

# Marxism Today

presents

## GRAMSCI 87

Saturday April 11th 10-6pm

University of London Union, Malet Street, London WC1



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Fifty years ago this month Antonio Gramsci died after spending many years incarcerated in Mussolini's jails. But like a composer whose major symphonies are only discovered many years after his death, so it took many decades before most of the world, especially outside Italy, discovered Gramsci's writings.

It was not until the early 70s that Gramsci's impact became anything like widespread on the British Left when a substantial English version of the *Prison Notebooks* became available for the first time. The effect then was profound. Suddenly a whole new world was opened up. Gramsci made sense of Western societies in a quite new way. Over-dependence on coercive notions of the state and such ideas as 'false consciousness' gave way to a new subtlety and complexity. British marxism had always been over-dependent on the Russian experience - historically and theoretically. Gramsci's concepts of hegemony, civil society and much else now enabled completely new insights. He rapidly became seen as *the* theorist of revolution in Western Europe.

In the 70s a generation of marxists was influenced by Gramsci. He was the key figure. By the late 70s the debates of that period were drawing to a close, not least as new political realities began to assert themselves; the swing to the right was there for all to see. Yet those debates - and, above all, Gramsci's influence - were to have an enormous impact on the political analyses of the 80s. To put it bluntly, without Gramsci, our understanding of Thatcherism would be impoverished. And without doubt, Gramsci has been the most important single theoretical influence on *Marxism Today* over the last decade.

On April 11, *Marxism Today* is organising a one-day conference to mark the 50th anniversary of Gramsci's death. A powerful array of speakers will help us assess the significance of Gramsci's ideas, introduce those ideas to a new generation, and discuss their relevance for Britain today. • **Martin Jacques**

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# GRAMSCI 87 PROGRAMME

This event is being held to mark the fiftieth anniversary of Gramsci's death, and will provide an invaluable opportunity to reassess his work.

Saturday April 11th 10-6pm  
University of London Union, Malet Street, London WCI

10-10.30am

Registration and coffee

10.30-11.30am

Gramsci and the Marxist Tradition (Manning Hall)  
ERIC HOBSBAWM outlines Gramsci's contribution to Marxism.

11.45-1.15pm

Lenin vs Gramsci (Room 3A)  
QUINTIN HOARE, ROGER SIMON and GAVIN KITCHEN  
debate the question 'did Gramsci simply develop Lenin's ideas  
or break with them?'

Gramsci and the National (Room 3B)  
Reviewing the concept of the 'national-popular'; speakers will  
include JUDÉ BLOOMFIELD, PAUL GILROY  
and ANTHONY BARNETT.

Is a 'Gramscian Feminism' possible? (Room 3C)  
Finding the answers will be ANNE SHOWSTACK SASSOON  
and MICHELE BARRETT.

**Bertolucci's 1900** - Part One (Manning Hall)

2.30-4pm

Why did Eurocommunism fail? (Room 3A)  
An international exchange between JON BLOOMFIELD and  
DONALD SASSOON with guest speakers from the French and  
Italian Communist parties.

Gramsci, the Left and the Popular (Room 3B)  
Revealing the links between Gramsci's cultural writings and  
today's 'designer-socialism' debate will be  
KATHY MYERS, STUART COSGROVE and ROS BRUNT.

**Bertolucci's 1900** - Part Two (Manning Hall)

2.30-4pm

Labour, the State, Civil Society (Room 3D)  
A discussion between BEATRIX CAMPBELL and PETER HAIN  
on the relationships between the Labour Party, autonomous  
movements and local councils.

Gramsci and the British Marxist Tradition  
(Room 3C)

Discussing the nature of Gramsci's impact on the British left  
will be GREGOR McLENNAN, ROSALIND DELMAR,  
DAVID FORGACS and BILL SCHWARZ.

4.15-5.30pm

'Occupations' (Room 3D)  
A drama workshop based on Trevor Griffiths' dramatisation of  
the early life of Gramsci.

Bertolucci's Cinema (Room 3A)  
A chance to discuss '1900' in the context of both Bertolucci's  
work and Italian political history.

Gramsci and Britain Today (Manning Hall)  
STUART HALL closes the daytime event by explaining how we  
can use Gramsci's original concepts to explain the politics of  
1980s Britain.

Throughout the day

Gramsci Bookfair • PCI and Gramsci Exhibitions  
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Gramsci by Renzo Galeotti. Paintings on view at Gramsci 87

# Gramsci: a glossary of revolution

**G**RAMSCI HAS become widely known for his concept of hegemony and this is undoubtedly the cornerstone in his political thought and his major contribution to marxist theory. But it cannot be fully grasped without taking into account his other concepts, and it may be helpful to begin with one of these, **civil society**, which I believe has not yet received the attention on the Left that it deserves.

Gramsci distinguished between the public institutions comprising the state, and all the private, voluntary relations that people enter into that are outside the sphere of the state. These voluntary relations are embodied in a wide variety of organisations and activities such as trade unions, political parties, churches, and community, cultural and charitable organisations. All these diverse voluntary activities make up civil society; they belong to the domain of society rather than to the state. Thus civil society consists of a network of social relations distinct from the economic structure as well as from the state. It is particularly important to note that it encompasses all cultural and leisure activities.

Gramsci argued that a ruling class dominates other classes by a combination of force and consent. Force is exercised mainly by the coercive apparatuses of the state - the armed forces, police, law courts and prisons - while consent is secured through the exercise of political, moral and intellectual leadership. He used the term **hegemony** to describe this exercise of national leadership. The building of alliances is central to the concept of hegemony. A hegemonic class is one that maintains a position of national leadership by gaining the consent of other classes and social groups through creating a system of alliances, and continually adapting it to changing conditions.

Gramsci suggested that it was within civil society that hegemony was mainly exercised. In one of the best-known passages of his *Prison Notebooks* he compared civil society to a system of 'fortresses and earthworks' standing behind the state: civil society had become far more complex in advanced capitalist countries than it was in Tsarist Russia before 1917, where society was dominated by the state and where the ruling class relied much more on force, and much less on hegemony, than was the case in the West. Thus in Russia a frontal attack, which Gramsci called a **war of movement**, could succeed. But in the West a different revolutionary strategy was required - a **war of position**. The advance to socialism consisted in the transformation of civil society, as a basis for the transformation of the state.

Thus in countries where civil society is highly developed, as in Britain, the labour movement has to undermine the hegemony of the capitalist class by building its own system of alliances and its own alternative hegemony in civil society.

This requires great attention to ideological struggle, to changing the way people think and act, to what Gramsci called **moral and intellectual reform**. He made a novel approach to the question of ideology by applying the term to the ways in which people make sense of the world they live in. He used the term **common sense** to mean the ordinary assumptions which people make, their way of seeing the world in which certain values seem natural and unquestionable.

Thus ideology, in this meaning of common sense, is not just an instrument of domination or a set of false beliefs. Rather, it is a terrain of struggle. It is the site on which the dominant ideology is constructed but it is also the site of resistance to that ideology.

Gramsci suggested that ideology is

effective in so far as it succeeds in binding together a bloc of diverse social forces. Thus the idea of the 'welfare state' was central in forming the consensus around the postwar political settlement, and the theme of individual self-interest has been central to Thatcherism. The labour movement has to build up a new bloc of social forces, cemented by an ideology - a new common sense - expressing socialist values in ways that are related to the needs and experiences of the working class.

For building a network of alliances, Gramsci adds a very important dimension with his concept of **national-popular**: a class cannot be hegemonic if it confines itself to its own immediate material interests as a class. It must take into account the range of popular and democratic issues which do not have a purely class character, and which have given rise in many cases to significant social movements, such as those concerning women, peace, ethnic minorities, civil liberties, national liberation and the environment. These democratic issues constitute arenas where the two fun-

damental classes contend for supremacy. The hegemonic class is the one that succeeds in combining the interests stemming from these issues with its own interests so as to achieve national leadership.

I should like to make two concluding points.

First, Gramsci's concepts of civil society and war of position have far-reaching effects: they extend the scope of politics and deepen its meaning. Electoral activity of political parties is shown to be only part of socialist politics, which concerns the transformation of civil society. The achievements of feminism - 'the personal is political' — and of the GLC are excellent illustrations of this, pointing the way forward.

Second, Gramsci only succeeded in developing his concepts because they arose out of his concrete analysis of Italian and European history. That is why the work of *Marxism Today* is so important in laying the basis for the left to rethink its political and economic strategy, and to adapt and develop Gramscian Marxism to British conditions. •

**Roger Simon**



## Sardinian beginnings

**B**ORN IN Sardinia in 1891, Gramsci won a scholarship in 1911 to study at the University of Turin, the capital of the rapidly expanding industrial north of Italy. Here, the political formation of the young Sardinian nationalist began in earnest when he joined the Socialist Party in 1913.

As news of the October Revolution broke in 1917, the socialists of Turin, Italy's 'Petrograd', chose Gramsci as their leader. In 1919, with Togliatti, he founded the journal *L'Ordine Nuovo*, which gave inspiration to the factory council movement.

The congress of the Socialists in January 1921 resulted in a split, and Gramsci, Togliatti and others, within days, founded the Italian Communist Party. From 1922-3 Gramsci was

the party's representative on the executive of the Communist International in Moscow. On his return to Italy he soon emerged as the intellectual and political leader of an opposition to the sectarian postures of the party under Bordiga.

Gramsci replaced Bordiga as leader in 1924, marking a decisive turning point for Italian communism. He brought to the party a new sense of mass politics. The period 1924-6 found him analysing the social roots and development of fascism in Italy, and the types of political alliances required to defeat it. Shortly after the PCI's 1926 congress in Lyons which approved his ideas, Gramsci was arrested, held until 1928, then condemned to 20 years in prison.

Even in prison, Gramsci had more to give. His *Prison Notebooks* deepened the new analyses begun during his leadership. The new situation required new instruments of analysis. 'Historic bloc', 'war of position', 'hegemony' were ideas born out of Gramsci's passionate commitment to creating effective strategic concepts to meet this need.

The leadership of the party had passed to Togliatti, his closest political collaborator. Togliatti, in exile, read the *Notebooks* smuggled out of prison after Gramsci's death in 1937. Gramsci's thought and political instincts became almost a mental habit with Togliatti, and when he returned to Italy in 1944 his former comrade's ideas became part of the political texture of the direction he gave to the 'new party'. •

**Gino Bedani**

## Hegemony in print



HERE ARE TWO ways into reading Gramsci: through writings by him or through writings about him. It is always preferable to start with the former, since the latter are a minefield strewn with conflicting views of what he is supposed to have said.

In English Gramsci's works are in five main volumes: a selection of his *Letters from Prison* (Jonathan Cape, 1975), two volumes of *Selections from Political Writings* from the period 1910-1926, *Selections from Prison Notebooks* and *Selections from Cultural Writings* (all published by Lawrence and Wishart).

Where you begin and how you read these texts depends on which aspect of Gramsci you are looking for. If you want to find out why Gramsci has mattered to the Left in Britain over the past 15 years, a good starting point is the note on state and civil society on p238 of *Selections from Prison Notebooks*. Another key passage is on pp181-2, where Gramsci explains that in order to attain hegemony, the working class must make its interests 'the interests of other groups too', it must become a 'universal' class.



Gramsci by Renzo Galeotti

These notes have been read as suggesting a left strategy appropriate mainly to the advanced capitalist West. As such, they illuminate just one facet of Gramsci. He also deals with the culture of the rural peripheries, with the peasant question, with national movements in the context of development and modernisation. Some of these issues may seem 'past' for Eurocentric marxists, but they are very 'present' for the developing world, for the European peripheries and for national minorities everywhere.

A third facet of Gramsci emerges in the two volumes of *Political Writings*, namely the political activist

engaged in day-to-day problems of tactics and strategy in the fraught period between the first world war and the rise to power of fascism. The Gramsci of the factory councils, workers control and socialist democracy is represented in Volume 1 (1910-1920). His writings on the early communist movement and his analyses of fascism can be found in Volume 2 (1921-1926).

These earlier writings have been used by some commentators to support a view of a more 'orthodox' Gramsci than the allegedly 'revisionist' figure who surfaces in the prison writings. The later pieces in Volume 2, notably the 'Lyons Theses' and 'Some Aspects of the Southern Question', are important reading for anyone trying to make up their mind on this question.

Turning to writings about Gramsci, there is a wide array to choose from in English, though the quality is uneven. Of the accounts of Gramsci's life, Giuseppe Fiori's *Antonio Gramsci: Life of a Revolutionary* (NLB/Verso) is essential reading, beautifully evocative on his Sardinian origins, though not the best source on his ideas. Paolo Spriano's *Antonio Gramsci: the Prison Years* (Lawrence and Wishart) contains a well-documented account of Gramsci's disagreement with Togliatti and the PCI leadership over their acceptance of the 'class against class' poli-

cy in the early 30s.

Of the short introductions, James Joll's *Gramsci* (Fonotana Modern Masters) is probably the best. There is also an excellent introductory essay on 'Gramsci and Marxist Political Theory' by Eric Hobsbawm in *Approaches to Gramsci*, edited by Anne Showstack Sassoon (Writers and Readers) (the essay originally appeared in the July 1977 issue of *Marxism Today*). Roger Simon's *Gramsci's Political Thought* (Lawrence and Wishart) is a model of lucidity, as well as an eloquent application of Gramscian ideas to practical politics in contemporary Britain, though because of this it is not always the most reliable guide to Gramsci's ideas in themselves.

Among the criticisms of the various liberal, social-democratic and Eurocommunist betrayals of Gramsci's revolutionary thought, Chris Harman's pamphlet *Gramsci Versus Reformism* (SWP) still repays reading, as does John Hoffman's more densely theoretical but intelligent book *The Gramscian Challenge* (Blackwell). The criticisms are often well-aimed, even though the authors have a tendency to throw out a few vital organs of the Gramscian baby with the reformist bathwater and to end up suggesting either that Gramsci was wrong or else that Marx, Lenin or Trotsky said it all before.

David Forgacs

## Home-ground comeback



IN THE LAST 10 years or so, Gramsci has almost been relegated to a street name in Italy. As the historic compromise broke down, terrorism created an atmosphere of near civil war in the late 70s, and neo-liberalism in the unlikely guise of Craxi's socialists improved the standard of living of a large part of the population (leaving a large minority well behind), Italian intellectuals have considered Gramsci out of fashion.

A constructive criticism of the limits of marxism and left politics has arrived at a wholesale rejection of the theoretical 'fathers' of the 1968 generation. Writing about him and sales of his work have been reduced to a trickle.

This is the context in which the Italian Communist Party (PCI) has launched a year of debates and discussions to celebrate the 50th anniversary of Gramsci's death. Symbolically the 1987 PCI membership card bears his portrait, but more significantly in January *L'Unita*, the PCI daily, published a long interview with PCI general secretary Alessandro Natta about Gramsci.

The thrust of his argument was that just as Gramsci was writing during a watershed for European society when capitalism was being reorganised along an 'American' model in the 1930s and the Soviet Union was encountering enormous problems in the first concrete attempt to build socialism, today Europe, East and West, is at another crossroads.

While suggesting that the PCI has gone beyond certain Gramscian categories, for example a totalising concept of the party, Natta maintained that others, such as passive revolution, and Gramsci's whole approach to analysing the changes confronting European society, are useful in the immense task confronting the European left: developing an analysis of the contemporary situation which provides the basis for a European-wide strategy.

Gramsci's status as a world-wide cultural figure whose categories are useful for re-thinking the present world crisis will be the theme of this Gramsci 'year' in Italy.

Gramsci, therefore, is being offered as part of the PCI's attempt to present itself as an integral part of a European Left which has to reconstitute itself if it is to have any affect on the developing social, economic, political and cultural processes now evident in the Western world.

Anne Showstack Sassoon

## In praise of the peculiar



GRAMSCI'S INFLUENCE on people like me, who first read him, in translation, in the early 1960s, has been profound. Our interest in Gramsci was not scholastic. We appropriated Gramsci for ourselves in our own way. Reading Gramsci has fertilised our political imagination, transformed our way of thinking, our style of thought, our whole political project.

Certainly, 'appropriating Gramsci' has never licensed us to read him any way that suits us, uncontrolled by a respect for the distinctive grain and formation of his thought. Our 'reading' is neither wilful nor arbitrary - precisely because that would be contrary to the very lessons we learned from him. It is, after all, Gramsci himself who first taught us how to 'read Gramsci'. He re-tuned our intellectual ear to the historically-specific and distinct register in which his concepts operate. It is from Gramsci that we learned to understand - and practise - the discipline imposed by an unswerving attention to the 'peculiarities' and unevenness of national-cultural de-

velopment. It is Gramsci's example which cautions us against the too-easy transfer of historical generalisations from one society or epoch to another, in the name of 'Theory'.

If I were to try to summarise, in a sentence, what Gramsci did for people of my generation, I would have to say something like this: simply, he made it possible for us to read Marx again, in a new way: that is, to go on 'thinking' the second half of the 20th century, face-to-face with the realities of the modern world, from a position somewhere within the legacy of Marx's thought. The legacy of Marx's thought, that is, not as a quasi-religious body of dogma but as a living, developing, constantly renewable stream of ideas.

If I had to make that general claim more specific, I would probably choose to emphasise - out of an array of possible arguments - the following points.

First, his boldness and independence of mind. Gramsci came to 'inhabit' Marx's ideas, not as a strait-jacket, which confined and hobbled his imagination, but as a framework of ideas which liberated his mind, which set it free, which put it to work. Most of us had been fed on a diet of so-called marxist writing in which the explicator, mindful of the quasi-religious character of his (definitely *his*) task,

allowed himself only the occasional free-range moment of textual emendation. Consequently, we experienced the freedom and freshness of Gramsci's writing as a liberation, revolutionary in its impact. Here, what was undoubtedly a limitation from a textual point of view - namely, the fragmentary nature of his writings - was, for us, a positive advantage. Gramsci's work resisted even the most concerted effort to knit up its loose ends into a seamless garment of Orthodoxy.

Then, there is the way in which Gramsci, without neglecting the other spheres of articulation, made himself *par excellence* the 'theorist of the political'. He gave us, as few comparable theorists ever have, an *expanded* conception of 'politics' - the rhythms, forms, antagonisms, transformations specific and peculiar to it as a region. I am thinking of the way he advances such concepts as 'the relation of forces', 'passive revolution', 'transformism', 'strategic conjuncture', 'historical bloc', the new meanings given to the concept of 'party'. These concepts are required if we are to think the political in modern terms, as the strategic level into which other determinations are explosively condensed.

Next, I would want to fasten on the manner in which his notion of 'hegemony' forces us to reconceptualise the nature of class and social forces:

indeed, he makes us rethink the very notion of power itself - its project and its complex 'conditions of existence' in modern societies. The work on the 'national-popular', on ideology, on the moral, cultural and intellectual dimensions of power, on its double articulation in state and in civil society, on the inter-play between authority, leadership, domination and the 'education of consent' equipped us with an enlarged conception of power, and of its molecular operations, its investment on many different sites. His pluri-centered conception of power made obsolete the narrow, one-dimensional conceptions with which most of us had operated.

The same could be said for the astonishing range of his writing on cultural questions, on language and popular literature and, of course, his work on ideology. The notion of the production and transformation of 'common sense', of the 'the popular' as the cultural terrain which all ideologies must encounter and negotiate with, and to the logic of which they must conform if they are to become historically organic changed the thinking of a whole generation on these questions. His work on the necessarily contradictory nature of the subjects of ideology, their fragmentary, pluri-centered character have been extraordinarily generative. They helped us to cut

through the arid wastes of a progressively abstract definitional debate about ideology, to look at the cultural logics and forms of practical reasoning where the languages of the popular masses take shape and where the historic struggle to create the forms of a new culture is engaged. Nothing is so calculated to destroy the simple minded notion of ideology as 'correct thoughts' parachuted into the empty heads of waiting proto-revolutionary subjects as Gramsci's stubborn attendance to the real, living textures of popular life, thought, and culture which circumscribe the historical effectivity of even the most coherent and persuasive of 'philosophies'.

Gramsci held aloft, with fortitude and courage, the torch of critical thought and political commitment amidst the darkening storm-clouds of fascism. We have drawn inspiration, in our own 'Iron Times', from his courage and commitment. It is therefore a bizarre turn in the wheel of fortune that he should have made his most profound mark, on my own political thinking, in two related directions apparently quite foreign to his own practice and circumstances.

It is by trying to understand Gramsci that I have come to have some glimmer of an understanding of the profound transformation which is now under way in Western

liberal-bourgeois societies under the aegis of the 'new Right' - the moment of revolution-and-reaction, of 'reconstruction in the very moment of destruction' which, under the name of Thatcherism, Reaganism and the other forms of crisis-resolution in capitalist societies, have come to dominate our epoch.

It is by studying this 'counter-hegemony' at work that one begins to understand what a 'hegemonic political project' might be like. Hence it is also Gramsci who has helped me to begin to understand the enormity of the task of *renewal* which socialism and the Left now has before it if it is ever to become a truly hegemonic project.

I mean by that, capable not simply of winning and holding office, or of putting into effect an outdated programme, but of laying the basis for a whole new conception of life, a whole new type of democratic socialist civilisation. Still, when I look at Gramsci's embattled face, that wild shock of hair, the unexpected orthodoxy of those wire-framed glasses, or into those luminous eyes, I like, fondly, to imagine that this is a reversal of fortune which, perversely, the Sardinian would have relished.

Stuart Hall

A version of this article has been published in *Rinascita*

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