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## **An Overview of the Gramsci Situation in Britain**

### **Abstract**

This is the Abstract of the English-language article by Derek Boothman on recent Gramsci work in and on the British Isles.

### **Keywords**

Gramsci; Britain; Scotland; economy; regional disparities; International Political Economy

## ***An Overview of the Gramsci Situation in Britain***

Derek Boothman

At the international level, of the first non-Italian political cultures into which Gramsci was translated, those in the Anglophone world were of importance not only just for Britain but because of their international diffusion in other language communities. Through various ‘old guard’ intellectuals of both old and new lefts in Britain, Gramsci’s concepts began to be applied in practice there and the legacy of some of these undertakings is still seen, debated and used. But after that ‘first wave’ there was seemingly a hiatus and a difficult period before some members of the old generation, with the addition of newer ones, began to come to terms with aspects of Gramsci that had been often – even sometimes totally – overlooked or neglected.

This contribution does not attempt to give a detailed list even of a great number majority of people in the British Isles who have written on or used Gramsci, but merely gives an overview of some of the areas of interest and a number of the main authors, whose other work may be traced by readers. As such this intervention is a sort of post-script to the historically oriented Italian-language anthology *Gramsci in Gran Bretagna* (Boothman et al. (eds.), 2015).

First, it is of use to briefly go into what some of the older generation have been attempting to do recently. Here, one line of development has paid much attention to the economic implications of what Gramsci wrote. This is the stance taken by the various people in the informal ‘hegemonics’ (i.e. ‘hegemony’ + ‘economics’) group: one may point out that if the hegemonic discourse in Italy runs through history and philosophy, an important strand in Britain remains that of economics. Two of the economists in the group, Dave Purdy and Pat Devine, both ex-Manchester University and both heavily involved in the practical politics that informs their approach, lay stress on a strategy (citing Devine) in which one sees, in condensed form, the question of civil society, the need to conquer the adversary’s trenches (war of position) in the concrete form of the national popular and in consequence the need to build on what society contains as its traditions of popular consciousness

(cf. Devine et al. 2009, and Devine and Purdy, in McNally and Schwarzmantel, especially pp. 182-3). There is in their work a realization of the need to create new spaces of political intervention in the interstices of society that bypasses and possibly replaces old(er) political structures. Without outward, explicit, polemics, their approach is radically different from the Labourist Fabian line of paternalism and management from above that leaves no space to initiative from below. It is best to regard their stance as a long-term goal, made more relevant now by the ecological crisis to which they devote much attention in arguing for a red-green alliance.

The Schwarzmantel-McNally volume contains contributions of interest, both from well-established writers on Gramsci (Jim Martin and the Australian working in Britain, Peter Thomas) and also some from people outside the normally thought-of Gramsci sphere but who make use of concepts developed by him (Will Leggett and Jules Townshend, both on Blairite [post-]social democracy). Other uses of, or critical approaches to, Gramsci can be read in recent numbers of the *International Gramsci Journal* (Michael Baines, 2021, and the philosopher and novelist Tony McKenna, also 2021).

Attention should be drawn to work of another member of the group associated with Devine, Purdy and the economist Mike Prior. Andy Pearmain is the author of a biography of Gramsci (2020) in the *Communist Lives* series, as well as a novel *Gramsci in Love* (2015). As well as this biography, a selection of the pre-prison letters has been translated by the present writer (2014), which corrects some misreadings in Antonio Santucci's otherwise excellent edition.

One of the by-now various guides to Gramsci that have been published, one by Steve Jones (2006: cf. also Yue Zhou Lin's article in this number for its Chinese translation) pays particular attention to the role of the economy in influencing the spheres of social life and existence. A major criticism of his is that Gramsci is at times inconsistent ('fragmentary and contradictory', a judgment that is now somewhat outmoded by recent philological work), but the discussion of Gramsci is serious, as are the comparisons made with other authors, Marxist and non-Marxist.

A more recent handbook, which gives a much-needed analytical guide to the *Notebooks* is – again – by John Schwarzmantel (2015). Of the same year is also another guide, less specifically oriented to the *Notebooks* and co-authored by George Hoare and Nathan

Sperber (2015), which takes into account the question of Gramsci as philosopher. In a certain sense the extended essay by Perry Anderson, republished on the eightieth anniversary (2017a) of Gramsci's death, as well as being a critique, is also a guide. The essay is much quoted and has been widely translated, but many, probably the majority of those who subject Gramsci to a 'close reading' (as distinct from those who use Gramsci's concepts and writing often at second hand) consider it methodologically flawed. There is an attempt on Anderson's part, a weakness of which many of us have been guilty, to interpret certain concepts as developing towards a near-unique meaning. At most this is partially true for some of them: what is crucial and overlooked by some users of Gramsci is to understand the use of a concept in its specific context, to take to heart the warning in the example give in the *Notebooks* that the 'distinction between political society and civil society [...] is made into and presented as an organic one, whereas in fact it is merely methodological' (Q13§18, p. 1590; *SPN* p. 160).<sup>1</sup> Not specifically and uniquely on Gramsci, but giving a historical survey, Anderson's *The H-Word* (viz. 'hegemony' [2017]) should also be noted.

This side of Gramsci's work, initially not taken greatly considered in Britain, has come to the fore through the work of people such as Rob Jackson (who also pays attention to the popularization of Gramsci) and especially Peter Thomas, author of the internationally successful *Gramscian Moment* (2008) and of much other work on Gramsci and philosophy. Of perhaps special note are his essays on the far-from-simple question of Gramsci's concepts of 'passive revolution' (cf. also Bieler and Morton 2018a, 2018b), the intellectuals and the question of the integral State (to which Bob Jessop has also devoted attention). In his later publications, in 2013 he deals with the reassessment of Gramsci in the late writings of Althusser, a topic that has acquired great interest, while in 2017 he deals with the plurality of times as conceived by Gramsci.

The question of the intellectuals – who they are and their formation in different eras – was one of the first aspects of Gramsci to be taken note of in British left culture. His input to pedagogy,

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<sup>1</sup> We use standard reference forms: notebook and paragraph number followed by the page refer to the Critical (1975) Edition of the *Quaderni del carcere*; these are followed by references to their English translation.

however, of recognized importance elsewhere, has had little follow-up and contributions on the subject have been scanty, despite comments in the *Notebooks* such as ‘Every relationship of “hegemony” is necessarily an educational [pedagogical] relationship’ (Q10II§44, p. 1331; Gramsci 1971, p 350). Of great interest therefore was the volume edited by Pizzolato and Holst (2017), which in the words of Anne Showstack Sassoon’s *Introduction* ‘for the first time brings to the attention of an English-speaking audience’ voices on Gramsci and pedagogy as dealt with in Italy and Latin America – but also here by Alessandro Carlucci, Italian but working in Britain, and by the Maltese educationalist Peter Mayo (cf. Mayo 2021). By ‘English-speaking’ the writer here refers to Britain: North America, instead, has been open to Gramscian pedagogical influences through the school of critical studies in education in the work of people such as Henry Giroux and Peter McLaren.

In Britain tribute must be paid to the work of such people as Carlucci, mentioned above, and Craig Brandist (2012 and 2015 in particular), both of whose work includes questions of linguistics and language-based culture, with great attention paid to Gramsci.

As noted above, in British culture the economic is an important aspect, one critical trend arguing that there is a long-drawn-out organic crisis of British capitalism, typified by uneven geographical aspects and distributions of wealth. The crisis, as Bob Jessop notes, has no single cause (cf. Q15§5, pp. 1755-9; 1995, pp. 219-23) but stems from intertwined factors, including the dominance of finance capital. This sector, together with banking and insurance, over 15 years covering much of the ‘New Labour’ government, nearly doubled while manufacturing grew by only 11%. Much blame for this increasing socio-economic divide in the ‘peripheral economies, was placed on the EU, rather than the national government, explaining why many ex-industrial areas (Scotland excluded) voted in favour of Brexit (Jessop 2018).

Unevenness is an important factor in Jessop’s reading of Gramsci (cf. his *Gramsci as a Spatial Theorist*). Taking note of the essay on the southern question and the comments in the *Notebooks*, he looks at the concrete situation of Britain (and farther afield) as an economic geographer. Not only regional factors but ‘scale’ is important – ‘a hierarchy of bounded spaces of different size (local, regional, national, continental and global) [...] typically the product of social

struggles for power and control', power being understood in the Gramscian sense of 'economic, political, intellectual and moral'.

In this type of context Adam D. Morton (English, now working in Australia) and Andreas Bieler (German, working in Britain) go beyond the national context. They recall the passage in Gramsci's Q4§38, p. 458; 1996, p. 180): 'moments become entangled with one another [...] through economic activity (horizontally) and territory (vertically) combining and diverging in various ways ... international relations become intertwined with these internal relations of a nation-state, and this, in turn, creates peculiar and historically concrete combinations'. These authors here defend the use of Gramscian concepts in a current international situation against various critics sceptical of transferring his categories to other periods and geographical scales. Together with Ian Bruff their stance may be summed up by the observation that Gramsci 'does not require his concepts to be "scaled-up" from the "national" to "the international" due to his inherent interest in the intertwining of the relations of force across different territorial and geographic scales of uneven development' (Bieler, Bruff and Morton 2015). There is an interpenetration between the economy and society, including its cultural aspect. Returning to Jessop, in the case of US capitalism this includes as dominant features, the 'supportive set of institutions, subjectivities, norms and values that enabled mass production and mass consumption' (Labrousse et al., interview with Jessop, 2012).

Another influential line of Gramscian studies in Britain is that of identity, especially national identity, now in the context of Brexit. Here we may quote the approach of Ray Burnett, a Scottish left nationalist Gramscian: 'Within the "homogeneous state" of Britain, the organisations and institutions in civil society which comprise its bulwarks and defences have an azoic complexity; a result is that civil society is very different in Scotland as compared with England'. For Burnett, the task is to 'nurture a specifically Scottish left, one organically grounded in our own distinct history and culture' and hence 'uphold and expound the merits of past achievements and the richness of [the Scottish] inheritance'. An analogous position to Burnett's was taken by Tom Nairn, one of the senior figures of the Scottish left, in whose view Scotland is 'seen as a genuine "totality" of culture, politics, economics and history, stretching back to the

Reformation’ (Scothorne, 2018). If there is a ‘conservative counter-revolution’ in the ‘heartland’, for which read England or now even more specifically South-East England, then in Scotthorne’s citation of an old position of Nairn’s. who can deny self-determination ‘as an urgently necessary step?’ (Scothorne 2018 and 2021 respectively).

What is relevant in these left nationalist positions, as Burnett notes here and elsewhere in his argument, is Gramsci’s warning:

every truth, even if it is universal ... owes its effectiveness to its being expressed in the language appropriate to specific concrete situations. If it cannot be expressed in such specific terms, it is a byzantine and scholastic abstraction, good only for phrasemongers to toy with” (Gramsci 1971, Q9§63, p. 1134; 1971 p. 201)

It should also be noted, from a source outside Gramsci, that

even in the most economically and politically globalized societies in Europe ‘among both elites and ordinary citizens territorial identities are narrowly diffused, nationally contingent, and remain rooted in national and regional contexts’ (Farrow, 2005, p. 72, cited in McNally 2017a).

From a different angle, a connected question is taken up by McNally in his 2017a article, where he discusses the neo-Gramscians (Cox, Gill, etc. together with the more strictly Gramscian work of Adam Morton and Andreas Bieler) in International Relations (IR) and International Political Economy (IPE), and the question of inter-state relations and the institutions in which hegemony, especially at the international level, is reproduced. McNally emphasizes on the building of an alternative hegemony to neo-liberalism in a bottom-up perspective founded on the national-popular, linked again for him to the United Front experience as applied in its specific context: ‘To deprive hegemony of this national-popular mass democratic character as neo-Gramscians do is therefore to depart from Gramsci in a manner than adds no value to their mode of analysis’. Given for example Morton’s well-known involvement with democratic movements in Central America this seems to indicate that positions are not uniform among Anglophone Gramscians. The concepts of hegemony and shifting equilibria are put to fruitful use in another national context in the British Isles – a rare Gramscian analysis of twentieth-century Irish history – in an early

essay by McNally (2009), who again returns to the subject of the national-popular in a wide-ranging survey of his (2019).

McNally had previously broached the issue of *international relations and internationalism* elsewhere (McNally and Schwarzmantel, 2009), assessing the position, on the one hand, of a number of academics critical of whether Gramscian notions could be applied to present-day international problems and, on the other, to the organizations of what can be called ‘inter-national’ or, as Showstack Sassoon says ‘global civil society’ (a description she uses in Germain and Kenny (2005) at the start of the period here discussed). In this period analyses and defences of neo-Gramscianism in political economy and international relations by various Anglophones are seen, for example, in the volume edited by Alison Ayers (2008).

On the international plane the notion of both a United Front and the national-popular surface come together as a future prospect: while ‘the line of development is towards internationalism [...] the point of departure is “national”’ (cf. Q14§68, p. 1729; Gramsci 1971, p. 240). Allied to this position is the scepticism expressed that the components of the Alternative Global Movement, such as it is, lack both a firm basis in a concrete (national) context and a viable democratic structure at the international level. The question, first raised in the Anglophone world by Stuart Hall, is again posed by his heirs: what are the structures that may be built and are appropriate to an international democratic movement, i.e. not just the national-popular but the international-popular? New movements have sprung up or been created at the international level but what are their forms and structures? What now constitutes democratic praxis? What is the form of the relation spontaneity-conscious leadership and how is leadership constituted? All are questions raised by Gramsci, which must now be resolved in a different time period and on an international as well as national scale. And naturally there are divisions between Gramscian or neo-Gramscians on the one hand and those who, often from a different background, are more sceptical about the relevance of concepts forged in a different epoch and national-cum-international setting.

On democracy, there is still something to be learnt from the experiments of Gramsci in the Turin period. McNally(2017b) takes up one of the subjects that were among the first to attract attention in the English language – that of the factory council period, initially

somewhat mythologized, and the overall question of democracy both within the state (Treves) and in industry (Gramsci). The Turin *Ordine nuovo* group failed to extend outside Piedmont the factory council movement and its fledgling alliances with the regional peasantry. Treves and the Socialist Party (maximalists and reformists) became the party with largest representation in parliament but failed to build on this. It might be said, with just a little reservation, that the history of subsequent twentieth-century social-ism in West Europe has largely followed on these failures. What McNally notes is that it may be argued that Gramsci ‘conceded some ground to the strategy championed by Treves’ (p. 329) in the distinction drawn between West and East and the entire question of the war of position. Did the *Biennio Rosso* experience, McNally asks in his conclusion, ‘span the reformist and revolutionary divide’?

A different aspect of this strategy is dealt with in other slightly earlier publications of McNally’s regarding the United Front question, and therefore that of alliance-building (McNally 2015) and hence, the whole subject of what – then and especially now – might constitute the contemporary ‘Modern Prince’. This is a question of world-wide relevance and, in a different setting, it is discussed in very thoughtful English-language articles, such as that of another contributor to the present number of the *IGJ*, though from outside the British Isles, the Greek Marxist Panagiotis Sotiris (2019).

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