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Review Essay

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Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci, edited and translated by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (Lawrence & Wishart, London, 1971), 572 pp., ISBN 071780397X

It is difficult to overestimate the significance of Antonio Gramsci's thinking on our contemporary understanding of political culture and cultural politics. To name but the most prominent, Louis Althusser, Pierre Bourdieu, Stuart Hall and Raymond Williams have all been in debt to Gramsci's thought, as have those who have followed them in sociology and media and cultural studies.

Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith's edited translation of key passages from Antonio Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* reflected a moment in the development of a 'Western Marxism' that emerged from a post-Stalinist New Left critique. It was also the time at which reformist currents were stirring within western European Communist Parties, most notably in Italy and in parts of the Soviet bloc. Think of the Prague Spring of 1968 and of Eurocommunism. Then the world was still in the depths of the Cold War. The fiscal and legitimisation crises of the capitalist state that intensified in the 1970s – and are being revisited today in a different form - were imminent. The search was on for imaginative solutions to questions of political theory and practice that might effect democratic change within the broad framework of Marxism – a third way between communism and social democracy.

For some, Gramsci seemed to provide an answer. The story of the *Notebooks* is remarkable. Gramsci was a parliamentarian and leader of the Italian Communist Party (PCI) from 1924-26. Deemed a serious danger to Mussolini's fascist state he was show tried and incarcerated. He began writing the *Notebooks* in 1929 under very adverse prison conditions that destroyed his health. Their entire production was conditioned by political censorship. Gramsci died in 1937 to exercise a striking posthumous influence

The editors have presented the selections in three large sections: 'problems of history and culture'; 'notes on politics'; and 'philosophy of praxis'. They have provided an excellent introduction and the work is also a model of scholarly footnoting. It is not an easy read, as it often allusive because of the censor's eye and because the text is so marked by its engagements with politics and history in Italy and its relationship to debates in the Third International. It needs hard interpretative work. So why is this composition, undertaken without proper reference materials, such a source of inspiration for our understanding of the politics of culture?

Although Gramsci was a Leninist, and certainly no soft liberal, his analysis has produced concepts that have entered the warp and weft of cultural analysis and have transcended their conditions of production. No study of the formation of cultural policy, for instance, can ignore the role of intellectuals and expertise in both public debate and policy formation. Gramsci theorised the role of ‘organic intellectuals’ – those for whom reasons of historic class alignment become integrally identified with specific political projects and worldviews. This remains a suggestive insight today, whether in struggles over national autonomy or in considering the role of interest-driven expertise – such as in conceptions of the ‘creative class’. Gramsci was also especially fond of military metaphors. Class was presented in terms of a strategic struggle over a complex terrain constituted by civil society, which in turn is profoundly shaped by its relationship to political power as embodied in the state. In classic Marxist terms, the struggle takes the form of a fundamental ‘war of position’ between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie that at times might become a ‘war of manoeuvre’ against the institutions of the bourgeois state.

In these struggles, the quest to achieve ‘hegemony’ is central. This is not simply a matter of achieving class dominance by force but also dominance by commanding the terrain of ‘consent’ – that is, the realm of culture and ideas. What you can still find in Gramsci – and why he still needs to be read – is a subtle sense of how ideological struggle may be conceived of in the fight to shape civil society and the obstacles it faces in the road to seizing state power. That sense of fighting step by step, through the institutions deeply shaped postwar Italian politics in the stand-off between Communism and Christian Democracy, and of course, had a much wider resonance. What Gramsci also recognises is that the war of position produces a series of battles that are not conclusive. Advances are not ineluctable; reverses are always possible – as he knew from the praxis of his own life.

From Gramsci, too, we gain an understanding of the political party as a ‘Modern Prince’, following in the tradition of Machiavelli’s political theory. What Gramsci had in mind, of course, was the Communist Party as an organiser of sentiment, rule, policy and action. But this insight can be generalised to other hegemonic projects.

Take the case of the UK (and parallel instances elsewhere). From Thatcherism to New Labour, we have witnessed the influence of Gramscian thought. The new Seventies Conservatives captured the ideological high ground in its elaboration of market liberalism and individualism. Alongside the slow collapse of traditional Labourism, neo-liberal intellectuals working in think tanks and a plethora of communications agencies prepared the ground for what came next. They were engaged in a war of position. Blairite New Labour followed suit, adopting identical means and bringing ‘spin’ in the field of news management to its zenith. New Left analyses of the time proclaimed the need to struggle for ‘the popular’ and to seize the ground of patriotism and the flag. This came from a fundamentally neo-Gramscian recognition of the importance of the symbolic terrain and the meanings assigned to key objects of identification in the struggle for public opinion – or consent.

The current financial and economic crisis may have sounded the death-knell of neo-liberalism’s hegemony. Is this a moment in which the commanding heights of ideology

might be conquered by new forces, in which new worldviews might be fashioned and take root? If so, it is a moment for neo-Gramscian analysis.

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