



**Gramsci, the Prison
Notebooks and Philosophy**

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Row's Collection

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Those who want to present Antonio Gramsci as someone other than a revolutionary Marxist focus on the notebooks he wrote in prison. Gramsci wrote his **Prison Notebooks** under the surveillance of a fascist jailer and often felt compelled to disguise his real meaning. So Marxism is called 'the philosophy of practice', Lenin is referred to as 'Ilyich' and the revolutionary party as 'the modern prince' (after the 'prince' who Niccolò Machiavelli hoped would bring about a revolutionary unification of renaissance Italy). Yet again and again there are references in the notebooks whose revolutionary meaning is obvious to those with eyes to see.

So, for instance, his writings on the most influential Italian intellectual of his time, Benedetto Croce – who greatly influenced the young Gramsci – are replete with criticisms of Croce for his 'reformism' [1] and for removing 'iron and fire' from history. [2] One passage in the **Prison Notebooks** that could be directed at many of today's supposed 'Gramscians' insists, 'To conceive historical development as a game with its referee and its pre-established norms to be respected loyally is a form

of preconceptualised history ... it is a question of continually patching up “from outside” an organism which internally is unable to keep itself healthy’. [3]

The reformist-academic interpretations of Gramsci virtually ignore the passages on economics, which support the basic elements of Karl Marx’s economics and his analysis of the tendency towards a falling rate of profit, [4] suggesting that this will lead eventually to great social crises precipitating mass action. For Gramsci, the ‘tendential’ must ‘be of a real “historical”, and not a methodological, nature,’ indicating a ‘dialectical process by which the molecular progressive thrust leads to a tendentially catastrophic result in the social ensemble,’ causing other ‘individual progressive thrusts’. Perhaps it is not surprising that one of the most influential attempts to use Gramsci against classic Marxism, that of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, ends up claiming ‘Gramsci is too much of an economic determinist’. [5]

Central to the reformist-academic interpretation of Gramsci is his concept of ‘hegemony’, which is counterposed to notions of class struggle and social revolution. Yet the person Gramsci honours for introducing the concept is ... Lenin!

The greatest modern theoretician of the philosophy of practice [i.e. Lenin] has in opposition to the various tendencies of ‘economism’ ... constructed the doctrine of hegemony as a complement to the theory of the state-as-force. [6]

Note the word ‘complement’, which is the opposite of the reformist notion that the ideological argument can be a substitute for a revolutionary confrontation.

Gramsci went through a process of learning through struggle in the years between 1918 and his imprisonment in 1926, as [Megan Trudell](#) and [Chris Bambery](#) show in their articles. This process culminated in writings such as the *Lyon Theses*, in which he argued that the revolutionary party could not wait in isolation for the masses to turn to it but had to struggle for leadership of the masses by combining ideological struggle with economic and political struggle. A key element of this is the method of the United Front, which Lenin and Leon Trotsky argued for at the third and fourth congresses of the Comintern, held in 1921 and 1922. Much of the content of the **Prison Notebooks** is concerned with developing this approach theoretically. That is why the

themes of hegemony, ideology, the revolutionary party, and the various forms of struggle ('war of position' and 'war of manoeuvre') are linked.

Gramsci was cut off from the practical struggle as he tried to develop these. 'Books and magazines contain generalised notions and only sketch the course of events in the world as best they can,' he wrote in 1928. 'They never let you have an immediate, direct, animated sense of the lives of Tom, Dick and Harry. If you are not able to understand real individuals, you are not able to understand what is universal and general.' Gramsci's isolation meant that he only had indirect and confused knowledge of the important events occurring outside his prison – the effects of Stalinism and the victory of fascism in Germany – and the political controversies they produced. This combined with need to 'use an ambiguous Aesopian language that concealed his real thoughts, not only from his jailers, but also from his Marxist readers and sometimes, one suspects, from himself'. [7] The result is an abstractness and ambiguity in some of his formulations. In particular, he could not spell out clearly his continuing belief in the need for a revolutionary party capable of organising an insurrection as well as engaging in ideological struggle. As a result, his writings are open to misinterpretation in a way that is rarely the case with Lenin and Trotsky (which is one reason why 'Gramsci studies' flourish in academia, providing respectable quotes for PhD theses in a way that Lenin or Trotsky studies certainly do not). But the long years in prison did give Gramsci time to think through certain theoretical points, in a way that the other great activist Marxists of the first decades of the 20th century did not, providing theoretical resources that revolutionaries in our century can turn to with profit.

Hegemony and political struggle

Running through the notebooks are two related concerns. Why was the revolutionary upsurge in Italy unsuccessful, ending with Benito Mussolini coming to power? Why was the Italian bourgeoisie so much less successful than the French bourgeoisie in uniting the country in a capitalist direction, even though it started off, at the time of the Renaissance, so much in advance of

the French? Gramsci moves from one experience to the other and back again in page after page. [8] He does so because he sees a single answer to both questions – the inability of an economic force to translate itself into a political force with the mass capacity to draw all sections of the oppressed in a bid to overthrow an old political structure.

In 19th century Italy the most radical elements, first the Italian Jacobins and then the Action Party of Giuseppe Mazzini and Giuseppe Garibaldi refused to follow the French Jacobins in unleashing the bitterness of the peasants against the landowners and so providing a mass base for their project of creating a bourgeois Italian nation. [9] In 1918 and 1920 the dominant figures in the Italian Socialist Party, on one side Giacinto Serrati, on the other Amadeo Bordiga, both shared the view that the economic power of workers would translate itself automatically into political power if they waited long enough. They differed over their attitude to the revisionists around Filippo Turati and to parliament but they shared a common failure to see the need to take the lead in practical and ideological steps to draw the mass of peasants, demobilised soldiers and the discontented layers of the petty bourgeoisie behind a revolutionary push for power. This left a political vacuum which the fascists were able to fill once the big bourgeoisie turned to them in 1922.

For Gramsci, the revolutionary movement failed because it organised around immediate economic interests (which he called ‘corporatism’) without drawing in other oppressed and exploited groups in a fight for a new society. He refers to Lenin’s example because this is exactly what Lenin argued, for instance, in **What is to be Done?**:

The awareness of the worker masses cannot be a genuine class awareness if the workers do not learn ... to observe each of the other social classes in all the manifestations of their intellectual, moral and political life – if they do not learn to apply in practice a materialist analysis and a materialist evaluation of all sides of the activity and life of all classes, strata and groups of the population. He who focuses the attention, powers of observation and awareness of the worker class exclusively or even primarily on itself is no social democrat [i.e. revolutionary socialist]: the self-knowledge of the working class is inextricably tied to full clarity in its conceptions of the mutual relations of all classes of present-day society ... as they are worked out via experience of political life. [10]

The ideal of the social democrat should ... be a people's tribune who can respond to each and every manifestation of abuse of power and oppression, wherever it occurs, whatever stratum or class it concerns, who can generalise all these manifestations into one big picture of police violence and capitalist exploitation, who is able to use each small affair to set before everybody his socialist convictions and his democratic demands and to explain to each and all the world-historical significance of the liberation struggle of the proletariat. [11]

Gramsci's concern is precisely how to carry through this task in a period which he does not see as immediately revolutionary. He also sees it as more difficult in the 'West' than it was in Russia, since, in his view, [12] the ideological ties binding people to existing states are stronger than they were in Russia because of the existence of dense networks of formal and informal organisations ('civil society'). These influence the lower classes but their leaderships are tied in one way or another into the structures of existing society and serve as a channel which feeds the ideologies into 'subaltern' [i.e. lower] classes.

The 'hegemonic' struggle is a double battle – to free the working class from ideas that bind it to the existing exploitative order and to bind other 'subaltern' classes into a 'bloc' with the working class. [13]

The battle of ideas

Gramsci describes this ideological struggle as a 'philosophical' one – meaning it is a battle between different conceptions of the world:

Everyone is a philosopher, though in his own way and unconsciously, since even in the slightest manifestation of any intellectual activity whatever, in 'language', there is contained a specific conception of the world, one then moves on to the second level, which is that of awareness and criticism. [14]

Anyone brought up in a certain society shares a 'conception of the world,' 'mechanically imposed by the external environment,'

that is by the ‘social groups with which they are automatically involved from the moment of their entry into the conscious world’. Clearly thinking of Italian rural life, he writes they might be influenced by ‘the local priest or ageing patriarch whose wisdom is law’ or ‘the minor intellectual soured by his own stupidity and inability to act’. [15] These different conceptions are what make up ‘common sense’ – views that are taken for granted without more thought and which cause ‘people to “think”, without having a critical awareness, in a disjointed and episodic way’. [16]

Marxism begins by challenging such taken-for-granted conceptions of the world, with the aim, through polemic and criticism, of ‘superseding the existing mode of thinking’. [17] It is ‘a criticism of “common sense” but it bases ‘itself initially on common sense, renovating and making “critical” an already existing activity’. [18] There is an ‘elementary and primitive phase’ of ‘consciousness of being part of a particular hegemonic force (that is to say, political consciousness)’, ‘an instinctive feeling of independence’. [19] But this is mixed up with other notions, producing ‘contradictory consciousness’ – a vital concept virtually missing from reformist-academic accounts of Gramsci’s thought:

The active man-in-the-mass has a practical activity, but has no clear theoretical consciousness of his practical activity, which nonetheless involves understanding the world in so far as it transforms it. His theoretical consciousness can indeed be historically in opposition to his activity. One might almost say that he has two theoretical consciousnesses (or one contradictory consciousness): one which is implicit in his activity and which in reality unites him with all his fellow workers in the practical transformation of the real world; and one, superficially explicit or verbal, which he has inherited from the past and uncritically absorbed. [20]

The ‘verbal conception’ can feed back into the practical activity with disastrous effect, producing ‘a situation in which the contradictory state of consciousness does not permit of any action, any decision or any choice’ and resulting in ‘political passivity’. [21] ‘Ideologies’ are ‘real historical facts which must be combated and their nature as instruments of domination exposed ... so as to make the governed intellectually independent

of the governors’ as ‘a necessary moment of the overturning of practice’. [22]

The crude formulations to be found in Karl Kautsky, and sometimes echoed by Lenin, that socialist ideas have to be brought to the working class from ‘outside’ are reformulated by Gramsci. There exist within the working class the elements that lay the basis for a new conception of the world. But they have to be distilled out from the mass of conflicting notions. And that can only happen insofar as organisation develops to carry through this task. The ‘multiple elements of “conscious leadership”,’ [23] which exist in any spontaneous struggle, need to come together to fight for the new conceptions. The struggle for ideological hegemony therefore also involves the struggle to build a revolutionary party – ‘the modern prince’:

A human mass does not ‘distinguish’ itself, does not become independent in its own right without, in the widest sense, organising itself; and there is no organisation without intellectuals, that is without organisers and leaders, in other words, without the theoretical aspect of the theory-practice nexus being distinguished concretely by the existence of a group of people ‘specialised’ in conceptual and philosophical elaboration of ideas. [24]

Waging ideological struggle

The struggle for ideological clarity and hegemony takes place at different levels. At one level it is the arguments that take place in the locality or the workplace. A key role is played here by people who have some basic conception of what a movement is fighting for and who its opponents are. These are the key to organising and influencing much larger numbers of people (just think of the role played today by trade union activists, shop stewards and workplace reps, or of those who try to mobilise against racism or war). But these people do not hold onto their own ideas in a vacuum. They are influenced by the debates that take place at the top of their organisations, in the media, through national political channels, and so on.

Gramsci takes the case of ‘the man of the people’ with certain ideas but who has not had the chance to develop his own ‘intellectual formation’ and finds himself out-argued by people who seems to know more than him. Should he change his views ‘every time he meets an ideological adversary who is his intellectual superior’? He will not do so, providing he knows there are people in the group whose views he shares who can win the argument. He remembers them putting forward the group’s view in a way that proves it is superior to opposing views even ‘even if the arguments in its favour cannot be readily produced’. [25]

So those holding on to the ideas at one level are influenced by the way the debate is conducted at a higher level – the ‘man of the people’ is influenced by the argument as carried on by the group’s activists and these in turn by the arguments that take place in the national media, parliamentary institutions, the universities and so on. Those hoping to win such an ideological battle are required ‘never to tire of repeating ... arguments (though offering literary variation of form)’ and to work ‘incessantly to raise the intellectual level of ever-growing strata of the populace’ by creating ‘elites of intellectuals of a new type which arise directly out of the masses, but remain in contact with them’. [26]

For Gramsci, the arguments at the highest level take place between ‘organic intellectuals’ and ‘traditional intellectuals’. Organic intellectuals are people who consciously ground their ideas in the struggles of a particular class. Traditional intellectuals, by contrast, see the clash of ideas occurring simply at an intellectual level without any connection to material struggles, while themselves taking for granted many of the ideas of existing society. Their approach therefore tends to justify that society, relying as they do on their knowledge and their prestige to face down any challenges to these ideas. The revolutionary organic intellectuals have to be able to take on these arguments, without, however, ever themselves forgetting their own connections to practical class struggle.

The problem of theory and practice

The struggle for hegemony then is a struggle between different competing worldviews. But this can be seen as simply a struggle to impose different ‘paradigms’ – each telling its own story and

each as good as the other. This is the old ‘relativist’ view, resurrected by postmodernist, post-structuralist and post-Marxist thinkers (or, one is tempted to say, non-thinkers). Some of these have attempted to hitch Gramsci to their own antiquated bandwagon, although one of the key ‘post-Marxist’ works of the mid-1980s to use the Gramscian terminology – Laclau and Mouffe’s **Hegemony and Socialist Strategy** – had to criticise Gramsci since ‘the concept of hegemony ... introduces a logic of the social which is incompatible with those ... basic categories of Marxist theory’. [27]

There are bits of ambiguous phraseology in the **Prison Notebooks** that can seem to justify a relativist approach. Reacting strongly against what he sees as the crude, mechanical materialism of Nikolai Bukharin’s **Historical Materialism**, Gramsci at one point inveighs against notions of ‘the external world’. But such phraseology stands in contrast to the many places where Gramsci writes about ‘objective’ knowledge, and should be seen as a reaction to the idea that knowledge of reality is something we get in an unproblematic way, simply by observing it. For Gramsci the concepts that determine how we observe reality have to be put to a test. And he refers again and again to the test – the test of practice. Hence his baptism of Marxism as the ‘philosophy of practice’.

His starting point is Marx’s second thesis on Feuerbach:

The question whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but is a practical question. Man must prove the truth – i.e. the reality and power, the this-sidedness of his thinking in practice. The dispute over the reality or non-reality of thinking that is isolated from practice is a purely scholastic question. [28]

So Gramsci argues that it is only possible to talk of ‘truth’ and an ‘objective’ world as something discovered by human activity – ‘objective means humanly objective’: [29]

The historical value of a philosophy can be calculated from the ‘practical’ efficacy it has acquired for itself, understanding ‘practical’ in the widest sense. If it is true that every philosophy is the expression of a society, it should react back on that society and produce certain effects, both positive and negative. [30]

Revolutionaries can only test the accuracy of their analyses of the material world in the process of trying to change it:

If the problem of the identification of theory and practice is to be raised it is to be done in this sense, that one can construct, on a specific practice, a theory which, by coinciding and identifying itself with the decisive elements of the practice itself, can accelerate the historical process that is going on, rendering practice more homogeneous, more coherent, more efficient in all its elements ... or alternatively, given a certain theoretical position one can organise the practical element which is essential for the theory to be realised. The identification of theory and practice is a critical act, through which practice is demonstrated rational and necessary, and theory realistic and rational. [31]

This might seem to bring Gramsci close to the ‘pragmatist’ school of philosophy, which was very influential in the US a century ago. According to this school, the ‘truth’ of a statement is determined by its immediate practical utility. In fact, Gramsci writes that ‘the conception of language held by ... pragmatists is not acceptable’, although ‘they felt real needs and “described” them with an exactness that was not far off the mark’. [32]

Clearly, the problem with any narrow view of the validation of ideas by practical activity is that it would seem to justify all sorts of views Gramsci would have regarded as false. Religion, for instance, could be held to be useful for people to whom it provided some sort of mental comfort, and therefore true. Or Mussolini could be held to be correct because he was successful and Gramsci himself wrong because he ended in prison. Gramsci rejects posing the validation of theory and practice in such a narrow limited sense. For him, what is in question is the historical development of humanity as a whole.

‘Philosophical innovations ... will demonstrate themselves to be “historically true” to the extent that they become concretely – i.e. historically and socially – universal’. [33] But this has to be for humanity as whole in its historical development, not just for this or that person or group. ‘Man knows objectively in so far as knowledge is real for the whole human race historically unified in a single unitary cultural system’. [34]

And such a unified cultural system can only come into being as a result of practical class struggles. ‘This process of historical unification

takes place through the disappearance of the internal contradictions which tear apart human society.’ Such contradictions produce groups with ideologies made ‘transient’ by their practical origins. So ‘the struggle for objectivity’ is a struggle ‘to free oneself from partial and fallacious ideologies’ and is ‘the same as the struggle for the cultural unification of the human race’. [35]

This process has gone furthest in the physical sciences, where the different material interests of people have less direct effect on their approaches:

Up to now experimental science has provided the terrain on which a cultural unity of this kind has reached its furthest extension ... The typical unitary process of reality is found here in the experimental activity of the scientist, which is the first model of dialectical mediation between man and nature ... through which man puts himself into relation with nature by means of technology, knows her and dominates her. [36]

But when it comes to understanding social aspects of reality, the different practical concerns of different classes translate into different approaches to reality, with intellectuals associated with dominant classes never being able to go beyond partial insights. When they generalise these, they provide necessarily contradictory accounts of the world. It is because Marxism is the theory of the class whose struggle alone is capable of bringing about the unification of humanity that it is able to overcome the contradictions that beset previous systems of thought. Here Gramsci’s argument is very close to that put forward by Georg Lukács some ten years earlier in the central essay, *Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat*, in his work **History and Class Consciousness**. Lukács argued that the great philosophers of the Enlightenment could only provide partial and contradictory insights into the world because they were associated with a rising class, the bourgeoisie, whose practical activity could not go beyond a certain point in confronting the society in which it lived and therefore in understanding its inner workings. This accounted for the ‘antinomies’ [37] (conceptual contradictions) of bourgeois thought, which could only be

overcome by theories based on the one class which fights within the heart of capitalism against its roots in exploitation – the working class.

Marxism's capacity to provide a non-contradictory worldview means it can also grasp the partial truths to be found in previous theories, and show why they end up in contradiction and falsity. That is, it can in a certain sense prove itself to be correct by its ability to criticise other views, even when practice does not seem to confirm its own theories. Marxists do not have to wait for the world revolution to justify all their opinions!

Gramsci provides an example of how Marxism should deal with the neoclassical (or marginalist) economic school:

If one wishes to defend the critical [i.e. Marxist] conception of economics, one must systematically insist on the fact that orthodox economics does deal with the same problems, albeit in another language, demonstrating this identity of the problems being treated and demonstrating that the critical solution is the superior one. [38]

This is the approach Marx takes in his economic writings to the 'classical' bourgeois economists who went before him. He points, in passing, to the interrelation between the development of their ideas and the practical concerns of the bourgeoisie. So long as it was a class trying in practice to transform the old society, it was able to develop theoretical ideas that undercut the myths perpetrated by that society. So Marx writes of the 'scientific' or 'esoteric' character of many of many of Adam Smith's ideas. They are scientific because of Smith's practical concern (to ensure the full dominance of capitalist relations in Scotland) 'as the interpreter of the frankly bourgeois upstart', [39] using 'the language of the still revolutionary bourgeoisie, which has not yet subjected to itself the whole of society, the state, etc.' [40] This leads Smith to attempt to grasp the inner connections between the economic categories – or the hidden structure of the bourgeois system, 'to attempt to penetrate the inner physiology of bourgeois society'. [41]

He counterposed to this the non-scientific, 'exoteric' elements in Smith's thought which arose insofar as he looked uncritically at certain features of established capitalism. (The contrast comes out most clearly in Smith's two versions of value theory, one based on the production of value through labour and, implicitly, exploitation, the other on the division of already produced revenues.) The non-scientific, apologetic versions came to dominate with the emergence of 'vulgar political economy', which restricts itself to describing the surface appearance of the market. This was all the practical minded bourgeois was now interested in – and the presentation of what it was interested in as the only thing of scientific interest restricted the possibilities of genuine scientific inquiry. **Capital** is a critique which both completes the investigations of classical political economy and shows where their limitations and internal contradictions came from.

So Gramsci's approach is very much along the same lines as Marx's, even though many of Marx's writings were still unpublished when Gramsci wrote. There is, however, one component in the relation between theory and practice which is only partially developed in Gramsci. He refers to the elements of a new worldview that exist, mixed up with other views, in the common sense of the masses. But he only provides a couple of passages that hint as to how this can be.

One such passage, quoted above, relates to contradictory consciousness, with its reference to the 'man in the mass' possessing a 'theoretical consciousness ... implicit in his activity'. In another passage Gramsci, while discussing the history of philosophy, writes, 'Precedence passes to practice, to the real history of the changes in social relations; from these therefore (and therefore, in the last analysis, from the economy) there arise (or are suggested) the problems that philosophers set themselves and elaborate on'. [42] But he does not spell out how practice becomes theory. To further develop this notion means adding to Gramsci's insights some of those of Marx and Frederick Engels, and also those of one of the many Russian Marxists to fall foul of Joseph Stalin – Valentin Voloshinov.

Language, ideology and class

Marx and Engels argued in **The German Ideology** (one of the unpublished works Gramsci had no access to), [43] ‘The production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness, is at first directly interwoven with the material activity and material intercourse of men, the language of real life. Conceiving, thinking, the material intercourse of men appears at this stage as the direct efflux of the material behaviour’. [44] Language, ‘the immediate actuality of thought’, is necessarily social. [45] ‘Language is practical consciousness that exists for other men and for that reason alone it really exists for me personally as well; language, like consciousness, only arises from the need, the necessity, of intercourse with other men’. [46]

Language and practical activity are inseparable from each other. Insofar as human beings take part in practical activity with one another they have to communicate with each other, to find verbal expressions that correspond to aspects of that activity. And every time new forms of practical activity arise (whether it is a question of new ways of making a livelihood, new struggles between social groups, or anything else), there emerge new linguistic expressions (reinterpretations of old ones) and, with them, new ways of conceptualising reality.

Voloshinov (who was also ignorant of **The German Ideology**) developed a similar conception of the relation between practice, language and thought, but at much greater length, in two invaluable books – **Marxism and the Philosophy of Language** and **Freudianism: A Marxist Critique**. He argued that language develops in concrete social situations, always involving dialogue – someone saying something, someone replying, and so on. In the process people throw up new words and new concepts, which are inseparable from the practical context in which they are used. [47] But changes in linguistic use necessarily affect people’s consciousness, since people express their thoughts through ‘internal speech’. So there are continual clashes between the attempts of ruling classes to determine how people think by fixing ‘a super-class, eternal character on ideological signs’ and the way people give expression to their own practical interactions with each other. [48] There are, for instance, contradictory interpretations of concepts such as ‘good’, ‘true’, ‘honest’, with the meaning that

established society tries to impose on people clashing with the way the mass of people begin to express their own needs and experiences.

In this way Voloshinov develops a conception of contradictory consciousness very similar to Gramsci's. But Voloshinov is mostly concerned with how these contradictions create confusion for the individuals, as they are torn mentally over what they can and should do, rather than paying attention, as Gramsci does, to the role of collective struggle in shaping consciousness.

There are some interesting parallels between the analyses of Marx, Gramsci and Voloshinov with some developments in linguistic philosophy associated with Ludwig Wittgenstein. [49] Wittgenstein recognised that the way people express their experiences in everyday language clashes with attempts to fix meaning. But his conclusion was that attempts to fix meaning were bound to fail and it was necessary to accept that people interpreted the world through different 'language games'. It was simply a form of 'mental cramp' afflicting philosophers that led them to think otherwise. This has allowed elements of Wittgenstein's approach to be appropriated by post-Marxists and postmodernists. By contrast, the Marx-Gramsci-Voloshinov approach sees different language games as corresponding to the different practical activities of different classes in an exploitative society. One of Wittgenstein's most famous imaginary language games involves people using words to communicate with each other as they move stone slabs. [50] What he does not consider, however, is the different meanings they might give to these words if one is a boss and the other slaving for him.

What is implicit, to varying degrees, in the analyses of Gramsci, Voloshinov, and Marx and Engels, is a view of consciousness as existing at different levels. [51] When individuals act, they have an immediate awareness expressed in language of their actions and the part of the world they impinge upon which cannot be false (assuming they do not suffer from physical hallucinations). However, over and above this immediate awareness there is a more general consciousness, born out of the ideology of existing society, which attempts to locate immediate experiences in a framework explaining their connection with the world as a whole. It is this that leads to contradictions within consciousness. The established ideology says one thing about people's lives, while their immediate activity leads them to say something very different – something which has the potential to develop into a whole new conception of the world.

In a capitalist society, it is the class from whom value is extracted through exploitation whose experiences are most consistently contradicted by the established ideologies and who are driven to rebel periodically and, in doing so, to develop the embryos of a different conception of the world. Their consciousness is contradictory because their practical activity is both constitutive of existing society (their work keeps it going) and driven into opposition to it. Recognition of this, of course, depends on recognition that it is labour that produces value and that the dynamics of capitalist society repeatedly clash with the hopes of those who provide that labour.

That is why Gramsci could see 'value, alias the relationship between the worker and the industrial productive forces', as a 'unitary centre' in economics. [52] That, incidentally, is also why Laclau and Mouffe in their attempt to 'go beyond' Gramsci in the direction of reformism and autonomism, are forced to criticise him for 'essentialising' the economy, that is for believing that 'the economy constitutes an insurmountable limit to society's potential for hegemonic recomposition' and falls into 'the naturalist prejudice which sees the economy as a homogenous space unified by necessary laws'. [53]

It is Gramsci's understanding of the working class as the object of capitalist exploitation that begins to turn against it ('to become a subject') that means he can insist, in contradiction to all the post-Marxist would-be Gramscians, that Marxist ideas do not stand in contradiction to all the notions that arise among the mass of people:

A fundamental theoretical question is raised: can modern theory [i.e. Marxism] be in opposition to the 'spontaneous' feelings of the masses? ('Spontaneous' in the sense that they ... have been formed through everyday experience illuminated by 'common sense' ...) It cannot be in opposition to them. Between the two there is a 'quantitative' difference of degree, not one of quality. A reciprocal 'reduction' so to speak, a passage from one to the other and vice versa, must be possible. [54]

At one point in the notebooks he provides an account of what this means, referring to the Turin movement of 1918-20, which was accused of being 'spontaneist' and 'voluntarist':

The leadership given to the movement was both creative and correct. This leadership was not 'abstract'... It applied itself to real men, formed in specific historical relations, with specific feelings, outlooks, fragmentary conceptions of the world, etc, which were the result of 'spontaneous' combinations of a given situation of material production with the

‘fortuitous’ agglomeration within it of disparate social elements. This element of ‘spontaneity’ was not neglected and even less despised. It was educated, directed, purged of extraneous contaminations; the aim was to bring it into line with modern theory – but in a living and historically effective manner ... the movement gave the masses a ‘theoretical’ consciousness of being creators of historical and institutional values, of being founders of a state. [55]

It is this account which should be seen as a guide for every revolutionary who wants to contribute to building a hegemonic socialist movement in the 21st century.

Notes

1. These writings are collected together in Italian in **Il Materialismo Storico e la Filosofia di Benedetto Croce**, and are contained in Antonio Gramsci, **Further Selections from the Prison Notebooks** (London, 1995), pp.498, 524. These are now out of print and, I suspect, much less read than the first volume of selections from Gramsci’s prison writings. The further selections are not currently available from www.marxists.org They are, however, to be found on **Antonio Gramsci the Revolutionary Reader**, CD-ROM (London 1999), details available from www.elecbook.com/gramsci **Further selections** is referred to here as **PN2**, and page numbers are from the CD version. Antonio Gramsci, **Selections from the Prison Notebooks** (London 1971), is referred to here as **PN1**; page numbers also refer to the version on the CD-ROM. Most of **PN1** is currently available online. [*Note by MIA*: Unfortunately this is no longer the case due to copyright problems.]

2. **PN2**, p.497.

3. **PN2**, p.527.

4. See **PN2**, p.589, where he provides an account that refutes criticisms of Marx’s theory of the sort that are today to be found in the writing of people such as Ian Steedman but which were already made more than a century ago by Croce in his **Historical Materialism and the Economics of Karl Marx**. Interestingly, Gramsci refers to the ideas of Henryk Grossman among others, and also refers to discussions with the Italian economist, resident in Cambridge, Piero Sraffa – which tends to suggest Sraffa was more of an orthodox Marxist than he is normally presented as.

5. Peter Ives, **Language and Hegemony in Gramsci** (London, 2004), p.30.

6. **PN2**, p.507. In this and other passages Gramsci used the Italian word ‘prassi’, which is translated in English-Italian dictionaries as ‘practice’. Some

people translate it as 'praxis', believing that gives it some deeper, almost mystical meaning. In fact, in Germany every medical doctor has a 'praxis'.

7. Chris Harman, *Gramsci versus Eurocommunism*, in **International Socialism**, first series, May and June 1977, reprinted (with minor changes), as **Gramsci Versus Reformism** (London, 1983). This is now [available online](#). Many of the same points were made in a powerful article by Perry Anderson, published shortly before mine, *The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci*, in **New Left Review** 100, November-December 1976. Anderson's article was particularly significant because it involved a clarification of notions he had played a part in propagating before he came to see that socialist change could not come through the methods of the Labour left or the Communist Party (see p.7 of his article).

8. This switching from the problems of bourgeois unification to those of workers' revolution is confusing as well as illuminating because it blurs over important differences – especially the way in which its economic strength under absolutism enables the bourgeoisie i.e. to gain control of major means of propagating its worldview before taking state power in a way that is not open to the workers' movement. The issue is further confused because some of Gramsci's references probably refer to the problems arising from the attempt to build 'socialism in one country' in the USSR of the late 1920s and early 1930s. On these matters, see Perry Anderson, as above, pp.45-46; and Chris Harman, as above, pp.25-26.

9. See, for instance, PN1, p.101.

10. Lenin, **What is to be Done?**, translation contained in Lars T. Lih, **Lenin Rediscovered**, p.737. Lih's book brings out brilliantly the positive features of **What is to be Done?** And it counters the distorted image of it in liberal scholarship. Unfortunately, in doing so, it makes the mistake of equating Lenin's ideas with the narrow, school teacherish approach of Karl Kautsky, with its lack of feeling for popular upsurges. An alternative translation of **What is to be Done?** is [available online](#).

11. Lenin, **What is to be Done?**, translation contained in Lars T. Lih, as above, p.746.

12. Gramsci's view on this matter was by no means an original one. It is implicit in some of the comments of Lenin and is also to be found in the writings of the Dutch 'left' Communist Antonie Pannekoek. See, for example, his article from 1920, *World Revolution and Communist Tactics*, in **Pannekoek and Gorter's Marxism** (London, 1978). The article is also [available online](#). According to Pannekoek, 'Bourgeois culture exists in the proletariat primarily as a traditional cast of thought. The masses caught up in it think in ideological instead of real terms ... The mental reflexes left over from the innumerable class struggles of former centuries have survived as political and religious systems of thought which separate the old bourgeois world, and hence the

proletarians born of it, into groups, churches, sects, parties, divided according to their ideological perspectives. The bourgeois past thus survives in the proletariat as an organisational tradition that stands in the way of the class unity necessary for the creation of the new world; in these archaic organisations the workers make up the followers and adherents of a bourgeois vanguard. It is the intelligentsia which supplies the leaders in these ideological struggles. The intelligentsia – priests, teachers, literati, journalists, artists, and politicians – form a numerous class, the function of which is to foster, develop and propagate bourgeois culture; it passes this on to the masses, and acts as mediator between the hegemony of capital and the interests of the masses. The hegemony of capital is rooted in this group's intellectual leadership of the masses. For even though the oppressed masses have often rebelled against capital and its agencies, they have only done so under the leadership of the intelligentsia.'

13. The use of the term 'bloc' is one weakness in Gramsci's formulations. In part it derives from the French theorist of syndicalism, Georges Sorel. But it also reflects the arguments put by Gregory Zinoviev and Nikolai Bukharin in the mid-1920s, after Lenin's death, which stressed the 'alliance' of the working class with the peasantry, petty bourgeoisie and, in colonial countries, the 'national' bourgeoisie, rather than the working class providing leadership to the other classes. For Zinoviev's position, see Zinoviev, *The NEP Peasant Policy is Valid Universally*, in Helmut Gruber (ed.), **Soviet Russia Masters the Comintern** (New York, 1974). For a discussion on some of these issues, see Jeremy Lester, **The Dialogue of Negation: Debates on Hegemony in Russia and the West** (London, 2000), pp.49-50.

14. PN1, p.626.

15. PN1, p.627.

16. PN1, p.627.

17. PN1, p.631.

18. PN1, p.631.

19. PN1, pp.641-642.

20. PN1, p.641.

21. PN1, p.641.

22. PN2, p.548.

23. See the section *Spontaneity and Conscious Leadership*, in PN1.

24. PN1, p.644.

25. PN1, pp.650-651.

26. PN1, p.652.

27. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, **Hegemony and Socialist strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics** (London 1985), p.3.
28. Karl Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach.*
29. Some of Gramsci's formulations might seem to question the reality of the world apart from our conceptualisation of it in the way that some postmodernists do. So he writes, 'The idea of "objective" in metaphysical materialism would appear to mean an objectivity that exists even apart from man; but when one affirms that a reality would exist even if man did not, one is either speaking metaphorically or one is falling into a form of mysticism' (PN1, p.808). But in the same passage he makes it clear that he sees there something real which human knowledge has to come to terms with, writing that references to places as 'north' or 'south' 'are real, they correspond to real facts, they allow one to travel by land and by sea, to arrive where one has decided to arrive, to "foresee" the future, to objectivise reality, to understand the objectivity of the external world. Rational and real become one' (PN1, p.810). In a footnote, he suggests that Georg Lukács, in seeing the dialectic as existing in history but not nature, may have fallen 'into a form of idealism' (PN1, p.811).
30. PN1, p.661.
31. PN1, p.688.
32. PN1, p.663.
33. PN1, p.663.
34. PN1, p.807.
35. PN1, p.807.
36. PN2, p.432.
37. The word comes from a central passage in Kant's **Critique of Pure Reason**, where it is used to describe how philosophers starting from the same premises are driven to draw contradictory conclusions when they try to grasp the most fundamental character of reality.
38. PN2, p.314.
39. Karl Marx, **Theories of Surplus Value**, volume 1 (Moscow 1963), p.279.
40. As above, p.291.
41. As above, p.202
42. PN2, pp.537-538
43. **The German Ideology** was first published in 1932. In prison Gramsci did not even have access to the long-published volumes of **Capital**. But it is possible he had some notion of the contents of **The German Ideology** from Piero Sraffa, who did get hold of a copy, according to Keiran Sharp, in Gavin

Kitching and Nigel Pleasants (eds.), **Marx and Wittgenstein: Knowledge, Morality and Politics** (London 2002).

44. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, **The German Ideology**, in Marx and Engels, **Collected Works**, volume 5 (London 1975), p.36. [Available online](#).

45. As above, p.446.

46. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, **The German Ideology** (Moscow 1968), p.41.

47. Valentin Voloshinov, *Discourse in Life and Discourse in Art*, in **Freudianism, a Critical Sketch** (Indiana, 1987).

48. Valentin Voloshinov, **Marxism and the Philosophy of Language** (Cambridge, MA 1986), pp.14, 24, 29. Sections of this work are currently [available online](#).

49. It has been suggested that Gramsci's ideas on language might have had some influence on the development of Wittgenstein's through the medium of Piero Sraffa, who was a friend of both. See, for instance, Amartya Sen, *Sraffa, Wittgenstein, and Gramsci*, in **Journal of Economic Literature**, volume 41, number 4 (December 2003), pp.1240-1255, and John Davis, *Gramsci, Sraffa, Wittgenstein: Philosophical Linkages*, **European Journal of the History of Economic Thought** 9 (2002). Interestingly (although probably only coincidentally) also in Cambridge at the same time as Wittgenstein and Sraffa was the brother of Mikhail Bakhtin, a major influence on Voloshinov.

50. Ludwig Wittgenstein, **Philosophical Investigations**, p.3. For useful discussions on the relations of Wittgenstein's ideas to Marx's see Gavin Kitching and Nigel Pleasants, as above; Anthony Manser, **The End of Philosophy: Marx and Wittgenstein** (Southampton 1979); and Susan Easton, **Humanistic Marxism and Wittgensteinian Social Philosophy** (Manchester 1983).

51. Which is, in some ways, similar to the distinction to be found in Georg Hegel's **Phenomenology of Mind**.

52. **PN2**, p.52.

53. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, as above, p.69. They seem to forget their own attack on 'essentialising capitalism' when they later write that 'today it is not only as a seller of labour power that the individual is subordinated to capital, but also through his or her incorporation into a multitude of other social relations: culture, free time, illness, education, sex or even death' – p.161.

54. **PN1**, p 432.

55. **PN1**, p 431.