

'A third organ'? Antonio Gramsci's conception of workers' education

1. What were key events in Gramsci's life?

- Born 1891, rural Sardinia
- (ie 20 years after unification)
- One of seven children
- Mother (Peppina Marcias): Sardinian, from family of small land-owners; literate; bilingual in Sardinian and Italian; 'dressed like European'
- Father (Francesco Gramsci): from mainland (Campania); legally qualified; in charge of land registry; ie, in terms used later by Gramsci, a typical 'traditional intellectual'
- At age 4, developed TB of spine, hence deformity, and less than 5' in height as adult
- 1898, father imprisoned (five years, on mainland) for alleged corruption (result of local political squabble)
- Family land sold; mother supported children by sewing
- G taken out of school at 11; to help support family, worked ten hours a day, six and a half days a week, dragging heavy ledgers about in land registry
- Days on end without a meal
- Returned to school at 15, and clawed his way back to win scholarship to Turin University, starting 1911.
- Hence both child labourer and - in certain sense - autodidact.
- But also *morto di fame* [low-grade intellectuals near peasant levels of starvation]

- Scholarship not enough to live on. Poverty stricken as student.
- Nevertheless en route to career as academic
- But in 1915 packed in university, without graduating, to work as journalist for PSI in Turin
- May 1919, started *L'Ordine Nuovo* weekly publication, [with Angelo Tasca, Palmiro Togliatti and Umberto Terracini].
- This a massive influence on industrial workers in Turin
- ON and G played central role in Biennio Rosso (= two red years, 1919 and 1920)
- Especially in April 1920 general strike across Piedmont, and occupation of factories in September 1920
- Potential revolution but defeated.
- Followed at once by fascist destruction of workers' organisations, leading to fascist government, with Mussolini prime minister from 1922, strengthened further in 1924.
- Communist Party of Italy formed early 1921 by L'Ordine Nuovo group and group round Amadeo Bordiga.
- Gramsci in Moscow as delegate to Comintern (May 1922 - November 1923).
- Became general secretary of PCI November 1923 (based initially in Vienna)
- Returned to Italy as Communist Party MP May 1924
- Arrested 1926 and imprisoned. Prosecutor said 'We must put this brain out of action for 20 years'.
- Moved from one prison to another all over Italy.
- Health destroyed.

- Defied prosecutor by writing Prison Notebooks
- Released 1937 and died within days.
- Notebooks smuggled out and passed to PCI leadership (Palmiro Togliatti) in Moscow.

2. How have Gramsci's ideas been distorted?

Distorted:

2.1 By imprisonment

- (ie because cut off from exchange with other socialists etc, and from libraries etc)

2.2 By PCI

- in aftermath of WW2, used selective version of Prison Notebooks to justify 'historic compromise' (ie reformist strategy)

2.3 By academics to this day.

- (they discuss PN in isolation from labour movement background / G's earlier writings / prison circumstances)

Examples:

2.4 'Hegemony'

- = ideological hegemony
- Gramsci widely thought to have originated this idea
- Widely assumed to be his central idea
- but all socialists in Marxist tradition then accepted that r/c ruled partly through ideas

- nothing to do with Fabian-style permeation / whispering in r/c ear

2.5 'Organic intellectuals'

- Gramsci seldom used this phrase
- did not use it to designate a sociological category
- especially did **not** use it to mean simply people from w/c backgrounds who've done degrees

3. How can we reclaim Gramsci's real ideas?

Starting point is to understand four things about him:

3.1 He was a Marxist revolutionary

- willing to die for this
- did so by refusing to apply for pardon while in prison

3.2 Biennio Rosso 1919-1920 his central life experience

3.3 He developed a radically from-below view of socialism

3.4 Main theoretical contribution in area of (in UK terms) 'Independent Working-Class Education'

4. What was 'IWCE'?

- tradition in UK going back to Chartism of from-below workers collective self-education on part of w/c activists
- in aftermath of Chartism, tradition also of from-above middle-class interference in this, eg university extension, eventually culminating (early 1908) in WEA tutorial classes, as promoted by Albert Mansbridge and taught by R. H. Tawney
- these two traditions met head-on in 1909 'strike' by miners and railway-workers who were students at Ruskin College

- outcome on workers' side was formation of Plebs League, CLC and eventually NCLC.
- continued till shut down by TUC in 1964.
- activists involved called this 'IWCE'

5. What was Gramsci's involvement in IWCE?

Involved in IWCE-type initiatives throughout his active political life

Examples:

5.1 While PSI journalist, also took part in workers' study circles across Turin

- listening all the time to how they saw the world, what they thought should happen etc
- December 1917, supported idea of a 'Cultural Association' of workers in Turin
- or, as Gramsci 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 [=CGL], the third organ in the Italian working class's drive to assert its rights'.

5.2 In 1919, spoke by invitation to workers' circles in Fiat and other factories, sometimes three in an afternoon

- Helped bring about situation where by autumn 1919, over 30,000 Turin factory workers, many of them anarchists or syndicalists, actively supported the ON conception of workers' control via factory councils.

5.3 Prison classes with Bordiga on Ustica

Above all, ON itself focused on education as well as agitation, and EB functioned as dialogue between trad. intellectuals like Gramsci and workers like Enea Matta, Giovanni Boero and Pietro Mosso.

6. How did Gramsci's thinking on workers' education develop?

Arguably went through three phases

7.1 Between leaving university and start of Biennio Rosso

7.2 During Biennio Rosso

7.3 In late 1920s / Prison Notebooks

First and third phases both centre on critique of Turin Popular University.

7. So what was the Popular University?

- PUs started by middle class in France in 1890s
- spread across southern Europe
- evening classes for less well-off, including workers
- in Italy, coordinated by anarchist Luigi Molinari, but in Turin under control of PSI
- PSI worldview dominated by Positivism
- ie in Marxist terms, form of crude (ie non-dialectical) materialism
- In Italy, Positivism tied up with racist view of southern peasants in south, Sardinia etc (as held by eg Cesare Lombroso, and Enrico Ferri [editor of *Avant!* 1904-08, PSI deputy 1921]).

8. What did Gramsci say before 1919 about the PU? (= phase 1)

- G's critique of Turin PU at this stage similar to

Mansbridge/Tawney critique of extension here

- ie that PU lecturers not providing valid HE appropriate to students from non-standard entry routes
- providing instead a poor quality imitation of mainstream HE
- handing out predigested parcels of knowledge
- G saw solution as that better section of trad intellectuals should get involved and teach workers properly
- ie as Tawney did in WEA tutorial classes 1908-14

9. How did Gramsci's views change during Biennio Rosso? (= phase 2)

- Through taking part in workers' circles in 1916 and 1917, Gramsci influenced by workers' ideas about how factories could be run
- then from Russian revolution latched on to idea of workers' formation of soviets as key driving force
- [soviets = councils composed of delegates representing workers in a local area]
- inspired also by IWW and shop stewards movement in WW1 Britain (published material on this in ON)
- looked for something in Turin that was equivalent, at least in embryo, to soviets in Petrograd
- Fiat factories had internal commissions, ie management-sanctioned participation by workers' reps in day to day decisions
- Gramsci saw internal commissions as potential 'soviets'
- ie they could become factory councils, ie organs of workers' control

- simultaneously adopted workers' control view of workers' education

- so now much closer to Ruskin strikers' / Plebs League position that workers could educate themselves

- Eg on 14th February 1920, 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.' [Meaning PSI bigwigs 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'.

10. In late 1920s / PN, how did Gramsci see workers' ed? (= phase 3)

10.1 Background:

- During struggle under fascism, came to believe that key factor in 'failure' of Biennio Rosso was role of PSI Maximalists

- ie leftwing faction in PSI, led by Giacinto Serrati

- took control from reformists (Filippo Turati) in 1912

- seen by Gramsci as trad intellectuals dominating ostensibly workers' party, who made demagogic speeches etc about revolution but did nothing practical to organise it

In 1925 article, Gramsci pointed out that between late 1918 and 1921, PSI membership rose from 16,000 to 200,000.

Vast majority of those joined 'in short period after the war'.

Says: '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, lack of ideological preparation of PSI rank and file made it easier for r/c to use PSI and its related union federation (CGL):

(a) to isolate and defeat September 1920 factory occupations, and

(b) in longer term as weapon to divide workers in north against poor peasants in south.

10.2 PN discussion

- went back to thinking about PU

- but also talking more broadly about relation between traditional intellectuals, the party, and broader layers of population

- now compares PU to 'the first contacts between English merchants and the negroes of Africa', in which 'trashy baubles were exchanged for nuggets of gold'.

- now sees solution in dialogic mutual ed:

(a) **within** a group of thinkers and organisers comprising both socialist trad intellectuals and w/c activists, and

(b) **between** this group and broader circles of workers, technicians, poor peasants, artisans, shopkeepers, impoverished intellectuals etc

Argued that:

' . . . 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 . . . '

Emphasis 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.

As well as educating those involved, this movement would 'elaborate a form of thought superior to 'common sense' and coherent on a scientific plane' - ie develop valid theory.

And in doing this, finally, it 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, before Biennio Rosso, Gramsci thought in terms of traditional intellectuals bringing high quality education to workers via a cultural '3rd organ'.

But now he 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 be under the control of those workers

And it would be central to the whole thrust of the w/c movement.

11. How does Gramsci's PN conception relate to earlier socialist ideas?

11.1 Marx (late 1843) wrote:

'As philosophy finds its material weapons in the proletariat, the proletariat finds its intellectual weapons in philosophy.'

- 'philosophy' = Doctors' Club = university-educated intellectuals like himself

- 'proletariat' = people like textile workers in Lancashire

- innovative for its time

- in a way envisages dialogue as per Gramsci 90 years later
- but could be taken as instrumentalist (each party to dialogue uses the other)
- cf Gramsci's 1925 rejection of 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'.

(This more in line with Marx's later thinking.)

11.2 Lenin WITBD footnote (February 1902)

- quoted Karl Kautsky argument that idea of socialism has to be brought to w/c from outside by traditional intellectuals
- ie workers themselves not able to participate in thinking up this idea

Lenin expressed broad agreement with this, but added key footnote saying that workers do in fact participate in this, but 'as theoreticians of socialism', 'not as workers' per se.

- ie like Gramsci, he believed that workers could and would become thinkers and organisers through dialogue within socialist movement

11.3 So Gramsci's PN conception of IWCE a valid development of approaches implicit in writings by Marx and Lenin.

12. So what is possible conclusion?

12.1 No obligation for us to be interested in Gramsci unless his ideas offer guide to what we need to do now.

12.2 Jury on Gramsci still out (a) because he pointed a direction rather than laying down a detailed route map, and (b) there hasn't been a serious attempt as yet to follow that direction.

12.3 However, NCLC/ WETUC/TUC tradition now in decay

12.4 State of mainstream post-compulsory ed. arguably means no longer feasible to hope for this alone as route for w/c ed.

12.5 Therefore arguable that G's ideas more relevant than ever.