

Hegemony and passive revolution  
in the global economy  
Adam David Morton

# Unravelling Gramsci



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## Hegemony and Passive Revolution in the Global Political Economy

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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 antidogmatic 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, postcolonialism 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 instrumentalised 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 disorganised 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 cognisant 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.

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# Abbreviations

BIP	Border Industrialisation Programme
CANACINTRA	National Chamber of Manufacturing Industries
CAP	Permanent Agrarian Congress
CCE	Business Co-ordinating Council
CGL	General Confederation of Labour
CMHN	Mexican Businessmen's Council
CND	National Democratic Convention
CNTE	National Coordinating Committee of Educational Workers
COCOPA	Commission of Concord and Pacification
Comintern	Communist International
CONAI	National Mediation Commission
CONCAMIN	Confederation of Chambers of Industry
CONCANACO	Confederation of National Chambers of Commerce, Services and Tourism
Confindustria	General Confederation of Italian Industry
COPARMEX	Employers' Confederation of the Republic of Mexico
CNI	National Indigenous Congress
EMU	Economic and Monetary Union
ESF	European Social Forum
EU	European Union
EZLN	Zapatista Army of National Liberation
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
FESEBES	Federation of Goods and Services
FIOM	Italian Federation of Metal-Mechanical Workers
FSCSP	Labour, Peasant, Social, and Popular Front
FSM	Mexican Union Front
FTAA	Free Trade Area of the Americas
FZLN	Zapatista National Liberation Front
GATT	General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade
ICRC	International Committee for the Red Cross
IMF	International Monetary Fund
INMECAFÉ	Mexican Coffee Institute

IPE	International Political Economy
IR	International Relations
ISI	Import Substitution Industrialisation
LOPEE	Law on Political Organisations and Electoral Processes
MSN	Mexico Solidarity Network
MST	Landless Rural Workers' Movement
NAFTA	North American Free Trade Agreement
NED	National Endowment for Democracy
NGOs	Non-Governmental Organisations
NIEO	New International Economic Order
NTAE	Non-Traditional Agricultural Exports
OPEC	Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries
PAN	National Action Party
PCd'I	Communist Party of Italy
PCI	Italian Communist Party
PCM	Mexican Communist Party
PDS	Party of the Democratic Left
PEMEX	Mexican Petroleum Company
PRD	Party of the Democratic Revolution
PRI	Institutional Revolutionary Party
PRM	Party of the Mexican Revolution
PROCAMPO	Direct Rural Support Programme
PRONASOL	National Solidarity Programme
PSE	Economic Solidarity Pact
PSI	Italian Socialist Party
PSUM	Unified Socialist Party of Mexico
SAM	Mexican Food System
SECOFI	Secretariat of Commerce and Industrial Development
SEDESOL	Ministry of Social Development
SPP	Ministry of Programming and Budget
SHCP	Ministry of the Treasury and Public Credit
STRM	Mexican Telephone Workers' Union
SNTE	National Education Workers' Union
TELMEX	Mexican Telephone Company
TNCs	Transnational Corporations
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNT	National Union of Workers
US	United States

USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WEF	World Economic Forum
WTO	World Trade Organization
YMCA	Young Men's Christian Association

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# 1 Introduction: the North/ South Question of Uneven Development

Capitalism is a world historical phenomenon and its uneven development means that individual nations cannot be at the same level of economic development at the same time.

— Antonio Gramsci, 'The Return to Freedom . . .', *Avanti!*  
(26 June 1919)

The purpose of this book is to 'unravel' the historical and contemporary relevance of the thought and practice of Antonio Gramsci to factors of hegemony and passive revolution to the global political economy. Its central premise is that Gramsci's approach to *uneven development* reveals pertinent concerns about the conditions of hegemony and passive revolution relevant to alternative processes of state formation elsewhere in the modern world. The aim of the book is therefore to provide readers with a detailed analysis of subject matter linked to the practical and theoretical constructions of hegemony and passive revolution. As a result, the book will provide a novel entrance point for readers into concerns about uneven development, conditions of state formation, and the role of international factors shaping hegemony and passive revolution in the global political economy.

Unravelling Gramsci in such a way will promote a detailed consideration of his theory and practice that can add to an understanding of the uneven development of capitalism. The task of excursus and interpretation is crucial because it is a necessary moment of concept formation. Once this task has been completed it is then possible to appropriate and develop concepts in a different context from that in which they were originally formed (Nield and Seed 1981: 218). As we shall see, Part I of the book embarks on an excursus and interpretation of Gramsci's writings by drawing from as wide a reading as possible of his texts, including the pre-prison writings, the *Prison Notebooks*, and the prison letters. Once such concepts and issues are raised it will then be possible to illustrate their explanatory value. Confronting theory and practice and bringing

the concepts to bear on concrete empirical examples in Part II of the book will achieve this objective. However, in accord with Keith Nield and John Seed (1981: 226), 'actively to engage with Gramsci requires more than a web of empirical illustration; it demands a theoretical engagement with and against Gramsci.' Unravelling Gramsci therefore takes on a second meaning. It becomes imperative to consider also what might be historically *limited* in a theoretical and practical translation of Gramsci's writings to alternative social and political circumstances of hegemony and passive revolution in the global political economy.<sup>1</sup> This task will be undertaken in the concluding chapter to the book, which will entail generating conclusions *against* the *Prison Notebooks*. Unravelling Gramsci in this second sense, in terms of considering themes that might work against the efficacy of his contemporary relevance, will also assist in developing pointers for future research.

It is hoped that, by recovering facets of older debates and introducing new elements, this approach to 'unravelling Gramsci' will contribute to understanding uneven development, conditions of state formation, and the role of international factors shaping hegemony and passive revolution in the global political economy. To concur with Stuart Hall (1991b: 125), Gramsci 'saw the pluralisation of modern cultural identities, emerging between the lines of uneven historical development, and asked the question: what are the political forms through which a new cultural order could be constructed?' It is to these issues that the next section will now turn before providing a more detailed overview of the organisation of the book.

### The 'North/South' Question of Uneven Development

On the eve of a meeting between an Italian delegation and key members of the Comintern leadership in Moscow, the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci wrote a letter, dated 18 May 1923, to Palmiro Togliatti, a colleague and co-founder of the Communist Party of Italy (PCd'I). In the letter, Gramsci (1978: 140) declared, 'We are in the flow of the historical current and will succeed, provided we "row" well and keep a firm grasp on the rudder.' Beyond the struggles within the PCd'I and other left parties in Italy, to which Gramsci refers, he also reflected in this letter on the changes wrought at the time by the rise of Fascism and the crisis of capitalism in the context both of Italy and of the world. It was within this context that Gramsci



was embroiled in activity that combined militant organisational and intellectual struggle.

This practical and intellectual odyssey began with Gramsci devoting his energy to journalism through columns in *Il Grido del Popolo*, *Avanti!*, and *La Città Futura* between 1914 and 1918. Among other issues, this journalism analysed the concrete phenomena of the nature of state formation in Italy, the reorganisation of society and capitalism through periods of crisis, the introduction of new techniques of management into the productive sphere, the Russian Revolution, and the attempt to build socialism in Italy. Activity subsequently centred on the Factory Council movement in Turin and editorship of the journal *L'Ordine Nuovo* (1919–20) with the aim of realising a vision of revolution from below based on the occupation of factories. The role of the political party later became paramount during the founding and leadership of the PCd'I, whilst Gramsci also further dwelled on the organic crisis of capitalism in Italy in the paper *L'Unità* (1924–26). By 1926 Gramsci had drafted his essay 'Some Aspects of the Southern Question' which analysed class and territorial relations between workers and peasants in the north and south of Italy and the strategic dilemma of forging links between these groups as a prelude to national transformation. Just after this, Gramsci was arrested along with other Communist Party deputies, despite parliamentary immunity, and began an incarceration that was to last almost until his death in 1937. During the show trial against Gramsci, the prosecutor Michele Isgrò enunciated the infamous statement, 'We must prevent this brain from functioning for 20 years.' Yet Gramsci's ambition to concentrate on something *für ewig* (for always or eternity), according to a pre-established programme, began in 1929, when he started penning the *Prison Notebooks* (Gramsci 1994a: 82–5).<sup>2</sup> Within these writings a prolonged reflection unfolded on issues spanning the formation, development and social function of intellectuals; theatre, literary criticism and the role of popular taste in literature; nineteenth-century Italian history; the theory of history and historiography; and the rise of Americanism and Fordism, which all contributed to a major reworking of historical materialism. Although Gramsci's sentence ended on 21 April 1937, he suffered a fatal cerebral haemorrhage that finally ended his struggle against ill health on the morning of 27 April 1937 at the Quisisana clinic (Rome). Almost immediately his posthumous patrimony was fought over and constructed; something that has continued ever since. On Gramsci's heritage, one commentator has pronounced him as, 'the