GRAMSCI'S APPROACH to marxism was so novel that he has been called a neo-marxist. The novelty starts with his extremely rigorous methodological approach to the content of marxism, and not with the conclusions he reaches. Obviously, one of the greatest dangers in drawing inspiration or creed from a collection of writings is eclecticism. Marx’ writings, as with those of the Bible, provide ammunition for God and the devil or, at least, have done so for a myriad of mutually contradictory schools of marxism, each claiming to find authority for its propositions in the work of the master. Such a situation immediately raises the question: What is marxism anyway? Gramsci’s method of deciding this question must be the starting point in any examination of his marxism. Without understanding his methodological approach to marxism we cannot understand fully some of his conclusions about what marxism is. Furthermore, if we do not agree with his methodology then we cannot of course, agree with his conclusions. He wrote:

In science in general the most important thing is method: in certain sciences, furthermore, which must necessarily base themselves on a restricted source of positive facts, restricted and not homogeneous, questions of method are even more important, if they are not everything.

He maintained that if a person wished to study a Weltanschauung (world outlook) which “was never systematically exposed by its creator (and whose essential coherence is to be sought not in a single writing or series of writings but in the entire development of his varied intellectual work) in which the elements of the conception are implicit, then it was necessary to make as a preliminary a minute philological study, conducted with the utmost care for precision, with scientific honesty and intellectual loyalty, and the absence of every preconception or a priori reasoning or party position. It is necessary first of all, to reconstruct the process of intellectual development of the given thinker, to identify the elements which have become stable and ‘permanent’ that is which have become his own thought, different and superior to the ‘material’ he previously studied and which served as a stimulus; only these elements are essential parts of the process of development.” He
further maintained that while the whole work of the philosopher had to be studied in the context of his life history in order to discover what he really said, even the most neglected and apparently irrelevant work, the main object was to search for the leitomotiv (main theme) of the work and not to worry about obiterdicta (incidentals) 4.

Gramsci ranked Marx’ writings for value as sources in this order: 1 works published under the direct authority of the author, among these were considered not only those given to the press, but those circulated in whatever manner by the author, like letters and circulars (typical examples were, he suggested, the Glosse al programma di Gotha and the letters); 2 the works not published under the authority of the author but posthumously by others. In this case it was preferable to work from the original source. Both sets of material should be studied chronologically. Preparatory work, first drafts and so on were not legitimate sources for the author’s thought. Letters should be treated with more care than texts as they were written in a different fashion and often not so carefully written. Marx’ ideas should, where possible, be separated from those of Engels as they were not always in agreement. All works other than the two sets listed above were definitely of secondary value. Gramsci indicated at least once that he considered Capital the most important source for a reconstruction of marxism.5 Apart from ranking Marx’s writings, Gramsci also considered what was permissible eclectically and, more importantly, whether it was possible and permissible to revise Marx’ writings themselves on certain grounds. His starting point in reaching conclusions on these points was a consideration of the methodology of previous marxists and why their methodologies had been used. Gramsci maintained that there were two main schools of marxists. The first was typified by Plekhanov whose method was that of vulgar materialism due to Plekhanov’ own positivism. To understand what Marx meant Plekhanov examined only Marx’ intellectual origins.6 The other school was typified by Otto Bauer and maintained that marxism could be related to other philosophies which were not materialist such as those of Kant. Both methodologies were inadequate. The lone man on the correct road in understanding Marx had been Antonio Labriola who had enjoyed little fame. The explanation for the methodology and success of the two previous schools lay in the need of the time they were coined, which was to combat the prevalent popular ideology which was essentially religious transcendentalism. They therefore offered the most crude and banal materialist version of Marx which appealed to the superstition in popular culture in the same way transcendental religions did.7

This wedding of marxism or interpretation of Marx in terms
of the ruling vogue of materialism and positivist philosophy was explicable on the grounds that marxism had the tasks of combating religion with whatever weapons it could find as well as providing a new world view. German marxism did the first. Gramsci proposed to do the second: provide a marxism which was a Weltanschauung (world outlook) and not merely an ideological weapon.

Due to their objects the two schools had overemphasised two aspects of marxism. The first had emphasised the mechanical determinist aspects and materialist aspects. The second had assumed that Marx should be interpreted in the light of other philosophy rather than on the face of his writings. Gramsci would do neither in his examination of Marx.

Turning to Marx himself Gramsci considered how Marx could be revised to eliminate the polemical from the objective material, assuming, of course, that the two earlier schools had found their authority in the dross of Marx, in his polemical writings. He considered that this was an essential preliminary exercise. He assumed that Marx used a development of Hegelian method for a tool of research and never quite freed himself of some of Hegel’s concepts (e.g. that according to which history proceeded in eras of progress according to the stage of development of man’s spirit). He also implied that Marx overstressed certain aspects of his theory for political purposes on occasion. For example, he maintained that the theory of the inevitable impoverishment of the proletariat was exalted far beyond its original importance, when it was intended as a polemical weapon.

So, Gramsci had a very elaborate methodology in which he first ranked Marx’ works in order of value as sources of Marx’ thought, and then was even prepared to revise them in the light of errors of emphasis which Marx would have made himself. This may seem a dangerous exercise, but at least Gramsci was very rigorous and honest about his methodology and his method is quite reasonable on the face of it.

To recapitulate, the two major errors of the past in the interpretation of Marx seemed to Gramsci to be that of the German school, which had made marxism a theory of mechanical determinism in which the wills of men were subordinate and that of Stalinism which had turned it into a religious dogma in which the solutions to all problems were to be found by looking at the appropriate page of Karl Marx, a man long dead and dealing with long dead problems.

For Gramsci marxism was not a sociology, that is, not a theory of “vulgar evolutionism”, as the Germans had tended to suppose, and it saw history not as functioning according to the notions of
the pure laws of science in which one made predictions on the basis of some writing or other and sat back fatalistically to see the predictions come true.

Marxism was a "creative" and not a "receptive" or "ordering" philosophy. By the last two terms Gramsci understood philosophies which assumed the existence of an immutable external order of world. He said to avoid solipsism . . . and the same time mechanistic conceptions which are implicit in the conception of thought as a receptive or ordering activity, it is necessary to examine the question "what is philosophy?" "historically" and at the same time pose as the basis of philosophy the "will" . . . but a rational and not an arbitrary will, which is realised inasmuch as it corresponds with objective historical necessities, that is, inasmuch as it is universal history itself at the moment of its progressive development (attuazione—fulfillment); if this will is represented initially by a single person, its rationality is documented by the fact that it is accepted by a great number of people, and permanently accepted, that it becomes a culture, a matter of "good sense", a conception of the world, with ethics which conform to its structure.10

By "creative" then, he meant thought which modified the modes of understanding of the great mass and thus of that reality itself which cannot be conceived of without this great majority.

Naturally, given this notion of marxism, Gramsci attributed a much greater importance to the action of men in determining social change, than did the marxists of the German tradition. He announced that it was necessary to counteract the notion of marxism as a theory in which men were but passive factors in social change and the notion that all changes in the mode of social life should be explained by changes in the economic base of society.11 Of course, such a position was not new in marxism, both Lenin and Trotsky had emphasised the importance of the conscious activity of men in determining their own destinies, but usually there has been a residue of fatalism in their creeds, (e.g. the concept of world revolution). Gramsci completely rejected the notion of fatalism, maintaining that nothing would ever happen through developments in the economic system itself, without the conscious activity of men themselves. He wrote:

We should, I think, prepare a funeral elegy on the concept of fatalism, praising its usefulness in a certain historical period but burying it once and for all—with full honors.12

In turn his emphasis on history as something of which men and their wills are part, led him to regard the developments in the superstructure of society as more important than those in the base in determining the course of history. He maintained that explaining every fluctuation of ideology and politics as an immediate reflection of some change in the economic base of society was "primitive infantilism". "In practice we can fight this idea with the authentic testimony of Marx, whose political and historical works are always
concrete.” According to Gramsci developments of the economic base could only be studied after the economic development was finished and that:

We don't pay enough attention to the fact that many political actions are due to internal organisational necessities, the need to maintain the coherence of a party, a group, a society. The history of the Catholic Church is full of examples. If every ideological struggle within the Church had to be explained by a change in the base of society, the student would go crazy. (I must say many political-economic “dime-novels” have been written this way). Most of the ideological arguments were related to organisational needs. For example, take the struggle between Rome and Byzantium on the derivation of the Holy Ghost. It would be ridiculous to seek in the economic base of Eastern Europe the reason for the assertion that the Holy Ghost derives only from the Father, and likewise in Western Europe for the assertion that the Holy Ghost derives from the Father and the Son. The existence and conflicts of the two Churches do depend on their economic base and on their historical developments, but the specific positions of the Holy Ghost were set forth as an area of differentiation by the two Churches to strengthen their internal cohesion. They could have changed positions and it would not have mattered so long as the conflict was maintained. This is the real problem to be analysed and not the casuistry on each side. 

There was no one relationship between even major developments in the base and political changes. Either economic well-being or economic hardship could cause such changes depending on the concrete circumstances. He repeated again and again that Marx had said that men become aware of their social position and thus of their tasks on the level of ideology: that marxism itself was of the superstructure. There was a vital connection between the structure and the superstructure of society. He drew this analogy:

You can certainly not say of the human body that the skin (and the type of physical beauty prevailing at that time of history) is mere illusion and that the skeleton and the anatomy are the sole reality; however for a long time something similar has been maintained (for marxism).

Consequent on his assumption that the causes of historical change were to be sought in the superstructure of society rather than in the base, which was so much the ultima ratio (long term reason) as to be almost indistinguishable for political purposes, Gramsci’s main concern became why men were committed to certain beliefs and to a certain system and what was needed to make them accept a new system of values. Here he lighted on the notion of hegemony, which he maintained was implicit in the ideas of Lenin.

There were two great levels of the superstructure, that of “civil society”, that is, the totality of organisms vulgarly called “private”, and that of the “political society or State”. To the first level corresponded the notion of hegemony which a dominant class exercised through society and to the second the direct dominion which was expressed through government by law. Hegemony was what was secured through the “spontaneous consensus” which the mass of the populace gave to the mode of life impressed on society by the dominant group, a consensus given because of the prestige
and trust the dominant group enjoyed due to its position. It was sometimes a more important method of rule than that of the State which functioned to secure the obedience of the groups who did not consent to the method of rule. The State became more important in moments of crisis of command when spontaneous agreement became less important. Gramsci indicated that a typical period in Italy when the State was more important than any consensus or hegemony was after the war of 1914-18. He also indicated that for various cultural reasons there were countries (e.g. Russia in 1917) where there was really no hegemonical basis of rule, solely one of coercion. Of course the relative strength of the ingredients depended on which country, or, more precisely, culture, was being examined. More will be said of the nature of Gramsci’s national communism anon; suffice to say here that he was certainly no interationalist in the sense that Trotsky was, nor was he clearly a national communist. The dominant hegemony might be universal only for a short period and then give way to conflict. It would be characterised at all times by compromise for hegemony

presupposes that the interests and tendencies of the groups over which the hegemony is exercised are taken into account, that a certain equilibrium of compromise is formed, that the directing group makes sacrifices of an economic cororative order, but it is also without doubt that such sacrifices and such compromises cannot concern that which is essential.

What Gramsci is saying here differs mainly in emphasis from what marxists had traditionally admitted, at least before Stalin. What he is saying is that the bulk of the populace at certain stages of history support the values of the dominant class, that is, crudely, aspire to be capitalists because there appears to be something in it for them. Nor is it entirely fiction that there is something in it for some of them, the concessions capitalists make ensure this. The mass may gradually lose this faith in the ruling values, but this loss of faith will not necessarily depend on conditions in the economic base. Certainly at no time is a marxist justified in believing that the bulk of the “oppressed classes” is with him or that history is working for him in the long run. Such conditions are the result of a long process of reorientation in the superstructure and cultural, social and religious as well as economic factors may play a part in determining how the bulk of the populace may feel. Certainly, there was no justification for assuming, as Stalin did in 1928, that a great depression would turn people away from capitalism and to socialism. The hegemony or moral sway of capitalist values would have to be broken first and this, in some cases where the hegemony had a very strong hold, necessitated very long and meticulous labour. For hegemony was achieved in a long process of socialisation which started in the cradle and went on through infancy, through schooling, contact with other social groups, and all the gamut of influences which sociologists and psychologists
tell us operate to make what we are. He wrote "... changes in the mode of thinking, in beliefs in opinions, do not come about through rapid 'explosions' which are simultaneous and general, they come about almost always through 'successive combinations' according to the most disparate and uncontrollable formulae of 'authority'." \(^{20}\)

How then did Gramsci expect changes to come about in the values of the non dominant classes in a capitalist society where they had been so long under a capitalist hegemony? It should be noted here that Gramsci is talking above all about Italy which fell, at the time he was writing, into the category of semi-industrialised country rather than advanced capitalist. However, for a multiplicity of reasons the nature of the Italian superstructure, though often having peculiar local characteristics, was similar to that of advanced capitalist countries with a long cultural heritage (i.e. he had modifications to his techniques for countries like the USA, and implicitly, Australia).

He drew analogies from military strategy, distinguishing between trench and assault warfare. Several items will be quoted verbatim here to make his point clearer.

The same reduction must be made in art and political science, at least insofar as advanced states are concerned, where "civil society" has become a very complex structure which is resistant to catastrophic "eruptions" of an immediate economic sort (crises, depressions etc.): the superstructures of civil society are like the system of trenches in modern warfare. As in this case when it happens that a furious attack of artillery seems to have destroyed the whole of the adversary's system of defence, but instead only destroys the external superficialities, and at the moment of the attack and advance the attackers find themselves facing a still efficient defensive line, so it happens in politics during great economic crises, that neither do the attacking troops, because of the crisis, organise themselves like lightning spatially and temporarily, nor do they acquire an aggressive spirit ... .

Therefore it is necessary to study in "depth" what elements of civil society correspond to the system of defences in a war of position.

It seems to me that Ilich (Lenin) had understood that a change should take place from a war of manoeuvre, applied victoriously in the East in '17, to a war of position which was the only thing possible in the West where, as Krasnov observed, in brief space of time the armies could acquire endless quantities of munitions, where the social cadres were themselves capable of becoming well supplied trenches.

Only Ilich did not have time to examine his formula more profoundly, taking into account the fact that he could only do this theoretically, while his fundamental task was national, that is demanded a recognition of the ground and an establishment of the elements of trench and fortress which were made up by the civil society, etc. In the East the State was everything, civil society was primordial and unformed; in the West, between the State and the civil society there was a fair relationship and through the shimmering of the State could be seen the robust structure of a "civil society". The State was only a forward trench, behind which there was a strong chain of fortresses and casemates; more or less from State to State, it is understood but this called for an accurate recognition of national character. \(^{21}\)
While more will be said in successive articles about how a socialist counter hegemony can be built up in the working class through the activities of the socialist party and intellectuals, here it is necessary to say that the long trench warfare designed to break down the dominant hegemony and establish a socialist counter-hegemony, could not be conducted by the populace itself. That is to say, there was no spontaneous development of a counter-hegemony, or a set of values conflicting with the ruling ones, something which the German marxists had always believed implicitly.

Gramsci believed that all men were philosophers, that is all men had a world view. Usually this world view was dubbed “common sense”. It did not exist at the level of conscious criticism but was inarticulate. Thus while a social class usually had a common world view it was sporadic in its manifestation and because of social and intellectual subordination the class borrowed the world view of the dominant class although it was frequently in conflict with its own inarticulate world view. The frequency of conflict diminished in “normal times”, when the subordinate class could live more or less in accordance with the world view of the dominant class. The conflict between what we may call unconscious and conscious values, could and did often end in moral and political passivity of the great mass. Critical understanding of oneself took place only through struggle for moral leadership of the particular social group and this in turn necessitated the emergence of a “leading group” of intellectuals. “The mass of people cannot become independent and autonomous without organising itself, and organisation is impossible without organisers and directors, without intellectuals”, he wrote. While he maintained that officers could quickly form an army but that an army was useless without officers, he was not propounding a crude theory of voluntarism. On the contrary, he maintained that the propagation of new concepts took place for political and ultimately social reasons and logic, authority and organisation were very important only as soon as a general reorientation has taken place in the individual or the group. He always maintained as a general principle that 1 no society poses itself with tasks for whose solution there do not exist already the necessary and sufficient conditions or at least in which there are not already appearing and developing such conditions; 2 that no society dissolves itself or can be replaced if it has not first elaborated (svolto) all the forms of life that are implicit in its relationships. On the other hand it could hang on for ever if no attempts were made to organise an opposition to its hegemony. The whole problem of making a revolution became a struggle for minds.

We deduce certain musts for any cultural movement which seeks to supplant old world views:

1 To repeat unceasingly and tirelessly one’s own arguments, though, of
course, varying the literary form. Repetition is the most efficient didactic method of working on the popular mind.

2 To work incessantly to raise the intellectual level of ever greater strata of the population. This entails developing groups of intellectuals of a new type, who rise directly from the people yet remain in contact with them forming as it were the "ribs" crossing the mass.

As might be expected, this work would be less onerous at a particular time in history when the hegemony of a ruling group was shaken by its own inability to cope with a disastrous social situation. The work would still have to be done, where the values of capitalism had been firmly instilled for centuries.

Of course, there were enormous problems facing any Gramscian marxist. Since Gramsci saw the relevant part of marxism, for political purposes anyway, in the theories of the superstructure, he automatically made it a much more sophisticated tool of analysis and also much more difficult to use, given the enormous complexity involved when dealing with moral values, implicit in the complex social life of the superstructure. Apart from the two major propositions and conditions for social change which have already been advanced, there were several other canons of historical methodology he said had to be followed by those wishing to use marxism as a guide to action. First the need to distinguish between "organic" and "circumstantial" movements in history. "The 'circumstantial' phenomena are certainly also dependent on the organic movements, but their influence is not long-range historically; they give place to a trifling everyday political criticism." There were a number of pitfalls in this exercise because of the difficulty in finding the correct relationship between the organic and the circumstantial or occasional; you could either regard as immediately operating causes what were only operating medially or affirm that the immediate operating causes were the sole efficient causes leading in the first case to an excess of economism and in the second to excess of voluntarism. It also meant that there was no possibility of "objective" augury (prevision)

He who forecasts something in reality has a program which is to triumph and the forecast is itself an element in that triumph. That does not mean that a forecast must always be arbitrary and free and tendentious. You could even say that only insofar as the objective aspect of the forecast is connected with a programme does it acquire objectivity because only passion sharpens the intellect and cooperates to render the intuition more clear; 2 because, as reality is the result of an application of human will to the society of things (the machinist to the machine), to leave out of consideration every voluntarist element or to calculate for the intervention of other wills only as an objective element of the general game is to distort reality itself.

It becomes obvious that in Gramscian marxism, great use must be made of subordinate disciplines to discover just what is going on in the superstructure. He himself showed his enormous erudition in the references in his Prison Notebooks. Furthermore because
of the complexity of the superstructure of society, it would be no simple matter discovering just what was going on in society. Gramsci suggested that if marxism were to have any value, even within his limited terms, as a mode of forecasting events, whole teams of experts would have to go to work to discover and analyse the developments taking place. He, working in prison, admitted that he did not have the sources to conduct any survey in depth of the nature of social developments. At best he claimed that his ideas and particularly the way hegemony worked were a preliminary canter. On the other hand, while he was often making informed guesses, his notion of how a democracy functions is very close to our own knowledge derived from advanced studies in political science, and his theory incorporates, or allows for the incorporation of many ideas difficult to reconcile with traditional marxism, such as elite leadership in the working class, the absence of class hatred or obvious antagonisms in many societies and the notion of the essentiality of mass apathy to the functioning of democracy.

However, if we agree that the real causes of social change are what he says they are, then it becomes obvious that he has something very important to say about the activities of a socialist party faced with the hegemony which exists in a country of the advanced capitalist sort. He also has major revisions to make about which section of the community is most important in attaining these social changes. These questions will be discussed in the next two articles in this series.

1 See e.g. Il Ponte, 28 February 1967, pp.201ff. It has also been maintained that he was in no sense a revisionist, N. McInnes, “Antonio Gramsci”, Survey, No.53, October 1964, pp.3-16.
2 A. Gramsci, Gli Intellettuali e l’Organizzazione della Cultura, p.183 (Henceforth Intellettuali).
3 A. Gramsci, Il Materialismo Storico e la Filosofia di Benedetto Croce, p.76. (Henceforth M.S.)
5 Ibid, p.155.
6 His understanding of Plekhanov’s position was drawn from The Fundamental Questions of Marxism.
7 Gramsci, Materialismo Storico, p.80.
8 MS, p.103.
10 MS, p.22-23.
11 MS, p.96-97, Marzani, op. cit. p.43-44.
12 Marzani, p.42.
13 MS, p.97. Marzani, p.44.
14 Note sul Machiavelli, Sulla Politica e Sullo Stato Moderno, p.49. (Henceforth Mach)
15 MS, p.238.
16 Ibid.
17 Ordine Nuovo, p.24, Mach p.68.
18 Mach, p.31.
19 e.g. M.S. p.14.
20 Intellettuali, p.142.
21 Mach, pp.66-68.
22 This aspect of his thought is excellently dealt with in Marzani, op. cit.
23 Mach, p.38.