

# ‘A third organ’? Antonio Gramsci’s conception of workers’ education

*We print here an article based on a talk given by Colin Waugh on 3/12/16 to the Wakefield Socialist History Group.*

Antonio Gramsci was born in 1891 - that is, twenty years after the unification of Italy - in rural Sardinia. He was one of seven children. His mother, Peppina Marcias, was Sardinian, from a family of small land-owners. She was literate, and bilingual in Sardinian and Italian. It was said that she ‘dressed like a European’. His father (Francesco Gramsci) came from the mainland (Campania). He had a law qualification, and was in Sardinia to supervise a land registry. In terms used later by Antonio Gramsci, then, his father was a typical ‘traditional intellectual’.

When Gramsci was four, he developed a tubercular infection in his spine, which resulted in a deformity and meant that as an adult he was less than 5' in height.

In 1898, as a result of a quarrel about local politics, his father was imprisoned for five years for alleged financial corruption, a sentence served on the mainland. Under these circumstances, the family’s land had to be sold, and Gramsci’s mother had little choice but to support the children by sewing. Gramsci himself was taken out of school at the age of eleven, and to help with this support he then worked ten hours a day, six and a half days a week, moving heavy ledgers about in a land registry, and going for days on end without a meal. However, when he was fifteen, Gramsci was able to return to school, and worked his way back into study, with the result that he won a scholarship to the University of Turin, starting there in 1911.

Gramsci, then, had been both a child labourer and - in a certain sense - an autodidact. But he was also what was called a *morto di fame* - a member of the layer of impoverished intellectuals whose standard of living was close to the starvation level of many peasants. His scholarship was not enough for him to live on, and he remained in poverty throughout his time as a student. Nevertheless he

was in line for a career as a lecturer (in linguistics) when in 1915, without graduating, he left university to work as a journalist for the Socialist Party (PSI) in Turin.

In May 1919, with Angelo Tasca, Palmiro Togliatti and Umberto Terracini, Gramsci started the weekly publication *L’Ordine Nuovo*. This rapidly came to exert a big influence on industrial workers in Turin, such that Gramsci in particular played a central role in the *Biennio Rosso* - the ‘two red years’, 1919 and 1920, which included the April 1920 general strike across Piedmont, and, in the following September, the factory occupations. However, this potential revolution was defeated, and followed at once by the fascist destruction of workers’ organisations, which in turn led in 1922 to a fascist government headed by the former leftwing socialist Benito Mussolini.

The Communist Party of Italy (PCd’I) was formed early in 1921 by people around *L’Ordine Nuovo* and a group led by Amadeo Bordiga. Gramsci was in Moscow as a delegate to the Communist International from May 1922 till November 1923, when he became general secretary of the PCd’I. As such, he was based initially in Vienna, returning to Italy as a member of parliament in May 1924. Despite the immunity this was supposed to provide, he was arrested in 1926 and imprisoned. At his trial the state prosecutor famously said, ‘We must put this brain out of action for twenty years’.

Gramsci was moved from one prison to another across Italy. Imprisonment destroyed his health; he died within days of release in 1937. However, he defied the prosecutor by writing several thousand pages of notes on political, cultural and philosophical issues. This material was smuggled out and passed to the PCd’I leadership, now headed by Palmiro Togliatti, in Moscow, and afterwards published as Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks*.

Gramsci's ideas have been distorted. They were distorted, first, by his imprisonment - because this cut him off from interaction with other leftwing thinkers, from libraries and from many sources of up-to-date information. Secondly, they were distorted by the Communist Party, which, in the aftermath of WW2, used a selective version of his *Prison Notebooks* to justify their 'historic compromise' - that is, the reformist strategy that the leaders now pursued. And thirdly, Gramsci's ideas have been distorted, to this day, by some of the academics who have written about him, many of whom have discussed his prison writings in isolation from their labour movement background, from articles he wrote earlier on, and from the circumstances under which he wrote while in prison.

One example of such academic distortion relates to the concept of what is usually called 'hegemony', but which Gramsci himself termed ideological hegemony. He is widely thought to have originated this idea, and it is often assumed to be his central contribution to thought. But in fact everybody who was a socialist thinker in the Marxist tradition at the time when Gramsci was active accepted that the ruling class ruled partly through ideas. Gramsci never used this idea to justify a Fabian Society-style strategy of 'permeation' - that is, of trying to convince the powerful to implement welfare measures. Another example of how his thinking has been distorted relates to the phrase 'organic intellectuals'. Gramsci himself seldom used this term, and when he did, never to designate a sociological category. Above all, he did not use it to mean just people from working-class backgrounds who have done degrees.

To start reclaiming Gramsci's real ideas we need to understand four things about him. First, he was a Marxist revolutionary. He was willing to die for this, and arguably did so, by refusing to apply for a pardon while in prison. Secondly, the *Biennio Rosso* was his central life experience. Thirdly, he developed a radically from-below view of socialism. Fourthly, his main theoretical contribution was in the area that in UK terms would be called 'independent working-class education' (IWCE). What, then, was IWCE?

In Gramsci's day there was in the UK a tradition that can be traced back to the 1830s of from-below collective self-education on the part of working-class activists. A tradition also developed of from-above middle-class interference in such activity. One form this interference took was university extension, which eventually (early 1908) culminated in WEA tutorial classes, as promoted by Albert Mansbridge and taught by R. H. Tawney. The two traditions then confronted one another in the 1909 'strike' (actually a boycott of lectures) by miners and railway-workers who were students at Ruskin College. The outcome on the workers' side was the formation of the Plebs

League, the Central Labour College (CLC) and eventually, after World War 1, the National Council of Labour Colleges (NCLC), which continued till the TUC shut it down in 1964. Those involved in these movements called them 'IWCE'.

Although this term was not used in Italy, Gramsci was involved in initiatives of this type throughout his political life. For example, while he was working for the PSI as a journalist, he was also taking part in workers' study circles across Turin, listening all the time to how those involved saw the world, and what they thought should happen. As a consequence, in December 1917 he supported proposals for a 'Cultural Association' of workers in Turin or, as he put it: 'the first nucleus . . . of a cultural organisation with a distinct socialist and proletarian identity, which would become, along with the [Socialist CW] Party and the *Confederazione del Lavoro* [ie the CGL union federation linked to the PSI. CW], the third organ in the Italian working class's drive to assert its rights'.

Secondly, for much of 1919, Gramsci spoke by invitation to workers' circles in Fiat and other factories, sometimes to three in an afternoon, and this helped to bring about a situation where, by the autumn of that year, over 30,000 Turin factory workers, many of them anarchists or syndicalists rather than PSI adherents like Gramsci, actively supported the *L'Ordine Nuovo* conception of workers' control via factory councils.

Thirdly, early on in his imprisonment, while confined on the island of Ustica, Gramsci joined with his factional opponent Amadeo Bordiga to provide political education classes for other inmates.

Above all, *L'Ordine Nuovo* itself focused on education as well as agitation. For example, its editorial board was organised so as both to produce the publication and to operate as a continuous dialogue on broader issues between traditional intellectuals like Gramsci and workers like Enea Matta, Giovanni Boero and Pietro Mosso.

Gramsci's thinking on workers' education went through three phases: between leaving university and the start of the *Biennio Rosso*; during the *Biennio Rosso*; and during his imprisonment. The first and third of these phases both centre on Gramsci's criticisms of the Popular University that had been set up in Turin.

The first Popular Universities were started by middle-class people in France in the 1890s, during the Dreyfus case. They spread across southern Europe, mainly providing evening classes for the less well-off, including industrial and agricultural workers. In Italy this movement was coordinated by an anarchist, Luigi Molinari, but in Turin the Popular University was under the control of the PSI. The worldview of the PSI at this time was dominated by

Positivism - that is, in Marxist terms, by a form of crude (in the sense of non-dialectical) materialism. In Italy in particular, Positivism was tied up with a racist view of peasants in the south, Sardinia and Sicily, as held by, for example, the criminologists Cesare Lombroso and Enrico Ferri. (Lombroso had been a professor at the University of Turin, and Ferri from 1904 to 1905 edited the PSI paper *Avanti!*, and in 1921 was a PSI member of parliament.)

Before the *Biennio Rosso*, Gramsci's critique of the Turin Popular University was in some ways similar to the critique of university extension put forward in the UK by Albert Mansbridge and R. H. Tawney in the lead-up to the Ruskin College 'strike'. Specifically, he maintained that, instead of providing teaching and learning appropriate to students from non-standard entry routes, people lecturing in the Popular University were handing out predigested parcels of knowledge that at best constituted a poor imitation of mainstream higher education. Gramsci thought that intellectuals from the idealist tradition associated with Benedetto Croce could improve this situation by involving themselves in this work, much as Tawney and some of his co-thinkers did when they involved themselves in university extension via WEA tutorial classes in 1908-14.

However, during the *Biennio Rosso* Gramsci's views about the education of working-class adults changed. We have already seen that, through taking part in workers' circles in 1916 and 1917, he had been influenced by workers' own ideas about how factories could be run. Then during 1917, he, like many others on the left, latched on to the idea that the workers' formation of soviets - that is, councils composed of delegates representing workers in a local area - was a key driving force in the revolution in Russia. Further, from material published in *L'Ordine Nuovo* under Gramsci's editorship it is clear that he was inspired also by the IWW in the US and by the shop stewards' movement in Britain during World War 1. In 1919, then, he looked for something in Turin that was equivalent, at least in embryo, to such forms of workers' from-below self-organisation, and in particular to soviets in Petrograd, which, like Turin, was a centre of modern industry.

The Fiat factories in Turin had internal commissions - that is, management-sanctioned committees through which workers' representatives participated in some aspects of day-to-day decisionmaking. Gramsci saw these internal commissions as potential 'soviets', arguing that they could and should become factory councils - that is, organs of workers' control. At the same time, he also adopted a workers' control view of adult education, with the result that his overall standpoint was now much closer than hitherto to

the Ruskin strikers' and Plebs League position, according to which working-class activists could and should organise for themselves their own collective education. For example, on 14th February 1920, he wrote: 'The meetings and discussions in preparation for the Factory Councils were worth more for the education of the working class than ten years of reading pamphlets and articles by the owners of the genie in the lamp [i.e. prominent figures in the PSI. CW].' He went on: 'The working class has informed itself about the concrete experiences of its individual members and turned them into a collective heritage. The working class had educated itself in communist terms, using its own means and its own systems'.

Finally, we can see from material in the *Prison Notebooks* that by about 1930 Gramsci's conception of workers' education had undergone a third development. During the struggle against fascism, Gramsci came to believe that a key factor in the 'failure' of the *Biennio Rosso* was the role played in it by the Maximalists - the leftwing faction led by Giacinto Serrati - within the PSI. In 1912 the Maximalists had taken control of the PSI from its reformist founders headed by Filippo Turati. In the 1920s Gramsci came to view the Maximalists as traditional intellectuals who dominated this ostensibly workers' party by making demagogic speeches about revolution while doing nothing to organise for one. In a 1925 article, for example, he pointed out that, between late 1918 and 1921, PSI membership rose from 16,000 to 200,000. Noting that most of these new entrants joined 'in a short period after the war', he then argued: 'They had undergone no political preparation . . . and as a result they were easy prey for the petit-bourgeois demagogues and braggarts who constituted the phenomenon of Maximalism during the years 1919-20'. In short, he came to believe that a lack of ideological preparation of the PSI rank and file made it easier for the ruling class, through the influence exercised by Maximalists over the PSI and by union officials over the CGL, to isolate and defeat the September 1920 factory occupations, and, in the longer term, to deepen existing divisions between workers in the north of Italy and peasants in the south and islands.

This analysis stands behind the discussion in the *Prison Notebooks* where Gramsci, in discussing once again the Turin Popular University, talked more broadly about the relations between traditional intellectuals, the Communist Party, and wider layers of the Italian population. Gramsci now compared the Popular University to 'the first contacts between English merchants and the negroes of Africa', in which 'trashy baubles were exchanged for nuggets of gold'. He went on to propose a solution to this state of affairs through dialogic mutual education, on the

one hand *within* a group of thinkers and organisers comprising both socialist traditional intellectuals and working-class activists, and, on the other, *between* this group and broader circles of workers, technicians, poor peasants, artisans, shopkeepers, impoverished intellectuals and other sections of what he referred to as 'the instrumental classes'. He argued that, in an attempt at workers' education such as the Popular University: '... one could only have had cultural stability and an organic quality of thought if ... the intellectuals [involved in workers' education CW] had been organically the intellectuals of those masses, and if they had worked out and made coherent the principles and the problems raised by the masses in their practical activity ...'

Further, in this third phase of Gramsci's thinking, his emphasis was all the time on levelling up, and on fostering people's capacity to think and act independently. By this route, he argued, 'a philosophical movement properly so called' could be built, and, as well as educating those involved, this movement would 'elaborate a form of thought superior to 'common sense' and coherent on a scientific plane' - that is, it would develop valid theory, and in doing this, finally, would 'never forget to remain in contact with [ordinary people] and indeed find in this contact the source of the problems it sets out to study and to resolve'. So whereas before the *Biennio Rosso*, Gramsci thought in terms of traditional intellectuals bringing high quality education to workers via a cultural 'third organ', he now thought in terms of educational dialogue between, on the one hand, traditional intellectuals who were serious socialists and, on the other, working-class activists. This dialogue would, in his view, be under the control of those workers, and it would be central to the overall dynamic of the working-class movement. How does this approach relate to earlier socialist ideas about the education of activists?

In late 1843, Karl Marx wrote that: 'As philosophy finds its material weapons in the proletariat, the proletariat finds its intellectual weapons in philosophy.' By 'philosophy' he meant university-educated intellectuals like himself, for example the leftwing Young Hegelians who with him took part in the 'Doctors' Club', while by the 'proletariat' he would have had in mind people like textile workers in Lancashire. The approach implied by Marx in this statement was innovative for its time, and in a way envisages dialogue along the lines supported by Gramsci 90 years later. However, the form of words used could be taken to imply that each party to the dialogue uses the other as its instrument. In 1925, Gramsci, in an approach more in line with Marx's later thinking, pointed to a danger with such a

formulation, when he criticised the 'anti-proletarian spirit of the petty-bourgeois intellectuals who believe they are the salt of the earth and see the workers as the material instrument of a social transformation rather than as the conscious and intelligent protagonist of revolution'.

Again, in *What Is To Be Done?*, published in February 1902, Lenin quoted Karl Kautsky's argument that an advanced conception of socialism can become available to working-class people only if it is brought to them from outside by traditional intellectuals - in other words, that workers are not able to develop such a conception for themselves. Lenin at this stage expressed broad agreement with this, adding, however, a footnote in which he maintained that workers do take part in this process, but 'as theoreticians of socialism', rather than as workers' *per se*. In other words, like Gramsci around 1930 he had come to believe that workers could and would become thinkers and organisers - in short, intellectuals of a new kind - through dialogue within the socialist movement.

The conception of IWCE put forward by Gramsci in the *Prison Notebooks* can be seen, then, as a valid development of approaches implicit in writings by Marx and Lenin where they addressed the question of workers' education as an aspect of class struggle.

There is no obligation on activists today to be interested in Gramsci unless his ideas offer a guide to what we need to do now. Further, the value of these ideas is necessarily still uncertain, both because he raised questions and pointed a direction rather than laying down a detailed route map, and because there hasn't been a serious attempt to test his ideas in practice. However, the IWCE tradition of workers' education, the WEA's version of this (WETUC), and the tradition of shop stewards' training substituted by the TUC for both of these in the 1970s, are all now in decay\*. At the same time, the state of mainstream post-compulsory education suggests that it is less realistic than ever to hope that this on its own can provide working-class activists with the education they need. Therefore we would do well to study Gramsci's thought in this area.

**\*As we go to press it has emerged that Ruskin College is effectively cutting its BA and MA International Labour and Trade Union Studies course and making the teaching staff redundant. Please see: <https://friendsofruskin.wordpress.com/2017/03/24/defend-ruskins-ba-and-ma-courses/>**