

Gramsci, Culture and Anthropology

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Reading Gramsci

General Editor: Joseph A. Buttigieg

Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937), little known outside communist circles at the time of his death, is now one of the most frequently cited and widely translated political theorists and cultural critics of the twentieth century. The first wave of interest in Gramsci was triggered by the publication, in Italy, of his prison writings, starting with the letters, which appeared in 1947, and continuing with the six volumes of the thematic edition of the notebooks, the last of which was brought out in 1951. Within the space of a few years, hundreds of articles and books were written explicating, analysing and debating Gramsci's concept of hegemony, his revisionist views on the history of Italy's unification, his anti-economistic and anti-dogmatic version of Marxist philosophy, his theory of the state and civil society, his anti-Crocean literary criticism, his novel approach to the study of popular culture, his extensive observations on the role of intellectuals in society, along with other aspects of his thought. Although long dead, Gramsci became more than an object of dispassionate study; the intensity of the discussions surrounding his work and the often heated struggle over his legacy had, and continue to have, a profound effect on the political culture and cultural politics of postwar Italy.

During the late 1960s and the 1970s Gramsci's name and ideas started circulating with increasing frequency throughout Europe, Latin America, and North America (and, to a lesser extent, elsewhere too). The various currents associated with Eurocommunism and the 'New Left' that accompanied the swell of interest in what came to be known as 'western Marxism' contributed immensely to Gramsci's rise to prominence during this period. In the anglophone world, the publication, in 1971, of Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith's superbly edited *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* made it possible for scholars to move from vague and general allusions to Gramsci to serious study and analysis of his work. Gramscian studies were further bolstered by various editions in diverse languages of the pre-prison writings – which, among other things, drew attention to the valuable essay on the Southern Question – and by the publication,

in Italy, of Valentino Gerratana's complete critical edition of the *Quaderni del carcere* (1975).

Gramsci's influence became even more pronounced in the 1980s with the spread of cultural studies, the growing fascination with the question of 'power', and the greater attention that scholars from different disciplines were devoting to the relations among culture, society, and politics. The rapid decline of interest in Marxist thought following the events of 1989 had no effect on Gramsci's 'fortunes'. By that time, as Stuart Hall was among the first to point out, Gramsci had already 'radically displaced some of the inheritances of Marxism in cultural studies'. Indeed, Gramsci's ideas have come to occupy a very special position in the best known of post-Marxist theories and strategies by the political left. Furthermore, the ubiquitous concern with the concept of civil society during the past 15 years has rekindled interest in Gramsci's reflections on the subject. Likewise, many of the issues and topics that currently preoccupy a broad spectrum of academic intellectuals – subaltern studies, post-colonialism and North–South relations, modernity and postmodernity, the relation between theory and praxis, the genealogy of Fascism, the socio-political dimensions of popular culture, hegemony and the manufacturing of consent, etc. – have motivated many a reading and rereading of Gramsci's texts.

In the 50 years since Gramsci first became an 'object' of study, his theories and concepts have left their mark on virtually every field in the humanities and the social sciences. His writings have been interpreted, appropriated, and even instrumentalized in many different and often conflicting ways. The amount of published material that now surrounds his work – John Cammett's updated *Bibliografia gramsciana* comprises over 10,000 items in 30 languages – threatens to overwhelm even the trained scholar and to paralyse or utterly confuse the uninitiated reader. Yet the sheer size of the Gramscian bibliography is also an important indication of the richness of Gramsci's legacy, the continuing relevance of his ideas, and the immensity of his contribution to contemporary thought. In many respects, Gramsci has become a 'classic' that demands to be read. Reading Gramsci, however, is not quite an easy undertaking; his most important writings are open-ended, fragmented, multidirectional explorations, reflections, and sketches. His prison notebooks have the character of a cluttered, seemingly disorganized intellectual laboratory. The well-trained scholar, no less than the first-time reader, would welcome an expert guide who could point to the

salient features of Gramsci's work and bring into relief the basic designs underlying the surface complexity of different parts of his massive oeuvre. Similarly, a critical exposition of the most important existing treatments of Gramsci's works, together with a discussion of the potential usefulness of his insights to certain current lines of inquiry in the humanities and social sciences, would enable readers of Gramsci to appreciate better why (and in what ways) his ideas have a bearing on discussions about some of the most pressing social, cultural, and political issues of our time.

The multifaceted character of Gramsci's writing and the rich diversity of critical and theoretical work it has inspired cannot be treated effectively in a single, comprehensive study. A series of monographs, each dealing with a specific aspect of his work (but also cognizant of the many threads that link its various parts), would be a much more useful companion to the reader who is seeking to become better acquainted with Gramsci's legacy. Each volume in the 'Reading Gramsci' series is devoted to a theme that is especially prominent in Gramsci's work or to a field of study that has been strongly influenced by his ideas.

Abbreviations

<i>Selections From the Prison Notebooks</i>	SPN
<i>Antonio Gramsci: Selections From Political Writings 1910–1920</i>	SPWI
<i>Antonio Gramsci: Selections From Political Writings 1921–1926</i>	SPWII
<i>Antonio Gramsci: Selections From Cultural Writings</i>	SCW
<i>Antonio Gramsci: Prison Notebooks</i> (vol. I)	PN I
<i>Antonio Gramsci: Prison Notebooks</i> , (vol. II)	PN II
<i>Letters from Prison</i> (vol. I)	PL I
<i>Letters from Prison</i> (vol. II)	PL II

1 INTRODUCTION

If one wants to study a conception of the world that has never been systematically expounded by its author-thinker, detailed work is required, and it has to be conducted with the most scrupulous accuracy and scientific honesty ... The search for the leitmotiv, the rhythm of the thought, more important than single, isolated quotations.

(PNII: 137)

This book is about the concept of culture in the writings of Antonio Gramsci and the potential relevance of Gramsci's approach to culture for contemporary anthropologists. The basic question it addresses is: what might anthropologists, and others interested in issues of culture, have to gain from reading this early twentieth-century Italian Marxist? Its aim is not so much to answer this question as to provide readers with the information they need to decide for themselves.

In the 30 years since the publication of the first major English edition of Gramsci's prison notebooks, Gramsci has become a name much cited by anthropologists. However, as Michel Foucault noted in a 1984 letter to the Gramsci scholar Joseph Buttigieg, Gramsci remains an author who is cited more often than he is genuinely known.¹ Most anthropologists it would seem get their Gramsci second-hand. A key interpreter of Gramsci for anthropologists is Raymond Williams; the section on hegemony in Williams' *Marxism and Literature* is probably the gloss on this much-argued-over Gramscian term most commonly cited by anthropologists. A reliance on interpreters and secondary sources is understandable given the nature of Gramsci's major work, the prison notebooks. For while these notebooks are without doubt one of the masterpieces of twentieth-century Marxism and have given rise to a vast literature,

1. 'Un auteur plus souvent cité que réellment connu', see PNI: xix (the first volume of Buttigieg's English translation of the complete prison notebooks, of which two volumes have so far been published; a list of the abbreviations I have used to refer to the different editions of Gramsci is given on p. x).

they are also a collection of fragments; a series of individual Notes² on related topics, some as short as a few sentences, some article length, that were never organized by Gramsci into a systematic whole. My hope is that this book will help provide a way into Gramsci's writings for those who would like to engage seriously with his thought but are not quite sure where to start.

I have chosen to organize this book around the concept of culture, firstly because this complicated and often slippery term is so central both to anthropology and to Gramsci's overall intellectual project, but secondly because what culture means in Gramsci's writings is often very different from what it has commonly meant in anthropology. Exploring this divergence and examining some of its implications is one of the book's major concerns. It is not, however, its only concern: this is also a book about the concept of class. Those who cite Gramsci's writings on culture are not always sufficiently aware that for Gramsci the notion of culture is always inextricably entangled with that of class. Culture for Gramsci is, at least in part, how class realities are *lived*. As I shall argue in subsequent chapters, an important part of the value of Gramsci's writings on culture is that they provide us with an insightful approach to the whole issue of class and inequality that is undogmatic, nuanced and never economically reductionist.

My intention, however, is not to force my particular interpretation of Gramsci on the reader. Rather I have attempted to provide an introduction to Gramsci's writings on culture that, while supplying the necessary context, allows him, as much as possible, to speak for himself. Given how daunting many readers find the prison notebooks, so that they turn instead to Gramsci's interpreters, I decided to structure the central chapters of this book almost as a Gramsci reader that would include extensive passages from Gramsci's own writings. My aim is to give readers the opportunity to judge for themselves what Gramsci understands by culture, and the place of culture within his overall project. My hope is that having read this book readers will both want to go on to read more of Gramsci and be in a better position to decide for themselves what Gramsci has to offer those interested in questions of culture. But let me not be too disingenuous. I would not have written this book if I did not think that Gramsci does indeed have much to offer anthropologists, so let me say a little more about what that might be.

2. 'Note' when capitalized refers to one of the Notes in the prison notebooks.

Why Should an Anthropologist Read Gramsci?

All too often anthropologists seem to assume, at least implicitly, that when Gramsci refers to culture he means what they mean by culture. Drawing attention to just how different Gramsci's concept of culture is can be a useful way of beginning to defamiliarize what is perhaps an over familiar term in anthropology. Reading Gramsci, and tracing out his complex and sometimes shifting definitions of culture, can offer the attentive anthropological reader a fresh approach to one of the discipline's fundamental concepts. Gramsci, read carefully, calls into question a number of basic assumptions as to the nature of 'culture' that seem to be deeply embedded in anthropological notions of culture. But also, I want to suggest, Gramsci's writings on culture can help anthropologists and anthropology as a discipline to think freshly about class, currently a rather unfashionable way of theorizing inequality.

One of the core concerns around which anthropology developed as a discipline was the need to understand societies encountered by an expanding West, societies that seemed to represent forms of social organization quite different from the West's own capitalist and market-based ones. While that concern certainly had its dark side, and the quest for knowledge was always entangled with a desire for control, anthropology can be considered as one of the very few disciplines that has always taken social worlds beyond those of the triumphant West seriously, and has attempted, albeit often unsuccessfully, to understand these 'other' worlds in their own terms. The 'othering' of various, often colonized societies has frequently, and justifiably, been much criticized in recent years. It is true, for instance, as Johannes Fabian has argued, that there was historically a powerful tendency in anthropology to map differences in social organization onto some broad evolutionary trajectory, so that, for example, hunters and gatherers existing in the contemporary world might be taken as representing the primordial past of humanity.³ Nonetheless, while it may have been flawed in practice, this attempt to see the world from standpoints other than those of Western capitalist rationality seems to me to represent one of the major contributions of anthropology as a discipline. For example, freed from any evolutionary assumptions, it can potentially offer an interesting vantage point from which to examine the hegemonic (to use the

3. Fabian's 1983 *Time and the Other* is a particularly thoughtful and powerful critique.

Gramscian term) and taken-for-granted certainties of what is commonly referred to nowadays as our 'globalized' world. All too often the term globalization seems to involve the assumption that capitalism and democracy, as these have developed in certain societies in the North, represent a *telos* to which every human society everywhere is (or should be) aspiring.

Associated historically with anthropology's definition of its object of study as the elucidation of 'other' worlds were two powerful tendencies; firstly, a tendency to treat these worlds as bounded wholes that could be understood in isolation from the larger political, economic and social contexts, such as those of various colonial encounters, within which they were embedded, and secondly, a tendency to celebrate and even romanticize them. Both of these can be seen as the other side of the insistence that these non-Western, non-capitalist worlds should be taken seriously and not judged simply in terms of their lack of recognizable Western forms of social organization. As Malinowski put it in the Introduction to *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, when laying out his version of what became arguably the defining anthropological research method, participant observation, non-Western societies should not to be seen as 'the sensational, wild and unaccountable world[s] of "savages"', but rather as 'well ordered communities, governed by law, behaving and thinking according to consistent principles' (1984[1922]: 9–10). This stress on the order and logic of apparently 'savage' societies has been a persistent theme in much anthropology.

The idea behind participant observation is that through living for extended periods of time in close daily contact with a small group of people the anthropologist comes to see the world they inhabit through their eyes. In the case of colonial anthropologists this necessarily had a tendency to undermine any unquestioned acceptance of the colonialist world view. It is true that colonial anthropologists always remained a part of the colonial elite, and that the larger intellectual project within which they worked had to an important extent emerged out of the realities of colonialism; nonetheless, at the same time that intellectual project had built into it certain tensions and contradictions. It is not coincidental that Jomo Kenyatta, later to become the first president of an independent Kenya, studied anthropology with Malinowski at the London School of Economics. Anthropology may indeed have been entangled with the rationalization and legitimation of colonialism but it also created an interesting space within which critiques of colonialism, rooted in

views of the colonial world which saw that world from the vantage point of the colonized, could emerge. However, the focus on the perspective of the subordinated, and the need to assert the legitimacy of that perspective in the face of an often dismissive colonial regime, could lead to anthropologists writing overly celebratory and sometimes romanticized accounts of the 'other' worlds they studied.

Gramsci's analytical starting point was very different from that of academic anthropology. Not only was he not an anthropologist, he was first and foremost a political activist whose primary concern was to bring about political change in Italy. Prior to his imprisonment by Mussolini's Fascist regime, he had been one of the leaders of the Italian Communist Party. He was certainly deeply interested in mapping the cultural worlds of those he termed subaltern, the peasants and other non-elite groups, but his interest stemmed from his awareness that to have any chance of success a revolutionary movement needs to be genuinely popular with the mass of the population. For Gramsci any would-be revolutionaries need to understand the cultural realities they are bent on transforming, apart from any other reason because counterhegemonies, capable of challenging in an effective way the dominant hegemony, emerge out of the lived reality of oppressed people's day-to-day lives. Any such embryonic counterhegemony would, as he saw it, necessarily emerge as an incoherent jumble requiring the work of intellectuals to provide it with coherence and intellectual rigour, but unless they engaged with such raw material those intellectuals, no matter how brilliant and committed, were doomed to irrelevance.

Gramsci's concern here is clearly a very different one from those that gave rise to the discipline of anthropology. Nonetheless, Gramsci's writings can be enormously illuminating for anthropologists. His approach to the analysis of the cultural worlds of peasants and other non-elite groups, for instance, provides anthropologists with potentially thought-provoking accounts of those worlds that, while taking them very seriously, never romanticize or sentimentalize those who inhabit them, nor overestimate the logical coherence of the narratives such worlds produce. Very importantly, Gramsci always recognized that subaltern groups are not homogeneous, that they have their own hierarchies and inequalities, and that it cannot be assumed that all the members of a particular subaltern group see the world in the same way. Gramsci was also aware that however isolated and seemingly remote such communities may appear, they are in fact embedded in larger political and economic realities. Their

heterogeneity and their embeddedness raise the question of what analytical framework we should use to understand these other, often marginalized worlds.

There has always been an interesting tension associated with the anthropological project of searching out, through participant observation, how the world appears from some other vantage point than that of a hegemonic, Western rationality. To what extent can, or should, anthropologists writing about different places, and different ways of seeing things, use the maps of the social world those they study themselves use? Should they use local categories and terms, local accounts of why the world is as it is, or should they translate these local, sometimes parochial social maps into the analytical maps of the larger world they inhabit as professional intellectuals? There is, of course, no one simple answer to this question; it all depends on the specific context. Gramsci's usefulness here, I would suggest, derives from his insistence that ultimately the most important question is that of power: who has power and who does not? who is the oppressor and who the oppressed? and what are the specificities of the relations of oppression? If we want to understand how power works in a small rural community in Sardinia, for instance, we need to understand both the larger forces that bind Sardinia and Italy itself into more encompassing economic and political entities, and how the realities of power are experienced and named by individuals within the community itself. For Gramsci, neither the larger, nor the local understanding on its own is adequate because in isolation neither is capable of producing effective, plausible political narratives; and as a committed activist, Gramsci's ultimate concern is with understandings of the world that can mobilize the oppressed to overcome their oppression. The problem here is that accounts of power that identify its larger structural underpinnings tend not to resonate with those they must mobilize, while narrow, parochial accounts are unable to see the larger forces at work. It should also be noted that for Gramsci, any adequate account of power is also an account of class.

In the context of analysis of societies of the South,⁴ I would argue, Gramsci's insistence that the key relation is that of oppressor and oppressed is a useful corrective to the common assumption that the primary opposition in these societies is one between tradition and

4. The currently preferred term for what used to be called the Third World, or the developing world.

modernity. In Chapter 3 I develop the argument that this assumption is bound up with the concept of culture as this came to be understood within the anthropological mainstream. But the characterization of a whole range of conflicts in postcolonial societies and those of the South generally in terms of a fundamental opposition between the 'traditional' and the 'modern' is also popular within those societies themselves. In any society in the South there are likely to be some who argue that their society needs to become 'modern' and leave the old traditional ways behind, while others insist that modernity is a false god in the name of which authentic 'tradition' is being lost, and that there should be a return to 'tradition'. What is generally agreed, it would seem, by many intellectuals and non-intellectuals in both North and South, is that mapping the contemporary world involves understanding this basic opposition between the 'traditional' and the 'modern'. Within anthropology, which has always prided itself on the attention it pays to people's own accounts of their world, the fact that this opposition is used by the very people the anthropologist is trying to understand tends to legitimize it. But does the fact that those within a given society use these categories in constructing their accounts of their world, necessarily mean that this is indeed the best way of 'naming' what is going on? There is much in Gramsci that can help us as anthropologists to think through this particular issue.

As an anthropologist I remain convinced that the discipline has developed important areas of expertise over the course of its history, even if some of this expertise remains entangled with some less helpful legacies. In sum, why anthropologists should read Gramsci, I would suggest, is because he can help us free ourselves from some of the unhelpful baggage that the anthropological concept of culture tends to carry, often in subtle, implicit ways, while simultaneously suggesting potentially productive ways, that build on our disciplinary expertise, of thinking about culture and class. He provides us, that is, with suggestive, sometimes provocative, insights into how we might rethink the whole complex terrain of culture, class and inequality. The value of Gramsci's approach is, firstly, that it recognizes the reality of fundamental, systematic inequalities, while rejecting any crude economic reductionism. Secondly, there is Gramsci's insistence that we take seriously the complexity and specificity of the cultural worlds different people inhabit – and pay serious attention to their own mappings of those worlds.

Organization of the Book

The two chapters of Part I provide context. Chapter 2 gives a brief sketch of Gramsci's life and discusses the relationship between his life and his writings, explaining the profoundly political nature of his intellectual project in the prison notebooks. Gramsci, writing in his prison cell, may appear to have been removed from active political life, but for him his intellectual work and his writings in prison were a way of continuing to engage in the political events of his time. His concern in his notebooks was to provide the rigorous analysis of inequality and injustice that is a crucial part of any struggle for social transformation; societies can only be transformed if we understand them. Chapter 3 focuses on the concept of culture in anthropology. I should say at once that my discussion here is a very partial and limited one. All I have tried to do is to draw attention to some assumptions about the nature of culture and cultures, associated, I would argue, with the history of the emergence of anthropology as a discipline, that have played an important shaping role in how many (although not all) anthropologists have approached questions of culture. While the ways in which anthropologists approach issues of culture may have been transformed in recent years, and many might argue that these assumptions belong to the history of the discipline rather than to its present practice, it seems to me that fragments of these older understandings of culture often continue to haunt the work of contemporary anthropologists.

The three chapters of Part II attempt to map out Gramsci's very different approach to culture and its inextricability from the issue of class. I have tried to do this using, as far as possible, Gramsci's own words. This has meant including relatively extensive extracts from Gramsci's writings; the chapters in fact take the form of something like an annotated reader with passages from Gramsci organized thematically. The themes around which I have structured the three chapters are: culture and history; subaltern culture; and intellectuals and the production of culture. Throughout the book, but particularly in these chapters, I have deliberately kept footnotes to a minimum with the idea of keeping the reader focused on what Gramsci himself has to say rather than immediately moving to the debates among Gramsci scholars. Also with the aim of focusing the attention of the reader on Gramsci's own mapping of the terrain of culture, I have largely refrained in these chapters from drawing attention to exactly how his maps differ from those of anthropologists, leaving this for

the final chapter. My hope is that having provided this kind of structured introduction to Gramsci's writings, as well as a generous sampling of the writings themselves, the interested reader, who may well quarrel with some of my readings of Gramsci, will move on to reading the now numerous editions of different selections of his writings now available in English.⁵ A full list of these is provided at the beginning of the bibliography.

In the final chapter I turn to how Gramsci has been used by anthropologists, looking at how he entered the anthropological conversation and at the interesting role played here by Williams' *Marxism and Literature*. I go on to look at the theorization of culture and class in the work of Eric Wolf, an anthropologist central to the renewal of a political economy approach. Finally, I turn to two examples of recent uses of Gramsci by the anthropologists Matthew Gutmann and Roger Keesing. Throughout this chapter my concern is to think through how anthropologists might engage in more substantive ways with this often challenging and difficult theorist; how Gramsci might become known and not merely cited.

Let me end this introduction with a few brief acknowledgements. First and foremost I want to thank Joseph Buttigieg who suggested the idea of a book about Gramsci and anthropology and has been enormously supportive throughout the book's gestation. Both he and Frank Rosengarten read the manuscript; I have benefited greatly from their deep knowledge of Gramsci and his writings. The anthropologists Shirley Lindenbaum, Steven Striffler, Michael Blim and Steven Caton also read the manuscript and gave me many helpful suggestions. I also benefited very much from the comments of Bruce Knauft and the other, anonymous, reader, both of whom read the manuscript for the University of California Press. From the City University of New York I received a PSC-CUNY grant which gave me some precious time to work on the project.

5. In common with many others who write on Gramsci in English, I have relied on the English translations of Gramsci's writings. Almost none of Gramsci's writings remain untranslated into English. For those readers interested in Italian debates on Gramsci, there is a series of volumes edited by Martin James (2001) from Routledge which provides a wide selection of previously untranslated essays on Gramsci by Italian scholars.

Part I

Contexts

