

# Understanding Antonio Gramsci's Ambiguous Legacy

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The current upheaval in Eastern Europe has seemingly sparked an increasing interest in one of the Communist Party's earliest and most ardent advocates. As recently described by Walzer[1], his was a life that invites counter-factual questions. A founder of the Italian Communist party and devoted militant, Antonio Gramsci wrote constantly throughout his life. While his *Prison Notebooks*[2] (an astounding 2,848 handwritten pages) have garnered the most interest, his earlier thoughts on worker ascendancy, labour unions, and political organisation are important for clarifying what Walzer refers to as Gramsci's ambiguous legacy. This ambiguity continues, in part, due to the failure of social economists, who "no matter how much they emphasise the importance of 'context', pay little attention to the historical context of Gramsci's prison meditations and as a result misinterpret his ideas"[3]. Thus, the purpose of this article is to bring attention to the historical context of Gramsci's writings by detailing his early life and work.

## **Gramsci's Early Life**

Gramsci was born in 1891 to a comfortably middle class family in Sardinia. Several family members held State positions; his father was head of the local Registry Office, but was imprisoned in 1898 for alleged embezzlement. The charge was most likely artificial, typical of local politics[4,5]. Regardless, this event changed the Gramsci family drastically. To ease the financial burden, Gramsci, the fourth of seven children, began work at the age of eleven to help pay for his schooling. Despite a tragic fall down a flight of stairs when he was four, which rendered him a dwarf hunchback, Gramsci worked some 65 hours per week in addition to attending school. His gruelling schedule and physical deformity combined to isolate him from his peers. Retreating to books, he developed what would become a *lifelong passion for reading*[6].

Eventually Gramsci won a small scholarship to the University of Turin, where he studied linguistics and literature. Here, too, he was generally alone, as his meagre income and study demands prevented many friendships and outings. The friends he eventually made were Socialists; this no doubt strengthened his leanings in that direction. Exempt from service during the war for physical reasons, Gramsci joined the editorial staff of *Avanti!*, a local left-wing publication. An excellent journalist, Gramsci quickly became well-known, and gradually rose in the Socialist Party.

After the war, Gramsci was reunited with his university coterie. They started a publication designed to supplement *Avanti!* — in particular, to bring culture to the proletariat. *L'Ordine Nuovo* was to play a major role in subsequent

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historical events outlined in this article. Articles by Gramsci and others not only explicated their philosophies, but often were responsible for political action. Before examining these events, however, it is helpful to backtrack slightly to the years of the First World War.

### **First World War**

As with most retrospective analyses, interpretations of Gramsci's writings are more comprehensible when considered in their historical context, especially the impact of unprecedented demands on the Italian economy for production during the First World War. Only a handful of large firms had the technical skills, financial support and political contacts to ensure availability of coal and other raw materials to produce goods on a timely basis. The war, then, both stimulated and distorted Italian industry[4].

The war years also witnessed an active state role in "private" industry. Any firm producing military supplies was subject to classification as "auxiliary": workers were supervised by armed soldiers, subjected to military discipline, and prohibited from resigning or changing jobs without state permission. Auxiliary firms also had access to raw materials and were able to secure favourable contracts. These advantages, combined with a stable workforce, provided strong incentives for producers to agree to become "auxiliary"[4, pp. 15-6]. Taken together, these conditions served to challenge pre-war industrial schemes:

By forcing the capitalist to produce its requirements, by providing him with raw materials, by fixing prices, by preventing him from selling how, when and to whom he might wish, by forcing him to make specific agreements with his workforce and to accept special supervision by public officials, by requisitioning and compensating him as it saw fit — often not compensating at all — in these ways the State made a frontal attack on the whole principle of private property and authority [A. Labriola cited in 4, pp. 14-5].

In Italy and other European countries after the war, there were attempts to revive various labour movements. Discontent was rampant — not only with the Socialist Party, but with existing trade unions. Workers wanted revolution! They rejected Socialist beliefs that change could only follow the capture of political power and that a Socialist economy required state ownership of the means of production, administered by professional managers responsible to the state.

### **Internal Commissions**

During the war, many factories established "Internal Commissions" — grievance committees elected by union members on the shopfloor — to present complaints to management. Wage and hour issues were still negotiated by formal union organisations, with the commissions primarily involved in disciplinary matters such as punishments and dismissals. Production demands during the war made internal factory commissions beneficial not only to labour, but to management as well, providing a mechanism for speedy conflict resolution. Indeed, employers were likely to make concessions on minor issues in favour of continued production. But union leaders felt the internal commissions could be effective only if backed by strong union organisations, and insisted on retaining control over them, often including demands for management recognition in wage claims.

## A House Divided

As mentioned, the war years witnessed substantial state control over factory workers. To retain influence, some union leaders decided to ally themselves with governing committees. While this permitted input on wages and working conditions, union leaders became associated with the evils of control and were bitterly attacked by workers for “collaborationism” [4, p. 29]. Feelings of alienation from union leadership heightened general discontent among workers with existing society.

## Enter Gramsci

The stage had been set for revolution; the only missing element was leaders who could marshal the necessary forces. These leaders emerged from the group of intellectuals associated with *L'Ordine Nuovo*, in which Gramsci was a key player.

Encouraged by the success of the Bolshevik revolution in Russia, Gramsci and his colleagues searched for a working class structure that could serve as an instrument in struggles for industrial autonomy. Growing worker resentment of labour unions reinforced Gramsci's own anti-union sentiments. He felt that trade union concentration on economic demands was too limited, and criticised their unwillingness to challenge capitalist labour exploitation. Further, he felt, as unions grow larger, they necessarily become more bureaucratic and remote from worker needs. Thus, they are unable to promote real worker control, as this would threaten union leaders' vested interests. Internal factory commissions provided a solution; in addition to convenience, they posed the additional potential advantage of overcoming union resistance to revolutionary political measures. The article “Working-class Democracy” (in *L'Ordine Nuovo*, 21 June 1919) promoted the slogan, “All Power in the Workshop to the Workshop Committees”, and urged workers to elect delegates to serve on ward committees representing all workers in a certain area [7]. The aim was to channel and concentrate revolutionary energy and to prepare the masses for power.

Contrary to normal conceptions of worker militancy involving conflict within existing systems (whether through revolution or through traditional union opposition), Gramsci tended away from militancy in favour of fundamental political change. He favoured *real* worker power whereby workers themselves would organise and control production. To this end, he emphasised the need for educating workers in the use of power, in developing technical and managerial skills, and in general knowledge. In fact, one purpose of *L'Ordine Nuovo* was to provide workers with the preparation necessary for creating a new proletarian culture. In essence, Gramsci wanted workers to become self-disciplined, acquiring views normally held by management. Internal factory commissions were the means by which workers could acquire self-control, autonomy and political consciousness [8,9]. They were not to bargain over wages and working conditions, as unions do, but actually to control entire factories [10]. Training a new, working élite meant “enormous efforts to raise up the masses, to educate them, to civilise them, to free them from vicious habits like alcoholism” [Gramsci cited in 4, p. 52].

Although internal factory commissions were the initial structure, certain changes were planned. Each shop (or work unit) within a factory was to elect a commissar; these representatives in turn would become responsible for electing internal commission members. Under this new system, the elected commissars formed a factory council which elected an internal commission from within its ranks as an Executive Committee[11]. In addition to duties previously performed by commission members, however, they were also to maintain discipline within their own work units and to tackle higher level problems. Specifically, it was planned that commissars would study production methods in their shops "to find out precisely (1) the value of the capital invested in the unit, (2) the return on this capital in relation to all known expenses, and (3) what increased returns might be possible" [Gramsci cited in 4, p. 58]. Gramsci and others involved with *L'Ordine Nuovo* considered these tasks essential to ensuring successful preparation for a workers' revolution:

Workers' solidarity . . . in the Councils is something positive, it is permanent, it is incarnate even in the most trivial aspects of industrial production, it is contained in the joyous consciousness of being an organic whole, a homogeneous compact system which, by performing useful labour and disinterestedly producing social wealth, affirms its sovereignty and actuates both its power and its own historical creative liberty[Gramsci cited in 4, p. 58].

Furthermore, the proposed factory councils were intended to create in workers a consciousness of their unity despite differences created by division of labour.

Gramsci's advocacy of the factory councils alienated him from the leaders of the Socialist Party[5]. Similar disagreements within the Party were widespread, leading ultimately to the splitting-off of a substantial minority in 1921. This group became the Italian Communist party. Gramsci, elected to the party's Central Committee, continued as editor of *L'Ordine Nuovo*, now a party newspaper[5].

Once the network of factory councils was established, Gramsci felt revolution (as a process, not an event) could be accomplished. The councils, then, were to provide organisation and industrial power to assure political power. This institutional emphasis was evident in plans for new governance, which was to be based on the councils. Representatives elected by each internal factory commission would comprise a central committee of the councils, the nucleus of local government. Finally, Gramsci felt a strong need for an autonomous working class political party, one that was completely responsive to worker needs[12,13]. He emphasised the mutual interdependence of the councils and the Communist party, closely linking political and industrial organisation. Other authors assert that Gramsci had less "mutuality" in mind — rather that he conceived of the councils as absolutely subrogated to Party rule. The idea, then, was not working class political autonomy, but a "rigidly pyramidal power structure" with the party at the top[14].

Gramsci also envisioned a new role for trade unions. Although union effectiveness was evident, their function had been entwined with capitalist society. To operate, they required officials who formed a closed group out of touch with the workers they ostensibly represented. Indeed, some believed unions themselves "to be an aspect of bourgeois society, and not a struggle

against bourgeois society, or a way of overcoming that society'' [15, p. 91]. But while existing unions posed a threat to revolution, Gramsci felt their discipline and solidarity was vital to success. The task, then, was to change unions by (1) transforming them from craft to industrial organisations to aid co-ordination and (2) infusing them with revolutionary discipline [4]. Gramsci firmly believed that factory councils and unions should be entirely independent organisations, although others in his coterie disagreed.

### The Factory Councils' Fate

Gramsci's revolution never materialised. Although factory councils spread rapidly, they never occupied the position planned. The few attempts by workers to seize control failed; independence from unions was never achieved; economic factors (rising prices and high unemployment) drew worker attention to more fundamental issues — in short, the Communists failed to achieve widespread support. By May 1921, the factory council movement was over [4].

Gramsci, however, remained active in the Communist Party. In the spring of 1922 he was a member of the Italian delegation to the Communist International Conference in Moscow. While there, Gramsci suffered a nervous breakdown. During his recovery, he met Giulia Schucht, who became his wife. Their marriage was marked by long periods of separation, however, since Giulia remained in Moscow. Gramsci did not see his first son until the child was almost a year old. Tragically, he never saw his second son, who was born a month before Gramsci's arrest [16].

Gramsci never abandoned his factory council ideas. Indeed, when he and his former colleagues became leaders in the party (1923), propaganda began to stress worker organisation in factories [4]. Gramsci continued to stress the importance of organisation around the workplace. He also retained his emphasis on education of the working class and productivist values of precision and sobriety. In this way he influenced the Italian Communist party with many of the earlier *L'Ordine Nuovo* concepts which had previously enjoyed limited diffusion.

In November 1926, Gramsci was arrested — along with many others — as part of Mussolini's attempt to eradicate opposing views. Because of his frail physical condition, Gramsci was sent to a prison for physically and psychologically unfit prisoners. After six years in prison, he became seriously ill, suffering from hallucinations and frequent periods of unconsciousness. Although granted parole in 1934, Gramsci was still in captivity. Not only was he still in very poor health, and thus confined to a clinic, his room was under close police surveillance. Ironically, in 1937 he suffered a cerebral haemorrhage, dying just two days after being notified the surveillance was about to be withdrawn [17].

While many of Gramsci's ideas were recorded during his imprisonment, his fundamental beliefs on worker control, on education of the masses, and on political organisation are evident in his earlier writings and activities. Whether imprisonment saved Gramsci from either the consequences of the 'truth' or the practical need to save himself remains an unanswerable question.

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