

International Gramsci Journal

Volume 4
Issue 1 *Latin America and Gramsci / The Young
Gramsci / Reviews*

Article 14

2020

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Lelio La Porta

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Recommended Citation

La Porta, Lelio, Antonio Gramsci, *Scritti (Writings)*, 1, 1910-1916, *International Gramsci Journal*, 4(1), 2021, 198-205.

Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/gramsci/vol4/iss1/14>

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Antonio Gramsci, Scritti (Writings), 1, 1910-1916

Abstract

The first volume of the early writings (largely his journalism – the specific form of his political militancy in this period) has come out after the second one, covering 1917, due to the even greater complexity of assembling and ascertaining authorship to the articles. These often appeared anonymously, sometimes with initials or an abbreviated name, and were sometimes subject to rigid censorship. In the latter case all efforts have been made to trace and reinstate the missing sections. In all, about 400 texts of various kinds are included in the volume, which supersedes previous collections dating back to the last quarter of last century. At the start of the volume is a transcription of Gramsci's very first journalistic article, published in 1910, as correspondent during his summer vacation, from the township of Aidomaggiore, near Ghilarza. The review pays particular attention to Gramsci's involvement in education, and especially to the adult educational question, long-ignored by successive governments from unity of the country on to the period covered. There are comments on his own formative school experience. Essays that he wrote at the high school (lycée) in Cagliari are included in the volume, but in the review we also transcribe, as an important key to his later thinking, the essay that marked the end of his elementary school period, a text not published in the volume since it lies outside the time period dealt with. Closely allied to the question of education is that of culture and the type of culture that remained to be acquired by the subaltern classes in order to transform their living conditions.

Keywords

Gramsci, school experience, early journalism, education, culture, political militancy

Antonio Gramsci, Scritti (Writings), 1, 1910-1916

Lelio La Porta

The *National Edition of Antonio Gramsci's Writings (Edizione nazionale degli scritti di Antonio Gramsci)* has now been further added to by publication of a new volume of the *Writings (1910-1926), I, 1910-1916*, edited by Giuseppe Guida and Maria Luisa Righi.¹ The present volume complements the previous one, published in 2015, of the writings dating to 1917.² Gramsci's pre-prison writings are often either not signed or bear solely his initials and, to a large extent, represent his journalistic production since, among other aspects, journalism was the specific form of his political militancy for a substantial length of time. For this reason, the preparation of this volume has required time and particular expertise, as demonstrated in concrete terms by the critical apparatus of substantial, painstakingly compiled, notes.

We should mention here the existence of certain other volumes: the 1958 *Scritti giovanili (Early Writings) 1914-1918*, edited by Giuseppe Berti for Einaudi and at least two other volumes that were devoted to Gramsci's pre-prison writings, the 1968 anthology *Scritti 1915-1921*, edited by Sergio Caprioglio for "I Quaderni de 'Il corpo'" and that of 1974 *Per la verità (For the Truth)*, edited by Renzo Martinelli for the publishers Editori Riuniti. It was precisely these first editors of the anthologies of the pre-prison writings who insisted on the need for a critical edition founded on scientific criteria, on the basis of a team effort that would take into account the comparative reading method capable of singling out common themes (expressed by the same wording and by the use of similar phrasing) but also of reconstructing relationships, ideas and facts, from which there would emerge the reasoning for an attribution. The present volume applies this method and is proposed as a decisive step forward as compared with the earlier volumes mentioned here.

¹ Antonio Gramsci, *Scritti (1910-1926), 1, 1910-1916*, ed. G. Guida and M.L. Righi, part of the *Edizione Nazionale degli scritti di Antonio Gramsci*, Roma, Istituto dell'Enciclopedia Treccani, 2019, 1105 pages.

² See the review by Giovanna Savant of the *Scritti (1910-1926), 2, 1917*, ed. L. Rapone: "International Gramsci Journal", 2 (4), 2018, 83-115 (Italian version) and 116-50 (English version).

The present volume brings together 401 articles ranging from a simple short paragraph to writings assuming the aspect of a full essay.

The opening article dates from July 1910 (pp. 3-4). For Raffa Garzia, Gramsci's teacher from the beginning of the second term in the second year of the lyc ee (high school) and editor of "L'Unione Sarda", Antonio became the favourite pupil. His essays were read in class and he lent Gramsci books, both textbooks and others, encouraging the interest of his young student in that reading which for him would become a pastime. At the end of the second year of the lyc ee, Gramsci told his teacher of his particular interest in journalism, asking if he could write brief articles from Ghilarza during the summer break. Since there was already a correspondent in Ghilarza, Garzia entrusted Gramsci with services from the neighbouring township of Aidomaggiore. On 21 July 1920 Gramsci received a letter from Garzia with his journalist's card enclosed as correspondent from Aidomaggiore of "L'Unione Sarda". Five days later, 26 July, Gramsci sent an article to the paper with the signature *Gi*, entitled *A proposito di una rivoluzione (Regarding a revolution)*:

In the surrounding villages the rumour has spread that, at the elections in Aidomaggiore, great and terrible events are going to take place. The population has wanted in the here and now to introduce universal suffrage, that is the election of mayor and councillors through the vote of all, and has seemed ready for any excess. The lieutenant of carabinieri at Ghilarza, Gay, seriously worried about these symptoms, had a whole army corps go to Aidomaggiore, two score carabinieri and two score infantry, fortunately leaving their cannons behind them, together with a public security dignitary (who would by himself have sufficed). When the ballot boxes were opened, the township was deserted: electors and non-electors, fearing arrest, had made themselves scarce and the authorities had to go round from house to house to dig out the recalcitrants ... Poor almond groves of Aidomaggiore! On top of phylloxera now the infantry.

The volume closes with the article *Preoccupazioni (Worries)* on pp. 809-10, published on 31 December 1916 in the column "Sotto la Mole"³ of the *Cronache torinesi (Chronicles of Turin)* of the "Avanti!" newspaper, in which the young Gramsci, examining the relations between the generations, observes that:

³ Often understood as "Under the Spire" – the immense Antonellian Spire that towers more than 160 metres high over Turin – Gramsci explained with a touch of irony that "la Mole" for him really meant the immense amount of work that under which he laboured (trans. note).

Man passes: one generation substitutes another. Men's history is a fertile womb of ever new consciousses, fed by the old, by tradition. But the raw material does not in itself possess this elasticity of renewal. It is men who provide it with this, when they have the consciousness of giving themselves a future, of this reliving their present effort in tomorrow's strength (p. 809).

It is worthwhile to pause and reflect on a number of the articles contained in the volume in so far as, in many ways, they constitute the origin of Gramsci's thought.

The article on pp. 7-30, *La luce che si è spenta* (*The Light that Has Gone Out*), was published on 20 November 1915 in the weekly "Il Grido del popolo", with which Gramsci had begun to collaborate. In it Gramsci starts from an autobiographical episode,⁴ to emphasize that teaching should not, as its objective, have pure and simple information, and therefore aridity, but beauty. Taking Francesco De Sanctis and Renato Serra as his reference points, Gramsci brought out their ability to make of poetry not a simple topic for a school lesson but the expression of beauty; and the young journalist lamented the fact that lessons of humanity and beauty could no longer be had from Serra, killed at the front on 20 July 1915. (Italy had entered the war in May of that year.)

The article *Capodanno* (*New Year*) on pp. 66-7 appeared on 1 January 1916 in the "Sotto la Mole" column of the *Chronicles of Turin* of "Avanti!". Here Gramsci deals with the question of time, understanding it as a continual proceeding towards something, without precise pauses or recurrences. The past, most certainly, is important, it can and does serve to cultivate the memory, but each new day begins with the perspective of reaching objectives that no-one had ever reached before. At a certain point in the article, Gramsci writes "No spiritual travettism": this neologism derives from the Piedmontese "travet", used to designate an "employee of modest

⁴ "I had finished my second grade in elementary school [...] and I had thought of taking the exemption exams in November that would have allowed me to skip third grade and go into fourth: I was convinced I could do this, but when I presented myself to the superintendent to submit my duly complied application, I was faced with the point-blank question 'But do you know the eighty-four articles of the Statute?' I hadn't even given a thought to these articles: I had confined myself to studying the notions of 'a citizen's rights and duties' contained in my textbook." (A. Gramsci, *Letters from Prison*, ed. F. Rosengarten and trans. R. Rosenthal, New York, Columbia University Press, 1994, Vol. 1, pp. 168-9; definitive edition in Italian, *Lettere dal carcere*, ed. F. Giasi, Torino, Einaudi, Torino, 2020, pp. 197-8. The letter was written on 2 January 1928 from the prison in Milan where Gramsci was awaiting trial and addressed to his sister-in-law, Tat'jana.)

and ill-paid rank”, as the *Zingarelli Dictionary of the Italian Language* confirms. The word refers to a character in Vittorio Bersezio’s Piedmontese comedy *Le miserie ’d Monsù Travet* (*The travails of Monsieur Travet*), given its first performance at Turin’s Alfieri Theatre in 1863, who became a paradigm for the drab-living employee with limited prospects. Gramsci meant here that he was not against uncorking a bottle to celebrate the new year, and that he did not therefore classify himself among the “Travets” of the spirit, grey and lacking initiative, as long however as this celebration was extended to everyone, and to all the days in the year in so far as they represented a new beginning for reaching ever-new aims.

Socialismo e cultura (pp. 128-33)⁵ was published in “Il Grido del popolo” on 29 January 1916. In his article Gramsci takes up again the polemic that began with *La luce che si è spenta* (see above) regarding the then current way in which culture was understood as “pedantry” rather than as the acquisition of a personality allowing one to comprehend, among other things, one’s rights and one’s duties. It is clear that every great change in the history of humanity (Gramsci here cites the French Revolution) has come about thanks to preparatory cultural work and the work of preparation is itself a revolution. Socialism, too, must be prepared through cultural work, out of which a conscious critique of capitalist society emerges. But this is still insufficient if one does not learn to know others: rather one has “to know oneself better through others and to know others better through oneself”.⁶

La scuola del lavoro (*The School of Work*) appears on pp. 528-30 and was published both in the *Chronicles of Turin* and in the Milan edition of “Avanti!” of 18 July 1916. Italy had already been at war for a year. In his speech on 28 June 1916, formally constituting his government, the incoming Premier (President of the Council of Ministers), Paolo Boselli (1838-1932) had noted that the war was requiring renewed attention paid by the State to the professional schools. Gramsci recalled, citing articles 272 and 276 of the 1859 educational reform law reform promoted by Gabrio Casati (1798-1873), that there was already an idea of the “school of work” – the professional school or technical school – that had been ignored by

⁵ See *Socialism and Culture* in *Selections from Political Writings 1910-1920* (SPW 1920-1920), ed. Q. Hoare and trans. J. Mathews, London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1977, pp. 10-13.

⁶ SPW 1920-1920, cit., p. 13.

successive governments. Now it was the proletariat that was having to demand a technical school where the professional and the cultural aspects should be brought into line with each other, in order that “there should be all the necessary means to elevate one’s inner self and demonstrate one’s good qualities to the best account”.

On 29 December Gramsci wrote *L’Università popolare* (*The Popular University*) for the *Chronicles of Turin* of “Avanti!”. In Gramsci’s perspective, the scope of the Popular University was to spread the culture that was the prerogative of the dominant groups among the subaltern ones. On the other hand, one of the aims that Gramsci set himself by holding lectures in the working-class quarters of Turin was that of making widespread among the industrial proletariat the culture of the bourgeoisie. In his view only in this way, in other words bringing the subalterns into contact with the culture of Dante and Michelangelo, would it be possible to lay the foundations for the *Città Futura*, the “City of the Future”, the realm of freedom in which the maximum of beauty would be enjoyed in a situation of substantial equality. Gramsci’s polemic was therefore directed against the organizers of the Popular University, who understood the institution as a sort of duplication of the public university. In this sense, what became decisive in the Popular University was the mode of teaching, namely the fact that the “listeners”⁷ as Gramsci defined them, should become impassioned with the history of the researches carried out, with the pathway that led to truth: “To show how [a path] has been explored by others is the teaching that bears the most fruitful results”. In the Popular Universities, then, a type of teaching had to be proposed that left behind the model of simple reception by the listeners and which, contrary to this, developed the spirit of research which, thanks to the labours of his teachers, had pervaded Gramsci during the years “of his university apprenticeship”. As was written by Mario Alighiero Manacorda (1914-2013), one of the most important Italian scholars regarding educational problems, Gramsci’s criticism of the Popular University related to the fact that in it:

⁷ In the original Italian “uditori”, meaning someone attending a university course, without being formally a student or having the right to take the examination at the end of the course.

“disinterested” culture was distributed to the masses outside any context of the real work of transformation of their social and cultural conditions. Neither a “university” nor “popular” [the institution] functions in the name of a bland spirit of charity, and its outcome is solely that of filling heads with notions that leave no trace: we are dealing, in a nutshell, with oratorical academies which carry out their spiritual humanitarianism by operating as a vehicle of ideology that is extraneous to the masses.⁸

The *Appendix* to the present volume contains four essays of Gramsci’s written when he was a lycée student, but not the essay written as his final test on leaving elementary school. The exclusion is probably to be explained since it goes outside the time period of the volume.

In the fifth year of elementary school, Gramsci did the written Italian examination on 15 July 1903 on the subject “If a well-off and very intelligent friend of yours had expressed the intention to abandon studies, what would you reply?”. Antonio obtained the elementary school leaving certificate with the following grades (out of ten): essay *ten*; dictation *ten*; arithmetic *ten* in both the written and the oral parts; explanation of texts read and grammatical notions *ten*; history and geography *ten*. The subject of the school leaving essay is however an important text, above all in the perspective of the collocation of this study among Gramsci’s primary interests. Here Antonio wrote:

Dearest friend,

A short while ago I received your very dear letter and I am very happy to know that your state of health is good.

Just one sole point in what you write surprises me; you say that you are not going to carry on with your studies, since you are bored by them. Why ever is it that you, who are so intelligent that, praise be to God, you are not lacking in the resources, you still want to abandon your studies?

You are saying to me that I should do the same, because it is much better to go in the fields, go to dances, to public meeting places, instead of shutting ourselves in a room for four hours a day, with the teacher always preaching at us to study otherwise we’ll stay a wooden-head. But my dear friend, I am never going to be able to give up my studies, which are my only hope of living honourably when I am a grown-up because, as you know, my family has no wealth to fall back on. How many poor children envy you, those who would

⁸ Mario Alighiero Manacorda, *Introduction* to A. Gramsci, *L’alternativa pedagogica*, anthology edited by Manacorda, Roma: Editori Riuniti University Press, 2012 [1972¹], p. 20.

have liked to study, but have not had the wherewithal not only for studying but, on many occasions, not even for eating.

I see them from my window, with what eyes they look at the boys with their satchels on their shoulders, they who can go only to evening school. You say you are rich, that you have to need for studies to get along, but take note of the proverb “idleness is the father of vice”.

The person who does not study when young will regret it bitterly when old. A downturn in fortune, a lost cause, can bring poverty to the richest of men. Remember that gentleman Francesco who was the son of a fairly rich family: he spent a most brilliant youth, giving himself to the theatre and gambling, and ended up by ruining himself completely, and is now the scribe for a lawyer who pays him sixty lire a month, just enough to keep ends together. These examples should be enough to dissuade you from your intentions. Go back to your studies, dear Giovanni, and you will find all the treasures possible.

Do not take it amiss if I speak to you from the heart, because you mean a lot to me, and I'm telling you to your face, not idolizing you like many do.

Goodbye for now, remember me to your parents and a kiss from your most affectionate friend

Antonio

Of undoubted interest, and not only on philological grounds, are the four essays from the lycée. One of these, *Oppressi ed oppressori* (*Oppressed and Oppressors*),⁹ dating to November 1910, is already known from other collections of Gramsci's pre-prison writings. The other three denote the same philosophical-historical-literary awareness of their author, ranging from Latin to Italian literature, from classical philosophy to Friedrich Nietzsche – to whom the “Dionysian fury” on p. 808 is referred – and from Roman to contemporary history. And the judgment passed by Professor Arullani¹⁰ shows what decisive direction Gramsci's interests would take.

The volume contains not only some of the theatre criticism from the *Cronache teatrali* column, but also theatre reviews of music often disregarded and destined to form a different picture from the one up to now that we have had of a Gramsci who was little interested in musical culture.

The book is for the most part composed of the journalistic articles of Gramsci, who on the subject of this passion, cultivated from his adolescence – as is demonstrated by the piece that opens

⁹ *SPW 1920-1920*, cit., pp. 3-5.

¹⁰ Vittorio Amedeo Arullani, a prolific author on literary topics, was Gramsci's Italian teacher in 1909-1910 at the Dettori lycée in Cagliari.

the volume and on which we have written above – wrote as follows to his sister-in-law Tat’jana from the fascist prison:

I have never been a professional journalist, who sells his pen to whomever pays him the most [...] I have always been an absolutely free journalist, I’ve always held only one opinion, and I’ve never had to hide my deep convictions to please bosses or their underlings.¹¹

¹¹ Letter to Tat’jana of 12 October 1931 from the prison in Turi, in *Lettere dal carcere*, edition cited above, p. 662; English translation, *Letters from Prison*, cit., Vol.2, p. 84.