



GRAMSCI'S POLITICAL THOUGHT. AN INTRODUCTION

Roger Simon

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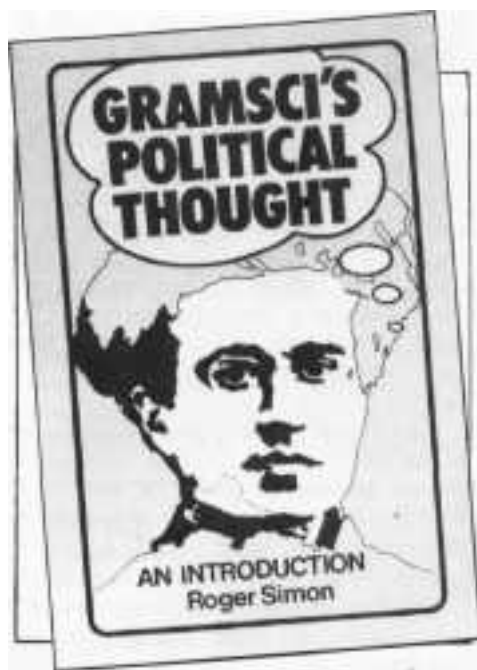
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The confusion and dismay which have characterised the labour movement's reactions to the effects of an ascendant Thatcherism, have brought sharply into focus the weakness of the analytical models traditionally deployed by socialists to interpret contemporary Britain. The stunned inability to come to terms with the nation's often active endorsement of Thatcherism despite the savage effects of its policies is a major roadblock to the development of alternative policies — and the tactical and strategic framework in which to pursue them — which will recapture for the Left the commanding heights of social and moral indignation and break up the pack-ice of political immobility.

Sharply contrasting with Labour's dazed uncertainty is the energy generated by the women's movement and CND, gloriously synthesised at Greenham Common. *Marxism Today* and latterly *New Socialist* have almost singlehandedly attempted to look Britain in its dulled and bloodshot eye and to ask the questions which cause a frisson of fear among those brothers and sisters whose knee jerk reflexes to political issues helped to get us into this mess in the first place.

That renaissance of socialist thought importantly orchestrated in the mainstream by *Marxism Today* — which has even had the audacity to make the issues exciting — demonstrates the transforming effect of a Gramscian political style creatively applied, and its ability to irrigate the arid deserts of policy and strategy.

For all of the above reasons, Roger



Simon's book is brilliantly timed, a rigorous and polemical lifeline for a confused and fragmented movement. In 131 pages he distills from Gramsci's huge output the essence of his theoretical contribution. What he distills is not moonshine. With a lucid and workmanlike style, it is an introduction which tightly relates key concepts in Gramsci to the malaise of the British Left.

Simon is sharp in his criticism of social democracy, Labourism, the ultra left and those whose model of politics rests on uncritical acceptance of the Soviet Union. He is equally clear-eyed on those areas of Gramsci's work which are either incomplete or inappropriate for a socialist strategy in Britain, particularly Gramsci's reliance on a Factory Council model of popular administration. He is also good on the central importance of Togliatti's development of the role of parliamentary democracy, and clear that the Leninist notion of the insurrectionary seizure of the state machine has distorted subsequent socialist thinking on

power and the revolutionary process. In developed capitalist nations, the Gramscian concepts of civil society, hegemony and alliance building with autonomous, progressive movements affords a more effective framework for analysis and strategy.

This more realistic framework poses significant difficulties in Britain, with a deep tradition of Labourism and powerful but increasingly economistic trade unions where the political Left is fragmented by organisational and theoretical differences which are not easily overcome; and Simon himself goes beyond his remit when at the end of the book he seeks to come to terms with them. But for an 'organic' intellectual writing on Gramsci in the 1980s the questions are unavoidable. His masterly analysis of the powerful ideological roots of Thatcherism through his discussion of Gramsci's 'common sense' clearly demonstrates Gramsci's contemporary relevance.

For this reviewer, who blundered into Gramscian ideas as full time trade union official attempting to develop hard-edged cultural policies in film and television and a pattern within which a number of astonishingly productive initiatives could be understood and developed, the relevance of Gramscian strategy has been demonstrated in practice. Breaking out of the traditional notion of the union as a self-sufficient engine of change, we have effectively formed an alliance of clout and ideas with a range of organisations — the Independent Filmmakers Association, the Regional Arts Association's Film and Television Officers, and elements within the British Film Institute — which in the past year has culminated in more than eleven Film Workshops whose annual funding now exceeds one million pounds. Regionally rooted, autonomous and democratically structured, the Workshops operate within a radical new union agreement which for the first time

acknowledges the cultural and social importance of the independent film sector.

The potential is enormous. The Workshops have already led to constructive dialogue on cable with major metropolitan authorities; to the possibility of radical initiatives in creating new forms of cinema in Britain's collapsing exhibition sector; and to a new energy and imagination within the union. Central to this initiative has been joint policy formulation with other organisations : taking on board their preoccupations and priorities, genuinely listening, working together in a fusion of ideas and action unprecedented in the film industry. It implicitly rejects policy formulation by small groups of intellectuals closeted in back rooms producing abstract social and economic models unrelated to what the people on the ground want or can develop.

The potential for a union outreach of this kind is almost wholly unexplored. For these initiatives to be achieved in an industry fissured by unemployment, massive freelancing and multinational financing is remarkable. If these initiatives are anything they are Gramscian. They are also, in their own way, revolutionary

Roy Lockett