

CHRISTOPHER HILL

## *Antonio Gramsci*

Antonio Gramsci was born in 1891, of a poor Sardinian family\*. He began work at the age of 11, but managed to get a scholarship to the university of Turin, where he did brilliantly and had the chance of an academic career. But already he was a revolutionary socialist and a leader of the working-class movement in Turin: "the first Italian Marxist," he was called by his friend at the university and close collaborator in later life, Togliatti. In May 1919 Gramsci founded the newspaper *Ordine Nuovo*, followed by *Unita* in 1924. In the same year he was elected secretary of the Italian Communist Party. He played a leading part in the opposition to Mussolini until he was arrested in November 1926. He was not brought to trial until May 1928, when he was sentenced to 20 years' imprisonment. "For twenty years," the Public Prosecutor said, "we must stop that brain from working."

But they did not stop it. For nine long years Gramsci, already a sick man, was slowly done to death in jail, dying in April 1937. But in prison he filled 32 large notebooks with essays on a vast variety of subjects, the connecting link being the application of Marxism to the historical, cultural and political problems of Italy. Gramsci was more fortunate than many political prisoners in that he was able to write, and that his writings survived. They have been published in Italy since the war.

The prison writings are difficult. Many circumlocutions had to be used to fool the prison censorship. Marxism is never referred to except as "the philosophy of action." The writings are often in abbreviated form - notes for essays, with steps in the argument left out. Familiarity with Italian problems is assumed, and with Italian writers and thinkers, especially with the idealist philosopher Croce. In the present selection the translator has removed some of these difficulties. The names of Marx and Engels are restored where Gramsci had referred to "the founders of the philosophy of action." But the structural difficulties, and the Italian topicality of the essays, remain. Moreover, all Gramsci's thought moves within the categories of Marxism. The non-Marxist reader must be prepared to take them seriously if he is to comprehend what Gramsci has to say. It is worth an effort. Gramsci may well be regarded as the greatest Marxist thinker since Lenin; certainly the greatest in western Eur-

\* Antonio Gramsci, *The Modern Prince and other writings*. Translated and edited by Dr. Louis Marks. (Lawrence and Wishart, 1957; pp. 192).

ope. Above all he is a fresh and stimulating thinker, and freshness and capacity to stimulate have not been too common in Marxist writings published in the past two decades. His writings have not previously been available for English readers. During the Stalinist era Gramsci was frowned upon by orthodox communists. When his works were published in Italy they were virtually ignored by the Communist Party press in the U.S.S.R. and in this country. On the other hand he was not sufficiently heretical to interest anti-Marxists, and this volume has been greeted with silence by reviewers. For many years all efforts to have an English translation published were defeated. Now that a first selection has appeared we can see why.

Gramsci was above all an enemy of dogmatism. He attacked this wherever he found it. He had the courage, and the integrity, to criticize Bukharin's *Historical Materialism* at a time when Bukharin was still regarded as an official exponent of orthodoxy in Moscow. ("Orthodoxy," Gramsci wrote, "must not be looked for in this or that follower of Marxism, in this or that tendency linked by extraneous currents to the original doctrine"). But Gramsci's criticisms of dogmatism go very deep. "The dialectic," he says

is very arduous and difficult, in that dialectical thinking- goes against vulgar common sense, which is dogmatic, (hungering after incontrovertible certainties and expresses itself in formal logic. To understand this attitude better one can think what would happen if the natural and physical sciences were taught in primary and secondary schools on the basis of Einstein's theory of relativity . . . . The children would understand nothing about anything and the clash between school teaching and family and popular life would be so great that the school would become an object of scorn and sceptical caricature (pp. 99-100).

In Bukharin's writings, Gramsci thought, the rough uneducated<sup>1</sup> environment has dominated the educator, vulgar common sense has imposed itself on science and not vice versa; if environment is the educator it must in its turn be educated, but (Bukharin's) Study does not understand this revolutionary dialectic. At the root of all the mistakes of the Study . . . . lies precisely this pretence of dividing Marxism into two parts: a 'sociology,' and a systematic philosophy. Cut off from the theory of (history and politics, philosophy can only be metaphysics, whereas the great achievement in the history of modern thought represented by Marxism is precisely the concrete historicisation of philosophy and its identification with history (p. 100).

So in Bukharin's system theoretical development remains stunted. The application of this not only to Stalin but also to Khrushchev's critique of Stalin is obvious enough.

In criticising Bukharin Gramsci made many shrewd remarks which throw light on later Stalinist attitudes. Bukharin "is under the illusion that there is some similarity (apart from the formal and metaphorical one) between the ideological and the politico-military front." This led him to concentrate his attack on "the weakest

people and on their weakest points . . . . in order to win easy verbal victories." But what matters is "to defeat the eminent people." The object of controversy is not "demolition" but "to raise the tone and intellectual level of one's followers," to create "the basis for one's own side to absorb and bring to life its own original doctrine corresponding to its own conditions of life" (pp. 97, 102-3).

Gramsci has some far-reaching things to say about democracy and about the responsibility of leaders. "Democratic centralism provides an elastic formula, which lends itself to many embodiments; it lives to the extent that it is continuously interpreted and adapted to necessity." as a result of "critical research" (p. 179). Some leaders think

that when the principle of the group is laid down, obedience ought to be automatic, should come about without the need to show its 'necessity' and rationality, or even that it is beyond discussion (some people think, and, what is worse, act on the thought, that obedience 'will come' without (being asked, without the paths being shown). So it is difficult to rid the leaders of dictatorial habits, that is, the conviction that something- will be done because the leader thinks it is correct and rational that it should be done: if it is not done, the 'blame' is put on those who 'ought to have,' etc. . . . . After every defeat it is always necessary to look into the responsibility of the leaders (p. 144).

This tendency of leaders to adopt an irresponsible attitude Gramsci associates with a rigid belief in determinism. "The determinist, fatalist mechanist element has been an immediate ideological 'aroma' of Marxism, a form of religion." But Gramsci does not leave it at that. He analyses this religious element that has crept into Marxism, and suggests that it is in a sense

necessitated and justified by the 'subordinate' character of certain social strata . . . . When one does not have the initiative in the struggle and the struggle itself is ultimately identified with a series of defeats, mechanical determinism becomes a formidable power of moral resistance, of patient and obstinate perseverance. 'I am defeated for the moment but the nature of things is on my side over a long period,' etc. Real will is disguised as an act of faith, a sure rationality of history, a primitive and empirical form of impassioned finalism (i.e. millenarianism), which appears as a substitute for the predestination, providence, etc., of the confessional religions (p. 69).

Most of us are familiar with this form of consolation: "We may have lost Wigan, but we've got Pekin!" "The mechanist conception has been the religion of subordinates," Gramsci suggests: "a naive philosophy of the masses." It becomes a dangerous "cause of passivity, of imbecile self-sufficiency, when it is made into a reflexive and coherent philosophy on the part of the intellectuals"; and especially when the hitherto subordinate classes "become leading and responsible" (p. 70), when they have taken over state power.

I have quoted passages from Gramsci's prison writings which

seem to me relevant to present discontents. But Gramsci was not consciously attacking the abuses of the Stalin era : his last visit to the Soviet Union was in 1924. His thought was formed in an earlier period, and the relevance of his conclusions to the U.S.S.R. of Stalin arises from the fact that Gramsci was thinking in Marxist terms of the problems of the transition to socialism, and: that his own first-hand experience was of a relatively backward economy - not indeed as backward as that of pre-1917 Russia, but also one in which the peasantry predominated. Gramsci tried to do for Italy what Lenin tried to do for Russia - to work out on the basis of Marxism a realistic, effective science for the transformation of society. For him this implied a revolutionary change as great as that involved in the birth of Christianity. He aimed to rebut all arguments which tended to limit the expansiveness of Marxism, Whether these came from within or without the Marxist camp. This meant that the true origin and nature of such arguments must be sought out and understood. They distorted Marxism, he thought, because they drew their inspiration from currents of thought derived from earlier philosophical systems, even though historically they may have become associated with the growth of Marxism.

A problem to which Gramsci returned again and again was the relation of intellectuals to the working-class movement. Taking the parallel of the protestant Reformation, Gramsci showed how the "desertion " of the Reformation by the main body of humanist intellectuals

explains the Reformation's 'sterility' in the sphere of higher culture, until there gradually emerged a new group of intellectuals from among' the masses of the people who remained faithful, and whose work culminated in classical (German idealist) philosophy. Something similar has happened with Marxism up to the present; the great intellectuals formed in its soil were few in number, not connected with the people, did not come from the people but were the expression of the traditional middle classes to which many reverted at the great historical ' turning-points' (p. 88),

Marxism " is still passing through its popularizing stage; to develop a core of independent intellectuals is no simple task but a long process, with actions and reactions . . . Marxism itself has become ' prejudice ' and ' superstition' " in this stage, although " it contains within itself the principle for overcoming this " (p. 87).

In stressing the importance of intellectuals for the socialist movement, Gramsci's concern was to avoid the kind of cultural sterility which followed the Reformation. Intellectuals are not politically decisive. "A class some of whose strata still retain a ptolemaic conception of the world can still be the representative of a very advanced historical situation; ideologically backward (at least for some parts of its conception of the world, which is still disjointed and ingenious)-

these strata are still the most advanced in practice, i.e. in their economic and political role." But Gramsci did not tell intellectuals that their only duty was humility, " contemplation of the backsides of the proletariat." " The task of the intellectuals is that of determining and organising moral and' intellectual reform." But in order to perform this task in the interests of the working-class, socialist intellectuals must break decisively with the norms of the' old order. I Every new historical organism (type of society) creates a new superstructure, whose specialised representatives and standard bearers (the intellectuals) must also be seen as 'new' intellectuals, arising from the new situation" (p. 113).

In pre-socialist societies intellectuals tend to be a caste apart, cut off from the masses of the population. But any man is an intellectual to some extent, even though he does not occupy the social position of intellectual; just as any man can fry an *egg*, though few are professional cooks. " The problem of creating a new class of intellectuals consists, therefore in the critical elaboration of the intellectual activity which exists at a certain stage of development in everyone." "To deepen and widen the 'intellectuality' of every individual, as well as to increase and refine specialisation " : such would have been Gramsci's remedies for preventing the sort of cultural stagnation which succeeded the Reformation (pp. 121-2). It was here indeed that he believed Marxism superior to preceding ideologies. A sophisticated Roman Catholic, Gramsci pointed out, differentiates between his philosophy and that of the present masses; and yet would never think it his duty to rescue the " simple people " from their belief in crude magic (Gramsci is thinking of Italian peasants) and bringing them up to the level of intellectuals.

Marxism does not seek to sustain the 'simple people' in their primitive philosophy of common sense, but instead to lead them to a higher view of life. If it asserts the need for contact between the intellectuals and the simple people it does so, not in order to limit scientific activity and maintain unity at the low level of the masses, but precisely in order to build an intellectual-moral bloc which makes politically possible the intellectual progress of the masses and not only of a few groups of intellectuals (p.66).

The problem is to preserve contact between the specialised intellectuals and the mass of the population. " The process of development is bound by an intellectual-mass dialectic; the stratum of intellectuals develops quantitatively and qualitatively, but every leap towards a new ' fullness ' and complexity on the part of the intellectuals is tied to an analogous movement of the mass of simple people, who raise themselves to higher levels of culture and at the same time broaden their circle of influence with thrusts forward by more or less important individuals or groups towards the level of the spec-

ialised intellectuals." Sometimes a separation takes place between the masses and the intellectuals, a loss of contact. "Insistence on the element of 'practice' in the theory-practice nexus," on such occasions, "means that we are passing through a relatively primitive historical phase" (p. 68). ("What we need is to cut the cackle and get out on the knocker!"). But Gramsci never wavered in his insistence on intellectual freedom. "It seems necessary," he was careful to add, as though foreseeing one way in which democratic centralism would be developed, "that the hard work of research for new truths and for better, more coherent and clear formulation of the truths themselves should be left to the free initiative of individual scholars, even if they continually replace in discussion the very principles which appear most essential . . . It will not be difficult to make clear when such discussions have interested motives and are not of a scientific character" (p. 74).

So Gramsci tried to demonstrate the fertility of Marxism in pointing the way to solutions of the historically urgent tasks of the Italy of his day. Hence the essay in this volume on *The Southern Question*, and his perennial concern with the role of the Roman Catholic church, with the philosophy of Croce - the first lay philosophy which ever took on the dimensions of a cultural movement in Italy - and with the problem of intellectual's in relation to socialism. Marxism for Gramsci was "revolutionary" in the sense that

Christianity was revolutionary as against paganism, because it was an element of complete break between the supporters of the old and the new words . . . To hold that Marxism is not a completely autonomous and independent structure of thought, antagonistic to all traditional philosophies and religions, means in reality not to have cut one's bonds with the old world, if not actually to have capitulated to it. Marxism has no need of heterogeneous supports; it is itself sufficiently robust and so productive of new truths that the old world resorts to it to furnish its arsenal with the most modern and effective arms. This signifies that Marxism is beginning- to exercise its own hegemony over traditional culture, but the latter, which is still robust and above all is more refined and finished, tries to react like conquered Greece, to stop the crude Roman conqueror from being victorious (p. 117).

The words are brave, and would no doubt have been differently chosen if Gramsci had lived another 20 years, as he so well might have done; but they have their relevance for those Marxists who have fallen back on liberal standards for their critique of the crudities of Stalinism.

I have quoted those remarks of Gramsci which seem to me especially topical. But there is much of more general value in this small volume for anyone sufficiently interested to dig for it. Thus the essay from which the volume takes its title has much to say to any student of politics or political theory. What Gramsci writes about

Marxism and prediction is relevant to Professor Popper's recently published attack on "historicism." "To hold that one particular conception of the world and of life has in itself a superior capacity for foresight is a mistake of the crudest fatuity and superficiality" (p. 162).

Posing the problem as a search for laws, for regular, uniform, constant lines, is linked with the need, looked at in a somewhat childlike and naive way, of peremptorily resolving the practical problem of the foreseeability of historical events. Since, by a strange turning upside down of perspectives, it 'seems' that the natural sciences provide the ability to foresee the evolution of natural processes, historical methodology has been conceived as 'scientific' only if, and in so far as, it enables one abstractly to 'foresee' the future of society. Hence the search for essential causes, or rather for the 'first cause,' the cause of causes. But the Theses on Feuerbach have already anticipated and criticised *bias* naive conception. In reality one can foresee only the struggle and not its concrete episodes; these must be the result of opposing forces in continuous movement, never reducible to fixed quantities, because in them quantity is always becoming quality. 'Really one 'foresees' to the extent to which one acts, to which one makes a voluntary effort and so contributes concretely to creating the 'foreseen' result. Foresight reveals itself therefore not as a scientific act of knowledge, but as the abstract expression of the effort one makes, the practical method of creating a collective will (p. 101).

So modest was the translator and editor of this volume of selections - or so modest were the publishers on his behalf - that some research is needed to discover that he is in fact Dr. Louis Marks. The translation is excellent, and Dr. Marks adds an efficient biographical introduction, from which the opening paragraphs of this review were taken, as well as useful notes. He is to be congratulated on making available a quarry of ideas. That it is not an easy quarry to work is no fault of the translator's. But the difficulties are worth facing for those who, in the words of Gramsci's last letter to his son, "like history . . . because it is about living men." For "everything that is about men, as many men as possible, all the men in the world united among themselves in societies, working and struggling and bettering themselves, must please you more than any other thing."

*Publication of letters of Antonio Gramsci, translated by Hamish Henderson, will commence in our Summer number: I. Letters on the Jewish Question.*