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Theoretical Approach to the Contributions of Antonio Gramsci to the Development of Sociology

AbdulGaniyu Abolore Issa
&
AbdulAziz Isiaka

Abstract
This paper discusses Antonio Gramscias, a leading Italian Marxist. He was an intellectual, a journalist and a major theorist. Gramsci's ideas and the later works based upon them propose a debate that is rather abstract with a concept of cultural hegemony as a substance with a life of its own settled over the whole public of capitalist societies to confuse the reality. This paper also advances that Gramsci's analysis went much further than any previous Marxist theory to provide an understanding of why the European working class had on the whole failed to develop revolutionary consciousness after the First World War and had instead moved towards reformism, i.e. tinkering with the system rather than working towards overthrowing it. It was a far more subtle theory of power than any of his contemporaries and went a long way to explain how the ruling class ruled. He saw one of his roles as assisting in the creation of organic intellectuals from the working class and the winning over of as many traditional intellectuals to the revolutionary cause as possible. Gramsci's insistence on the fundamental importance of the ideological struggle to social change meant that this struggle was not limited to consciousness rising but must aim at consciousness transformation - the creation of a socialist consciousness. This paper discusses a number of critical views about Gramsci's ideas that could be reviewed. There are entire libraries dedicated exclusively to Gramsci and his theories from heterogeneous perspectives. They seem to be an unlimited source of inspiration. For the purpose of this paper, specific flaws were identified and magnified.

Keywords: Marxism, Working Class, Reformism, Hegemony, Domination

Introduction

Antonio Gramsci who lived between 1891 and 1937 was a leading Italian Marxist. He was an intellectual, a journalist and a major theorist who spent his last eleven years in Mussolini's prisons. During this time, he completed 32 notebooks containing almost 3,000 pages. These notebooks were smuggled out from his prison and published in Italian after the war but did not find an English-language publisher until the 1970s. The central and guiding theme of the Notebooks was the development of a new Marxist theory applicable to the conditions of advanced capitalism. He was born in a little town on the island of Sardinia in 1891, one of seven children. His was one of a very small minority of families on the island that could read and write and because of this he did well at school, finally winning a scholarship to the University of Turin. Italy was then, as it is now, a country divided between North and South. The South is overwhelmingly rural with a large illiterate peasantry and the North essentially an industrialized region with a well-organized and politically aware working class. Antonio Gramsci was born on January 22,

1891 in Ales in the province of Cagliari in Sardinia. He was the fourth of seven children born to Francesco Gramsci and Giuseppina Marcias.

His relationship with his father was never very close, but he had a strong affection and love for his mother, whose resilience, gift for story-telling and pungent humor made a lasting impression on him. Of his six siblings, Antonio enjoyed a mutual interest in literature with his younger sister, Teresina, and seemed to have always felt a spiritual kinship with his two brothers, Gennaro, the oldest of the Gramsci children, and Carlo, the youngest. Gennaro's early embrace of socialism contributed significantly to Antonio's political development. In 1897, Antonio's father was suspended and subsequently arrested and imprisoned for five years for alleged administrative abuses. Shortly thereafter, Giuseppina and her children moved to Ghilarza, where Gramsci attended elementary school. Sometime during these years of trial and near poverty, he fell from the arms of a servant, to which his family attributed his hunched back and stunted growth: he was an inch or two short of five feet in height.

The idea of Gramsci as a leader as well as a theoretician is very relevant to understanding his notes, especially when we study the place he reserved for the intellectuals in society. Just like Karl Marx, he believed that everything in life is determined by capital. The flow of money affects our relations with other persons, with nature and with the world. Our thoughts and goals are the products of property structures. Every cultural activity (culture in its widest sense) is reduced to a direct or indirect expression of some preceding and controlling economic content. Men find themselves born in a process independent of their will. They cannot control it, they can seek only to understand it and guide their actions accordingly.

In line with the position of Karl Marx, he posits that the dynamic of a society can only be understood in terms of a system where the dominant ideas are formulated by the ruling class to secure its control over the working class. The latter, exploited by the former, will eventually try to change this situation (through revolution), producing its own ideas as well as its own industrial and political organization. He concurred with Marx's deterministic economic conception, which divides the society in two layers or levels: base and superstructure. The first, upon which everything grows, is composed by material production, money, objects, the relations of production and the stage of the development of productive forces. In other words, the palpable and tangible world plus the economic relations that capital generates. The second, determined by the first, is where we can find the political and ideological institutions; our social relations; a set of ideas; our cultures; hopes; dreams and spirit. The world of souls i.e. souls shaped by capital.

The Contributions of Antonio Gramsci

(i) *The Concept of Hegemony*

Gramsci was concerned about eradicating economic determinism from Marxism and developing its explanatory power with respect to superstructural institutions. So, he held that class struggle must always involve ideas and ideologies, ideas that would make the

revolution and also that would prevent it. He stressed the role performed by human agency in historical change: economic crises by themselves would not subvert capitalism. Gitlin, 1994: 516, observed that Gramsci was more "dialectic" than "deterministic": he tried to build a theory which recognized the autonomy, independence and importance of culture and ideology.

Strinati (1995) posits that Gramsci's theory suggests that subordinated groups accept the ideas, values and leadership of the dominant group not because they are physically or mentally induced to do so, nor because they are ideologically indoctrinated, but because they have reasons of their own. From Gramsci's view, the supremacy of the bourgeoisie is based on two, equally important, facts, which are economic domination and intellectual and moral leadership.

Dominant groups in society, including fundamentally but not exclusively the ruling class, maintain their dominance by securing the 'spontaneous consent' of subordinate groups, including the working class, through the negotiated construction of a political and ideological consensus, which incorporates both dominant and dominated groups (Strinati, 1995). Periodically, there may develop an organic crisis in which the governing group begins to disintegrate, creating the opportunity for a subordinate class to transcend its limitations and build up a broad movement capable of challenging the existing order and achieving hegemony. But if the opportunity is not taken, the balance of forces will shift back to the dominant class, which reestablishes its hegemony on the basis of a new pattern of alliances.

Hegemony goes beyond culture, because of its insistence on relating the 'whole' social process to specific distributions of power and influence. To say that 'men' define and shape their whole lives is true only in abstraction. In any actual society, there are specific inequalities in means and therefore in capacity to realize this process. In a class society, these are primarily inequalities between classes. Gramsci therefore introduced the necessary recognition of dominance and subordination in what has still, however, to be recognized as a whole process (Williams, 1977).

Gramsci's significance for informal education lies in three realms. First, his exposition of the notion of hegemony provides us with a way of coming to understand the context in which informal educators function and the possibility of critique and transformation. Second, his concern with the role of organic intellectuals deepens our understanding of the place of informal educators. Last, his interest in schooling and more traditional forms of education points to the need not to dismiss more traditional forms. We will look at each of these in turn.

Gramsci accepted the analysis of capitalism put forward by Marx in the previous century and accepted that the struggle between the ruling class and the subordinate working class was the driving force that moved society forward. What he found unacceptable was the traditional Marxist view of how the ruling class ruled. It was here that Gramsci made a major contribution to modern thought in his concept of the role played by ideology. Often the term "ideology" is seen as referring simply to a system of ideas and beliefs. However, it is closely tied to the concept of power and the definition given by Anthony Giddens is

probably the easiest to understand. Giddens (1997) defines ideology as "shared ideas or beliefs which serve to justify the interests of dominant groups." Its relationship to power is that it legitimizes the differential power that groups hold and as such it distorts the real situation that people find themselves in. The traditional Marxist theory of power was a very one-sided one based on the role of force and coercion as the basis of ruling class domination. This was reinforced by Lenin whose influence was at its height after the success of the Russian Revolution in 1917. Gramsci felt that what was missing was an understanding of the subtle but pervasive forms of ideological control and manipulation that served to perpetuate all repressive structures. He identified two quite distinct forms of political control: domination, which refers to direct physical coercion by the police and the armed forces, and hegemony, which refers to both ideological control and more crucially, consent. He assumed that no regime, regardless of how authoritarian it might be, could sustain itself *primarily* through organized state power and armed force. In the long run, it had to have popular support and legitimacy in order to maintain stability.

By hegemony, Gramsci meant the permeation throughout society of an entire system of values, attitudes, beliefs and morality that has the effect of supporting the status quo in power relations. Hegemony in this sense might be defined as an 'organizing principle' that is diffused by the process of socialization into every area of daily life. To the extent that this prevailing consciousness is internalized by the population, it becomes part of what is generally called 'common sense', so that the philosophy, culture and morality of the ruling elite comes to appear as the natural order of things (Boggs,1976).

Marx's basic division of society into a base represented by the economic structure and a superstructure represented by the institutions and beliefs prevalent in society was accepted by most Marxists familiar with the concepts. Gramsci took this a step further when he divided the superstructure into those institutions that were overtly coercive and those that were not. The coercive ones, which were basically the public institutions such as the government, the police, the armed forces and the legal system he regarded as the state or political society and the non-coercive ones were the others such as the churches, the schools, trade unions, political parties, cultural associations, clubs, the family, etc. which he regarded as civil society. To some extent, schools could fit into both categories. Parts of school life are quite clearly coercive (compulsory education, the national curriculum, national standards and qualifications) whilst others are not (the hidden curriculum). So for Gramsci, society was made up of the relations of production (capital v labour); the state or political society (coercive institutions) and civil society (all other non-coercive institutions).

Gramsci's analysis went much further than any previous Marxist theory to provide an understanding of why the European working class had on the whole failed to develop revolutionary consciousness after the First World War and had instead moved towards reformism, i.e. tinkering with the system rather than working towards overthrowing it. It was a far more subtle theory of power than any of his contemporaries and went a long way to explain how the ruling class ruled.

(ii) *The Role of Intellectuals in Society*

The second theme in Gramsci's work is that he saw the role of the intellectual as a crucial one in the context of creating counterhegemony. He was clear that the transformation from capitalism to socialism required mass participation. There was no question that socialism could be brought about by an elite group of dedicated revolutionaries acting for the working class. It had to be the work of the majority of the population conscious of what they were doing and not an organized party leadership. The revolution led by Lenin and the Bolsheviks in Russia in 1917 was *not* the model suitable for Western Europe or indeed any advanced industrialized country. The Leninist model took place in a backward country with a huge peasantry and a tiny working class. The result was that the mass of the population were not involved. For Gramsci, mass consciousness was essential and the role of the intellectual was crucial. It is important at this juncture to note that when Gramsci wrote about intellectuals, he was not referring solely to the boffins and academics that sat in ivory towers or wrote erudite pieces for academic journals only read by others of the same ilk. His definition went much further, as he spread his net much wider.

Gramsci's notebooks are quite clear on the matter. He writes that "all men are intellectuals [and presumably women] but not all men have in society the function of intellectuals." What he meant by that was that everyone has an intellect and uses it, but not all are intellectuals by social function. He explains this by stating that everyone at some time fries a couple of eggs or sews up a tear in a jacket. We do not necessarily say that everyone is a cook or a tailor. Each social group that comes into existence creates within itself one or more strata of intellectuals that gives it meaning, that helps to bind it together and helps it function. They can take the form of managers, civil servants, the clergy, professors and teachers, technicians and scientists, lawyers, doctors, etc. Essentially, they have developed organically alongside the ruling class and function for the benefit of the ruling class. Gramsci maintained that the notion of intellectuals as being a distinct social category independent of class was a myth.

He identified two types of intellectuals-traditional and organic. Traditional intellectuals are those who do regard themselves as autonomous and independent of the dominant social group and are regarded as such by the population at large. They seem autonomous and independent. They give themselves an aura of historical continuity despite all the social upheavals that they might go through. The clergy are an example of that as are the men of letters, the philosophers and professors. These are what we tend to think of when we think of intellectuals. Although they like to think of themselves as independent of ruling groups, this is usually a myth and an illusion. They are essentially conservative allied to and assisting the ruling group in society. The second type is the organic intellectual. This is the group mentioned earlier that grows organically with the dominant social group, the ruling class, and is their thinking and organizing element. For Gramsci, it was important to see them for what they were. They were produced by the educational system to perform a function for the dominant social group in society. It is through this group that the ruling class maintains its hegemony over the rest of society. Having said that, what was required for those who wished to overthrow the present system was a

counter hegemony, a method of upsetting the consensus, of countering the 'common sense' view of society.

Gramsci, in his Notebooks, maintained that what was required was that not only should a significant number of 'traditional' intellectuals come over to the revolutionary cause (Marx, Lenin and Gramsci were examples of this), but also the working class movement should produce its own organic intellectuals. Gramsci said that all men were intellectuals but not all men have the function of intellectuals in society. He went on to point out that "there is no human activity from which every form of intellectual participation can be excluded" and that everyone, outside their particular professional activity, "carries on some form of intellectual activity ..., participates in a particular conception of the world, has a conscious line of moral conduct, and therefore contributes to sustain a conception of the world or to modify it, that is, to bring into being new modes of thought". This sounds as if he was exaggerating the possibilities, but what he was really trying to convey is that people have the capability and the capacity to think. The problem was how to harness those capabilities and capacities.

Antonio saw one of his roles as assisting in the creation of organic intellectuals from the working class and the winning over of as many traditional intellectuals to the revolutionary cause as possible. He attempted this through the columns of a journal called *L'Ordine Nuovo* (New Order), subtitled "a weekly review of Socialist culture". This journal came out at the same time as the huge spontaneous outbreak of industrial and political militancy that swept Turin in 1919. This outbreak mirrored events throughout the industrial world that shook the very foundations of capitalist society.

Gramsci (1871) insisted that the fundamental importance of the ideological struggle to social change meant that this struggle was not limited to consciousness raising but must aim at consciousness transformation - the creation of a socialist consciousness. It was not something that could be imposed on people but must arise from their actual working lives. The intellectual realm, therefore, was not to be seen as something confined to the elite, but to be seen as something grounded in everyday life. Gramsci wrote that "the mode of being of the new intellectual can no longer consist in eloquence but in active participation in practical life, as constructor, organizer, permanent persuader and not just a simple orator.

Smith (1994:127) submits that the role of informal educators in local communities links up with Gramsci's ideas on the role of the intellectual. The educator working successfully in the neighborhood and with the local community has a commitment to that neighborhood. They are not 'here today and gone tomorrow'. They may have always lived in the area and have much in common with the local people or they may not. What is important is that they develop relationships with the people they work with that ensures that wherever they go, they are regarded as part of the community ('one of us'). "They can strive to sustain people's critical commitment to the social groups with whom they share fundamental interests. Their purpose is not necessarily individual advancement, but human well-being as a whole.

(iii) *Gramsci and Communications Matters*

According to Gramsci, the mass media have to be interpreted as an instrument to spread and reinforce the dominant hegemony, although they could be used by those who want to spread counter-hegemonic ideas too.

Strinati (1995) argued that Pop culture and the mass media are subject to the production, reproduction and transformation of hegemony through the institution of civil society, which covers the areas of cultural production and consumption. Hegemony operates culturally and ideologically through the institutions of civil society, which characterizes mature liberal-democratic, capitalist societies. These institutions include education, the family, the church, the mass media, popular culture, etc. Different authors (Foucault, Althauser, Feminist theories, etc.) have taken Gramsci's idea of a prominent discourse, reinterpreting and proposing it as a suitable explanation about our culture, the construction of our beliefs, identities, opinions and relations, everything under the influence of a dominant common sense. Eventually, we can suggest that the media could operate also as a tool of insurrection.

(iv) *Gramscion Schooling and Education*

Schooling played an important part in Gramsci's analysis of modern society. The school system was just one part of the system of ideological hegemony in which individuals were socialized into maintaining the status quo. He did not write much in his Notebooks on the school system, but what he did write was essentially a critique of the increased specialisation occurring within the Italian school system and a plea for a more 'comprehensive' form of education. The vocational school was being created in order to help 'modernize' Italy. This new system was "advocated as being democratic, while in fact it is destined not merely to perpetuate social differences but to crystallize them in Chinese complexities". Gramsci described the social character of the traditional schools as determined by the fact that each social group throughout society had its own type of school "intended to perpetuate a specific traditional function, ruling or subordinate" but the answer to the question of modernizing education was not to create a whole system of different types of vocational school, but "to create a single type of formative school (primary-secondary) which would take the child up to the threshold of his choice of job, forming him during this time as a person capable of thinking, studying and ruling or controlling those who rule" (Gramsci, 1971).

Gramsci's writings on education are not always easy to understand. In fact, they are quite confusing at times. They are certainly open to misinterpretation (Allman, 1988; Entwistle, 1979). The editors of his Prison Notebooks make the point that his apparent "conservative" eulogy of the old system of education in Italy was really only a device to get round the prison censors (Gramsci, 1971:24). However, this device has had the effect of perplexing more than his captors. For informal educators, Gramsci stands out as a major thinker. The importance he placed on critical self awareness, on critical social awareness, on the importance of the intellectual being part of everyday life, on the part played by so-called 'common sense' in maintaining the status quo and the

transformational possibilities of education - all of these are now commonplace in the formation of informal educators.

The Merits of Gramsci's Theory

Every author who has studied or developed the writings of Gramsci has something different to stress from his theory. Some of these opinions include interalia:

David Harris argued that Gramci is responsible for the emergence of a critical sociology of culture and for the politicization of culture.

Raymond Williams noted that the forms of domination and subordination correspond much more closely to the normal process of social organization and control in developed societies than the idea of a ruling class, which are usually based on much earlier and simpler historical phases.

Paul Ransom submits that Gramsci resolved two central weaknesses of Marx's original approach that Marx was mistaken in assuming that social development always originates from the economic-structure; and, secondly, Marx placed too much faith in the possibility of a spontaneous outburst of revolutionary consciousness among the working class.

Todd Gitlin advanced that Gramsci's distinction of culture was a great advance for radical theories; it called attention to the routine structures of everyday 'common sense', which work to sustain class domination and tyranny.

Dominic Strinati opined that Gramsci suggested that there is dialectic between the process of production and the activities of consumption. He also displayed a lack of dogmatism, unlike some other Marxist authors.

The Flaws of Gramsci's Theory

There are a number of critical views about Gramsci's ideas that could be reviewed. There are entire libraries dedicated exclusively to him and his theories from heterogeneous perspectives. They seem to be an unlimited source of inspiration. For the purpose of this paper, specific flaws were magnified which include interalia:

(i) ***Dominic Strinati***

From Strinati's point of view, the main problem with Gramsci's ideas is the same as with the Frankfurt School's theories and Althusser's work: their Marxist background. A class-based analysis is always reductionist and tends to simplify the relation between the people and their own culture, which is the problem of confining a social theory within the Marxist limits. The deterministic framework does not allow history to contradict the theory, and the interpretation of reality becomes rather elementary.

(ii) *Raymond Williams*

Williams understands that culture is not only a vehicle of domination; he finds preferable a definition of culture as a language of co-operative shaping, of common contribution. He also thinks that Gramsci proposed the concept of hegemony as a uniform, static and abstract structure. Williams finds a third theoretical problem: how the modern citizen can distinguish between alternative and opposed initiatives, between the independent and the reactionary ideas. Because everything in society could be tied to the hegemonic thoughts, one can say that the dominant culture produces and limits its own forms of counter-culture. The notions of revolution and social change have no sense in these circumstances.

(iii) *David Harris*

He has mentioned that Gramsci's ideas about the role of intellectuals in society are rather elitist, and all the theory is too political and partisan to be credible. He adds later that another problem of Gramsci's thought is the lack of empiricism. There is no room for studies of audiences, surveys or something related directly with the people and their behaviour.

(iv) *Todd Gitlin*

Gitlin's opinion is that Gramsci's ideas, and the later works based upon them, propose a debate that is rather abstract with a concept of cultural hegemony as a substance with a life of its own settled over the whole public of capitalist societies to confuse the reality. A kind of evil power seeking to colonise our consciousness. But Gitlin wonders if the fact that the same film (or the same advertisement, or the same article, or the same tv programme) is subject to a variety of interpretations, may suggest a crisis of hegemonic ideology, a failure in the cultural programmed minds. Moreover, the success of media in modern societies implies a certain sensitivity to audience tastes, desires and tolerances, in order to perpetuate the system. From Gitlin's perspective, the relationship between audiences, media products and culture structures is less inflexible and more collaborative.

Conclusion

Antonio Gramsci is an unrepentant Marxist who opined that the society was made up of the relations of production (capital v labour); the state or political society (coercive institutions) and civil society (all other non-coercive institutions). Gramsci's analysis went much further than any previous Marxist theory to provide an understanding of why the European working class had on the whole failed to develop revolutionary consciousness after the First World War and had instead moved towards reformism, i.e. tinkering with the system rather than working towards overthrowing it. It was a far more subtle theory of power than any of his contemporaries and went a long way to explain how the ruling class ruled. He saw one of his roles as assisting in the creation of organic intellectuals from the working class and the winning over of as many traditional intellectuals to the revolutionary cause as possible. Gramsci's insistence on the fundamental importance of the ideological struggle to social change meant that this struggle was not limited to consciousness raising, but must aim at consciousness

transformation - the creation of a socialist consciousness. It was not something that could be imposed on people, but must arise from their actual working lives. The intellectual realm, therefore, was not to be seen as something confined to the elite, but to be seen as something grounded in everyday life. His intellectual life benefitted immensely from the Marxian inspiration and the ecological domination and injustices of his era.

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