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Resisting Abstraction: Gramsci's Historiological Method

Nigel Greaves
University of Kurdistan, Iraq

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This article argues that the writings of Antonio Gramsci should be situated in their rightful social, philosophical, political, in short, 'historical' context. This is particularly true of his prison writing which is a rich resource but one which calls for delicate archaeological handling. It appears that Gramsci's Marxism is unapologetically eclectic but this results in an integrated and surprisingly harmonious theoretical and practical approach to history and society. This can be brought to sharp focus only by close examination of the educational properties of Gramsci's historical environment, the suggestions it makes, the perceptible possibilities it entails, that which blocks or impedes movement and progress, and so on. That is to say, Gramsci was not an abstract thinker. His thinking is grounded in the class war of the Italy of his time and, in turn, this was attuned to the broader struggle against capitalism in and beyond Italy's borders. This is arguably the way Gramsci would prefer to be remembered and indeed the context in which he would perhaps prefer to be utilised today. Reading Gramsci, therefore, requires knowing Gramsci. The problems encountered are an unfortunate consequence of the conditions in which he wrote but they can be overcome if we apply 'Gramsci to Gramsci'.

Dr. Nigel M. Greaves is a lecturer in political theory at the University of Kurdistan Hawler, Kurdish Regional Adminstered N. Iraq.
Email contact: nmgreaves@gmail.com

Resisting Abstraction: Gramsci's Historiological Method

Nigel Greaves

Introduction

How is Antonio Gramsci remembered today? More to the point, how should he be remembered? By drawing on the insights of Gramsci himself, this article proposes an interpretive stance which might allow for a more sensitive historiological treatment of his intellectual legacy than we have sometimes witnessed in the last few decades. It argues Gramsci's mature writing imparts a method for textual interpretation that allows for the precise location of the meaning and function of his ideas.

Gramsci has attracted intense interest in academia since his Prison Notebooks (*Quaderni*) were first published in English in 1971. Much of the flurry of subsequent literature is a credit-worthy attempt to recover the meaning of his work and its significance in the contemporary world (see Martin, 2002; Morton, 2003). However, others have identified certain ambiguities in order to modify Gramsci to the support of their particular preoccupations and assumptions (i.e., Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). This is problematic on methodological grounds.

Whilst there is some appeal in not 'closing the circle' and leaving Gramsci's work open-ended, any dismissal of the historical context of his intellectual output runs the risk of sacrificing the original author's meaning and intent. There is always an intimate relationship between ideas and extant conditions. Gramsci stressed this repeatedly in his interpretation, for example, of the neo-Hegelian philosopher Benedetto Croce (1866-1952), Machiavelli, Marx and many others. Therefore, why not apply Gramsci to Gramsci? Here, Stuart Hall writes: "[i]t is, after all, Gramsci himself who first taught us how to 'read Gramsci'" (1991:7). Moreover, Hall continues: "[Gramsci] made it possible for us to read Marx again, in a new way" (1991:8). What all this means, though, is open to debate.

For Gramsci, Marxism represents the culmination of a historical struggle for 'self-consciousness' which enables the human mass to understand itself and point out to it what it is capable of becoming. Indeed, Gramsci's work within Marxism is largely a refinement of the assumption that the body of ideas it represents is the philosophy of the proletariat, the advanced historical force. Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) work has moved the debate on, and

once assumed a sort of vanguard trend in Gramscian studies that strips Marxism and indeed Gramsci of all social and historical location. It entails the association of Gramsci's Marxism with the deconstructive epistemology of postmodernism in various ways, bringing forth 'post-Marxism'. This attempt at Kuhnian (Kuhn, 1970) 'paradigm-busting' renders the current condition of the Marxist tradition - to which Gramsci undoubtedly belongs – an exercise in reaction (Daly, 1999:62); Enlightenment metaphysics (Daly, 1994:178); modernist idealism (Docherty, 1996:71); or as Sim, (2000:35) puts it "control freakery". It seems to me that the weak spot in all of this is its inherent a-historicism. Post-Marxism offers no account of history and yet it seeks to experiment with the ideas of a great, if not the greatest, historicist.

Current Uses (and Misuses?) of Gramsci

How is Gramsci remembered today? To a significant extent, the answer merely requires us to observe how Gramsci's ideas are being currently used. Generally speaking, Gramsci was a class agent in the Leninist tradition, and yet much contemporary literature defuses the true character of his radicalism and smoothes his transition into mainstream political science, sociology, and what has become 'cultural studies'.

As Boggs (1984:282-3) anticipated, leftists in academia today seeking to maintain critical bite, but wishing to relinquish the ontological baggage of historical materialism (i.e. Laclau & Mouffe, 1985), have seized on the thrust of Gramsci's anti-economism, albeit without the originator's strict historiological qualifications. The assumption appears to be that Gramsci's work on hegemony alone provides a de-ontological platform for social, political and cultural analysis which can be readily adapted to the current postmodern intellectual turn. This is all very well, as nothing is sacred, but can it be said to properly derive from Gramsci? Gramsci's schema is so loaded with potential it can, it seems, be made to mean anything at all. As David Harris notes, to be Gramscian today could mean to be an advocate of a good many strategies of 'enrichment' of the founder of the school of thought, and yet nothing at all definitive (1992:27). In many ways this is true of Laclau and Mouffe (1985), who invoke the authority of Gramsci in replacing class struggle with a determinant-free, antagonistic politics.

Gramsci's current usage is not entirely heterodox. He undoubtedly shares with the Cultural Studies fraternity, and indeed the early Frankfurt School, concern for the role of the cultural and ideological dimensions of social life in moulding consensus, and that society has to be viewed therefore in Hegelian terms as a 'divided unity'. Indeed, this is the underlying assumption of Stuart Hall's activity at the University of Birmingham. Yet, as Dworkin points out, cultural studies has tended to analyse the question, and to see the potential for creating subversive identities, increasingly from the subjective and secondary perspective of

products and consumerism, not production itself (1997:5-6). Harris puts it wryly: "[w]e have heard a good deal about the proletarian shopper" (1992:205).

In a sense, with the demand for Marxists to think creatively, Gramsci's current popularity in the academy is a consequence of his bid to upgrade Marxism for the twentieth century. No less a figure than Althusser says that Gramsci provides "completely original… insights into the problem… of the superstructures" (Althusser, 1965:114). This is amplified by a number of seasoned contemporary scholars (Buci-Glucksmann, 1982; Showstack Sassoon, 1980; Dimitrakos, 1986; Anderson, 1976; Femia, 1975:45; Hoffman, 1984; Mercer, 1980; Bobbio, 1979; etc). At bottom, Gramsci's great feat was to adapt Marx and Engels to the Hegelian concept of civil society and the role of ideas in securing the state such that ideas were to receive dialectical parity with economics. However, Texier reminds us that this certainly does not mean that Gramsci takes us back to the Hegelian 'man standing on his head' and a "disembodied" conception of human creativity (1979:60).

It should be acknowledged, however, that a consequence of Gramsci's elevation of subjective factors to dialectical parity with infrastructures is debate concerning his epistemic trajectory. This coincides today with the supposed arrival of a postmodern condition. Indeed, based on the textual flavour of his prison writing it has been said that Gramsci is a precursor of the postmodern turn (Landry, 2000:145; Smart, 1986:161). Of course, the would-be postmodernisation of Gramsci represents an outgrowth of his ideas on ideology and the construction of identity, which is at least in part open to the contingency of political organisation, rather than the spontaneous product of the 'relations of production' we find in Marx's 1859 Preface to *A Critique of Political Economy*.

Gramsci rejects Croce's notion that thinking is divided into separate categories of activity (the practical, the aesthetic, and so on) such that it is ultimately possible to formulate an autonomous discursive line of politics. However, whilst politics and economics are ultimately inseparable from the historical totality of social existence, as animated practices engaging social power they do assume significantly different operational characteristics. Gramsci states:

> [p]olitics becomes permanent action and gives birth to permanent organisations precisely in so far as it identifies itself with economics. But it is also distinct from it, which is why one may speak separately of economics and politics, and speak of "political passion" as of an immediate impulse to action which is born on the "permanent and organic" terrain of economic life but which transcends it, bringing into play emotions and aspirations in whose incandescent atmosphere even calculations involving the individual human life itself obey different laws from those of individual profit, etc (Gramsci, 1971:139-40).

Yet, at the same time Gramsci wished to avoid dialectical 'one-sidedness'. Indeed, here Laclau is wrong to suggest that Gramsci "asserted [the] primacy of politics" (Laclau, 1996:62). With probably the revolutionary syndicalist Georges Sorel (1847-1922) in mind,

Gramsci immediately counter-posed the error of economic determinism with its opposite: a tendency to excesses of voluntaristic "desires and passions" he dubbed "ideologism" (Gramsci, 1971:178-9). For Gramsci, excesses of eco-determinant and politico-voluntarist kinds are equally dialectically inert. Gramsci brings the Cartesian duality (the material and thinking realms of existence) into dialectical reciprocation. He acknowledges that ideology and the knowledge that informs it has no autonomous existence (Morera, 2000:43-5). He saw ideas as material forces in the sense that they become attached to specific social forces pre-formed in the productive world, historically (Gramsci, 1971:165). What Gramsci refers to as history in this regard is "determined social relations"; relations, by virtue of practiced and learned ideological articulations, which become an accurate basis for political action (Gramsci, 1971:133). His point is that social relations are determined economically but not historical outcomes *per se*. It is only when ideas become attached to these social relations that historical movement can occur. In this case, ideas have to refer directly to certain social forces. They must appeal to a 'being' already formed or in the process of being formed, historically. In this sense ideas become attached to the conditions, will, aspirations, and so on, which result from the occupation of a certain pre-existing position in the social world. Not surprisingly, we find an insistence on this material grounding in Gramsci's use of the term 'hegemony':

> [al]though hegemony is ethico-political, it must also be economic, must necessarily be based on the decisive function exercised by the leading group in the decisive nucleus of economic activity (Gramsci, 1971:161).

The key phrase here is: "must necessarily be based". The task is to bring into dialectical reciprocation 'being' and 'consciousness'. This stems from Gramsci's recognition that the concept of being refers to socio-historical location – a product of involuntary productive configuration. By contrast, the question of consciousness, or one's conception of self, is moulded in a contested hegemonic (political) environment that is to some extent voluntary in that persuasion rather than force is the characteristic determinant. Here, of course, Laclau and Mouffe detect a point of entry for their deconstructionist politics.

Gramsci seems at once to be moving in the direction of contingency and yet he remains anchored to the basic assumptions of historical materialism – his 'in the last instance' economism. By removing this remaining (and, by Laclau and Mouffe's account, redundant) economic vestige the hegemonic discourse is now freed of all socio-historical referents and occupies its own wholly autonomous space. Yet, hermeneutically speaking, this re-reading of Gramsci denudes its originator's notion of hegemony of its historiological orientation. The act of freeing the hegemonic discourse incurs the price of historiological abstraction. In other words, the ultimate means employed by Gramsci to map hegemony is relinquished.

Post-Marxism is thus wholly devoid of a theory of history or indeed any epistemic references employed by Gramsci to render hegemony and its political usage intelligible (Greaves,

2009:38). Laclau and Mouffe effectively strip hegemony of any extra-discursive structural implication; in keeping with the postmodern turn, the discourse is given to refer to nothing outside of itself (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985:85). To assume otherwise, of course, would return the authors to the very essentialism they seek to avoid, and indeed to that which Gramsci is criticised for retaining (Lacalu & Mouffe, 1985:69). Gramsci does provide a nuanced approach to class politics with the concept of 'historical bloc', but he makes no attempt to escape socio-economic class as an ontological referent. For example, Gramsci writes of hegemony as "direction"/"domination" (Gramsci, 1971:12-13). This begs an elementary political question: who is doing the directing/dominating and who is directed/dominated? Again, the answer Gramsci consistently supplies in his prison writing is that for hegemony to be historically significant it must become attached to historically specific 'organic' interests; those corresponding to a historical level of development in socialised production. By way of an example, Gramsci observes the new Fordist techniques of assembly-line production then underway in the US. The significance of this imposition is that it creates an immediate deficit of ideological regulation: since the workers cannot be prevented from thinking, and thus fomenting *ad hoc* feelings of anti-conformist sentiment corresponding, albeit perhaps imprecisely, but corresponding nonetheless, to a perceived reduction in their human status to that of the "trained gorilla" (Gramsci, 1985: 310). This crisis had to be addressed by the owners of this mode of production by promoting Fordism somehow as morally and rationally digestible to the workers, and indeed the entire historical bloc. This is done either directly, or, more likely, indirectly via the cadre of intellectuals acting as appointed 'mediators' for the dominant group (Gramsci, 1971: 12).

The inescapable upshot here is that ideology in the form of hegemony remains class-necessitarian for Gramsci. He rules out hegemony as non-political, spontaneous reflection, but it is nonetheless, like all things political, born out of necessity for direction imposed *de factum* on the historical bloc by the developing impulses of economic life. For Gramsci, hegemony in all its complexity merely represents the political attempt to regulate (and out of necessity continually amend itself) according to the suggestions imposed by the economy. Hegemony becomes the only means to render history intelligible; by the same token history is the only means to render hegemony intelligible:

> [The] material forces are the content and ideologies are the form, though this distinction between form and content has purely didactic value, since the material forces would be inconceivable historically without form and the ideologies would be individual fancies without the material forces (Gramsci, 1971:377).

Laclau and Mouffe's work on post-Marxist theory has been useful perhaps in necessitating a reconsideration of who Gramsci was and what he was actually saying, but it remains unclear *who* post-Marxist theory is addressing. Indeed, this is undoubtedly the first question Gramsci would ask of it. For Gramsci, hegemony is free in the moment of its construction but it can only posit itself meaningfully as 'truth' by attachment to the socio-historical reality that firstly

initiates the need for it. If it fails in this regard it is 'inorganic' (a-historical) and quickly forgotten:

> [i]t is evident that [the superstructure] cannot just happen "arbitrarily", around any ideology, simply because of the formally constructive will of a personality or a group which puts it forward solely on the basis of its own fanatical philosophical… convictions. Mass adhesion or non-adhesion to an ideology is the real critical test of the rationality and historicity of modes of thinking. Any arbitrary constructions are pretty rapidly eliminated by historical competition, even if sometimes, through a combination of immediately favourable circumstances, they manage to enjoy popularity of a kind; whereas constructions which respond to the demands of a complex organic period of history always impose themselves and prevail in the end (Gramsci, 1971:341).

Roger Simon (1991) brings out another dubious assumption. He locates Gramsci within the revolutionary upheavals of the early twentieth century. However, he then argues that in the aftermath of revolutionary failure in Italy Gramsci recognises that history is "not going that way" (Simon, 1991:115). In other words, Simon assumes that Gramsci concluded that revolution was not going to happen and he thus set out on an alternative course. In short, Simon implies that Gramsci ended his life a non-revolutionary reformist.

In this regard, Simon takes Gramsci's concept of 'war of position' as connoting a strategic political distinction from the 'war of movement' of the Russian October Revolution of 1917 (Simon, 1991:18). Gramsci did certainly introduce the concept of 'war of position' into the Marxist vocabulary, but Simon is wrong to imply that this led him to advocate a reformist political outlook. On the contrary, as Ernest Mandel states:

> there is not the slightest evidence that Gramsci ever abandoned the conception that the socialist revolution implies the destruction of the bourgeois state apparatus (1978:201).

Simon's point rather typifies not so much the way history has gone, but the recent fate of the Gramscian legacy. A distinct fracture has emerged between Gramsci's complementary revolutionary strategies – those of wars of 'position' and 'manoeuvre' – which are taken to mean either 'reform' or 'revolution'. This misreads Gramsci's argument. The dispute it seems centres on a seeming fetishisation of the war of position tactic. Indeed, how is this fought? Who is doing the fighting?

The war of manoeuvre is the classical Leninist assault and seizure of the instruments of capitalist oppression – the state. In the aftermath of defeats in Italy and other advanced European countries, Gramsci realised that the revolutionary strategy had to include an attack on the consenting (hegemonic) components of state:

> The State was only an outer ditch, behind which there stood a powerful system of fortresses and earthworks: more or less numerous from one State to the next, it goes without saying — but this precisely necessitated an accurate reconnaissance of each individual country (Gramsci, 1971:238).

War of position is aimed at the fortresses and earthworks - an advanced assault on the consent mechanisms of the capitalist state. Naturally, the means by which consent is generated will vary between western states. This is what Gramsci means by his otherwise odd analogy that whilst all water is "H2O", there are an infinite variety of "waters" (1995:305).

In the light of revolutionary failure in Italy, Gramsci was brought to a more sophisticated appreciation of how the capitalist actively wins and maintains political power, and this is the basis of his unique contribution to Marxist theory. His insights were intended to better equip the working class in its struggle to alter the course of history. Gramsci sought to elaborate the Marxian problematic of subjective consciousness and its control in revolutionary situations and to include certain social forces not automatically included in the progressive historical thrust, such as the peasantry. However, his was not an argument for consensual reformism in states with reasonably established parliamentary systems; his analysis remains fundamentally class-antagonistic and revolutionary in the full Leninist sense of the term.

In this regard, Gramsci studied Italy's idiosyncrasies. He found that Italians had not made a nation of themselves as much as an 'empire' within state boundaries. He noticed that the Italian capitalist class of the north of the country provided leadership that thrived upon the surreptitious monopolisation of culture in which the south was dismissed as "heathen and primitive" (King, 1987:12). In perpetrating a common conviction that 'high culture', in terms of literature and art, and so forth, represented innate national properties, domination was effected by the leading social elements of society toward its masses (Dombroski, 1986:113). The masses themselves remained either non-contributory and ambivalent toward the higher national-cultural mysteries, or became imitative of them. In both cases, the leading group's hold on culture went unchallenged, particularly by the predominantly agrarian southern mass of Italy. The point here is that cultural domination assumes political form as 'capital' once removed (or disguised) from production.

That culture is once removed from economic determination has led to an understandable attraction to the semiotic and linguistic dimensions of Gramsci's hegemonic theory (Ives, 2004; Holub, 1992). This is, of course, particularly pertinent to the national question in Gramsci's thinking.

Gramsci addressed the problem of national integration and exposed those features unique to Italy, but offered a theoretical pattern that may be applied elsewhere in corresponding circumstances. Admittedly though, there was little time in his relatively short life to move on from the morass of national questions in which he had become immersed and the development of his internationalism undoubtedly suffered as a result (Harman, 1978:14). For good reasons, therefore, the essential Italian character of Gramsci's Marxism is

emphasised in Salamini (1981); Cammett (1967); Pozzolini (1970); Boggs (1976 & 1984); Showstack Sassoon (1980); Joll (1977); Bellamy (2002); and Anderson (1976).

Yet, by its nature, much of the work on Gramsci today in the Anglo-Saxon world that is Marxist, non-Marxist or post-Marxist, appears to reject this reading. In one sense, this aspect of current analysis is promising. Marxists need not retreat with Gramsci into specifically national relativity in order to preserve his intellectual character. Gramsci's political imagination was expansionary. One could indeed call it internationalist to a level in which it rivals the position of Trotsky. This was certainly the view of Gramsci contemporary Angelo Tasca (Spriano, 1979:131). Gramsci was outward looking, as his practical activities in trying to balance the needs of the Italian proletariat with that of the Comintern indicate. He argued that:

> [e]very relationship of "hegemony" is necessarily an educational relationship and occurs not only within a nation, between the various forces of which the nation is composed, but in the international and world-wide field, between complexes of national and continental civilisations (Gramsci, 1971:350).

Gramsci did not seek to elevate national factors over the greater global designs of communism initiated by Marx. He merely wished to demonstrate the necessity to take into account contradictory national factors and thus to avoid crass generalisations that actually obstructed the global ambitions he otherwise supported.

An Approach to Intellectual Archaeology

EH Carr has written that there is "an unending dialogue between the present and the past… between the historian and his facts" (1961:30). This is true, but how do we locate the facts? How can we be sure we have them?

Clearly under the influence of Gramsci's contemporary Croce, RG Collingwood in *An Autobiography* (1939) argues that the historical actor must be seen as a 'problem-solver' and thus, in many respects, the study of history and philosophy correlate (1939:77). The problems preoccupying the thinker condition the thought and the thought reflects an attempt to address the condition. In *The Idea of History* (1946), Collingwood advocates an empathetic approach to the study of history; we must attempt to enter the mind of the historical subject and locate the active contextual factors which caused an author to commit word to paper. In recent times, Quentin Skinner has become the inheritor of this 'interpretative' method. In *The Foundation of Modern Political Thought* (1978), Skinner summarises his method as an attempt to interpret the historical text in the context of the "general social and intellectual matrix" at large (1978:x). "I begin", he says, "by discussing what I judge to be the most relevant characteristics of the societies in and for which they originally wrote" (1978:x-xi). In other words, Skinner argues for a relativistic approach to the historical exercise in which we are warned of the need to suppress our tendencies to

invest texts of the past with claims and assumptions the original author could not foresee from his/her historical standpoint. We must search instead for the prevailing political, social and ideological climate in which the text was produced in order to recover the relationship between historical theory and historical practice (Skinner, 1978:xiii). This compels us to discover why a text was produced in the way it was produced, at whom it was aimed, for what it was intended, and so forth. To Skinner political thought has no innate and timeless quality to it; its historical context provides its only intelligible standpoint.

'Contextual relativism' calls, therefore, for the 'historicisation' of the subject for the risks are these. Firstly, we are in danger of transmitting to the past something of ourselves and of the present. That is to say, we risk judgement with hindsight and certain developmental advantages the original thinker had no knowledge of and/or could not foresee. Here, methodologically speaking, we might become 'tourists' lost without bearings in an unfamiliar location or, worse, insensitive 'colonials' seeking some trans-historical exportation of would-be universal mores and understandings. Secondly, we run the risk of wrenching incongruously into the present a portion of the past, putting us in mind of the 'plundering' that frequently passed as Egyptology in the nineteenth century and indeed the current ethical debate surrounding the Ancient Greek artefacts, the Elgin Marbles.

However, having insisted on unlimited historical and contextual sensitivity, Skinner at least would be prepared to leave it at that. Yet, what has been largely overlooked it seems is that Gramsci's pursues this historiological methodology initiated originally by Croce, but, in adapting it to historical materialism, takes us much further than non-Marxist contextualist schools in our understanding of the 'problems' philosophy seeks to address.

Gramsci's notion 'war of position' is in effect the barometer of the condition of class war in a given era. It reflects a battle for supremacy fought with hegemonic weaponry. Hegemony at its highest and most coherent form is expressed in philosophy; this then becomes the intellectual armament to establish a way of life conducive to the interests of certain socio-economic classes in a given epoch. Political thought of the past thus becomes an expression of a greater underlying conflict. As Gramsci writes:

> [t]he philosophy of an historical epoch is… nothing other than the "history" of that epoch itself, nothing other than the mass of variations that the leading group has succeeded in imposing on preceding reality (1971:345).

Gramsci demands that the exploration of intellectual history takes account of not just its context but, specifically, its 'hegemonic context'. Thus, 'truth' is 'historical truth' in the sense that, at any point in time, it reflects a view of the world that has been successfully imposed on society sufficient to hold together the various heterogeneous class elements of a 'historical bloc'. In other words, class war takes shape in economic life but is expressed in the superstructure. In fact, there are competing superstructures, some more coherent than others, borne on the terrain of differing experiences within the dialectical totality of the historical bloc. A philosophy might be ingenious but it is little more than the theorisation

of extant experience, or that already suggested by life. The great task of a philosophy such as Marxism is to create conditions which will allow it to become critical, then to pass into general hegemonic currency for the whole of society, much, for example, as the ideas of Adam Smith, John Locke and JS Mill have accomplished for western liberal-capitalist culture.

The history of ideas and philosophy in general is now tied by Gramsci to specific historical situations in which there is always an extant struggle to control popular beliefs and to consolidate a culture, not only in legality, but morally and ethically according to class interests. In this way, Gramsci arrives at his assessment mentioned before that "ideas are themselves material forces" (Gramsci, 1971:165).

Hence, for Gramsci, the historical text is related to material forces in that it is essentially a record of the attempt by one group in an economically conflictive society to stamp its values and interests on another by voluntary means. Truth is therefore not eternal but qualified as a practical matter mediated by its dialectical insertion into the living reality of an epoch. The written historical work in itself becomes an indicator of this attempt; an expression of the perceived needs of the social conditions in which it was produced.

Of course, some ideologies reflect meaningful situations whilst others are wholly ephemeral. As discussed above, Gramsci provides the means to determine the difference by locating their socio-historical attachment to 'organic' forces, to the concrete needs of competing groups in the historical bloc.

Hence, history does not merely relate to itself such that those who seek to understand it become inevitably caught up in an endless vortex of methodological relativity. The class-relative attribution of hegemony emerges as a historical constant in itself. To Gramsci, history is certainly anything but a random and fathomless succession of accidents and occurrences of local and unconnected determination. As Dimitrakos argues, Gramsci did not give equal weight to all ideologies in their cultural possibilities; class struggle and ideas associated with it were his objective historical points of reference (Dimitrakos, 1986:465). Therefore, any methodological relativism that exists in Gramsci that might allow for his transportation to different historical locations (i.e., the supposed postmodern) is immediately checked by his historicism. In this sense, the organic function of postmodern ideology would need to be located. Again, in this regard, to whom, and for whom, does post-Marxism speak?

I would argue that Gramsci's *Quaderni* writing ought to be approached in this general vein; since it cannot be claimed that the author was unaware of the precise historical function for which they were intended. There are other specific issues to be addressed in Gramsci's mature work, but this tends to support the overall point.

Reading the *Quaderni* – Expediency, Cryptology, Continuity

At least some of the ongoing ambiguity surrounding Gramsci results from his prison writing which, following its publication in Italian in 1951, is often read as 'text' and not 'history'. Subsequently, in 1971, the original Italian version of the *Quaderni del carcere* was selected, edited and translated into English by Quinton Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, as *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*. I have encountered no direct criticism of this work. It was sensitively and intelligently undertaken, and the editors made no attempt to make light of the now notorious problems they encountered in attempting to set the notes in order and minimise the losses incurred in translation. Although inevitably 'selective', the finished work does appear both thorough and punctilious – note, for example, the copious editorial footnotes. Mention should be made also of Hoare's very helpful Introduction.

At the time of writing, three volumes of a proposed five volume full English translation of the prison notebooks, in sequence, is underway by Gramsci scholar, Joseph A. Buttigieg (1992, 1996, 2007). These contain rich and detailed background notes on European and Italian intellectual cultural and political milieu in which Gramsci was writing while in prison. If anything these notes are more comprehensive than the 1971 *Selections* and the reader glimpses the evolution of Gramsci's overall schema with some early notes being revisited in later notebooks. Similarly, Derek Boothman (1995) has edited and translated a fresh selection of the *Quaderni* from the originals held in the specially dedicated *Il Fondazione Istituto di Gramsci* (Gramsci Institute) in Rome. Boothman's selection has, for example, provided even greater insights into Gramsci's intellectual relationship with Croce, and translation of material new to English readers is very much to be welcomed, but the benefits for Gramscian discussion may take some time to mature.

It nonetheless remains the case that to the Anglo-Saxon world, at least, the edited English version of the *Notebooks* has come to represent something of a definitive manual of Gramsci's thought. Yet despite the best efforts of Hoare and Nowell Smith, the *Notebooks* remain wayward and fragmentary, understandably so; they were certainly never intended for publishing as they are. Indeed, in this regard, an almost anticipatory Gramsci issues a caution. When reading the historical text:

> [a] distinction should… be made within the work of the thinker under consideration between those works which he has carried through to the end and published himself or those which remain unpublished, because incomplete, and those which were published by a friend or disciple, but not without revisions, rewritings, cuts, etc., or in other words not without the active intervention of a publisher or editor. It is clear that the content of posthumous works has to be taken with great discretion and caution, because it cannot be considered definitive but only as material still being elaborated and still provisional. One should not exclude the possibility that these works, particularly if they have been a long time in the making and if the author never decided to finish them, might have been repudiated or deemed unsatisfactory in whole or in part by the author (Gramsci, 1971:384).

From the outset, then, it is perhaps arguable that current disputes concerning the meaning of Gramsci's prison writing can be attributed in part to the fact that its author was not at the same time its editor. At a minimum, the posthumous collation of fragmented notes is not automatically conducive to a tightly argued, rigorous and integrated argument in which the author's thought can be easily tracked thematically. Verdicchio seems to be correct in stating:

> Gramsci's work does not represent a theoretical body, but presents a theoretical stance that, by not delineating or centering itself as a proponent of a strong "theory", leaves its readers the possibility of interpretation and expansion. Of course, this also leaves room for what may be called "misunderstanding" (1995:173).

However, he continues:

> ... as a whole the Gramscian corpus is an intricate set of details in which every fragment participates, thereby resulting in much less ambiguity than one might expect (1995:173).

I take this to be correct, but Verdicchio might have expanded his point. We could argue that what he calls the 'Gramscian corpus' must include his (Gramsci's) earlier, pre-prison writing. This tells us of the importance of his historical conditions and its impact on his thinking, his major theoretical preoccupations, his politics and so forth. A mental picture of Gramsci the theoretical and practical man does not form so readily on the sole basis of the *Quaderni* writings for they were never intended to be definitive.

Gramsci's early writing is important because, through it, we can observe the events, preoccupations and theoretical struggles he tries to resolve later in prison. It provides also an invaluable insight into his intellectual character, often stated in uncompromising and unrestrained language and style (see Passolini, 1982:180-5). There is far less attention to actual 'will' in the prison writings and much more of an elaboration of the difficulties standing in opposition to it as, generally speaking, a drier philosophical and theoretical undertaking. Indeed, Femia has argued that the early and later Gramsci are distinguishable (1998:82). It is true, for example, that Gramsci becomes more interested in Machiavelli in prison and that he never writes about factory councils again. However, there is no suggestion that the overall character of the *Quaderni* is dislocated from class struggle.

On encountering the *Quaderni*, it is immediately apparent that there is a remarkable change of style in Gramsci's writing when compared to the firebrand syntax of *L'Ordine Nuouvo* period of the early 1920s. The most obvious explanation for this is expediency. In prison, Gramsci employs benign language in order that he might continue his important work unhindered and avoid being denied certain reading and writing materials. Apparently, the prison-censor was uninitiated in 'Gramscian studies' and not surprisingly easily outwitted. For much of it, Gramsci manages to make his writings appear as an exercise in philosophical

navel-gazing, that is, when they were clearly designed to enable the workers' struggle in Italy to continue with updated theoretical weaponry.

Indeed, considering the pamphleteering style of Gramsci's early political writing, it is immediately apparent that nowhere in the prison notebooks does he sound explicitly like the communist revolutionary he was. Here we might offer a rather crude but effective illustration. In his *Lyons Theses*, written for the *Partito Communista d'Italia* (PCd'I) congress of 1926, Gramsci writes:

> [t]he transformation of the communist parties, in which the vanguard of the working class is assembled, into Bolshevik parties can be considered at the present moment as the fundamental task of the Communist International. This task must be related to the historical development of the international workers' movement, and in particular to the struggle which has taken place within it between Marxism and the currents which represented a deviation from the principles and practice of the revolutionary class struggle (1978:340).

Many words used above were never penned by Gramsci after imprisonment in 1928, were routinely encoded thereafter and disguised, although, to the educated eye, in fairly blatant cryptography to deceive the prison censor. Had such a paragraph as that above occurred in the *Notebooks*, one might venture, it would have appeared something like the following: [t]he transformation of the nomenclature for the working mass, in which the vanguard of the mass itself is assembled, into Jacobinist tendencies can be considered at the present moment as the fundamental task of the international Modern Prince (Comintern). This task must be related to the historical development of the larger mass movement, and in particular to the struggle that has taken place within it between the Philosophy of Praxis and the currents that represented a deviation from the principles and practice of the historically imminent movement. However, the radical polemicism remains if the historical and thematic context of Gramsci's sentences and subject matter of the *Quaderni* are understood.

Whilst Gramsci's *Quaderni* are a profoundly intellectually rewarding experience to read, no one can claim that they are immediately accessible. They are often so steeped in the history and historical context of contemporary Italy that in the absence of knowledge of his pre-prison writing, his political activism and practical conditions, one would find one's self lost in what amounts to an 'unfamiliar city' without a map. Here the only way to navigate would be to observe how the 'streets' of his often baffling array of ideas relate to one another. This would be a mammoth and doubtless less than successful exercise without some prior guidance. Much of Gramsci's later work on intellectuals and hegemony, for example, relates to his observations of Italy's national revolution and national characteristics, Lenin's achievements in Russia, experiments with factory councils and worker democracy, the role of the Communist Party, and the rise of fascism. Again, even with Buttigieg's efforts, it does not make for the most accessible reading.

Leo Strauss, in *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (1952) argues that political philosophers of the past often wrote against the backdrop of persecution and fear. This makes it necessary, so to speak, to read between the lines. Gramsci's *Quaderni* certainly necessitate similar treatment. They are shot through with curious sounding aphorisms, cryptology and historically qualified and extremely loaded phrases, often rendering the texts a distinctly obscure and deeply academic appearance.

Hence, there are serious methodological preconditions for reading Gramsci's mature writing. Verdicchio's point above that the fragments of Gramsci's ideas participate in the whole is an extremely sagacious one. The ideas of the *Quaderni* inter-lock. They are nothing like the 'pick-and-mix' they might appear to be such that the various ideas can be lifted and abstracted in isolation, as tempting as this might be. Gramsci's ideas are connected by myriad fibres, "as with spaghetti, the attempt to lift bite-sizes from the plate often results in lifting too much to manage or nothing at all" (Greaves, 2005:4). For example, when he refers to the political party as the 'nomenclature of a class', as he often does, one is immediately ushered into accepting an enormous range of practical and philosophical assumptions. Moreover, that the Italian Communist Party might be dubbed the 'Modern Prince' embodies a quite distinctive interpretation of Machiavelli's original *Prince* that requires us to acknowledge his understanding of Machiavelli's historio-hegemonic function.

Of course, the necessity for all this subterfuge and disguise and the fact that Gramsci was not able to present his work as a finished article must have been borne with extreme frustration by a man who, more than most, understood the unquestionable need for direct communication between workers and intellectuals, or what amounts to his perceived need to get his work into popular circulation. Gramsci understood the need to conceive of the workers' movement as an organic body. In this regard it was necessary to establish a dialogue between the sensual experience of modern capitalist practices and the theoretical elements necessary to articulate it. In this respect, in anticipation of a communist uprising, the Italian fascist regime was well advised to gaol Gramsci, although ironically it would require his work in gaol to reveal why exactly this was. Removing Gramsci and his fellow 'thinking' elements from the political scene effectively decapitated the Italian workers' movement. And, thus, by accident or design the scene was set for Gramsci's prison writing to become subsequently adopted and interpreted by the academy, that is, rather than the people for whom it was originally designed and intended – the Italian working classes.

One can only lament the inherent loss of historical grounding this ironic historical twist has entailed for much subsequent evaluation of the *Quaderni*. If we imagine the Gramsci of the prison years in isolation of the rest of his life, then the *Quaderni* writings would need to be taken as an example of miraculous, super-human abstraction. Yet, it is significant that Gramsci himself never accorded this miracle to any of the historical thinkers he most admired – i.e., Machiavelli, Marx and Lenin. As has been said, for Gramsci, all great political

thought is essentially an expression of a war of position for intellectual supremacy, but this is always rooted in class struggle and the attempt to establish a way of life on behalf of identifiable social forces. This is true of Gramsci also. That is to say, Gramsci's ideas have no independent existence. They refer continually to the reality of social existence already constructed outside of the text itself.

Of course, for Gramsci, what was unique about Marx was that this struggle had finally reached the level of 'self-consciousness'. Thought had finally reached the stage where it not only addressed a historical situation, it was aware of itself as a product of it, and thus what it was doing or seeking to do on the ground, in 'concrete', as Gramsci was fond of saying.

It therefore must be insisted that Gramsci be read in the same way. There is no other means to effectively map the *Quaderni*. Gramsci's generic philosophical framework had to have been in place, if not necessarily formulated in detail, before he was cut-off from his historical grounding and imprisoned. This was necessary because it allowed him to apply his own conception of the function of philosophy to operate in terms and conditions he understood. In fact, his principal theoretical and strategic conceptions actually germinated in the class struggle of the 1920s and came to fruition in his prison notes. Many notable Gramsci experts concur on this point. For example, Joll (1977:105) states that in prison Gramsci was engaged in "analysing the past"; there was "no stupendous rupture in Gramsci's intellectual development since 1919-20" (Davidson, 1977:242); and Hoare writes:

> [e]ven some of the most important theoretical formulations of the Prison *Notebooks* were essentially elaborations of conclusions he had reached in the period of his active involvement in the class struggle (Introduction to Gramsci, 1978:xxiii).

Conclusion

We ought to be recalling Antonio Gramsci's work with the same consciousness as Gramsci. Gramsci was acutely aware of the role of ideas in society and thus his ideas were 'self-conscious', or aware of the specific historical terrain that produced them and indeed the terrain into which they were to be inserted as dialectical weapons. That is to say, Gramsci's ideas were historiological. They were addressed to a specific target audience at a particular time with a precise purpose in mind. In fact, Gramsci's prison writing was a continuation of class warfare as 'war of position', an attack on the consent mechanisms of capitalist oppression. It is Machiavellian in the sense that it reveals to his audience the techniques used in the same way that Machiavelli revealed how the Medici family held on to power in Florence. The war of position tactic actually provides Gramsci's life with intellectual continuity and political consistency; even if the nature of the struggle was perceived to have changed, struggle between classes was what it was.

If this is accepted then we are compelled to read Gramsci with an interpretive strategy that acknowledges the hegemonic conditions in which the writing was undertaken (the economic, political, social and cultural); we may then question whether what we are doing with Gramsci is appropriate, responsible and thus useful. Contemporary writers should be wary of dislocating Gramsci from context. Ideas are material forces; they speak to and for groups of people whose existence and identity are already formed, but through adoption of the right description of that identity the determinant levers of history can be controlled. This was always Gramsci's intention – the complete humanisation of history by virtue of our understanding of what history actually is.

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