation he generically calls *Caesarism*, where a momentary stalemate between exhausted antagonists creates the opportunity for the rise of a group which has the stamina to lead and dictate the terms to all the opponents. Caesarist solutions can either be reactionary, like the fascists, or progressive, like Cromwell's Commonwealth, but all will need to develop a new bloc or otherwise quickly fall.

Yet, Gramsci also fears that too great an emphasis on the war of position can weaken subaltern resolve and make a group's *dirigente* lose patience and switch sides. Like the dual perspective of force and persuasion, movement and position must work in dialectical tension. As new blocs become stronger they can hazard gambits of movement to further desegregate the solidarity of the traditional bloc. A counter-hegemony can delegitimize the traditional state by creating a crisis of confidence by attracting the old bloc's members so that the old bloc implodes because it can no longer maintain the architecture that covers its competing interests. If the new bloc's *dirigente* refuse to continue acting as the regulators in the same way that the old ones did, then we have a picture of how the state may 'wither away' in a socialist regime. *The Prison Notebooks* did not fully investigate this process of deconstruction. The horizon of *The Prison Notebooks* is the illustration of what a socialist society might be like after it has conquered the bourgeois one. But *The Prison Notebooks* remain Gramsci's *Grandsire*, incomplete because he was not allowed a life long enough to revise it. The task of critical theory today is to build on Gramsci's foundations and imagine what a 'post' *Modern Prince* would contain.

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18. Walter Benjamin (1892–1940)

The work of German literary and cultural critic Walter Benjamin is one of the most influential sources for postwar literary, historical and cultural studies. Benjamin studied German literature and philosophy but he also travelled widely in Europe and wrote about European cities, and translated Baudelaire and Proust in the 1920s. Introduced to Zionism in 1912 when he was twenty, this interest was supplemented by a friendship with Gershom Sholem (1897–1982) which he formed three years later and carried on in letter form after Sholem left for Palestine in 1923. Sholem's comments on Benjamin are important (see Smith 1985, 51–89). His marxism was formed by association with the Riga-born communist and theatre director Asja Lacin in 1924 (see Benjamin 1979, 45), who introduced him to Brecht in 1929, for a friendship and influence that lasted the rest of his life. The central event of Benjamin's life was the rejection of his monograph on German tragic drama by the University of Frankfurt when it was submitted as a *Habilitationsschrift* in 1925, which subsequently became his only book published in his lifetime (see Benjamin 1977a). This failure to qualify for university teaching committed him instead to a lifetime of freelance writing and broadcasting, and to being patronized by other members of the Frankfurt Institute of Social Research, such as Adorno and Horkheimer, who nonetheless published his work in the Institute's journal, the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*. It produced