Antonio Gramsci was one of the pioneers of Western or humanistic Marxism—a tradition that opposed orthodox Marxism for its determinism and its objective materialist conception of history. Disenchantment among Marxists with the prevailing orthodoxy was fueled by unfolding historical events. By the mid-1930s, economic depressions had come and gone without producing the systemic collapse of capitalism that Marx had predicted. World War I, from 1914 to 1918, and the subsequent disintegration of proletarian internationalism nourished the suspicion that the European masses had ceased to be a revolutionary force—if indeed they ever were. The rapid rise of fascism and Nazism in the years following the war reinforced the gathering sense that Marx's predictions were mistaken. In place of deterministic modes of analysis, a new breed of Marxist, influenced by Hegelian categories of thought, began to highlight the importance of human agency, of creative human action, in historical development. Every contribution Gramsci made to Marxist theory was underpinned by his belief in the power of the reflective human subject. This belief itself may have been spawned by his own triumph over personal adversity.

Gramsci's Early Life
Born in Sardinia, the son of a minor public official, Gramsci endured a miserable childhood. Mocked by other children because of his physical shortcomings (he was a hunchback of diminutive stature) and family scandal (his father was imprisoned for corruption), he compensated by becoming something of a bookworm. His academic prowess was sufficient to earn him a scholarship to the University of Turin, where he specialized in linguistics. While there, he became acutely aware of northern prejudice against southern Italians like himself, and his resentment soon transmuted into political activism. In 1913, he joined the Italian Socialist Party (PSI), which was then (at least officially) Marxist in orientation. Before too long, his literary gifts were recognized, and he became a frequent contributor to party publications. Inspired by the romantic intransigence of Georges Sorel and the neo-Hegelian spiritualism of Benedetto Croce, the young revolutionary displayed nothing but contempt for the scientific reductivism of the more orthodox Marxists. Indeed, he wrote a famous article after the Russian Revolution interpreting that event as a revolution “against Capital,” as a victory of will power over Marxist materialism.

Gramsci on Political Organization
If Gramsci's hostility to economic determinism was far from orthodox, his ideas on political organization exposed him to charges of treachery. By 1919, he had become a prominent figure in the Italian factory
council movement, its theory elaborated in *Ordine Nuovo*, a dissident socialist publication, during the *biennio rosso* of 1919 to 1920. The central ideal of the *ordinovista* group was that the factory council structure, not the party, should be the main vehicle of revolutionary education, as well as the institutional framework of the future society. The *biennio rosso* was a period of considerable industrial strife, but the PSI seemed strangely reluctant to seize the opportunity for revolutionary mobilization. Gramsci explained their “betrayal” in terms of the logic of parliamentary electioneering, which encouraged the PSI to obey the rules of the game. Trade unions, he added, were no better, as they expressed a view of labor as a commodity. Factory councils, on the other hand, could transcend the logic of capitalism, embedded as they were in the quotidian work experience of the proletariat.

Gramsci and his colleagues thought that this recipe for “revolution from below” was impeccably Marxist, but they never resolved the central conundrum raised by their strategy: How can a reliance on the spontaneous insurrectionary instincts of the proletariat be reconciled with the discipline and coordination necessary for successful revolution? After some initial successes, the council movement petered out as the Italian industrialists, spurred on by a reformist government, made some timely concessions to the unions. Militancy gave way to resigned acceptance. Appalled by this development and alarmed by the growing threat of fascism, Gramsci abandoned the *Ordine Nuovo* strategy and adopted a more orthodox approach, proclaiming the primacy of the party. Along with a group of Leninists who were also disillusioned with the supposed reformism of the PSI, Gramsci helped to found the Italian Communist Party (PCI) in 1921. By now, the former *ordinovista* was spouting a standard Leninist line, routinely comparing revolution to war, and calling for rigorous direction from above by a revolutionary officer class. In 1924, with the blessing of Moscow, Gramsci became both general secretary of the PCI and a member of parliament. The shy and retiring scholar from the Sardinian backwoods, a man with a deformed body and a reedy voice, had somehow become a formidable politician. But survival in a political system where Mussolini was gradually consolidating his power could never be guaranteed. In 1926, Gramsci was arrested for allegedly conspiring to overthrow the government, and he remained a prisoner of the fascist regime until just before his death from natural causes in 1937.

**Prison Notebooks and the Exploration of Doctrine**

During his confinement, he produced his major theoretical achievement—a vast collection of notes and (mainly unfinished) essays published posthumously as the *Prison Notebooks* (1929-1935). Despite their elliptical, labyrinthine, and often incomprehensible nature, the *Notebooks* secured Gramsci a place alongside Gyorgy Lukács as one of the great theoreticians of Hegelian and humanistic Marxism. Gramsci’s earlier writings, while bearing the imprint of his capacious theoretical imagination, were basically the outpourings of a political polemicist and pamphleteer. The different stances he adopted usually reflected particular circumstances and events. The *Notebooks* offer a more considered exploration of doctrine, set within a more synoptic framework. Prison was for him the functional equivalent of an ivory tower, allowing the former communist functionary to let his mind roam freely. While focusing on politics and philosophy, the *Notebooks* explore an astonishing range of topics, including sociolinguistics and literary criticism. But their most striking feature is their relentless attack on every axiom of dialectical materialism. Like Lukács, Gramsci argued that the orthodox Marxists had wrongly interpreted Marx as wanting to substitute Matter for the Hegelian Idea. According to Gramsci, Marx was a materialist only in the sense that he gave priority to the economic organization of society—which, of course, incorporates conscious human action. In contrast to the orthodox Marxists, Gramsci
refused to see people as nothing more than a material object, subject to the same dialectical laws that
govern the world of nature. The materialist interpretation of consciousness, correctly understood, had
nothing to do with physiological reductionism; it simply held that all things mental—emotions, feelings,
ideas—are in some sense the products of social interaction.

Gramsci’s emphasis on human subjectivity also led him to deny the common Marxist belief that
knowledge was merely the passive reflection of a ready-made universe. The external reality we
confront, says Gramsci, is not a pure objective datum, independent of cognitive activity or human
purposes. Marxism, it follows, should not be viewed as a scientific description of an objective world,
considered in the abstract. Marxism's validity, like that of any other doctrine, must ultimately be
determined by practice, by the social functions it performs. Theoretical knowledge and practical activity
are two sides of the same coin. Since truth depends on the successful mediation, as distinct from
reflection, of reality, theory must constantly evolve to cope with historically modified human
experience. Gramsci, therefore, derides the tendency to turn Marxism into a closed system, fitting the
whole of reality into an abstract dialectical scheme. To the contrary, Marxism, as he conceived it, was a
form of absolute historicism, capable of demonstrating its truth only through practical success. Neither
Marxism nor any other worldview can claim to be true unless it wins mass acceptance and penetrates
deeply into everyday life, he thought. The implicit relativism of his absolute historicism can be
misleading; Gramsci explicitly upheld the independent validity of logical and empirical procedures.
Perhaps he thought that such procedures could take us only so far when analyzing complex theoretical
structures, as such structures usually combine judgments of fact (which can be evaluated rationally) with
judgments of value (which cannot be so evaluated).

Because of his stress on “man-the-creator,” Gramsci poured scorn on fatalistic conceptions of
Marxism, which posited immutable laws underlying social evolution. More specifically, he rejected the
notion that human liberation was an inevitable consequence of the internal dynamics of capitalism. Such
iron-clad certainty about the future was a direct result of Marxism’s fallacious claim to scientificity, he
said. Not only was determinism false, in Gramsci’s opinion; it was also a kind of bad faith, a culpable
form of self-deception by means of which Marxists evaded their historical responsibilities. After all, it
makes little sense to risk life and limb in pursuit of an outcome as certain as the rising of the sun.
Gramsci was also adamant that economic determinism cannot adequately explain why capitalism
persists despite its debilitating contradictions. By reducing thought to a reflex of the productive
process, Marx’s followers paid insufficient attention to the motivational power of myths and ideas in
general. Physical domination, Gramsci insists, is not enough. The cohesion of advanced capitalist
society depends primarily on the hegemony—that is, the spiritual and cultural supremacy—of the ruling
class, which through manipulation of civil society (and especially the mechanisms of socialization, such as
the media, the churches, the trade unions, political parties, educational institutions) manages to instill its
values and beliefs in the rest of the population. Although Gramsci always regarded himself as an
historical materialist who explained ideas in terms of their role within a specific mode of production, his
theory of hegemony calls to mind the Hegelian principle that any given society embodies a spirit or
idea, firmly planted in the psychology of its inhabitants. Herein lies the key, Gramsci tells us, to
capitalism’s vexatious powers of endurance. Classical Marxists never dreamed of giving such weight to
cultural or ideational factors. Their model of society was based on endemic conflict, kept in check only
by state violence or the threat of it. For Gramsci, however, the moral and cultural integration of the
masses into a system operating against their interests rendered physical coercion unnecessary, in all
but the most extreme circumstances.
The theory of hegemony carries important strategic implications and enabled Gramsci to revise the classical Marxist-Leninist approach to revolution—then held as an article of faith. He lamented the fact that most Marxists, preoccupied as they were with economic laws of development, had lost sight of the political dimension in human affairs. As an admirer of Niccolò Machiavelli, he understood that Marxism was deficient in the tools of political analysis. Because his fellow Marxists assumed that the foundation of social order was force, they conceived the struggle for socialism as a paramilitary assault on the coercive apparatus of the state. Gramsci acknowledged that this approach was valid in the case of Russia in 1917, where the Tsarist regime lacked developed mechanisms of cultural organization and where social order was founded on a combination of apathy and repression. In modern capitalist states, however, where workers are integrated into the prevailing framework of bourgeois values, the revolutionary forces must engage in a “war of position,” aiming to scrape away the whole system of bourgeois attitudes and narratives and to create a proletarian counterhegemony. In the West, revolution presupposes a peaceful and gradual transformation of mass consciousness. A military-style attack on the state's defenses will still be necessary (Gramsci called this the “war of manoeuvre”), but the decisive battles will already have been won. Insurrection is the final, rather than the initial act in the revolutionary process.

Gramsci’s preoccupation with the battle of ideas encouraged him to analyze the role of intellectuals in shaping mass psychology. He divided them into two categories: (1) traditional intellectuals (artists, scholars, priests), who think of themselves as above economic or political imperatives and struggles, and (2) organic intellectuals (civil servants, political activists, managers, technocrats, trade union bosses), who are more closely tied to the classes they represent. Although the latter are not normally deemed to be intellectuals, Gramsci wants to make the point that they, as much as their traditional counterparts, are engaged—directly or indirectly—in the propagation of values and attitudes that either sustain or undermine the established order. For him, ideology is not simply something that we encounter in books or lectures or sermons; it is embedded in social and political practices and is expressed in behavior as well as words.

Although Gramsci never advocated a parliamentary road to socialism, proponents of Eurocommunism claimed him as a kindred spirit. One can understand why. His emphasis on persuasion and consent is an obvious source of inspiration to those who wish to integrate Marxism and liberalism. It is, however, his analysis of social order under capitalism that most excites political theorists, especially those on the left of the political spectrum, who are anxious to find an acceptable explanation for the continued acquiescence of the exploited masses. Gramsci’s view that subjective preferences are not necessarily reducible to economic interests may seem obvious to most people, but it came as a revelation to Marxists.

**Gramsci’s Legacy**

At bottom, Gramsci's reputation as a theorist stems from his belief that our perception of the world is, to some degree, socially and mentally constructed. By the 1960s, the materialism and positivism of the orthodox Marxists had become extremely unfashionable, and Gramsci’s Hegelian leanings struck a responsive chord. He became a symbol for the hopes and dreams of all those who wanted to rescue Marxism from its deterministic associations and to stress instead the contingency of human action and the role of human subjectivity in the historical process. His almost legendary status has caused some of his intellectual disciples to overlook the subtle nuances and historical limitations of his ideas. This tendency remains strong, although modern Gramscians (or neo-Gramscians) are often content to be
labeled post-Marxists, a category of thinkers who refuse to be confined by the classic texts. Particularly significant have been recent attempts to align Gramsci with Michel Foucault's discourse theory, according to which social reality is symbolically constituted in conformity with existing power relations. Gramscian notions of hegemony have even been extended to the international system in an attempt to challenge the dominant assumption of realist international relations that existing categories of analysis (nation-states, permanent conflict) enjoy ontological primacy over alternative (emancipatory) constructions. Although such interpretations ignore Gramsci's insistence on the “facticity” of the external world, they testify to the enduring relevance and fecundity of the *Prison Notebooks*.

**See also**

Fascism, Foucault, Michel, Hegelians, Hegemony, Historicism, Humanism, Lenin and the Russian Revolution, Marxism, Positivism, Sorel, Georges

**Further Readings**


Femia, Joseph V.
APA

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