

Unfinished Business: Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*

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Reading Joseph Buttigieg's edition of Gramsci's Prison Notebooks represents for me and, I imagine, for others, the discovery of a new Gramsci—at each turn of the page, either stumbling upon themes and concerns of which we had been largely unaware or encountering familiar concepts in an entirely different context. Gramsci pushes Marxian theory forward, and the text of the Notebooks allows us to do the same with Gramsci's work. But for all their richness concerning the issues of culture, politics, and intellectuals, one of the traditional areas of Marxism—political economy—appears to be largely overlooked in the Notebooks.

Key Words: Antonio Gramsci, Joseph Buttigieg, Hegemony, Political Economy

In thinking about the significance of the Italian Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci, especially his *Prison Notebooks*, I often think of my grandfather. Not because my ancestor was a socialist or communist. Far from it. Like many in his immigrant generation of the first quarter of the twentieth century, particularly those from the south of Italy, he voted Democratic in the United States (the result of being victimized by nativist prejudice and “schooling” in factory life) and, at the same time, expressed sympathies for monarchism, Mussolini, and the fascist-era colonial adventures of his country of origin.

The connections I am drawn to make between my grandfather and Gramsci are of a different order. My first encounter with Gramsci's unfinished notes “On Some Aspects of the Southern Question” helped me to understand the conditions that, in addition to the immigrant experience itself, produced the contours and horizons of my Italian family's world-view. Even before I arrived in the village that my maternal grandparents were forced to have the freedom to abandon, I was struck by Gramsci's “sympathy” for the south (he was born and raised in Sardinia, before leaving for the continent) and his decidedly unsentimental analysis—of “the great amorphous, disintegrated mass of the peasantry,” the “politicking, corrupt, and faithless” layer of Southern intellectuals, their role in mediating the relations between big landowners and the peasantry, the three groups forming a “monstrous agrarian bloc” whose “single aim is to the preserve the status quo,” the coexistence in the South of “great accumulations of culture and intelligence” and a lack of “any organization of middle culture.” While Gramsci made these observations in 1926 (just before being

sentenced to incarceration by the fascist regime), my own series of visits to the ancestral village beginning in the 1970s have confirmed their continued validity.

And I consider myself fortunate to have had my grandfather around for as long as I did (he died at the age of 101), having had the opportunity to learn about both the “old country” and immigrant life in the United States in the first half of the twentieth century. As it turns out, my grandfather was born one year before Gramsci, that mythical historical figure! This natal coincidence just shows that the lives of many of us (of a certain age) could have overlapped with that of Gramsci. Our generation could have conversed with him directly. But, due to his own ill health and the punishing conditions of fascist prisons, Gramsci died in 1937. What we are left with, now that the political party he founded has been summarily undone, is a distant memory and a set of remarkable writings.

None is more powerful than the *Prison Notebooks*. Until recently, all those of us in the English-speaking world had access to were the Hoare and Smith *Selections*. Now, Joseph Buttigieg—whose insightful commentaries on various aspects of Gramsci’s work have already raised the standard for Gramscian scholarship (especially, in English, Buttigieg 1983, 1987, 1990, 1994, and 1995), and who, as secretary for the International Gramsci Society, has worked with a close-knit group of international Gramscian intellectuals, many of whom have published essays in *Rethinking Marxism*,¹ to expand access to both Gramsci’s texts and the interpretive work that has been carried out—has embarked on an ambitious and carefully rendered project of making the entire set of notebooks available in English for the first time. The first two volumes of a projected six have already been published, while the third should appear soon.

What is the significance of this enterprise—of making available to an international readership (to the extent that English has become the world language) the text of all twenty-nine notebooks (along with the critical apparatus originally supplied by the late Italian editor Valentino Gerratana, corrected and supplemented by Buttigieg’s own meticulous notes)? As Buttigieg makes clear in his introductory essay to the first volume (comprising notebooks 1 and 2), it is unlikely that readers of the complete *Prison Notebooks* will approach them without some prior acquaintance with or knowledge of Gramsci’s contributions to Marxist theory. That is, those who are approaching Gramsci for the first time will probably start elsewhere (perhaps, for the English-speaking world, with the *Selections*, *Letters*, or *Reader*, one or another recent synthesis of Gramsci’s work, in article or book form, or even with one of the growing list of Web sites that focus on Gramsci).² In my case (since you already know the intimate details of my family), I opened the first volume of the *Prison Notebooks* with limited exposure, which included the combination of praise and critique aimed at Gramsci’s contributions to Marxian philosophy in Althusser’s essay “Marxism Is Not a Historicism,” various selective readings of the *Selections*, and a familiarity with certain basic concepts closely associated with Gramsci (such as hegemony, passive revolution, and subaltern groups) that one generally picks up in Western Marxist

1. See the list of texts in the Appendix and the insightful review essay by Jonathan Diskin (1993).

2. The International Gramsci Society (<http://www.italnet.nd.edu/gramsci/>) maintains an updated list of publications on Gramsci. It also has links to other online Gramsci bibliographies.

intellectual circles. For me, reading Buttigieg's edition of the *Notebooks* therefore represented the discovery of a new Gramsci—at each turn of the page, either stumbling upon themes and concerns of which I had been largely unaware or encountering familiar concepts in an entirely different context.

A good example of what I'm referring to is a pair of notes in the first volume: notes 43 and 44 to Notebook 1.³ Note 43 starts out in a relatively innocuous fashion, with the continuation (from notes 35 and 38) of Gramsci's ruminations on "different types of periodicals" and then opens up a discussion of the relationship between different cultural movements and the North/South divide in Italy, finally focusing his attention on the roles of the main political parties in the Risorgimento. These are not topics that, per se, attract the nonspecialist. However, along the way, Gramsci is drawn to make thought-provoking comments concerning the relationship between language and politics ("In reality, every political movement creates a language of its own" [126]) and the existence of different kinds of cultures ("A very common error is that of thinking that every social stratum elaborates its consciousness and culture in the same way, with the same methods, that is, with the methods of professional intellectuals" [128]), and to produce the first version of his distinctive treatment of intellectuals. To wit, "By intellectuals, one must understand not [only] those ranks commonly referred to by this term, but generally the whole social mass that exercises an organizational function in the broad sense, whether it be in the field of production, or culture, or political administration" (133).

Gramsci's analysis of the different political currents in the Risorgimento spills over into note 44, where readers will now be on more familiar terrain. As is almost always the case in the *Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci begins with a concrete case (in history or the current conjuncture, from memory or an item he picked up in one of the books or journals he managed to procure while in prison) and then produces the appropriate concepts. In this case, he notes that "historically, the Action Party was led by the Moderates," which leads him to make a distinction between the role of a class in "leading" and being "dominant" and to create for the first time his notion of hegemony. He writes, "There can and there must be a 'political hegemony' even before assuming government power, and in order to exercise political leadership or hegemony one must not count solely on the power and material force that is given by government" (137).

Here, in condensed form, one can find all the major elements of what Gramsci will continue to elaborate in the remainder of the *Notebooks*, which will be codified by later scholars as his theory of hegemony. Hegemony represents a combination of leadership (of allied forces) and dominance (over opposing forces). It is created—it can and, for Gramsci, must be created—before assuming power, through "passive

3. As is easy to determine from Buttigieg's notation at the end of each note, number 43 reappears, in modified form, in Notebooks 20, 24, and 19 while a version of number 44 can be found in Notebook 19. According to Marcus Green's concordance tables (http://www.italnet.nd.edu/gramsci/resources/concordance_table/, accessed: 18 October 2003), neither of these notes is reprinted in any of the three major anthologies. Their later versions, from notebook 19, are included in the *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, although in a different context and order.

revolution,” an important term that he simply adds at a later date in the margin. And, once a group is in power, its hegemony is maintained not solely by “material force” but, presumably (as he alludes to in the previous note), through culture and the work of intellectuals.

Even in this embryonic form, various aspects of Gramsci’s notion of hegemony can be utilized to illuminate contemporary issues and problems. Given the limitations of time, I would like to mention only two. The first concerns what I consider to be a disturbing tendency within the current antiglobalization or “global justice” movement to focus on the coercive exercise of power, while downplaying the other dimensions of hegemony. This can be seen in the coverage of many events, including the documentary produced and disseminated by the video team of the Independent Media Center in the wake of the anti-FTAA protests in Quebec City in April 2001, *Trading Freedom: The Secret Life of the FTAA*.⁴ I agree that it is important to record instances of police brutality and limitations placed on free speech and freedom of assembly—what the videographers refer to as the “state repression of dissent.” However, an exaggerated interest in the creation and maintenance of hegemony through coercion has two negative consequences: one tactical, the other strategic. In terms of tactics, it romanticizes violent confrontation, thereby leading to one-sided conceptions of and preparations for antiglobalization activities and, perhaps even more significant, the alienation of potential allies. Strategically, the tendency to forget about the other dimensions of hegemony overlooks, on one hand, the roles played by the broad group of intellectuals and cultures distinct from that of the intellectuals (what Gramsci will later, in Notebook 1, note 64, refer to as common sense) in creating the conditions whereby the current hegemony of neoliberalism is produced and reproduced over time and, on the other hand, the cracks and fissures in that hegemony (along with the existence of alternative notions of global justice) that can be marshaled for the “passive revolution” whereby neoliberalism (both at home and abroad) can be successfully opposed.

The second example is the sequence of events that brought Bush and the rest of his administration to power in the United States. While much of the liberal media has centered attention on the machinations that took place during the 2000 voting (especially in Florida) or the role of neoconservative figures within the administration after the election (especially after 9/11) or the role of “values” in the 2004 campaign and ultimate reelection of Bush, the Left is in the position to conduct a great deal more analysis of the right wing’s creation of “political hegemony” even before it assumed government power. In the remainder of note 44, Gramsci provides an example of the kind of concrete investigation that might be carried out in order to understand the ways in which, through a long and patient preparation, a neoconservative hegemony was established such that, in the aftermath of the 2000 election and the events of 9/11, the right wing was in the position to assume and maintain power. What we can retrieve from Gramsci is less an overarching theory that, in its application, would yield the “correct results” than an orientation and set of research

4. The video is available for downloading at <http://tacticalmedia.mine.nu/index.html> (accessed: 18 October 2003), a Web site that also contains details about the making of the video and the growth of the Independent Media Center project.

criteria offered by the method of concretely determining the conditions within which one movement is successful in “establishing the apparatus of their political leadership” (137). In the case of the United States, one would have to analyze the changes that have taken place over the course of the past twenty years in economic thought and policy (from which the likes of Paul Krugman and Joseph Stiglitz have now chosen to defect), national defense planning (culminating in the formation of the Project for the New American Century in 1997), political theory (especially around the figure of Leo Strauss), and much more. We might then conduct research on specific intellectuals as well as larger intellectual movements, on sources of financing and influential organizations (from obscure think tanks to radio talk shows), on the failures of liberal and radical thought as well as the ability of right-wing intellectuals to create “such a power of attraction” for others (137).⁵

Of course, that would only be the start. But it does offer an indication of the wealth of contributions to Marxian theory that can be found in working one’s way through the *Prison Notebooks*. The benefits consist, partly, in capturing and utilizing the results (the suggestive observations, the powerful concepts); but what one also has the opportunity to see is a method of working, a process of intellectual production, the step-by-step generation of new insights and theoretical categories. And that is precisely because the *Notebooks* remain unfinished. Etienne Balibar’s remarks concerning Marx’s “incomplete work” would thus seem to apply equally to Gramsci’s: “We have the right then to interpret the implications of what Marx wrote. Not to consider the fragments of his discourse as cards to be infinitely reshuffled at will but, nonetheless, to take a foothold in his ‘problematics’ and ‘axiomatics’—in other words, in his ‘philosophies’—and push these to their conclusions (to find the contradictions, limits, and openings to which they lead)” (Balibar 1995, 117–8).

Gramsci pushes Marxian theory forward—and the text of the *Notebooks* allows us to do the same with Gramsci’s work. But for all their richness concerning the issues of culture, politics, and intellectuals, one of the traditional areas of Marxism, political economy, appears to be largely overlooked. It’s not that Gramsci was uninterested in economics. Various passages (e.g., the sequence of notes on Americanism, beginning with Notebook 1, note 61, his observations on the “*problemi finanziari*” of the Italian state in Notebook 2, note 6, and so on), not to mention his relationship with the famous Cambridge University economist Piero Sraffa, indicate that he had more than a passing interest in and knowledge of economic matters. But it appears that, by virtue of a specific combination of his intellectual training and political sensibilities, Gramsci was drawn to the concerns raised in some Marxist texts and not others.⁶ The fact that he focused his attention on questions of ideology, hegemony, and the state and not on other questions, such as those suggested by commodity fetishism, the appropriation of surplus-value, and the accumulation of capital, forces us to recognize that, while Gramsci opens up and adds to one wing of the Marxian

5. A good example is the prowar stance of liberal intellectuals such as Michael Walzer, Christopher Hitchens, Michael Ignatieff, and Paul Berman.

6. It would be a fascinating study, if one does not yet exist, to determine which texts of Marx and Engels that Gramsci had an interest in and access to and which he did not.

tradition, much work remains to be done to integrate his insights into other wings of that tradition.

One of the topics that cut across these various lines of thought is class. Indeed, in my remarks above, I glossed over the fact that, in the note in which he introduces the concept of hegemony, Gramsci refers not just to political or social forces but also to dominant and leading *classes*. However, in much of contemporary leftist thought, references to class have virtually disappeared, at least when conducting more conjunctural analyses of political events and projects. We seem to be more inclined to name and to focus our attention on such phenomena as the neoconservative shift within the Bush administration or neoliberal policies or imperialist wars and occupations than on “allied classes,” “opposing classes,” or a “historically progressive class” (Notebook 1, note 44). While we now have a rich tradition of deconstructing the Marxian class categories that have been handed down to us, and elaborating the concrete modalities of fundamental and subsumed class processes (stemming from the work of Stephen Resnick and Richard Wolff), what appears to be missing in the *Prison Notebooks*, as in contemporary Marxian thought, is a set of concepts and conceptual strategies that allows us to draw the connections between, on one hand, changing class structures and class groupings and, on the other hand, the kinds of cultural and political events and movements to which Gramsci devoted so much of his work.

This is only to say that our work is as unfinished as Gramsci’s. Fortunately, however, in order to pursue the projects that fall to us, we have Gramsci’s legacy and, now, Buttigieg’s magnificent edition of the *Prison Notebooks*.

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Appendix

The Presence of Gramsci in *Rethinking Marxism* (1988–2003)

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