

International Gramsci Journal

Volume 1
Issue 1 *International Gramsci Journal*

Article 1

January 2008

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Recommended Citation

Davidson, Alastair, Obituary for John Cammett: Organic Intellectual, *International Gramsci Journal*, 1(1), 2008.

Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/gramsci/vol1/iss1/1>

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Obituary for John Cammett: Organic Intellectual

Abstract

John Cammett, died on July 30, 2008. Internationally known as a pioneering scholar of Antonio Gramsci, he studied the impact of Gramsci on the Italian communist movement, which became the most significant aspect of his life's work.

Obituary for John Cammett: Organic intellectual

By Alastair Davidson

When I first met John Cammett, he had been living with serious health problems for years and miraculously survived a dramatic crisis. Yet he remained a big, bluff, smiling man of extraordinarily kindness and generosity. Little identified him as the “father” of Gramsci studies in North America and beyond. With his recent death, a generation of *gramscisti* is also disappearing.

John began his working life as an auto worker and a unionist. He also became a communist at a time when that meant persecution by the US state and social ostracism. Had he remained a union worker, he would have won our esteem like many others who worked for a socialist world in quasi-anonymity and great self-sacrifice; already, he would have deserved the description of organic intellectual, an organiser of the working class. But he merits it doubly because he struggled into an academy when the witch hunt for leftists allowed little space for critical views in the Cold War US. He was lucky to be supported and encouraged by Shephard Clough, one of the US’ foremost liberal economic historians of Italy, impressed by the brilliant young leftist.

In the 1950s and ’60s, US ignorance of modern Italy was almost as shocking as that of the British, and fear of a communist revolution prompted US Ambassador to Italy, Claire Booth Luce, to fund conservative and neo-fascist parties to keep communists out of government. John arrived in Italy as the Italian Communist Party began an agonising reassessment of its “Leninism” and Antonio Gramsci’s work became the chapbook of a new generation of communists.

It was this knowledge that John publicised in North America, although still obliged to publish under a pseudonym. Out of it came his *Antonio Gramsci and the Origins of Italian Communism* (1967), the book that really brought Gramsci to English-speaking leftists despite earlier, valuable, but mostly forgotten work by Louis Marks and Carl Marzani. John’s book was quickly followed by work on Gramsci by others. Nevertheless, he was first to propose the Italian theorist as a fruitful guide to action.

As the title of his book revealed, John saw Gramsci as a political leader and a communist, belonging to a leftist patrimony whose insights were born through struggle and suffering. It would be many years before the “everybody’s Gramsci”, already decried in 1969 by the Italian extreme left, would include not only rightwingers and cultural studies theorists, but also become a PhD industry.

We should never forget the Gramsci that John emphasised: a man whose interest lay in organising the working class, in the factory councils, in the education of the educators, indeed, as a Gramsci who could, on this level, be considered as close to Mao. Had John not proposed the “militant” Gramsci to us, the latter would not have become the inspiration he was to the English-speaking left of the 1970s, to the student revolution. It is presently not vogueish to make that reading of Gramsci, although the new wave of works critical of cultural studies and postmodern readings tends to indicate the strongly “class” oriented themes in Gramsci’s work, even in the *Notebooks*. Given his origins and his politics, John never forgot that a fruitful

theory comes, as Gramsci said in a famous letter about the councils, by constantly remaining in contact with the masses. On this count, too, John should be remembered as an organic intellectual, perhaps not a sort of “lay pope”, but high up there in his writing about the themes of creating “good sense” out of common sense.

The later part of his career, after 1989, was devoted to the meticulous and exhaustive Gramsci bibliography which now lists on-line 17,000 books and articles on or by Gramsci in 40 languages. John was quick to realise the organising capacity of the new cyber technology, how it allows intellectual work to reach great numbers of people. His bibliographic interests were foreshadowed in his magnificent personal library, which we can only hope will be preserved. On this count, he again deserves to be numbered among the organic intellectuals of the global age.

None of these signal contributions can be understood without remembering his abiding love of Italy and his long association with its revolutionary left—he was stalwart of Italian studies in the USA, opening up and making John Jay College, CUNY, famous for its liberal Italian studies and critical approach to scholarship, like the Rutgers University that once sheltered much of the US left. As dean of John Jay College, John was memorable and when he went to the seminars of the Italian Studies Center at Columbia, his alma mater, they waited for this sage of few words to speak.

John Cammett set leftwing scholars an example of courage, generosity and probity that we should remember in this age without ideals. I like to think it was because he was and remained a man of the left.