

Why Gramsci Now?

The International Gramsci Society was founded on October 28th 1989, the final day of the International Convention of Gramscian Studies that was held in Formia, Italy, and was devoted to the topic “Gramsci nel mondo” (Gramsci in the World). The dramatic events that were transforming the political map of Europe at breathtaking speed and the remarkable shifts that were taking place in the evaluation of Gramsci’s legacy at that time, not to mention the presence of political intellectuals from all over the world, contributed to the extraordinary atmosphere that enveloped the Convention. Fascinated by the rapid unfolding of events and their magnitude, the participants found themselves seeking, both individually and collectively, an adequate interpretation of the situation and of its many ironies and paradoxes. The biggest paradox, in the context of the Convention, was Gramsci: an international group of scholars had gathered to celebrate his legacy at a time when socialism was everywhere in retreat and Marxism consigned to the outermost margins of political and cultural discourse.

Almost exactly six months before the “Gramsci nel mondo” convention, students from several major Chinese universities started their protest in Tiananmen Square. By May 17th, the protestors in Beijing demanding democracy numbered over a million and about ten days later they erected a huge statue of the Goddess of Democracy in Tiananmen, which in the U.S. was promptly interpreted as a rough replica of the Statue of Liberty. A few weeks later, however, the protest movement was squashed while countless millions worldwide watched live on television, but the indelible image in the global collective memory was of a brave Chinese dissenter defiantly refusing to make way for a column of military tanks in the middle of an avenue in Beijing—an icon of brave resistance against the coercive force of the Communist state. The defeat of the popular uprising in China did nothing to dampen—indeed, it intensified—the struggle for democracy elsewhere.

Two months before the Formia convention, Tadeusz Mazowiecki, one of the leaders of the Solidarity movement was elected Prime Minister of Poland. In early September, Hungary opened its western border, permitting East Germans to leave their country; before the month was over, Czechoslovakia followed suit. Internal agitation

against the East German regime started to gather significant momentum in early October. In the meantime, Mikhail Gorbachev was having some success instituting reforms aimed at democratizing the Soviet Union; the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa was gaining strength; and Brazil was gearing up for its first free elections in almost three decades. By the end of that year, the Berlin wall was torn down, Romania overthrew the Ceausescu regime, the anti-communist Vaclav Havel became President of Czechoslovakia, and a summit meeting between George Bush and Mikhail Gorbachev in Malta marked the end to the Cold War.

Though no one could have anticipated the quick succession of mostly non-violent events propelled by an explosion of democratic fervor that erased actually existing socialism in Europe, intellectuals on the left had been discussing the relationship between socialism and democracy for quite some time, especially in Latin America and Europe. It was in the context of those discussions that Gramsci gained prominence, primarily because of the anti-dogmatic and democratic character of his thought.

The genealogy of Gramsci's presence in Latin America dates back to the 1950s when a group of young Argentine communists guided by their mentor, Héctor Agosti, embarked on the ambitious project of translating from the Italian the thematic edition of the Quaderni del carcere. Several members of the group—among them José Aricó (who was one of the most prominent speakers at the Formia convention) and Juan Carlos Portantiero, who would later write important and influential books on Gramsci—became leading proponents of a radical renewal of the left and increasingly critical of the Communist Party's official doctrine. They published important essays in the journal Pasado y presente that manifested a strong affinity with Gramscian thought. Though their initial political impact was rather limited at first, the translation of the prison writings was a significant step in the dissemination of Gramsci in Latin America.

For years, Latin American Gramscians found themselves battling on two fronts: against the intransigent dogmatists who controlled the Communist parties with which they were affiliated, and against the fiercely anti-communist dictatorial regimes in their respective countries. Many of them were driven into exile. Like Gramsci, they had to confront catastrophic defeat but from his writings they derived a way of articulating the relationship between socialism and democracy.

One of the most significant figures in the story of Gramsci's fortunes in Latin America and, particularly, in Brazil was Carlos Nelson Coutinho who, in addition to making Gramsci accessible to a wide readership through various editions/translations of his works, formulated a radical conceptualization of democracy based almost entirely on a thorough study of the Prison Notebooks. In Formia, Coutinho concluded his presentation on "La recezione di Gramsci in Brasile" by affirming Gramsci's contemporary relevance in his country:

Ho sottolineato altrove che, oltre alla nozione di "rivoluzione passiva," è di particolare importanza per noi il concetto di "Stato allargato," che ci permette di individuare alcune delle caratteristiche essenziali della nostra situazione presente—il fatto cioè che il Brasile di oggi è una formazione sociale di tipo "occidentale"—e, di conseguenza, raccogliere allo stesso tempo spunti per la costruzione di una strategia democratica per il socialismo in Brasile. È questa attualità di Gramsci il principale motivo per cui egli ha conquistato en maître uno spazio proprio nella vita culturale brasiliana, diventando un riferimento obbligato per qualsiasi riflessione creativa sulle nostre contraddizioni e prospettive. Trent'anni dopo il suo arrivo nel nostro paese, Gramsci ha le carte in regola: è oggi un cittadino brasiliano.

The strong influence of Gramsci in Latin America was viewed with alarm by the United States. In 1980, the Council for Inter-American Security, a conservative think-tank based in Washington, D.C., formed a research group that came to be known as The Committee of Santa Fe and enjoined it to formulate a new U.S. strategy for dealing with Latin America. The resulting document, A New Inter-American Policy for the Eighties, with its critique of Jimmy Carter's preoccupation with human rights in the conduct of foreign affairs, became the blueprint for Ronald Reagan's Latin American policy—each one its authors subsequently served the Reagan administration in some capacity or other related to Latin American affairs. In 1989, the same think-tank brought out Santa Fe II: A Strategy for Latin America in the Nineties, obviously with a view to preparing in advance a Latin American policy for George Bush Sr.'s administration. The document contains a section on "The Marxist Cultural Offensive" that is devoted to exposing the menace presented by the influence of Gramsci among Latin American leftist intellectuals and

politicians. According to the report, Gramsci's analysis of culture showed "that it was possible to control or shape the regime [sic] through the democratic process if Marxists were able to create the nation's dominant cultural values." In other words, even with the cold war rapidly winding down, the U. S. could not countenance the possibility of a socialist government with democratic credentials in Latin America; it would rather deal with a right wing dictatorship than a government that disproved the notion of the incompatibility of democracy and socialism.

In 1989, alarm over Gramsci's growing influence reached such a point in the U.S. that it manifested itself in the mainstream press. In an article with the alarmist title "The Gramscists Are Coming," that appeared in business bi-weekly Forbes (20 March 1989), Michael Novak—who at the time was affiliated with The American Enterprise Institute, an extremely influential conservative think-tank—declared that "in Latin America, Gramsci is now the rage." "Recently," Novak wrote by way of illustrating his point, "the Socialist party leader in Chile, Ricardo Lagos, said that an economic interpretation of the socialist revolution is an outdated notion. The future of socialism, he said, lies in penetrating the educational, religious and cultural systems. Lagos is a democrat and a socialist, not a Marxist, but here Gramsci is his inspiration." Even more worrisome for Novak was the seductive power that Gramsci could exercise over academic intellectuals in the U.S.: "Many American professors [are] vulnerable to Gramsci's project." In other words, Gramsci was a kind of Trojan horse, a vehicle for introducing subversive Marxist ideas into the bastion of capitalism.

For another very prominent U.S. journalist, the primary cause for concern was Gramsci's influence among Eastern European and Chinese intellectuals actively engaged in the battle for democracy. Flora Lewis, the then senior foreign affairs correspondent of the New York Times, opens one of her articles, "The Rise of 'Civil Society'" (The New York Times, 25 June 1989) with the observation that the concept of "civil society" is of crucial importance for "understanding what is going on in places as different as Poland, Hungary, the Soviet Union and China." She then goes on to inform her readers: "Ironically, it was the Italian Communist Antonio Gramsci who brought the notion into modern political usage." Why "ironically"? Because, in her view, Gramsci was a proponent of the kind of totalitarian communist party-state that in recent years we have

seen self-destruct because of its inability to create and sustain a viable civil society. Her article ends with the jingoistic assertion: “Americans don’t talk about civil society because they take it for granted. It is the society.” Flora Lewis, like Novak, was simply repeating a deep-seated U.S. belief, namely that Marxism = Stalinism/totalitarianism whereas capitalism = democracy.

What Lewis and Novak could not acknowledge was that leftist and progressive intellectuals were drawn to Gramsci precisely because the political theory he elaborated bore no relation to—and, in many important respects, constitute a refutation of—the theories and practices that characterized communist rule in the Soviet Union and its satellites. Indeed, starting around the mid-1980s, Gramsci becomes increasingly appropriated by and/or associated with theoretical schools and critical currents that explicitly dissociated themselves from Marxism. A good example of how Gramsci's views were integrated into post-Marxist, poststructuralist political theory is to be found in the much discussed book by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, Hegemony and Socialist Theory (1985) . The stated goal of Laclau and Mouffe, who declared themselves to be “situated in a post-Marxist terrain,” was to formulate “a new politics for the Left based upon the project of a radical democracy.” Laclau and Mouffe’s operation entailed a dual operation vis-à-vis Gramsci. On the one hand, they adopt and adapt Gramsci’s concept of hegemony so that it becomes a core component of their theory; on the other hand, they distance themselves categorically from they regard as the residues of Marxist essentialism in his thought. To an important degree, the enduring interest in and study of Gramsci, despite the almost total marginalization of Marxist thought in the U.S. and much of Europe, is attributable to theorists and critics like Laclau, Mouffe, Stuart Hall and many others who approach him through a post-Marxist or non-Marxist lens.

One of the highlights of the Formia convention was the presentation of the Bibliografia Gramsciana compiled by John Cammett, a copy of which was distributed to all the participants. Although not yet comprehensive at the time, the international bibliography listed 6000 items in over twenty-five languages. For many Italians this statistic must have come as a surprise, for in 1989 Gramsci’s fortune in Italy was at a very low point and his continuing relevance was being questioned. Just two years earlier, on the 50th anniversary of Gramsci’s death, Aldo Schiavone, who was then director of the

Fondazione Istituto Gramsci and a member of the Italian Communist Party (PCI), stated in an interview that there was hardly any connection left between Gramsci and the political party he co-founded: “Today we no longer find any indication of Gramscian politics in fundamental overall politics of the PCI.” The daily newspaper, Il Mattino (18 April 1987), published the interview under the heading “Compagno Nino, addio” (Goodbye Comrade Nino). [See Liguori, Gramsci conteso, p. 310.] The PCI was obviously in crisis—a crisis that would continue to spiral downward into the abyss of extinction, or self-immolation that occurred in 1991, the hundredth anniversary of Gramsci’s birth. By then, however, as the Formia convention had made clear, Gramsci’s fortunes were no longer linked to his Party’s.

Since the Formia convention and the founding of the IGS, just over a quarter of a century ago, the Bibliografia Gramsciana has more than tripled in volume. The most recent version, now available in searchable form on the Fondazione Istituto Gramsci, comprises over 19,000 items. Publications apart, during that same period, the number of doctoral theses, conferences, seminars, lectures, and university courses devoted to the study of Gramsci all across the world has continued to multiply. Two aspects of all this activity are, in my view, particularly noteworthy. First, the production and publication of philologically rigorous critical editions of Gramsci’s writings in various languages now make it possible to better appreciate the richness and complexity of Gramsci’s legacy and to analyze it in greater detail. The German and French editions of the Prison Notebooks are models of scholarship. The range of Gramsci’s texts available to Anglophone readers in philologically rigorous editions continues to grow. In Brazil, thanks to the efforts Carlos Nelson Coutinho and his collaborators, Gramsci’s writings are available in editions that are simultaneously accessible and philologically reliable. The edizione nazionale, currently well under way in Italy, is already proving of immense value to Gramscian studies. Another invaluable work to come out of Italy, thanks to the initiative of IGS-Italia, led by the indefatigable Guido Liguori, is the Dizionario gramsciano (2009), an indispensable guide and aid to a serious reading of the Quaderni. An equally important development in Gramscian studies over the past couple of decades has been the exploration of certain themes and issues in his writing that had hitherto received scant attention. For an example, one need only look at the massive body of literature on the

topic of the subalterns/subalternity that has been published over the past couple of decades.

A text or a body of work that continues to yield new insights over a long period time and remains a fertile source of new lines of inquiry or research in different historical and socio-cultural contexts has the marks of a classic. As Italo Calvino pointed out in a widely circulated essay, “Why Read the Classics?”: “A classic is a book that has never finished saying what it has to say.” Nevertheless, in the late 1980s, intellectuals like Schiavone who wanted to distance not just themselves but the PCI itself from its communist, even Marxist, roots were only too willing to designate Gramsci as a classic, in the belief that they could thus embalm him and consign him once and for all to the mausoleum of history. Yet, as Eric Hobsbawm observed:

[Gramsci] has survived the political conjunctures which first gave him international prominence. He has survived the European communist movement itself. He has demonstrated his independence of the fluctuations of ideological fashion. [...] He has survived the enclosure in academic ghettos which looks like being the fate of so many other thinkers of “western marxism.” He has even avoided becoming an “ism.” [Forgacs, The Gramsci Reader, 13]

Hobsbawm also points out, however, that while the frequent recurrence of Gramsci’s name and the increasingly widespread allusions to the concepts he elaborated may be a measure of his elevated status in the cultural pantheon, they are by no means an index of general familiarity with or understanding of his thought. Similarly, Timothy Brennan, in Wars of Position, lamented that

Almost every postcolonial text in the last two decades has deferred to Gramsci’s authority, but few went back to immerse themselves in his writing with the view of mastering it or learning from it in a novel way. [...] Gramsci’s own theses, styles of thinking, or points of departure are in these circles still received at second hand. It is difficult to find work in postcolonial studies that does *not* cite Gramsci, but there is usually little claim to provide an exposition of his work as such. (234)

There are, of course, several scholars and critics who have studied Gramsci’s writings carefully. Inevitably, especially given the textual complexities as well as the

almost encyclopedic range of the *Prison Notebooks*, they have produced significantly different interpretations and assessments of Gramsci's thought. There is no consensus as to what in Gramsci is most important, or on why and how to read him. According to one view, Gramsci is of little relevance today; the value of his work resides, rather, in the light it sheds on the political situation of his own pre-World War II epoch. Richard Bellamy, for example, criticizes those who "have applied his ideas to events and movements that he neither knew nor could have anticipated." Recalling Gramsci's deep involvement in the political and cultural debates of his time, Bellamy insists that "anyone interested in Gramsci, therefore, must be interested in these discussions as well, for it is in them that his lasting relevance, if any, is to be found" (TLS,8/14/92).

Oddly, such an approach to Gramsci overlooks one of the most salient features of the *Prison Notebooks* in which the extensive, thorough analyses of earlier writers and past events, while unwavering in their rigorous attention to historical specificity and particularity, nonetheless yield valuable insights into the present. One need only look at the very large block of notes on Machiavelli to see how deeply Gramsci involves himself in the interpretation of the Florentine's works; how his reading, while always attentive to the historical specificity of the original texts, leads him to an illuminating examination of the relations of power in the modern epoch (which, in turn, enables him to further develop and deepen his concept of hegemony) and to a series of reflections on the requirements of a political strategy adequate to his own times. Gramsci's reading of Machiavelli's *Prince* is an exemplary hermeneutical operation that cautiously avoids instrumentalizing the text even while "translating" it into a modern idiom. In his treatment of the *Prince* (as well as other works), Gramsci illustrates, without betraying his historicism, how a text firmly rooted in its time and place can be relevant to the study of a much later epoch.

Gramsci's present relevance or importance cannot be assessed through experiments of direct application of his concepts to contemporary phenomena. As Stuart Hall colorfully put it, "we can't pluck up this 'Sardinian' from his specific and unique political formation, beam him down at the end of the twentieth century, and ask him to solve our problems for us: especially since the whole thrust of his thinking was to refuse this easy transfer of generalizations from one conjuncture, nation or epoch to another"

(Hall, Hard Road, 161). Gramsci's concepts and insights cannot be readily transferred; what they call for, rather, is careful translation—in the broader sense of the term. Exemplary instances of translating Gramsci in this sense—that is, of bringing his views to bear on the present conjuncture without unmooring him from the circumstances that generated his work—can be found in the writings of, among others, Jose Aricò and Carlos Nelson Coutinho, as well as in much of the work of IGS-Italia and of many members of IGS.

This is by no means an easy task and it is never complete; it has to be carried out continuously and in different contexts, always cognizant of the specificities of history and geography. The most urgent political, social, cultural, and economic problems that confront us today are significantly different from those of Gramsci's time and even from those that prevailed in 1989 when the IGS was founded. Instead of celebrating the spread of democracy many people in the U.S and elsewhere have now reason to fear the rise of plutocracy; the exacerbation of the already massive disparities in wealth shows little sign of abating; the huge demographic shifts the world is witnessing today add an almost entirely new dimension to the “southern question”; the impoverishment of civil society, especially the spread of new forms of Lorianism and reactionary populism, threaten to suffocate oppositional criticism while perpetuating the invisibility of subaltern social groups. These are all problems which the careful study of Gramsci will help us analyze with greater acuity and enable us to approach from an alternative perspective.

The tradition of Gramsci studies in Brazil is extraordinarily rich and Brazilians have played a vital role in the founding and the growth of the IGS. The IGS convention held in Rio de Janeiro in 2001 was one of the most memorable and fruitful milestones in the history of Gramsci studies worldwide. The formation of IGS-Brazil will not only carry forward the admirable tradition of Gramsci studies within Brazil and contribute to the enrichment of Brazilian civil society, it will also greatly extend the network of the IGS membership, broaden its horizons even further, and enliven it with new perspectives and insights.

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