

Bob Jessop

The Gramsci Debate

Assimilating Gramsci is
a key aspect in the renewal of the Left



It is a commonplace nowadays that Marxism is in crisis. Theoretically this is apparent in the disintegration of the old orthodoxies and the failure to fill the resulting vacuum with more fruitful analyses; politically it is evident in the inability of socialist and popular-democratic forces to build upon the current crisis in capitalism as well as in the problems of 'actually existing socialism'. Without wishing to suggest that theoretical incapacity alone could have produced this crisis, the connection between its theoretical and political moments is implied in Lenin's dictum that there can be no revolution without revolutionary theory. The current crisis is thus both theoretical and practical. This is certainly reflected in the position of the Left in Britain. On the theoretical plane we find a number of responses ranging from a radical attack on the foundations of Marxist political economy in the name of an abstract discourse theory and a practical socialist politics (eg, Hindess and Hirst) to a spirited onslaught on Marxist theoretical practice as a whole by those who proclaim the poverty of theory and the potential analytical fruitfulness of historical research and personal experience (eg, E P Thompson). On the political plane we find a partial retreat from the turn towards right Eurocommunism and a continuing inability of left Eurocommunism to create a broad popular-democratic, socialist bloc embracing

Christine Buci-Glucksmann, *Gramsci and the State* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1980) xvii + 470pp, £14.00; Chantal Mouffe, ed., *Gramsci and Marxist Theory* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979) viii + 288pp, £5.95; and Antonio Gramsci, *Letters from Prison*, selected, translated, and introduced by Lynne Lawner (London: Quartet, 1979) pp292, £3.95.

movements as diverse as the Labour Party, feminism, and ecological groups. This points to the need for a regeneration of Marxism and new solutions to the old question of 'what is to be done?'

In this pessimistic intellectual climate, one name stimulates a certain optimism of political will: that of the justly celebrated Italian communist, Antonio Gramsci. This is hardly surprising. For Gramsci was himself actively involved in an attempt to resolve an equally significant crisis in Marxism during the twenties and thirties. It is increasingly in this context that the work of Gramsci is now considered. Indeed it has even been suggested that we are now witnessing a new phase in the development of Marxist theory following a period of Althusserianism in the sixties: the phase of 'Gramscism' (Mouffe, 1979, pi). However, whilst this remark points to the growing theoretical and political interest in Gramsci as an innovative Marxist intellectual and leading protagonist of socialist revolution in the West, it does not indicate the precise nature of this new theoretical current. For there are almost as many ways of appropriating Gramsci as there are socialist tendencies. In the thirty years or so that Gramsci's prison writings have been widely available, we have encountered the libertarian Gramsci, the Stalinist Gramsci, the social democratic Gramsci, the Togliattian Gramsci, the Trotskyist Gramsci, right and left Eurocommunist Gramscis, and, recently, Gramsci as discourse theorist. Whilst it would be entertaining to pursue the somewhat elusive 'pure' Gramsci, it is surely more important to ask how the current uses of Gramsci can contribute to resolving the present crisis in Marxism. To this end it is worth considering two new works on Gramsci as a political theorist but we shall first comment on the prison letters of Gramsci himself.

The Letters

For those confined to the English language the appropriation of Gramsci has been marked by an extremely uneven development. This is due not only to the belated translation of the prison notebooks (as yet both incomplete and thematic in nature) and the even more belated translation of Gramsci's most important earlier political writings; but also to the continuing inaccessibility of the lively and stimulating Gramsci debate in France as well as Italy. This is not to deny the virtues of various English-language intellectual and political biographies (especially the studies by Cammett, 1967, and Davidson, 1977) but simply to recall that they do not engage to any great extent, if at all, in this particular debate. It is for this reason that one must give a much stronger and warmer welcome to the recently published works of Buci-Glucksmann and Mouffe than to the new paperback edition of Gramsci's prison letters. Over ninety of these letters (about a fifth of the total now known to be extant) have been translated, annotated, and introduced by Lynne Lawner and, thanks to Quartet, are now available in a reasonably priced paperback. However, whilst the prison letters provide further evidence of Gramsci's refusal to be crushed intellectually as well as physically by his years in incarceration — his refusal to 'let go the threads of life', it must be conceded that their theoretical and political importance is slight in comparison with the prison notebooks themselves or, to take a parallel example, the correspondence of Marx and Engels. The letters offer certain indications as to the development of Gramsci's theoretical and political concerns, certain formulations on significant conceptual issues such as the nature of hegemony, certain conclusions on such themes as the role of Croce in Italian political culture; and, as Buci-Glucksmann, for example, shows, they can be made to reveal some interesting points about the theoretical revolution achieved by Gramsci during the prison years. But the letters are basically human documents whose significance is inspirational and literary rather than systematic and theoretical. Moreover, whilst this particular edition has a useful and readable introduction as well as extensive notes, it

should also be noted that a wider selection of the letters is available in the edition produced under the aegis of *The New Edinburgh Review* (1974). This said we can now turn to two studies emerging from the Gramsci debate itself.

Gramsci and the State

It is a pleasure to welcome the new translation of Christine Buci-Glucksmann's major French text on *Gramsci and the State*. Originally published in 1975, it now appears in English with a fresh introduction. It provides one of the most original and important interpretations of the political thought of Gramsci and should stimulate critical comment on a wide range of topics. Buci-Glucksmann argues that Gramsci's role as a political leader of the workers' movement cannot be fully grasped without referring to the specifically theoretical and philosophical dimensions of his revolutionary practice. Accordingly she presents a 'theoretical-political' reading organised around three main themes: the appropriate revolutionary strategy for socialist transition in the West, the role of culture as a dimension of politics — hegemony as moral and intellectual as well as political leadership, and Gramsci's contribution to Marxist philosophy. These three themes are unified through her concern with Gramsci's analysis of the state, which Buci-Glucksmann sees as the key to all his work. Thus, in contrast to those accounts which focus more or less exclusively on Gramsci's discoveries concerning intellectuals, hegemony, the revolutionary party, and so on, this text argues that Gramsci's views on such matters are only intelligible in relation to the 'immense theoretical revolution' involved in his enlarged concept of the state and its implications for political

For those confined to the English language the appropriation of Gramsci has been marked by an extremely uneven development.

strategy. There can be no adequate theory of intellectuals, for example, without a theory of hegemonic state apparatuses and their articulation with the integral state. Much of her analysis is therefore concerned with the methodological duplication of the state apparatus and the moments of state power: with political society and civil society, dictatorship and hegemony, the repressive apparatus and apparatuses of hegemony, state in the narrow sense of government and the broad sense of hegemony protected by the armour of coercion, state as apparatus of power and as organiser of consent, domination and leadership. This analysis is linked in turn to an investigation into the historic bases of different forms of state in terms of the organisation of their social bases of support and the relations of force that sustain them. And this is related to such important strategic issues as war of position, passive revolution, and socialist transition. In analysing these aspects of Gramsci's state theory Buci-Glucksmann pays careful attention to his comparative historical analyses and emphasises the theoretical and political significance of his studies of Fordism and fascism as well as those concerned with the growth of the Italian liberal state. In all this she also highlights the specifically philosophical dimension of Gramsci's work — arguing that Gramsci's historicism is best understood in terms of his original preliminary contributions to a 'gnoseology of polities'. Throughout a wide-ranging and thorough account Buci-Glucksmann is always concerned to relate Gramsci's political thought to his role as a political leader and to contemporary issues in political theory. Thus, in addition to considering his intellectual and political development from the factory council movement of the *biennio rosso* through his period of leadership of the early PCI to his fatal period of incarceration, she also locates his

work in relation to that of Lenin and other communists (eg, Stalin, Lukacs, Trotsky, Bukharin, and Togliatti) and to other leading contemporary political theorists (especially Croce, Gentile, and Sorel). In this context she emphasises Gramsci's continuity with Lenin as well as his remarkable theoretical innovations within the Marxist-Leninist tradition. In short Buci-Glucksmann offers an important interpretation of Gramsci's political thought and points beyond this to a left Eurocommunist strategy based on that interpretation.

Gramsci and Marxist Philosophy

Buci-Glucksmann's analysis of the Gramscian theory of the state will be particularly welcome because it is comprehensive and closely related to strategic questions. Her own commitments in this respect emerge quite clearly in the discussion of war of position and the need for an 'anti-passive revolution'. But equally significant is her account of Gramsci's contribution to Marxist philosophy. For, whilst Buci-Glucksmann rightly stresses his critique of economism and mechanical materialism as central elements in Gramsci's view of historical materialism, she also presents a novel interpretation of the positive content of his philosophical work. She argues that, from 1930 onwards, Gramsci approached the state in both political and philosophical terms. Gramsci emphasised the political nature of philosophy, its character as a superstructural moment, its link with the apparatus of philosophical hegemony, its materialisation in everyday life as well as the abstract, contemplative thought of high philosophy. He argued that hegemony goes beyond political leadership to encompass leadership in the fields of science, morality, and philosophy; and that the transition to socialism would therefore require the creation of a new common sense, a new culture, a new philosophy that is adapted to the new civilisation. In this context Buci-Glucksmann introduces a claim that Gramsci developed a 'gnoseology of polities', ie, a dialectical account of the effects of philosophy in all practices, including those of everyday life, together with the knowledge effects, including philosophical knowledge, involved in these practices. It must be admitted that her arguments here are sometimes as enigmatic as her sources in Gramsci's notebooks but their overall thrust is clear and is well illustrated in the analysis of Gramsci's 'anti-Croce'. For it is in this critique of Crocean philosophy and its political implications that Gramsci most clearly adumbrates the approach reconstructed after the fashion of Althusser in Buci-Glucksmann's work. Whether Gramsci's analyses will bear the weight of this interpretation is questionable and it is also far from certain what precise strategic implications follow from such a 'gnoseology'. But with this one major exception, itself bound to generate further comment, Buci-Glucksmann has provided us with a model of theoretical criticism.

The Italian and French Debates

Chantal Mouffe has also performed a valuable service in collecting and introducing some critical assessments of Gramsci as a political theorist. For, although his most important political writings have been available in English for some time, there has been a dearth of readily accessible Italian and French criticism. This problem has now been remedied in part with the appearance of *Gramsci and Marxist Theory*. In her introduction Mouffe traces the resurgence of interest in Gramsci to the crisis of historicism in the PCI after 1956 (to which one might well add the more general difficulties confronting Marxism in the aftermath of Stalin) and also reviews the current status of the Gramsci debate. This is followed by eight essays on Gramsci as a political theorist, arranged in three groups dealing respectively with his views on superstructures and civil society, philosophy and hegemony, and the state and revolutionary strategy. The first group

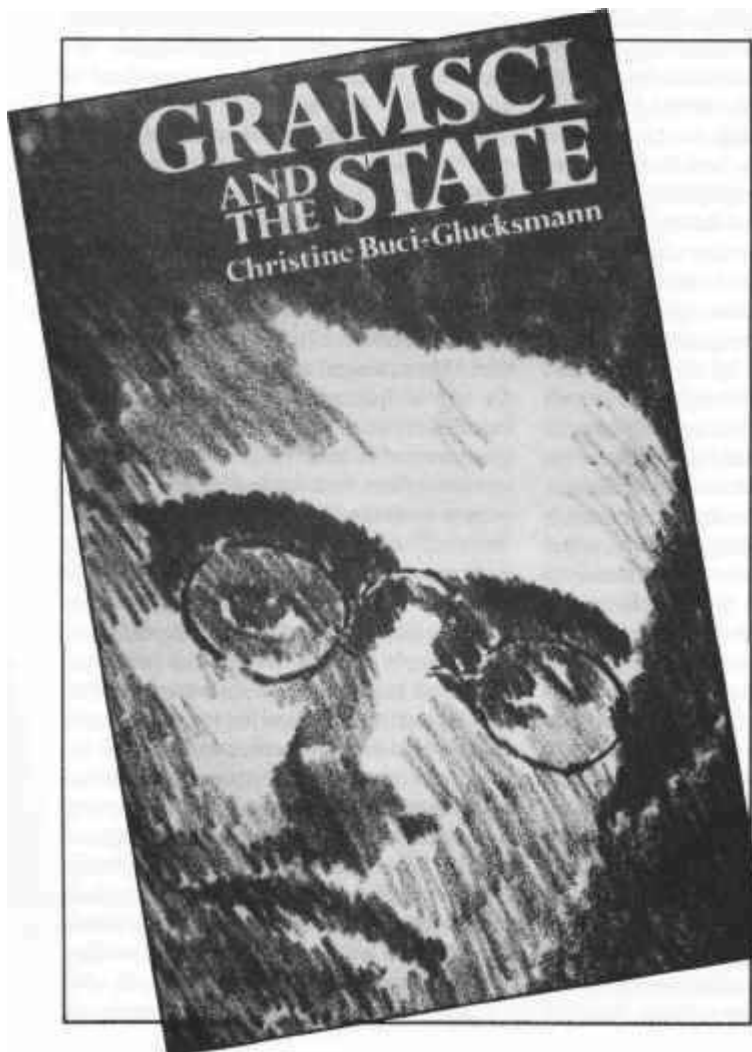
His work can be appropriated in various ways to help solve the theoretical and political difficulties involved in the current crisis of Marxism.

includes the well-known Bobbio-Texier debate. This established a 'superstructuralist' problematic concerned with the extent to which Gramsci attributed causal primacy to civil society over political society and to both moments of the superstructure over the economic system (Bobbio) or, alternatively, retained the Marxist commitment to economic determination in the last instance and simply rounded out historical materialism by concentrating on the superstructural moment of the social whole (Texier). This group also includes a complex and thorough analysis of Gramsci's relation to such critics of Marxism as Sorel, Croce, and Bernstein in an attempt to determine his originality as a theorist of revolution (Badaloni). There follows a second group of two essays dealing with Gramsci's contribution to Marxist philosophy. One stresses his creation of an anti-economistic and non-positivistic 'general theory' in which due weight is given to the ethico-political moment and to Marxism as a guide to action (Paggi); the other argues that Gramsci broke decisively with economism not only in its strong form of epiphenomenalism but also in its weak form of class reductionism and thereby provided the theoretical preconditions for an original and productive analysis of ideology and hegemony as political, intellectual, and moral leadership (Mouffe). The latter essay, rescued from a recondite American

journal rather than from an Italian or French source, is particularly stimulating. For, not only does it provide an incisive critique of class reductionism in the analysis of ideologies, it also offers a preliminary account of a non-reductionist approach to the question of their class nature. The collection concludes with three essays on revolutionary strategy. Thus Buci-Glucksmann develops a novel interpretation of Gramsci's views on the 'war of position' and argues that, whereas the bourgeoisie seeks to consolidate its hegemony through a 'war of position' which permits the reorganisation of social relations at the same time as maintaining the passivity of the masses, a socialist transition demands a 'war of position' that mobilises the people and so achieves an 'anti-passive revolution'. Then, following a short essay by Salvadori on the contrasting conceptions of hegemony found in Gramsci's work and the PCI's reformist strategy, a selection from de Giovanni argues that Gramsci developed a new theory of the party to correspond to the changed nature of the state in the era of state monopoly capitalism. This collection merits a wide audience not only on account of its overall aim of providing a guide to the main lines of interpretation of Gramsci's political theory but also because of the high quality and continuing significance of the essays by Mouffe, Buci-Glucksmann, and de Giovanni.

Relevance to Our Political Problems

It is hoped that this necessarily cursory review of the two texts on Gramsci has shown the contemporary significance of his prison writings. For, regardless of whether Gramsci actually solved the problems in the manner and to the extent suggested by recent commentaries or only pointed in the general direction of such solutions, his work can be appropriated in various ways to help solve the theoretical and political difficulties involved in the current crisis of Marxism. Thus Gramsci established the foundations for Marxist theoretical work that avoids all forms of reductionism whilst retaining the central perspective of class struggle; and, in seeking to explain the astonishing resilience of the bourgeoisie in the face of crises as well as the disappointing course of the Bolshevik revolution, he also produced a set of theoretical concepts for the analysis of the super-structural moment which have clear strategic implications. In this respect one can single out the essay by Mouffe as an excellent demonstration of the non-reductionist implications of his work and the book by Buci-Glucksmann as a theoretical *tour de force* concerned with the strategic implications of Gramsci's enlargement of the concept of the state. Certainly there is no cause here to bewail the poverty of theory or to abandon the quest for an approach that permits an understanding of the social whole. The theoretical perspective proffered in Gramsci's work also has obvious strategic implications for resolving the political moment of the current crisis in Marxism. A first step in this respect is the improved understanding of the political problems confronting the Left (as evidenced in the analyses of Thatcherism in recent issues of this journal). But this must be accompanied by greater concern with the development of a left Euro-communist strategy and its successful conduct in a conjuncture that is far from favourable thereto. In this respect the Gramsci debate is still in its infancy and one looks forward to further work on this problem in Britain as well as elsewhere. •



References

- J Cammett, *Antonio Gramsci and the Origins of Italian Communism* (Stanford; Stanford University Press, 1967).
- A Davidson, *Antonio Gramsci: towards an intellectual biography* (London: Merlin, 1977).
- The New Edinburgh Review*, 3 special Gramsci numbers, 1974 (ed. C K Maisels).