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# Gramsci's democracy : the development of Antonio Gramsci's concept of democracy

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GRAMSCI'S DEMOCRACY:  
THE DEVELOPMENT OF ANTONIO GRAMSCI'S  
CONCEPT OF DEMOCRACY

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of Political Science  
San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts

By

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August, 1990

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## ABSTRACT

### GRAMSCI'S DEMOCRACY: THE DEVELOPMENT OF ANTONIO GRAMSCI'S CONCEPT OF DEMOCRACY

by James H. Honig

More than any other Marxist theorist, Antonio Gramsci focused on the question of political power in terms of consent. This thesis examines the evolution of his concept of democracy through four phases: (1) his formative years (1891-1918), (2) his factory council years (1918-1921), (3) his communist years (1921-1926), and (4) his prison years (1926-1937).

Gramsci's democracy is both the means by which society is transformed and a measure by which to evaluate the results. His model for a socialist transformation of society was guided by a principle of radical democracy. It was radical in that it posed a direct challenge to the basic assumptions regarding the relationship between capitalism and democracy. It was democratic in that he remained convinced that the new society must be grounded in the active consent of the social majority.



## PREFACE

Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) has been acclaimed "as an extraordinary philosopher, perhaps a genius,"<sup>1</sup> as a "true intellectual hero of our time,"<sup>2</sup> and as "the Marxist you can take home to mother."<sup>3</sup> His Prison Notebooks have been described as "a modern classic of social philosophy and political theory."<sup>4</sup>

The focus of this thesis is Antonio Gramsci as a great political thinker. Its purpose is to examine the development of his concept of democracy. The basic questions asked are: (1) What specific meaning does Antonio Gramsci attach to the term democracy?, (2) What function does democracy play in his "good" society?, and (3) What implications do these views hold for the way that people live together? Each of these broad questions will be discussed specifically in the context of Gramsci's political thought.

The goal of this thesis is to present an examination of the most conspicuous contemporary political ideal by one of the 20th century's most intriguing political thinkers. This project, therefore, has been organized to provide a complete exegesis of Gramsci's thinking on democracy. The Introduction addresses the basic relationship between democracy, Marxism, capitalism, and

socialism. The intent is to illuminate the larger issues associated with this study and provide a spectrum into which Gramsci's thinking may be placed. Chapter One is a brief overview of Gramsci's life. Its purpose is to provide a context for a deeper examination into Gramsci's political thought. Chapter Two is a review of the Gramsci literature. Its purpose is to describe how the world came to know of Antonio Gramsci, the state of Gramscian studies, and how this work fits into the secondary literature, in English, on Gramsci. Chapter Three discusses the formative years of Gramsci's life (1891-1917), during which he primarily thought of "democracy" in the narrow context of his Sardinian nationalism. This concept was later challenged by his Turin experiences and the Russian Revolution. Chapter Four examines the years 1918-1921. In this period, Gramsci's expanding notion of democracy is expressed against the background of the Italian factory council movement. Chapter Five examines Gramsci's communist years (1921-1926). Its focus is on Gramsci's attempt to implement the lessons of the factory councils in the environment of fascism and the threat it presented to democracy. Chapter Six examines Gramsci's prison years (1927-1937). To a degree, his writings during this period reflect Gramsci's most theoretical concept on the

operation of democracy. The last chapter presents a summation and concluding remarks.

#### NOTES

1. Eric J. Hobsbawm, "The Great Gramsci," The New York Review of Books (April 4, 1974), p. 39.
2. James Roll, Antonio Gramsci (Middlesex, England, 1977), p. 24.
3. Carlin Romano, "But Was He a Marxist?," Village Voice (March 29, 1983), p. 41.
4. Maurice A. Finocchiaro, Gramsci and the History of Dialectical Thought (New York, 1988), p. 233.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis is not the product of one person. While I alone am responsible for its errors and limitations, this project could not have been completed without the valuable contributions of others. First, I would like to thank the CSUSJ Interlibrary Loan staff. Without them, a number of important works would have escaped my attention. Second, comments and suggestions offered by John H. Rood, Sr. resulted in my writing a much improved final draft. For his contributions, I am most grateful. Third, I must express my deep appreciation to my Thesis Committee, Professors William McCraw (Chair), Charles Kunsman, and Raymond Lou, for their time, criticisms, and interest in supporting this project. Fourth, a special acknowledgment must be extended to Prof. McCraw for his eagerness to pursue this topic and encourage me along the way. Finally, this thesis is dedicated to my wife, Christine, who made it all possible.

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The most advanced thinker is he who understands that his adversary may express a truth which should be incorporated in his own ideas, even if in a minor way. To understand and evaluate realistically the position and reasons of one's adversary (and sometimes the adversary is the entire thought of the past) means to have freed oneself from the prison of ideologies, in the sense of blind fanaticism.

-- Antonio Gramsci  
The Open Marxism of Antonio Gramsci

## INTRODUCTION

On April 27, 1937, Antonio Gramsci died at the age of forty-six. For twenty years his ideas and writings were essentially unknown in the English-speaking world. While Italians had been interpreting and reinterpreting Gramsci since his death, awareness of his work in other countries remained fragmented and isolated. Today, his writings are discussed by a wide range of scholars throughout the world. Even his most severe critics have acknowledged his importance as a social and political thinker. Further, Gramsci is no longer confined to the specialists. His concepts are now found in a wide range of disciplines: political science, history, sociology, philosophy, education, literature, cultural studies, religious studies, law, and education. Today, Antonio Gramsci stands as perhaps the most novel Marxist thinker of the twentieth century.

Gramsci's originality stems from the priority he gave to civil society over political society. As such, his work is viewed as an analysis of the superstructure from an orientation that departs from is often termed classical Marxism. For Gramsci, Marxism was neither a theory of economic causation nor dogma. The attention he gave to the role of culture distinguishes him from those Marxist

theorists that focus strictly on the economic base of society. Gramsci believed that rigid attention to this base resulted far too often in a mechanical dialectical materialism. This economic determinism departed from the original philosophical foundations of Marx's thought. Gramsci often referred to this tendency as "primitive infantilism" and "vulgar determinism." Although, Gramsci did not discount the economic base, his materialism gives priority to the superstructure over the economic base as a means of countering "economism." His work, then, gives attention to the impact of the individual will and the influence of ideas, but within the political economic context of society. Gramsci's concern is not just the "objective" conditions created by capitalism, but also the "subjective" response to those conditions.

For Gramsci, Marxism meant the dialectical relationship between the objective and the subjective. Gramsci's analysis stressed human subjectivity. Therefore, his writings stress intellectual and cultural influences rather than strictly economic factors. He emphasized the power of the human mind to create, and argued that the economic base did not mechanically determine ideas and culture. Instead, in a social system, the economic base provides a constraining influence on the superstructure. To this degree, Gramsci's thought can be viewed as an



attempt to do for philosophy what Marx did for economics. For Gramsci, Marxism is a class interpretation of history which incorporates economic, political, social, cultural, and moral influences.

There is little doubt that Gramsci greatly admired Marx and was mightily influenced by his writings, but he was also greatly influenced by a number of other great thinkers. Cases have been made that he was also Crocean, Hegelian, Leninist, and Machiavellian, to name only a few of the suggested possibilities. A great deal of the secondary literature on Gramsci is devoted to delineating the genealogy of his Marxism.<sup>1</sup> Karl Marx's thought, however, has been used by both his followers, as well as his detractors, to describe and/or justify many different strains of politics.<sup>2</sup> In what sense, then, can Antonio Gramsci be described as a "Marxist?" Might he more accurately be described as "Marxian?" Given his life and thought, this is an important consideration for any examination of Gramsci.

Antonio Gramsci is "Marxist" to the extent that Karl Marx's thought remained the primary influence and inspiration on his work. He remained firmly attached to the philosophical foundation of Marx's political thought. For Marx, philosophers must move beyond simply interpreting "the world, in various ways; the point is to change it."<sup>3</sup>

Similarly, Gramsci was not content with just interpreting the world. He remained committed to the advancement of working class interests to socialism. If the definition of a Marxist is based on a person's influence and commitment to a socialist ideal, then Antonio Gramsci was a Marxist. If a Marxist is to be measured by one's placement on a scale of orthodoxy, then he was not. Accordingly, it has been argued that Gramsci can be more accurately described as "Marxian."<sup>4</sup>

This thesis holds Gramsci's thought as Marxian. Gramsci held certain views that are considered to contradict what has traditionally been considered Marxist. If the Marxist theory of class struggle is defined strictly in terms of conflict and coercion, then Gramsci is not a traditional Marxist. His model of class struggle was based on the theory of "hegemony," which emphasizes a dialectical relationship between consent and coercion. If the Marxist theory of revolution is defined as the seizure of state power, then Gramsci is not an orthodox Marxist. Gramsci's theory of proletarian revolution focuses on the necessity of a cultural strategy. If the core of Marxist theory (historical materialism) is defined in terms of the economic base determining consciousness, then Gramsci is no Marxist. As noted above, Gramsci's materialism describes the interaction between the base and super-

structure as a constraint on the possible forms of that consciousness.<sup>5</sup> The implications derived from these distinctions are important considerations for any interpretation of Antonio Gramsci and a definition of Marxism. They form the parameters of understanding Gramsci's contribution to Marxism.

The precise identification of Gramsci's Marxism is beyond the scope of this project. Rather, this thesis considers Gramsci as an important political and social thinker who happened to be Marxian. Its focus, then, is on his thought. Its intent is to understand the ideas and theories that he expressed. References to Gramsci's Marxism are therefore meant to identify him with this broad perspective rather than to indicate a political theory by means of a definition containing a specific criterion.

Political theories are intensified attempts to answer the basic questions of "What constitutes the good or just society?" and "How shall we live together?" In effect, these are the same questions faced by citizens in confronting the political issues of the day. Historically, a number of concepts have been used to describe and judge these political questions. That is, decisions on specific issues are sometimes based on their perceived relationships to larger values. In today's world, the political values of equality, liberty, and democracy are typically

held as the most important ideals. While historically democracy has not always been a popular idea, it has proven to be one of the most enduring ideas in politics. In the twentieth century, it has become one of the most central political concepts and standards used for comparing political systems. While other ideals are important, democracy has become the ideal by which political reality is most often tested. Questions surrounding democracy, then, are typically answered within a context which attaches specific meanings, as well as priorities, to these political ideals.

Conceptually, the greatest problem in approaching democracy is its popularity. This popularity has resulted in more than 300 specific definitions for democracy.<sup>6</sup> While there is no agreement on the specific meaning, there is a general consensus on its essence. The core of democracy refers to those processes by which individuals influence or make the decisions that directly affect their lives. The citizens of a particular political system are defined as the ultimate political authority. Sovereignty rests with the citizens: the people. Within a particular political system, legitimacy is based upon their consent. Democracy, then, is fundamentally about power. Questions regarding democracy should be answered with attention given to the particular meaning attached it and mindful of

the value given society attaches to other political ideals.

Given the historical experiences of democracy and the sheer variety of those systems claiming to be democratic, what clearly emerges is the fact that democracy should be viewed as a matter of degree rather than a rigid category. That is, questions of democracy do not simply involve whether a particular system is democratic or not. More often these questions should be aimed at understanding how democratic the political system is and in what ways is it considered to be democratic. Since democracy is but one ideal held in political systems, it is possible that democracy, at some point, will come into conflict with these other ideals. Such implications should be addressed with attention given to the context and particular meanings attached to the additional political ideals.

In modern times, the answers to these basic questions have routinely involved a basic choice between capitalism and socialism. Central to the choice between capitalism and socialism is the basic question of economics. This refers to basic notions of how people provide for their material sufficiency and how a society is arranged to provide material provisions. In this criteria, capitalism is characterized by three basic features. The first is the institution of private property. The means of pro-

duction are primarily controlled by private ownership. Second, capitalism is an economic system primarily controlled, regulated, and directed by markets alone. Basic elements, such as labor and capital, are to be allocated by market forces. And third, economic growth is entrusted to the market mechanism. Self-interest, as reflected by the drive for profit, serves as the primary motivator, as the incentive for growth. In contrast, socialism is characterized by the basic economic trait of state/public ownership of all primary means of production.

Capitalist economies differ in the degree, forms, and goals of the state's involvement with managing the economy. Here the spectrum varies from the more market-oriented nations (e.g., the United States), where the primary goal of government involvement is moderating extreme market fluctuations, to the social-welfare nations (e.g., Sweden), where state involvement includes a qualitatively stronger commitment to social welfare policies.

Socialist systems differ in how their economies are regulated. On one extreme, state socialism (e.g., the Soviet Union) regulates economic exchanges through central planning, in which all production and distribution decisions are made by a centralized party-state apparatus. Planners replace the market forces of capitalism. On the other extreme, Yugoslavia has a very limited degree of

centralized planning. Its economy relies upon worker self-management and a degree of market regulation. Power is decentralized through a system of representation. Local power plays a much larger role in decision making.<sup>7</sup> In summary, the contrasting elements of capitalism versus socialism involve basic vision more than specific definitions. Each vision entails a broad approach to questions of political economy, philosophy, and politics.

Politics is the process by which the members of a social unit or system live together. It is routinely defined as the authoritative allocation of values for a society as a whole.<sup>8</sup> Politics, by definition, involves power and decision making. Democracy is one answer to the question, "Who shall rule?" Democracy is about the power to rule based on the input of "the many." For most of its history, democracy has been viewed negatively. Today, democracy is the central ideal of contemporary politics. Most nations in the world attempt to describe themselves as either a democracy or as becoming more democratic.

Historically and theoretically, the relationship between democracy and either capitalism or socialism is not a new consideration. History shows that there is no automatic link between either capitalism and democracy or socialism and democracy. Political thinkers and observers, however, have sought to explain their particular

system by its relationship to democracy. The political reality of each variation of capitalism and socialism is continually propagandized by correlation to one concept of democracy. Each political system uses in its definition particular traits to emphasize its political effect and, by implication, the limitations of the rival system.

All of these discussions basically agree that the distinguishing characteristic between capitalist and socialist democracies is the separation between the market and the state. In capitalist democracies, ownership of the means of production is primarily in private hands. Economic decisions which may have major social implications are made through private exchanges. This arrangement is purported to be an expression of individual freedom. The focus is on the individuality of the particular person. Capitalism is the term used to identify the structural arrangement of the economic system, and the philosophy of liberalism provides the theoretical justifications.

Socialists argue that "true" democracy requires a social and an economic dimension. The socialist ideal finds that too little recognition is given to how the concentration of private property limits the expression of political democracy. Here freedom is defined in terms of the organization of the social conditions in which an



individual can realize that freedom. Social relations are viewed as the essence of human activity. The focus here is on the individual, but the emphasis is on the individual's social being acting as part of a collective consensus and conscience. Marxism is typically identified as the philosophy justifying most socialist systems.

Marxism portrays capitalist, or liberal, democracy as a political democracy (a democratic government) dominated by the rule of capital. It does not challenge the basic structure of society because key decisions never reach the ballot box. The capitalist ideal argues that state (public) ownership of the means of production destroys the economic freedom of individuals and establishes an ever-present form of state interference. Economic freedom is viewed as the basic freedom that permits all other individual freedoms to be exercised. Private property, then, refers only indirectly to an individual's right to possessions. Its particular meaning is more accurately understood in reference to the individual's right to exercise economic freedom without state interference.

Each structure presents itself as a necessary complement to democracy. For liberal capitalism, democracy needs liberalism because without individual freedom there is no democracy. In this context, liberalism presents itself as the necessary precondition for democracy. Dem-

ocracy and socialism, then, are virtually incompatible by definition. Marxism, however, views socialism as the extension of democracy throughout society, giving a "higher" standard for evaluating democracy. Socialism is defended as the necessary condition for a fuller expression of individual freedom. The pursuit of this view of the common good is linked with what socialists see as the fuller development of human potential, in contrast to the liberal emphasis on pursuit of private ends. Whereas liberal capitalism views itself as the best possible environment for democracy, Marxist socialism views itself as a fuller expression of democracy. Either explicitly or implicitly, then, both sides defend their views of democracy as both a procedure and a set of principles designed to preserve particular values. Each criticizes the other's perception of democracy as a disguise for the rule of the most powerful. Each professes to be a procedure that insures the participation of the majority. Each criticizes the other for limiting the types of questions that "the people" may legitimately address.

This antagonism exposes a fundamental relationship between the primacy each attaches to democracy as an ideal. The basic question raised by Gramsci was: "Can a democratic consensus be reached to transform the capitalist state and economy?" He believed that it could.

More importantly, Gramsci thought that the transformation must be "democratic" if it is to be successful.

Gramsci refocused the relationship between the superstructure and the economic base of society. In a mechanical version of this relationship, the capitalist class rules through the state. The state is a coercive force acting on its behalf. Gramsci argued that the state dominates on behalf of the capitalist class, but it does more than simply obey the ruling class. No state can live by force alone. Internalized ruling ideas play an important role in maintaining order. Gramsci saw "hegemony" as domination through consenting acceptance of the ideas people hold about themselves and their society. Ideology, not force, is the key. Particular attention, then, must be paid to counter popular capitalist ideology. Without widespread ideological acceptance, socialism only gains control of the state. According to Gramsci, the socialist movement must develop its own hegemonic presence in society. Before it acquires state power, the working class must establish its claim to be a ruling class politically, culturally, intellectually and morally.

Throughout his work, Gramsci defined a socialist transformation as the expansion of democratic control. His socialism is a process that emerges inside and in reaction to a particular political system both objectively

and subjectively. Gramsci's concept of democracy, then, is vital to the successful transformation of a liberal capitalist democracy. Since capitalist democracies claim the premise that the people are sovereign, Gramsci's democracy, then, must prove itself to be more than simply a better procedure or technique. His conception of it must transcend the basic question asked of existing democracies. To be successful, Gramscian democracy must first bridge the gap between competing political ideologies.

#### NOTES

1. For examples see; Perry Anderson, "The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci," New Left Review, No. 100 (Nov. 1976-Jan. 1977), pp. 5-94; Carl Boggs, Gramsci's Marxism (London, 1976); Biagio de Felice, "Lenin and Gramsci: State, Politics and Party," in Gramsci and Marxist Theory, Edited by Chantal Mouffe (London, 1979), pp. 259-288; Alastair Davidson, "Gramsci and Lenin, 1917-1922," Socialist Register; 1974 (London, 1974), pp. 125-150; Maurice A. Finocchiaro, "Gramsci's Crocean Marxism," Telos, No. 41, 12:3 (Fall 1979), pp. 17-32; James P. Hawley, "Antonio Gramsci's Marxism: Class, State and Work," Social Problems, 27:5 (June 1980), pp. 584-600; Eric J. Hobsbawm, "Gramsci and Marxist Political Theory," in Approaches to Gramsci, Edited by A. S. Sassoon (London, 1982), pp. 20-36; V. G. Kiernan, "Gramsci and Marxism," The Socialist Register; 1972 (London, 1972), pp. 1-33; Leonardo Paggi, "Gramsci's General Theory of Marxism," Telos, No. 33, 10:3 (Fall 1977), pp. 27-70; Paggi's article is reprinted in Gramsci and Marxist Theory, Edited by Chantal Mouffe (London, 1979), pp. 113-167; Paul Piccone, "Gramsci's Hegelian Marxism," Political Theory, 2:1 (Feb. 1974), pp. 32-45; Paul Piccone, "Gramsci's Marxism: Beyond Lenin and Togliatti," Theory and Society, 3:4 (Winter 1976), pp. 485-512; Paul Piccone, "From Spaventato Gramsci," Telos, No. 31, 10:1 (Spring 1977), pp. 35-65; Paul Piccone, Italian Marxism (Berkeley, 1983); Carlin Romano, "But Was He a Marxist?," Village Voice, (March 9, 1983), pp. 41-42;

Palmiro Togliatti, "Leninism in the Theory and Practice of Gramsci" and "Gramsci and Leninism," both in his On Gramsci and Other Writings (London, 1979), pp. 161-181 and 183-207; Beverly L. Kahn, "Antonio Gramsci's Reformulation of Benedetto Croce's Speculative Idealism," Idealistic Studies, 15:1 (January 1985), pp. 18-40.

2. It is important to remember that there is often a distinguish between Karl Marx and the "Marxism" of his followers, as well as his detractors. Marx himself once stated: "All I know is that I am no Marxist." See; Hal Draper, Karl Marx's Theory of Revolution; Vol. II (New York, 1978), pp. 5-11.

3. Karl Marx, "Theses on Feurbach," in The Marx-Engels Reader, Edited by Robert C. Tucker (New York, 1972), p. 109.

4. Maurice A. Finocchiaro, Gramsci and the History of Dialectical Thought (New York, 1988), pp. 231-242.

5. Maurice A. Finocchiaro, "The Labyrinth of Gramscian Studies," Inquiry, 27:2-3 (July 1984), pp. 292-293. Also see; Paggi, "Gramsci's General Theory of Marxism," pp. 27-70; Larry B. Garner, "Marxism and Idealism in the Political Thought of Antonio Gramsci" (Ph.D. Dissertation, 1974).

6. Frank Cunningham, Democratic Theory and Socialism (New York, 1987), p. 25.

7. Richard Ashcraft, "The Changing Foundations of Contemporary Political Theory," Political Power and Social Theory, Vol. 6 (1987), pp. 27-56; Valerie Bunce and Alexander Hicks, "Capitalisms, Socialisms, and Democracy," Ibid., pp. 89-132.

8. David Easton, The Political System (New York, 1953).

## CHAPTER I:

### AN OVERVIEW OF GRAMSCI'S LIFE

Antonio Gramsci was born the fourth of seven children on January 22, 1891, in the village of Ales on Sardinia. Historically, Sardinia had suffered from its colonial status. This prompted a strong nationalistic pride and an intense distrust of the mainland Italian rulers. Peasant agriculture dominated the economy. Culture was dominated by poverty, illiteracy, and religion. While the Gramsci family can be described as poor, their lives were an improvement over the poverty of the peasants.

His father, Francesco Gramsci (b. 1860), was a native of Gaeta, Italy, and of Albanian and Italian-Spanish descent. While he was studying to be a lawyer, Francesco's father died. Forced to leave his studies, Francesco became a civil servant. At the age of twenty-one, he found himself a registry clerk in the Sardinian village of Ghilarza. He has been described as "corpulent, given to grandiose schemes of little practicality, to vanity and boasting, and a typical authoritarian type."<sup>1</sup> In later life, Gramsci wrote:

My father and my brother are always busy preparing mountains of projects and hypotheses. But then they forget the essential thing, and all their projects fail . . . . They thought they had great capacities for commercial affairs, and were forever con-

structing great castles in the air and criticizing other Sardinians for their lack of initiative. Naturally nothing ever came of their ventures, and it was always someone else's fault, as though the someone else had not previously existed and should not have taken into consideration from the outset.<sup>2</sup>

Gramsci's mother, Giuseppina Marcias (b. 1861), was from a respected local family. In a number of ways, she could be described as the typical young Sardinian woman. What distinguished her from the others, and had an important effect on the young Antonio, was that she could write, speak Italian, and loved to read. All commentators note the deep love and respect Gramsci held for his mother throughout his life. In one of his many letters to her, Gramsci wrote:

You can't imagine how many incidents I remember in which you always appear as a beneficent force, full of interest in us . . . . Since all our memories of you are of goodness and strength, that strength that you gave in bringing us up, you have gained the only true paradise, which for a mother, I think, is in the hearts of her children.<sup>3</sup>

The family's poverty and Gramsci's physical health were important factors that shaped the young Antonio. At the time of their marriage, the Gramsci family was not poor by local standards. By Sardinian standards, the family lived a middle class life. But in 1897, Francesco Gramsci was accused of administrative irregularities and suspended from his position. He was tried and sentenced

to five years in prison. The imprisonment brought economic hardship to a family already concerned about Antonio's poor health. Poverty would aggravate his health problems.

From birth, Antonio was considered physically frail. In 1894, the toddler Gramsci slipped from the arms of a servant and fell head-first down a staircase. He suffered head and spinal injuries. For the next three months, Gramsci remained close to death. This fall is thought to have contributed to his hunchback condition.<sup>4</sup> In the Sardinian culture which emphasized comparability, this abnormality would physically distinguish Antonio.<sup>5</sup> The young Gramsci's health problems were aggravated by the family's poverty, which continued to haunt him throughout his life. While in prison, Gramsci wrote: "The doctors had given me up for dead, and until about 1914 my mother kept the small coffin and little dress I was supposed to be buried in."<sup>6</sup> Physical problems would plague Gramsci and set him apart throughout his life. As an adult, standing less than five feet tall, he would endure headaches and dizzy spells as part of his daily existence.

In 1911, Gramsci won a scholarship to the University of Turin. There he would meet a fellow scholarship winner, Palmiro Togliatti. For the first time, he left his impoverished, rural peasant society for the experiences of



a great industrializing urban area. At the university, Gramsci studied Italian literature, linguistics, history, and philosophy. Intellectually, he was primarily influenced by the revolt against positivism as it was led by the Italian idealist philosopher Benedetto Croce. Positivism held that questions about humanity could be answered through the scientific method. Croce held that man was more than an organism and history was more than the predetermined evolution of man. Croce's idealism stressed the freedom of the human spirit and the power of the mind to create. Politically, Gramsci found himself in a rapidly industrializing city where worker militancy and the influence of socialist ideas combined to make Turin known as "Italy's red capital."<sup>7</sup>

In 1912-1913, political strikes were widespread. University students, impressed by the Turin working-class, began joining the Italian Socialist Party (PSI). Gramsci had already become familiar with basic socialist ideas before he left Sardinia through his older brother's influence. At this point, his intellectual commitment was to an ideal of socialism that would solve the Sardinian problems he had experienced growing up. During this period, his socialism has been described as "first of all a reply to the offenses of society"<sup>8</sup> and only minimally influenced by Marxism. His political commitment was limited to

joining the PSI, writing an occasional newspaper article, and teaching young workers about socialism. Gramsci's primary commitment in life was still his university studies. His goal was a teaching career.

Political activity throughout Italy greatly increased with the approach of World War I. Gramsci's participation in the effort against Italy's entry into the war brought the beginnings of a new intensity to his socialism and a new level to his commitment. His newspaper writings began to overtake his university studies. By 1916, Gramsci had withdrawn from the university and formally ended his academic life. Now, socialism was "more and more the answer to all problems, even to the personal ones."<sup>9</sup> Gramsci's career as a political activist had begun.

Between 1915 and 1917 conditions grew worse throughout Italy. Italian workers, especially those in Turin, became increasingly militant in their anti-war position. The Turin workers became more radical than their socialist leadership. More than anything else, this militancy challenged the limits to Gramsci's commitment to socialism and political activity. He still held Crocean ideas "which in practice meant an elitist notion of socialist activity where the intellectuals taught the workers what they thought the workers should know."<sup>10</sup> It was during this period that Gramsci began a serious study of Marx's

writings. But, as he would later write, it was the Turin working-class that taught him the meaning of Marx.<sup>11</sup>

Before 1917, Gramsci made few direct references to Marx and knew nothing of Lenin. He considered Croce as the single most important influence upon his thought. But Gramsci's study of Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Antonio Labriola would soon diminish his Crocean idealism.<sup>12</sup> His Marxism would be influenced both by his boyhood experiences with the impoverished Sardinian peasant culture and by his Turin activities in an industrializing urban environment. This impact would mold his view that the political role of culture and ideology requires attention.<sup>13</sup> For Gramsci, this meant that a socialist revolution in Italy required a national-popular perspective. The revolution's legitimacy must be based upon popular culture. Therefore, the Italian working class must go beyond its own interests and establish a political alliance with the peasantry.

The first phase of Gramsci's life drew to a close in 1917. By August, a number of anti-war protests and food riots had taken place in Italy. In September, following a five-day period which resulted in 2,000 injuries and 500 deaths, many leaders of the socialist movement and nearly all of the PSI leadership were arrested. With an urgent need for leadership, Gramsci became secretary of the Turin

section of the PSI. For the first time, Gramsci moved into the upper realm of actual political leadership.

Gramsci now considered himself a Marxist, but he still had a Crocean core. During 1917, he wrote a number of articles defending Lenin and the Bolsheviks. The most famous of these, "The Revolution Against Capital", illustrates the relation between his Marxism and his idealism, an idealism influenced by Croce that held thought as primary and stressed the power of the will to create. In December 1917, Gramsci wrote:

In Russia, Marx's Capital was more the book of the bourgeoisie than of the proletariat. It stood as the critical demonstration of how events should follow a predetermined course: . . . The Bolsheviks reject Karl Marx, and their explicit action and conquests bear witness that the canons of historical materialism are not so rigid as might have been and has been thought. . . . (They) have not used the works of the Master to compile a rigid doctrine of dogmatic utterances never to be questioned . . . . (Their) thought sees as the dominant factor in history, not raw economic facts, but man, men in societies, men in relation to one another . . . .<sup>14</sup>

In other words, Gramsci praised the Russian revolution as an example that demonstrates people making their own destinies. The revolution had proven wrong those who identified economic determinism with Marx and its mechanistic application with Marxism. The revolution was successful in a backward country primarily composed of peasants, rather than an advanced industrial society with its

fully-developed capitalistic forces of production. History had not been made by economic forces, but by people who had learned to understand, guide, and adapt those forces to their will.

Gramsci's intellectual understanding of revolt soon began to be challenged by the Russian realities. As the Bolsheviks realized the need for centralized authority to counter the realities of war-torn Russia, Gramsci continued to defend their actions. Only now the defense was based on the notion that the Bolsheviks would become the majority. For Gramsci, then, the key problem was not the Bolshevik actions, but the weakness of the level of mass consciousness. In his view, leadership must maintain its ties with the masses to be legitimate. The Bolsheviks had provided the proper leadership. Therefore, Gramsci concluded that he had misjudged the Russian masses. While Gramsci moved closer to Marx and Lenin during this time, his basic philosophical values remained idealistic.

The tensions between Gramsci's basic values and his support of the Russian Revolution also required ideological clarification. The task was to clarify the connection between his support for Leninism and his basic philosophical principles. This link was articulated in late 1918 when Gramsci wrote about the similarities between his "philosophical revolt" and the "critical communism" which

he saw in Russia. Leninism was the Marxism verified in Russia, but a Marxism specifically defined. It was a Marxism based on anti-positivism, one not that much removed from Gramsci's own Crocean roots. Gramsci wrote:

Critical communism has nothing in common with philosophical positivism, the metaphysics of Evolution and Nature. Marxism is based on philosophical idealism which, however, has nothing in common with what is ordinarily meant by the word 'idealism': . . . . Philosophical idealism is a doctrine of being and knowing, in which these two concepts are identified, and reality is what one knows theoretically, one's I, it-self. . . . What is certain is that the essence of (Marx's) doctrine is dependent on philosophical idealism, and that in the subsequent development of this philosophy is the ideal current which now converges with the proletarian socialist movement.<sup>15</sup>

After World War I, Italy entered into a severe, prolonged economic, social, and political crisis. The years 1919 and 1920 are known as the "Red Two Years." Strikes, land occupations, and street demonstration erupted throughout Italy. Some 4,000,000 workers and peasants engaged in 4,000 actions against employers and landowners. These actions were primarily spontaneous and initially aimed at improving immediate economic conditions. By 1919, trade union organizations had swollen to more than two million members. The November 1919 elections made the PSI the largest national party in parliament. The mass movement had motivated the PSI.

Conditions appeared ripe for either revolution or reaction.

Before World War I, industrialists began establishing factory councils to facilitate communications between management and the workers. By 1919 these councils were in place throughout Italy. Turin was Italy's most industrialized city and had an exceptionally strong tradition of labor organization. In May, Gramsci, along with Togliatti, helped to found the Turin socialist newspaper, L'Ordine Nuovo (The New Order). One of the intentions of this newspaper was to give a voice to the rapidly growing and changing factory council movement.

The factory councils of 1919 were radically different from those prior to the war. Worker militancy combined with an expanded union suffrage and a secret ballot to make the councils more independent and reflective of the working class in general. Gramsci thought the councils could translate the Russian experience into an equivalent Italian expression. For him, "the socialist State already exists, potentially in the institutions of social life characteristic of the exploited working class."<sup>16</sup> Specifically, "(t)he Factory Council is the model of the proletarian State. All the problems inherent in the organization of the proletarian state are inherent in the organization of the Council."<sup>17</sup>

For Gramsci, the problem was how to prepare the working class for the proletarian state. He thought that the factory councils would help to unite the working class and allow them to understand their function within the productive and social system. At the same time, the councils would prepare the basis for a new society and a new type of state. In other words, Gramsci thought these councils could become the instrument of working class power and do for the Italian working class what the early soviets were to have done in Russia. The factory council would be the means by which to translate the Russian experience into the Italian context.<sup>18</sup>

In April 1920, Turin experienced an eleven-day general strike. It did not spread to the rest of Italy as Gramsci had hoped. The PSI's hesitancy to demonstrate strong support for the general strike weakened its standing among the workers and ensured a victory for the industrialists. Despite the end of the strike, relations between the workers and the employers continued to deteriorate. By August a number of employers had terminated their dealings with the factory councils.

During early September, what ordinarily would have been a routine wage dispute resulted instead in "the occupation of the factories." The workers' occupation did not originate as a radical action, but as a practical



response to an announced lockout, a way to keep the factories open. It quickly spread, however, far beyond the original factory and union leadership. Some 500,000 workers, primarily in Italy's heavy industries, were immediately involved, with millions more joining throughout Italy.

By late September, the dispute over wage increases and additional union benefits was settled with factory control restored to traditional industrial management. Although most saw the results as a victory for the workers, the issue of workers' controlling the factories was lost. For Gramsci, this was the missed opportunity. In his mind the lessons learned from the occupation of the factories were clear. As Thomas Bates states: "The first was that a soviet-style movement from below could not carry out the revolution without the discipline from above of a strong revolutionary party. The second lesson was that the PSI was not this party."<sup>19</sup> For the left-wing within the PSI, the PSI's vacillation during the occupation was the final proof of its inability to lead the working class. In January 1921, Gramsci, Togliatti, and others split from the PSI and founded the Italian Communist Party (PCI). Amadeo Bordiga was elected its first secretary, and Gramsci was elected a member of its central committee.

The Italian Left was now seriously divided precisely when Italian fascism was transforming itself from a movement into a political party. The movement began in reaction to World War I. The PNF, the National Fascist Party, was a reflection of fascism's rapidly rising strength and a reaction to the occupation of the factories. In 1922, the fascists would "March on Rome." Afterwards, Benito Mussolini, the former PSI member, would write:

It may be that in the nineteenth century capitalism needed democracy; now it can do without it. . . . Democracy in the factory has lasted only as long as a bad dream. . . . Now it is the other democracy, the political one, which is about to end, which must end.<sup>20</sup>

Gramsci thought that the PCI should pursue a united popular front policy with the PSI and other parties to block the PNF. Given fascism's strength and intentions, it was necessary to fight for preserving existing democratic liberties. Fascism, in Gramsci's view, was quite capable of providing a unity upon which it could build an Italian state. He saw fascism as an instrument being used by large landowners, industrialists, and functionary elements within the state machinery. Its mass base was comprised of disaffected members from both the urban and rural petty bourgeoisie. Bordiga and a majority of the PCI, however, opposed a united front policy. They viewed

fascism as essentially the same as the parliamentary system. They were both forms of the same bourgeois rule. Gramsci led the PCI's internal opposition, but was unable to change the policy.

From 1922 to 1924, Gramsci worked for the Comintern in Moscow and Vienna. In May 1922, Gramsci left Italy as the PCI Comintern delegate to Moscow. His time in Moscow was spent debating questions relating to building socialism in the Soviet Union, and defining relationships between socialists and the new communist parties in the West. While in Moscow Gramsci met his future wife, Julia (Julca) Schucht. Initially shy and always self-conscious of his physical appearance, Gramsci's personal relations with others had always been reserved. As he would later write in a letter to Julia: "For a long time, a very long time, I have believed it was absolutely fatally impossible that I should ever be loved."<sup>21</sup>

Julia brought a new happiness into Gramsci's life. Years later, Gramsci remained quite impressed by the impact of that love. In his mind, she had strengthened his commitment to socialism by providing him with a new appreciation of himself. No longer did the "sewer of (his) past" have him live like "a bear in a cavern," hiding "behind a hard mask or an ironic smile . . . to prevent others from knowing what (he) really felt."<sup>22</sup>

Gramsci would remember his time with Julia as the happiest of his life.

In late September 1923, the PCI executive committee was arrested by the Fascist dominated Italian government. This left Gramsci, in effect, the leader of the Italian communist movement, but a leader in absentia. In November 1923, to monitor the events in Italy more closely, Gramsci left for Vienna. In April 1924, while still in Vienna, Gramsci was elected to the Italian Parliament. As a deputy, he was protected by law from arrest and could return to Italy in May 1924 to assume actual PCI leadership. The pregnant Julia remained in Moscow, where their son Delio was born in 1924. Their second son, Giuliano, was born there in 1926. Gramsci, who never saw Giuliano, would know him only through letters and photographs.

In late 1926 the Exceptional Laws were passed, which removed parliamentary immunity. On November 8th, Gramsci was arrested while en route to Parliament to vote against bills restoring the death penalty and establishing a special court for political offenses. He languished in prison until the following May when he finally went to trial before the Special Tribunal for the Defense of the State, the new political court. On June 4th, "Gramsci was found guilty of conspiracy and of agitation provoking class hatred, civil war, insurrection, and alteration of

the Constitution and the form of the State through violence."<sup>23</sup> In his closing remarks, the prosecutor declared: "We must prevent this brain from functioning for twenty years!"<sup>24</sup> Gramsci was given the maximum sentence: twenty years, four months and five days. His brain, however, did not stop functioning.

Four months after his initial arrest, Gramsci had established a major plan for study while in prison. Not until February, 1929, however, was he given formal permission and did he actually begin the work. Despite the limitations created by near isolation, limited research materials, prison censorship, and his deteriorating physical health, Gramsci filled thirty-three notebooks between 1929 and 1935. He managed to write more than a million words on some 2,848 pages. By October 1934, Gramsci's health had reached a point where he was granted a conditional release which would take effect April 21, 1937. In August 1935, his condition was now such that he could physically no longer write more than an occasional letter. At this point, the government transferred him to a clinic near Rome where he would technically await his release. On April 25th, four days after his release, Gramsci suffered a severe cerebral hemorrhage. On April 27th, 1937, Antonio Gramsci died.

## NOTES

1. Alastair Davidson, Antonio Gramsci (London, 1977), p. 15.

2. John M. Cammett, Antonio Gramsci and the Origins of Italian Communism (Stanford, 1967), p. 4.

3. Ibid., p. 5.

4. As a small child Gramsci suffered from the rickets. This diet-related bone disease is believed to have also contributed to his spinal curvature.

5. Dante Germino, "Antonio Gramsci," Boundary 2, 14:3 (Spring 1986), pp. 19-23.

6. Giuseppe Fiori, Antonio Gramsci (New York, 1973), p. 17.

7. Ibid., p. 41.

8. Davidson, Antonio Gramsci, p. 71.

9. Fiori, Antonio Gramsci, p. 99.

10. Davidson, Antonio Gramsci, p. 81.

11. Thomas Bates, "The Political Thought of Antonio Gramsci" (Ph.D. Dissertation, 1972), p. 66. (Hereafter referred to as "PTAG.")

12. For an examination of Italian social theory and Marxism, see; Richard Bellamy, Modern Italian Social Theory (Stanford, 1987); Edmund E. Jacobitti, "Labriola, Croce, and Italian Marxism," Journal of the History of Ideas, 36:2 (April-June 1975), pp. 66-84; Paul Piccone, Italian Marxism, (Berkeley, 1983).

13. On January 29, 1916, Gramsci's article "Socialism and Culture" was published. In it he wrote: "Man is above all spirit, i.e., a creation of history and not of nature. . . . consciousness has been formed not under the ugly goad of physiological necessities, but through intelligent reflection, first on the part of a few and then by a whole class, reflecting on the reasons for certain conditions and on how best to convert them from causes of servitude into symbols of rebellion and social reconstruction. What this means is that every revolution

has been preceded by an intense critical effort of cultural penetration, of the infusion of ideas through groups of men who were initially unresponsive and thought only of resolving day by day, hour by hour, their own political and social problems, without creating links of solidarity with others who found themselves under the same conditions." See; Antonio Gramsci, History, Philosophy and Culture in the Young Gramsci, Edited by Pedro Cavalcanti and Paul Piccone (St.Louis, 1975), p. 21; Antonio Gramsci, "Socialism and Culture," Selections From Political Writings; 1910-1920, Selected and Edited by Quintin Hoare (New York, 1977), p. 11. (Hereafter referred to as SPW1.) In this latter volume, "spirit" is replaced by the word "mind."

14. Gramsci, "The Revolution Against Capital," SPW1, pp. 34-35.

15. Bates, "PTAG," pp. 130-131.

16. Gramsci, "Workers' Democracy," SPW1, p. 65.

17. Gramsci, "Unions and Councils," SPW1, p. 100.

18. Ibid.

19. Bates, "PTAG," pp. 171-172.

20. Adrian Lyttelton, The Seizure of Power (Princeton, 1987), p. 75.

21. Fiori, Antonio Gramsci, p. 157.

22. Cammett, Antonio Gramsci, p. 12.

23. Antonio Gramsci, Letters From Prison, Edited by Lynne Lawner (New York, 1973), p. 35.

24. Ibid., p. 36; Fiori, Antonio Gramsci, p. 230; James Joll, Antonio Gramsci (Middlesex, 1977), p. 98.

CHAPTER II:  
THE LITERATURE

On April 28th, 1937, Gramsci was cremated and buried in a Roman cemetery. Except for the police guards, only his brother, Carlo, and his sister-in-law, Tatiana (Tania) Schucht attended. The primary body of his works (letters, journalistic work, documents related to his PSI and PCI activities, and the prison notebooks) lay essentially dormant during the crisis years prior to World War II and during the war years. Even in Italy, the publication of Gramsci's basic writings did not take place until after World War II, and the English-speaking world did not have access to Gramsci's legacy until the late 1950s. In Italy, the official publication of Gramsci's complete political writings was not completed until 1971. An English translation of Gramsci's complete work has yet to appear.<sup>1</sup>

Without question, Gramsci's prison writings have had the single most important impact on establishing his reputation as an innovative Marxist writer and theoretician. His prison notebooks are considered to be masterpieces, if not classics, of modern political thought. Gramsci's legacy and the recognition of his thought owes its survival and existence to Tatiana Schucht (an elder sister of Gramsci's wife Julia), who managed to preserve most of his



prison writings. She met Gramsci in 1925 and was his primary physical contact with the outside world during his imprisonment. She was with Gramsci the night he died. While making the funeral arrangements, she removed the notebooks and his other personal effects from the clinic. Gramsci's brother, Carlo, assisted Tatiana in safely sequestering the prison documents. Two weeks later Tatiana told Piero Sraffa, one of Gramsci's Turin friends, that she had the notebooks. Sraffa had first met Gramsci during the labor struggles of 1919 in Turin. When Gramsci was imprisoned, Sraffa established an account with a Milan bookstore that would supply him with reading material. As Gramsci's health worsened, Piero and Tatiana were the principal agents in securing a conditional prison release for him.

From Cambridge Sraffa wrote Tatiana that he believed the prison documents should be turned over to the PCI. Almost a year later Tatiana sent the prison notebooks to Togliatti in Moscow. Togliatti became leader of the PCI after Gramsci's arrest. Shortly after becoming the PCI's leader, Togliatti moved to Moscow to avoid arrest by the Italian police. Upon delivery in Moscow, the prison notebooks were photocopied and declared "material of interest to the Soviet State." In April 1944, Togliatti returned to Italy and resumed direct leadership of the PCI. He

would continue to head the party until his death in 1964.<sup>2</sup>

Togliatti established the criteria for the initial interpretations of Gramsci. He and the PCI were responsible for determining the conditions regarding the release of Gramsci's prison writings. Because of his longtime association with Gramsci and his position as head of the party, Togliatti was viewed as the leading interpreter of Gramsci's thought as well. Shortly after Gramsci's arrest, Togliatti's image of Gramsci began to emerge. He was portrayed as a tireless party activist, dedicated follower of the Soviet-led Communist movement, and heroic leader of the working class. At Gramsci's death, Togliatti championed him as martyred by fascism, a long-time Stalinist, and Italy's first Bolshevik (Leninist).

Until 1944 Gramsci was primarily portrayed as the heroic martyr. In campaigning for the 1944 parliamentary elections, the PCI adopted a mass strategy which included a new Gramsci image to reflect the new political reality. Emphasis shifted from his being an orthodox spokesman of Soviet communism to a Marxist theorist and politician inspired by the Italian nation. Whereas Togliatti had once linked Gramsci's thinking with that of Stalin, Gramsci now offered an Italian perspective on the development and resurrection of Italy. Gramsci had become primarily an Italian leader whose focus and influence were

strictly national. These shifts in Togliatti's Gramsci appear to mirror the changes in the PCI's post-World War II political objectives.<sup>3</sup>

Gramsci's image, then, was initially influenced by the PCI's control over the publication of Gramsci's prison writings. After receiving Tatiana's note, Sraffa notified Togliatti of the prison writings in 1937. Tatiana mailed the notebooks to Moscow the following year. In the opinion of his secretary, however, Togliatti "probably" did not actually read the prison writings himself until shortly after 1940. But in May 1937, responding to Sraffa's letter, Togliatti showed that he understood the significance of Gramsci's prison legacy. Regarding the future of the raw, fragmented notes and the undeveloped, obscure ideas contained in the notebooks, Togliatti wrote:

. . . please let me know with precision what instructions Antonio left for the eventual publication of his writings. I mean in the first place the writings in prison, but also the earlier writings . . . I haven't the slightest, even approximate idea of what is in them or what they are about. Are they in a form which will allow us to publish them within a relatively brief period? The editing of Antonio's literary and political legacy is too important a matter to be left to the hazard of chance . . . encounters . . . .<sup>4</sup>

The publication of Gramsci's writings was equally embedded in the political debates of the day. The early extracts were suspected of being selected primarily to

bolster the notion of a Gramsci-Togliatti link and to strengthen the PCI's policy positions. Questions regarding Gramsci's possible contribution to Marxism were discussed in terms of his orthodoxy. In 1945 the first notebook selections were printed by the PCI press, and the full scale publication of Gramsci's prison legacy would soon follow. But at this point, English translations of these writings were extremely rare.<sup>5</sup>

In 1947, Giulio Einaudi of Turin began publishing Gramsci's prison writings. The series began with a collection of 218 prison letters. It immediately won scholarly recognition. In 1948, the actual prison notebooks began to be published. A six-volume series was edited by Felice Platone. The material was selected, edited and published thematically, not in chronological order. Additional editions of Gramsci's pre-prison writings and additional prison letters followed.<sup>6</sup>

In 1951 the last volume of these early Einaudi editions was published. The total compilation of these volumes proved to be immensely popular. By 1957, some 400,000 copies of Gramsci's Prison Notebooks had been sold. Much of the PCI's postwar success has been attributed to the popularity of Gramsci's prison writings.<sup>7</sup> The first readers of the Einaudi volumes looked for and

found Togliatti's Gramsci. They also discovered a great deal more.

While these early volumes present a solid portrait of Gramsci and contain a great deal of material, the Einaudi works are said to be incomplete on two levels. First, the volumes do not contain the complete legacy of Gramsci's writings. The PCI decided which sections would be published, when to publish them, and in what order to publish them. As such, the complete range of Gramsci's writings was not available to the reader. Specifically, particular references to opposition within communism were omitted. Indications of Gramsci's personal relationship with Amadeo Bordiga were dropped. Material discussing Rosa Luxemburg or mentioning Leon Trotsky was removed. Certain family references, which might have offended surviving family members were cut. Descriptions of Gramsci's split in 1931 with the PCI were trimmed, and Togliatti's relationship with Gramsci appeared to have been exaggerated. Second, the Einaudi edition appears to have been edited for political as well as critical considerations. Gramsci's writings were edited so as to contain only what were deemed the essential points. Unfortunately, the edited PCI/Einaudi texts lost a great deal of the subtlety and context of Gramsci's writings.<sup>8</sup>

During the late 1950s, Italian interest in Antonio Gramsci reached a new level of intensity. In conjunction with this new intensity, there began an "ideological relaxation" following the 1956 Twentieth Party Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU). One result was that studies and discussions of Gramsci's contribution to Marxism moved beyond the question of his orthodoxy. Another result was in the quality of the writings available. In subsequent years to the initial Einaudi volumes, a much fuller range of Gramsci's writings was published. In addition, most of the deleted "marginal" materials, which provided context and flavor, were now being included. One outcome was that during the 1950s a number of interpretations, reinterpretations, and various language translations of Gramsci began to emerge worldwide. The Einaudi edition survived during this period as the primary source for the new translations being published.

A complete critical edition of Gramsci's prison notebooks would not be available until 1975.<sup>9</sup> This four-volume critical edition was edited by Valentino Gerratana. This time, Gerratana arranged the notebooks in chronological order and published them exactly as originally written. For the first time, all of Gramsci's various drafts were included. This critical edition accomplished

two things. First, it reconfirmed the value of the Einaudi edition by removing some of the suspicions raised by its editing. Second, the inclusion of the various drafts meant that the development and process of Gramsci's thought were now open to deeper study. In addition, an equally complete, multi-volume critical Italian edition of Gramsci's pre-prison writings began to be published in 1980.<sup>10</sup>

During the late 1950s, interest in Gramsci developed in France on the heels of the CPSU's 20th Congress, the events in Poland, and the Hungarian uprising in 1956.<sup>11</sup> A three-volume Gramsci set was published in the Soviet Union between 1957 and 1959. Also, in 1959, a "Selected Works" volume appeared in Yugoslavia.<sup>12</sup> A German translation of Gramsci did not reach world until 1967.<sup>13</sup> Currently, Gramsci's writings are becoming increasingly available in translation throughout the world.

The reception of Gramsci's works in the English-speaking world was equally slow and isolated. Between 1948 and 1950 Hamish Henderson translated the 1947 Einaudi Prison Letters. While a few passages were published earlier, the entire work remained unpublished until 1974.<sup>14</sup> In 1957 the first English translations of selections from the Prison Notebooks were printed. The first were The Modern Prince and Other Writings, edited and translated by

Louis Marks and The Open Marxism of Antonio Gramsci, translated and annotated by Carl Marzani. These translations were important because they provided the only real access to Gramsci's writings for the English-speaking world. Their main limitation was length. The 170 pages of translations contained in Marks' book and the 70 pages found in the Marzani volume could provide little more than an introduction to Gramsci's thought. Twenty years after his death, these slim volumes began to spread an awareness of Gramsci throughout the English-speaking world.

A number of article-length translations on specific topics would follow, but for the next fourteen years, these two books provided the primary English access to Gramsci's prison writings. In 1971, Selections From the Prison Notebooks, edited and translated by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, was published in England. This volume contained some 470 pages of text, plus approximately 90 pages of introductory material. It provided a much more comprehensive selection of Gramsci's thought than prior English translations. In 1973, Lynne Lawner's English translation of the prison letters was published. This volume contained 94 letters selected and translated from the 1965 Italian edition of Letters From Prison. It also provided a 53-page introduction. Interest in Gramsci's writings was now firmly sized by scholars



throughout the world. Research projects investigating Gramsci's life, ideas, and political activities were also becoming readily available through various journals.

During the mid-1960s the secondary Gramsci literature in English began to emerge. Two early biographies reflected the quality of the work now being produced and in turn greatly stimulated interest in Gramsci. The first was John M. Cammett's Antonio Gramsci and the Origins of Italian Communism in 1967. Cammett's book is primarily a work of historical exposition, not political philosophy. It is an excellent study of Gramsci's life and thought as they relate to the emergence of Italian communism. The second is Giuseppe Fiori's Antonio Gramsci: Life of a Revolutionary, the original Italian edition of which was published in 1970. The English translation became available in 1973. Fiori's biography is distinguished by the extensive interviews conducted by the author. It contains considerable remembrances by Gramsci's family, friends, and acquaintances. Both biographies contributed mightily to awareness and interest in Gramsci's life, ideas, and political activities, and by the early 1970s, the secondary English literature was on the verge of exploding.<sup>15</sup>

The sheer volume of the secondary literature examining Gramsci's life and ideas is nothing less than phenomenal.<sup>16</sup> In 1969, the Gramsci Institute in Rome printed

the first Gramsci bibliography. The bibliography contained some 1,100 entries covering the years 1922-1967. The second bibliography, covering the years 1967-1977, contained an additional 1,500 titles. During the 1980s, interest in Gramsci showed no signs of weakening. Presently, an international Gramsci bibliography would contain more than six thousand titles.<sup>17</sup> Only a small percentage of these works, however, are available in English; in 1981, there were less than 150 English works. By 1987, "more than seven hundred books, essays, articles, and doctoral dissertations dealing with one aspect or another of Gramsci" had been published in English.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, as John Cammett stated, "many of those who have published on Gramsci do not have a practical knowledge of Italian."<sup>19</sup>

Broadly speaking, the English study of Gramsci can be seen as having developed through a series of phases. Beginning in the late 1950s, discussion of his work took place primarily within the larger context of Marxism and was conducted primarily by the Left. By the mid-1970s, as more translations became available, the focus shifted. Gramsci's thought, not his orthodoxy, was the topic. The studies had become "more scholarly" and the discussions were now dominated by specialists familiar with Italian. By the early 1980s, Gramsci studies had reached their

present level. The quality and depth of the literature has reached a stage of "mature Gramsci scholarship, (where) an adequate basis has finally been laid for a discussion of Gramsci in English. . . . To some extent, then, we are seeing the arrival of 'Gramsciology' in English-speaking scholarship."<sup>20</sup> This "Gramsciology" has also moved beyond the domain of any particular discipline; the Gramsci debate has been joined by a host of academic fields. The resulting studies presented a wide range of accounts grounded in the particular perspectives of these various fields. In this sense, the secondary Gramsci literature has become its own area of study.

Given the inherent difficulties of Gramsci's writing style, the special emphasis given to Italian history and culture in his work, the extraordinary circumstances under which his prison notebooks were written, the raw, fragmented, obscure nature of the prison writings, the manner by which his writings reached the world, and the maturation of the Gramsci studies, it is not surprising to find an extreme variety of interpretations and reinterpretations in the secondary literature. A host of different Gramscis, often contradictory, can easily be found. Maurice A. Finocchiaro has captured perfectly the basic character of this "labyrinth of Gramscian studies." He writes:

The variety of this secondary literature is such that Gramsci has been and continues to be, interpreted, praised, and damned for being Hegelian, Leninist, Stalinist, Crocean, Gentilean, totalitarian, democratic, reformist, revolutionary, fanatic, open-minded, religious-minded, lay-minded, idealist, materialist, scientific, anti-scientific, etc. . . . (Also), the interdisciplinary character of this secondary literature adds to the confusion as his work has attracted the interests of philosophers, historians, hagiographers, sociologists, political scientists, Marxists, and Marxologists.<sup>21</sup>

The English literature on Gramsci, then, is a rapidly growing maze containing a diversity of interpretations. Most of these studies can be broadly categorized by their approach to Gramsci and by the scope of their discussion. In the first category, most studies either focus on Gramsci's Marxism or on Gramsci as a great social and political thinker. In the former, the concentration is on the nature of the relationship between Gramsci's life and ideas and the history of socialism and Marxism. In the latter, the concentration is on the specifics of Gramsci's ideas and concepts. These studies approach Gramsci as a great thinker. Their view is that his life and writings demand serious analysis to determine the precise nature and limitations of his contributions.

Under the second consideration, most Gramsci studies either focus on the overall nature of his thought or on a specific aspect of it. In the first category, one primarily finds biographies and introductory surveys of his

political thought. These works focus on the whole of his life and thought. In the second category, one finds particular topics such as hegemony, civil society, the philosophy of praxis, factory councils, religion, party organization, and the role of intellectuals. These works examine his thought regarding the particular topic and are often limited to a particular phase of his life. While these are simplified distinctions, which are neither total nor mutually exclusive, they do provide a basic map through the secondary Gramsci literature.

Discussions related to Gramsci's thoughts on democracy are scattered throughout the literature in English.<sup>22</sup> The range of interpretations has been extreme. On the one hand, Gramsci's democracy has been described as just the latest version of "totalitarian democracy."<sup>23</sup> He is defined as one more authoritarian Marxist. On the other hand, Gramsci's democracy is viewed as a genuinely democratic approach to socialism. His works contains "a new concept of democracy"<sup>24</sup> which demands an "organic exchange between rulers and ruled."<sup>25</sup> The bulk of these discussions take place in the context of other issues which are usually the focus of the study. These works primarily focus on questions of hegemony, the factory councils, democratic centralism, the party, or politics. Sustained examinations of Gramsci's democracy are relatively few.<sup>26</sup>

While these studies provide excellent discussions of Gramsci's overall model of democracy or a particular aspect of it, none of them focus on Gramsci's concept of democracy as it developed through his life. This thesis aims at providing such an examination.

#### NOTES

1. "A translation into English of a complete edition" of Gramsci's work is being prepared. It is being translated by Joseph Buttigieg and will be published by Columbia University Press. See; Anne Showstack Sassoon, Gramsci's Politics, 2nd Edition (Minneapolis, 1987), p. xx.

2. Joseph A. Buttigieg, "The Legacy of Antonio Gramsci," Boundary 2, 14:3 (Spring 1986), pp. 1-17.

3. See; A. B. Davidson, "The Varying Seasons of Gramscian Studies," Political Studies, 20:4 (December 1973), pp. 448-450; Gwyn A. Williams, "The Making and Unmaking of Antonio Gramsci," New Edinburgh Review, No. 27 (1974), pp. 7-15.

4. Quote from; Alastair Davidson, "Book Review," Telos, No. 32 (Summer 1977), p. 225. Also see; Steven White, "Gramsci in Soviet Historiography," New Edinburgh Review, No. 27 (1974), pp. 15-19; Chantal Mouffe and Anne Showstack Sassoon, "Gramsci in France and Italy; A Review of the Literature," Economy and Society, 6:1 (February 1977), pp. 31-68.

5. In June 1937, the first extracts from Gramsci's prison letters were published in Paris. The first English translations of Gramsci's prison writings would not be published until 1946. See; Antonio Gramsci, "Benedetto Croce and His Concept of Liberty," Science and Society, 10:3 (Summer 1946), pp. 283-292. These notes were translated by Samuel Putnam from the Italian texts as published in La Rinascita, 1:1 (June 1944), Edited by Palmiro Togliatti.

6. The volumes of the Einaudi edition are: Lettere dal Carcere (1947); Il materialismo storico e la filosofia di Benedetto Croce (1948); Gli intellettuali e l'organizzazione della cultura (1949); Il Risorgimento (1949); Note sul Machiavelli, sulla politica, e sullo stato moderno (1949); Letteratura e vita nazionale (1950); and Passato e presente. The second phase of writings released and the years they cover are: L'Ordine Nuovo (1919-1920) was published in 1954; Scritti Giovanili (1914-1922) in 1958; Sotto la Mole (1916-1920) in 1960; Socialismo e fascismo (1921-1922) in 1966; and La Costruzione del Partito Comunista (1923-1926) in 1971. Additional letters were published in 2000 pagine di Gramsci (1964). It contains 64 letters from 1912-1926 and 268 prison letters (many from the original Einaudi edition); La Formazione del Gruppo Dirigente del PCI (1962); Lettere dal carcere (1965). This volume contains the complete 428 prison letter collection.

7. John M. Cammett, Antonio Gramsci and the Origins of Italian Communism (Stanford, 1967), p. 190.

8. Giuseppe Fiori, Antonio Gramsci (New York, 1973), p. 293; Gwyn A. Williams, "The Making and Unmaking of Antonio Gramsci," p. 7; Stephen White, "Gramsci and the Italian Communist Party," Government and Opposition, 7:2 (Spring 1972), pp. 186-195; Chris Harmon, "Gramsci versus Eurocommunism," International Socialism, No. 98 (May 1977), p. 23.

9. Quaderni del carcere, Vols. 1-4 (Einaudi, 1975).

10. Three volumes of Gramsci's pre-prison writings have been published thus far: Cronache torinesi; 1913-1917 (1980); La città futura; 1917-1918 (1982); Il Nostro Marx; 1918-1919 (1984). The works were edited by Sergio Caprioglio and published by Einaudi.

11. Francois Fejto, "A New Guru of the Paris Intellectuals," Encounter, 50:3 (March 1978), p. 37.

12. White, "Gramsci and the Italian Communist Party," p. 186; White, "Gramsci in Soviet Historiography," p. 18.

13. Raymond Morrow, "Gramsci in Germany," Telos, No. 22, 7:4 (Winter 1974-'75), p. 175.

14. Extracts from Hamish Henderson's English translation of the Prison Letters would be printed in 1959. His complete translations would not be printed

until 1974. See; Antonio Gramsci, "Gramsci on the Jews," The New Reasoner, No. 9 (1959), pp. 141-144; Antonio Gramsci, "Further Letters of Gramsci," The New Reasoner, No. 10 (1959), pp. 123-129; Antonio Gramsci, "Notes on Anti-Semitism," The Promethean Review, 1:4 (October-November 1959), pp. 39-42; Antonio Gramsci, "Gramsci's Letters from Prison," New Edinburgh Review, Nos. 23-24 (1974), pp. 3-47 and "Gramsci's Letters from Prison, Part II," New Edinburgh Review, Nos. 25-26 (1974), pp. 1-44; Antonio Gramsci, Gramsci's Prison Letters: Lettere dal Carcere, a Selection Translated and Introduced by Hamish Henderson (London, 1988). This is a corrected and revised version of the New Edinburgh Review special editions.

15. By the early 1970s a number of articles made a significant contribution to bring Gramsci to the attention of the English-speaking world. In particular see the early works by Neil McInnes, Albert Martinelli, Gwyn A. Williams, Alastair Davidson, Perry Anderson, John Merrington, Eugene D. Genovese, Carl Boggs, Andrea Calzolari, and Romano Giachetti.

16. There are three published bibliographies on Gramsci in English: Phil Cozens, Twenty Years of Antonio Gramsci (London, 1977); Harvey J. Kaye, "Antonio Gramsci: An Annotated Bibliography of Studies in English," Politics and Society, 10:3 (1981), pp. 335-353; Joan Nordquist, Antonio Gramsci: A Bibliography (Santa Cruz, 1987). The Gramsci Study Circle in New York City is working to produce a comprehensive bibliography and assessment of Gramscian studies in English.

17. Frank Rosengarten, "Institutes, Research Groups, Library Resources," Socialism and Democracy, No. 10 (Spring/Summer 1990), pp. 157-158.

18. Joseph A. Buttigieg, "The Gramscian Presence in American Criticism," Socialism and Democracy, No. 5 (Fall/Winter 1987), p. 55.

19. Ibid. Also see; Anne Showstack Sassoon, "The Gramsci Boom Continues," History Workshop Journal, No. 26 (Autumn 1988), pp. 213-214; Maurice A. Finocchiaro, "The Labyrinth of Gramscian Studies and Femia's Contribution," Inquiry, 27:2-3 (July 1984), p.294; Joseph V. Femia, "The Gramsci Phenomenon," Political Studies, 27:3 (September 1979), pp. 472-483.



20. Geoff Eley, "Reading Gramsci in English," European History Quarterly, 14:4 (Oct. 1984), pp.441-478; For a longer, more detailed version see his "Reading Gramsci in English" CRSO Working Paper No. 314, (March 1984).

21. Finocchiaro, "The Labyrinth of Gramscian Studies and Femia's Contribution," p. 295.

22. For an overview of the Italian discussion of Gramsci's democracy see; Walter L. Anderson, "Book Review," Journal of Politics, 50:3 (November 1988), pp. 1114-1116.

23. Luciano Pellicani, Gramsci: An Alternative Communism? (Stanford, 1981), p. 8. Michael Novak characterized Gramsci by quoting Yogi Berra's "Deja vu all over again." See his "The Gramscists Are Coming," Forbes (March 20, 1989), p. 54.

24. Roger Simon, Gramsci's Political Thought (London, 1982), p. 103.

25. Anne Showstack Sassoon, Gramsci's Politics (New York, 1980), p. 231.

26. In particular see; Walter L. Adamson, Hegemony and Revolution (Berkeley, 1980), pp. 209-213; Joseph V. Femia, Gramsci's Political Thought (Oxford, England 1981), pp. 172-189; Anne Showstack Sassoon, Gramsci's Politics (New York, 1980), pp. 222-231; Anne Showstack Sassoon, "Gramsci: A New Concept of Politics and the Expansion of Democracy," in Marxism and Democracy, Edited and introduced by Alan Hunt (London, 1980), pp. 81-99; Federico Mancini, "The Theoretical Roots of Italian Communism: Worker Democracy and Political Party," in The Italian Communist Party, Edited by Simon Seraty and Lawrence Gray (New York, 1980), pp. 3-20; Jerome Karabell, "Revolutionary Contradictions," Politics and Society, 6:2 (1976), pp. 335-353; Noberto Bobbio, "Gramsci and the Conception of Civil Society," in Gramsci and Marxist Theory, Edited by Chantal Mouffe (London, 1979), pp. 32-43; Gwyn Williams, Proletarian Order (London, 1975), pp. 103-120; John Cammett, Antonio Gramsci and the Origins of Italian Communism (Stanford, 1967), pp. 65-95; John Cammett, "Socialism and Participatory Democracy," in The Revival of American Socialism (New York, 1971), pp. 41-60; Jose Nun, "Elements for a Theory of Democracy: Gramsci and Common Sense," Boundary 2, 14:3 (Spring 1983), pp. 197-226; Stuart Hall, "Popular-Democracy vs. Authoritarian Popu-

lism," in Marxism and Democracy, Edited by Alan Hunt  
(London, 1980), pp. 165-168; Carl Boggs, The Two Revolu-  
tions (Boston, 1984).

CHAPTER III:  
FROM SARDINIA TO THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION

Gramsci lived in Sardinia between 1891 and 1911. During these years his "instinct for rebellion" was formed in the miasma of Sardinia's poverty and was expressed primarily in terms of Sardinian nationalism. He developed a deep resentment for the mainland industrialists and their parliamentary functionaries who dominated Sardinian economic and political life. As a youth, Gramsci began to recognize that the constraints he faced as an individual were but a small part of a larger exploited society. These early tendencies are directly linked with Sardinia's long history of foreign domination and native rebellion. As Gramsci would later write to Julia Schucht, it was this "instinct" that "saved him from ending up" living a typical Sardinian life. He stated that:

the instinct of rebellion, which, from the time I was a child, was aimed at the rich, because I could not go on to school, I who had scored ten (perfect) in all subjects of the elementary school, while the sons of the butcher, the pharmacist and the draper went instead. This extended to all the wealthy who oppressed the peasants of Sardinia. . .<sup>1</sup>

Sardinian history can be seen as successive periods of colonialism. As such, the island's culture developed under the onus of foreign domination rather than as an existing culture responding to external domination. While

the specific reasons for the domination changed, its impact on the people and the land remained constant. In the sixth century B.C., the Carthaginians set the basic pattern which would later be followed by the Romans and then the Byzantines. Large grain farms were established to feed the larger empire. Sardinians and imported slaves provided the labor.

In 1297 Sardinia was placed under the rule of the Aragonese by Papal fiat. With the unification of Spain in 1492, Sardinia officially came under Spanish control. Feudalism developed under Aragonese rule. The island was divided among thirty-eight Aragonese nobles. Farming continued on these feudal domains, with the surplus seized by the Aragonese. Since the Sardinian serfs depended upon subsistence farming for their livelihood, the Aragonese also rented small plots of land to the peasants. As very little of this land was suitable for farming, most of it was used as pasture. What little commerce existed was reserved exclusively for foreigners. Given these feudal relationships, the poor quality and exhausted condition of the soil, and the subsistence level of existence, Sardinian daily life was one of hard work, inadequate diet, and disease. Mortality rates were so high that the native Sardinian population declined during the Aragonese-Spanish period of control.<sup>2</sup>

In 1720 Sardinia came under the control of the Piedmontese. By treaty with the Spanish Government, the Spanish nobles on Sardinia kept possession of their estates. Feudalism would remain until it was formally abolished in 1840. In effect, this meant that what had been the common lands were now enclosed. Serfs lost their access rights to this common land which eliminated animal grazing and wood gathering rights. While the large land owners continued to own the best land, most land was worked in small plots by peasants. In addition, the Piedmontese had introduced a money economy to the island. This meant that most Sardinians worked rented land. Since the rents were paid either in crops or coins, this meant that the peasants were usually in debt until the harvest. In terms of the Sardinians' daily life experiences, very little had changed, then, from the Carthaginian and the Roman periods.<sup>3</sup>

The unification of Italy in 1861 only resulted in, for Sardinia, continued domination, economically and politically, by the mainland. By the time Gramsci was born, the export of agricultural products such as wine, olive oil, and cattle to France was all that separated the island's economy from a total collapse. During 1886 and 1887 a number of bank failures struck an already weak economy. The effect was to force many of who produced

agricultural exports into dealings with "local money-lenders" at greatly increased rates. Given the small plots of the land being worked, the poor resources being utilized, and the importance of the exports, these higher interest rates meant increased and more widespread hardships for Sardinia.

Shortly after Gramsci's birth, Italy's trade arrangements with France came to an end. In 1887, the Italian government introduced protective tariffs as a means to shield northern Italy's growing industrial interests. In response, the French closed their markets to "Italian" goods. The primary market for Sardinia's agricultural exports vanished. Sardinia still lacked any type of manufacturing which might have cushioned the impact of this economic disaster. Also, during this time a phylloxera epidemic swept through the island's grapevines adding to the hardship. From this situation four main consequences emerged: (1) an increased reliance upon the island's mineral deposits, (2) a dramatic rise in emigration, (3) a sharp growth in unemployment combined with increased rural "underemployment," and (4) the revival of banditry during the 1890s.<sup>4</sup>

Sardinian culture and social relations deteriorated in this atmosphere of domination and exploitation. Although Sardinians were well-known for their traditional

resentment of rulers, their resentment was very general in its nature which fueled its proclivity for banditry. Since outlaws were part of the folklore, the myth of the popular hero had strong ties to Sardinian life; the outlaw was the avenger and an important part of the Sardinian peasant culture. As a youth Gramsci grew up aware of worker and peasant unrest. He saw the revival of banditry as an expression of this situation. Since there was no organized political response, he viewed banditry as a primitive, but rational, political expression. In 1919, Gramsci wrote about this aspect of Sardinian culture:

The class struggle used to be all mixed up with banditry: it was scarcely distinguishable from taking ransom, from burning down woods and hamstringing animals, from the abduction of women and children, from attacks on town halls. It was a kind of primitive terrorism, with no lasting or effective results.<sup>5</sup>

In Gramsci's view the Sardinian workers and peasants were helpless because they had neither loyal nor effective leaders. Local leadership was either directly linked to the state, the mine owners, or the large landowners. In effect, the Sardinians were caught without leadership in a social situation politically controlled by others. In May 1906, this combination produced a spontaneous revolt in Cagliari which quickly spread throughout the island. The Italian government sent mainland troops to suppress the Sardinian revolt. The intensity of this repression

further fueled resentment against the mainland and increased the appeal of Sardinian nationalism as the answer to the island's problems. Just as he viewed banditry as a primitive but rational consequence of an unjust social system, Gramsci saw the revolt and nationalism as a more organized rational response to the same conditions. In 1919 he would write:

Objectively, the psychology of the peasant was reducible to a tiny sum of primordial sentiments dependent on social conditions created by the parliamentary-democratic state. The peasant was left completely at the mercy of the landlords and their sycophants, and the corrupt public functionaries. The main preoccupation of his life was to defend himself bodily from the ambushes and crude barbarism of the landlords and public functionaries.<sup>6</sup>

In 1895, the Sardinian socialist movement began under the leadership of Giuseppe Cavallera. The Sardinian socialists sought a program which would ensure that the interests of the peasants were taken into account. They focused their activities primarily on organizational efforts. Although the socialists had been active in a number of mine strikes, they remained a small group concerned primarily with developing their cadre. Their slogans were sounded during the 1906 revolt, but support from the mainland socialists proved nonexistent. The crackdown which followed the rebellion easily crushed the relatively small and impotent organized Sardinian socialist movement.



Gramsci's early political perspective was formed through his exposure and experiences with Sardinian politics and culture. To Gramsci, the Italian parliament simply represented the continuation of the past. Democracy had not improved life for the Sardinians.

In 1905 Gramsci began reading the socialist newspaper Avanti! on a regular basis. By 1908 his older brother, Gennaro, supplied him with additional socialist material from the mainland. By 1910, he had started reading Karl Marx "out of intellectual curiosity."<sup>7</sup> In a 1911 school essay entitled "Oppressed and Oppressors," Gramsci demonstrated the level of his political perceptions prior to his departure for Turin. His writing reflects a mixture of humanist tendencies with Marx's notion of class struggle. Gramsci wrote:

Men, when they come to feel their strength and to be conscious of their responsibility and their value, will no longer suffer another man to impose his will on them and claim the right to control their actions and thoughts. For it would seem to be a cruel fate for humans, this instinct that drives them to devour one another in place of bringing their united strength to bear on the struggles against Nature, the struggle to adapt it to men's needs.<sup>8</sup>

He concluded the essay by summarizing the historical lessons of the French Revolution, stating that:

The French revolution abolished many privileges, and raised up many of the oppressed; but all it did was replace one class in power

by another. Yet it did teach us one great lesson: social privileges and differences, being products of society and not nature, can be overcome.<sup>9</sup>

On November 16, 1911 Gramsci enrolled at the University of Turin. The social upheaval in Turin would eventually complement his formal academic education at the University with a political education. During this period Italy was in a state of crisis. Between 1911 and 1913 the Italian economy was in a period of adjustment that produced a general sense of uncertainty. The Libyan War (1911-1912) added to the difficulties. Culturally, there was an increasingly widespread lack of faith in the Italian social and political arrangements. This cultural crisis was most fundamentally expressed as the attack on positivism. Positivism's attempt to apply the methods of the natural sciences to all aspects of human activity was losing its hold on Italian intellectuals. At the University, Gramsci was introduced to the historical idealism of Benedetto Croce and the "practical" Marxism of Antonio Labriola.<sup>10</sup>

Gramsci was at first fully absorbed in his studies. The outside world was less important. Eventually, Gramsci's political education would have the greater impact and would replace his intention to be a teacher with the desire to be a political activist. He would

later state that it was the Turin working class which taught him the real meaning of Marx.<sup>11</sup>

Turin's radical political genesis stemmed from the rapid industrialization of the city. As a result, between 1901 and 1911 Turin's population grew by more than 27 per cent. John M. Cammett describes the city's population as having been politically and socially divided itself between "an industrial proletariat and a capitalist bourgeoisie."<sup>12</sup> There was no middle ground. Turin had few middle-class wage earners and less self-employed artisans.<sup>13</sup> Politically, this class division was reflected by the dominant issues which divided them. The Turin workers and a few intellectuals sided with socialism, whereas Nationalist sentiments were supported by the "capitalist bourgeois" and an increasing number of the University faculty. World War I would move almost all of the faculty into the Nationalist camp.

World War I increased the tensions within the Italian labor movement. Its leaders were primarily divided between those who favored fighting within parliament through party politics as the means to winning power through elections and the "syndicalists," who argued that election success would only result in new faces and not a new political structure. This group favored direct action over theory. Syndicalists believed in the need for worker

initiative; the best way to overthrow the system was through the development of worker organizations.

Gramsci's arrival in Turin coincided with the Libyan War. In 1911 Italy had initiated a war against the Ottoman Empire with the intention of acquiring the Turks' North African province of Libya. The Libyan War, like World War I, presented a major dilemma of ambivalence for the Italian Socialist Party (PSI). Should the PSI favor national interests over the international working class? The PSI's "reformist" wing supported the Italian government and the war effort. They argued that the immediate concern should be the Italian working class. Support for the Italian government was viewed as a means to increase their opportunity for political success. With increased political strength, the PSI would increase its ability to advance its program through the parliament. Both gains were viewed as necessary preconditions for the development of Italian socialism. The "syndicalists," like the majority of the working class, favored neutrality. They argued that backing the Italian government and the war effort would only undermine their own class interests.

In 1913 Gramsci quietly joined the PSI. His main activities were divided between writing articles for local socialist newspapers and teaching an occasional class on socialism to workers. In 1914 he became editor of the

socialist weekly Il Grido del Popolo ("The Cry of the People"). While he did not become actively involved in the political debates of the day, one of his first articles supported Benito Mussolini's position of "active neutrality."<sup>14</sup> Gramsci's position can be seen as an attempt to get beyond the "reformist" vs. "syndicalist" debate as a means to increase the PSI's unity. With greater unity, it was hoped, the PSI could specifically address the larger crisis of Italian society. This "false start" would be politically costly. For the next year he remained silent. This "support of Mussolini" would be a charge his political opponents would periodically raise throughout his life.<sup>15</sup> Gramsci left the University of Turin shortly after Italy entered World War I (May 1915) to commit his energies fully to political activism.

While Gramsci's concept of democracy had greatly expanded from his Sardinian days, it remained dominated by the limitations of the parliamentary democracy. Gramsci's criticisms of democracy are criticisms of this particular strand. In his assessment, democracy does not represent the solution, instead, it is something that can be used to achieve that solution. The inherent danger of liberal democracy is that the class base of society goes into hiding. Reflecting on recent events, Gramsci concluded that the practical danger associated with parliamentary

democracy is that the revolutionary struggle is diluted by the encouragement given to reformist tendencies. In 1916 he wrote:

. . . democracy is our worst enemy. We must always be ready to fight it, because it blurs the clear separation of the classes. . . . It isn't that democratic conquests are not desirable, but only as a means and a way toward a more rapid development and not as the ultimate end of history. They must, in short, become instruments of the class struggle and not excuses for softening and for general fraternizing.<sup>16</sup>

Between 1915 and 1917 his writings emphasized cultural questions. In part this was due to wartime censorship, but it also reflects Gramsci's desire to move beyond the reformist PSI elements. For him (and the left-wing of the PSI) the key was to address the question of revolution within Italian society. This meant attention to the attitude of the workers and the peasants. For Gramsci, World War I proved that working class consciousness would not be spontaneously developed by the objective circumstances. This meant that revolution was not an automatic effect of material evolution. Gramsci saw that "none of this can come about through spontaneous evolution. . . . Above all, man is mind, i.e. he is a product of history, not nature."<sup>17</sup>

The development of a revolutionary class consciousness is a slow, deliberate political struggle. The focus

of this struggle must be cultural. In January 1916, Gramsci wrote:

The fact is that only by degrees, one stage at a time, has humanity acquired consciousness of its own value and won for itself the right to throw off the patterns of organization imposed on it by minorities at previous periods in history. And this consciousness was formed not under the brutal goad of physiological necessity but as a result of intelligent reflection, at first by just a few people and later by a whole class, on why certain conditions exist and how best to convert the facts of vassalage into the signals of rebellion and social reconstruction. This means that every revolution has been preceded by an intense labour of criticism, by the diffusion of culture and the spread of ideas amongst masses of men who are at first resistant, and think only of solving their own immediate economic and political problems for themselves, who have no ties of solidarity with others in the same condition.<sup>18</sup>

The Italian workers' movement, especially in Turin, grew increasingly militant between 1915 and 1917. Inflation negated the benefits of the full employment required for war production. Food and other basic necessities were increasingly in short supply. Appeals to patriotism were no longer enough. Following a prolonged bread shortage, Turin erupted with spontaneous rioting. Within two days the bread riot became an unplanned, worker-led anti-war and anti-capitalist rebellion. The spontaneous bread riot had grown into an armed, potentially revolutionary, struggle with Turin at the center of the insurrection.

The rebellion lasted five days. It primarily demonstrated the gulf which separated the workers from their formal leadership. Both the socialist and the traditional union leadership had very little to do with the workers' insurrection. The PSI failed to provide any leadership whatsoever. In fact, with only four exceptions, the socialist deputies, "at the mayor's insistence, signed a manifesto calling on the workers to return to their jobs."<sup>19</sup> Gramsci and other left-wing PSI members backed the workers. They condemned the PSI's lack of leadership in general and the deputies' actions in particular.

In the aftermath of the Turin rebellion and in light of the news from Russia, the disputes over reform and revolution, evolutionism and voluntarism, and democratic means and elitist means, took on added importance and urgency. It was in this atmosphere of social dislocation that Gramsci first moved into a position of actual political leadership. In mid-September, most of the PSI leadership was arrested as part the government's response to the Turin rebellion. Shortly thereafter, Gramsci became the newly-elected Secretary of the Turin Section of the PSI.

News about the Russian revolution filtered through the government censors into Italy. Italian socialists were united by their support of the February revolution,



but divided by the question of what should replace the Tsar. The news from Russia was particularly welcomed in Turin and by Gramsci. Outside of Turin, the PSI's left or revolutionary wing did not agree with Gramsci's enthusiasm for Bolsheviks. In April, Gramsci wrote that "the Russian revolution is more than simply a proletarian event, it is a proletarian act, which must naturally lead to a socialist regime."<sup>20</sup> In July, Lenin and the Bolsheviks were identified as "the Russian revolution itself."<sup>21</sup> In December, Gramsci described the events in Russian as "the revolution against Capital."<sup>22</sup>

For Gramsci, the Russian revolution illustrated the basic error of economic determinism. It reaffirmed his belief that human will was the prime mover in history. In Russia the revolution was not being carried out by economic forces, but by people who had gone beyond the mechanical application of Marxism. Gramsci's writings on the Russian revolution also reflect his faith in the possibilities of the masses. In his April 1917 article, he saw the people of Russia rising to create something new. Unlike the French Revolution, characterized by Jacobinism, the Russian Revolution was not "one authoritarian regime replacing another. . . . the Russian revolutionaries (are) not Jacobins . . . because they are pursuing aims which are common to the vast majority of the populations."<sup>23</sup>

For Gramsci, the success of the Bolshevik Revolution reflected the broadly-based support and involvement of the Russian masses. This success and mass support during the early years of the revolution moved Gramsci decidedly away from his previous position of backing elite-led socialism. In September 1917, Gramsci wrote: "the proletariat is not any army. It does not have officers, corporals and soldiers. Its collective life cannot be even distinctly compared to the collective life of an army in arms."<sup>24</sup> For Gramsci, the spread of the Russian Soviets meant the decentralization of power in Russia. This decentralization demonstrated the Bolshevik commitment to a "complete" socialism.<sup>25</sup>

Against the background of the PSI's inaction, the initial reports from Russia demonstrated for Gramsci the importance that leadership must give to maintaining a legitimate relationship with the masses. Given the realities faced by the Bolsheviks, time exposed the limitations of the revolution. Popular support, especially among the peasants, dwindled. In Gramsci's enthusiastic accounts, the Bolsheviks represented the highest standards for a socialist revolution. As such, the decline in peasant support for the revolution must reflect a lower level of mass consciousness than what was initially perceived. In Gramsci's view, the main lesson to be

learned was that, just as socialism would not mechanically evolve from capitalism, a revolutionary working class consciousness would not automatically result from any particular economic and/or social conditions.

From Lenin and the Russian Revolution, Gramsci's views on the relationship between the leaders and the led expanded. The elite still must provide the necessary leadership, but they must earn the active support of the masses. Legitimate leadership does not only express the collective will of the masses, but it must also work to develop their consciousness. Revolutions are not the product of a formula, but are the result of a unity between the leaders and the led. The nature of the "unity" and how to achieve it in the Italian milieu became an important problem. The "Red Two Years" would provide an Italian test case for Gramsci's new political perspective.

#### NOTES

1. Thomas Bates, "The Political Thought of Antonio Gramsci" (Ph.D. Dissertation, 1972), pp. 17-18 (Hereafter referred to as "PTAG"); Also see, Dante Germino, "Antonio Gramsci," Boundary 2, 14:3 (Spring 1986), pp. 19-25.

2. Alastair Davidson, Antonio Gramsci (London, 1977), pp. 1-4.

3. Davidson, op. cit., pp. 7-12.

4. Giuseppe Fiori, Antonio Gramsci (London, 1970), pp. 29-30.
5. Fiori, op. cit., p. 31; Also see; Eric Hobsbawm, Bandits (New York, 1969).
6. Thomas Bates, "PTAG," pp. 22-23.
7. Fiori, op. cit., p. 56.
8. Antonio Gramsci, "Oppressed and Oppressors," in Selections From Political Writings 1910-1920 (London, 1977), p. 3. (Hereafter referred to as SPW1.)
9. Ibid., p. 5; As Thomas Bates points out, this essay reflects Gramsci's growing familiarity with Marx, not the abandonment of his Sardinian nationalism. During this period, Bates quotes Gramsci ("To sea with the mainlanders! How many times I repeated these words.") to illustrate how deeply he still felt it necessary "to struggle for the national independence of the region." See; Bates, "PTAG," p. 29.
10. Edmund E. Jacobitti, "Labriola, Croce, and Italian Marxism," Journal of the History of Ideas, 36:2 (April-June 1975), pp. 297-318; Richard Bellamy, Modern Italian Social Theory (Stanford, 1987), pp. 54-99 and 115-140; Paul Piccone, Italian Marxism (Berkeley, 1983), pp. 44-104; Carl Boggs, The Two Revolutions (Boston, 1984), pp. 37-48.
11. Bates, "PTAG," p. 66.
12. John M. Cammett, Antonio Gramsci (Stanford, 1967), p. 19.
13. Ibid.
14. Gramsci, "Active and Operative Neutrality," SPW1, pp. 6-9.
15. Neil McInnes, The Western Marxists (New York, 1972), p. 92; James Joll, Antonio Gramsci (Middlesex, England, 1977), pp. 41-48.
16. Alberto Pozzolini, Antonio Gramsci (London, 1970), p. 69.
17. Gramsci, "Socialism and Culture," SPW1, p.11.

18. Ibid., pp. 11-12.
19. Thomas Bates, "PTAG," p. 114.
20. Gramsci, "Notes on the Russian Revolution," SPW1, p. 28.
21. Gramsci, "The Russian Maximalists," SPW1, p. 31.
22. Gramsci, "The Revolution Against 'Capital'," SPW1, p. 34.
23. Gramsci, "Notes On The Russian Revolution," SPW1, pp. 28-29.
24. Quoted by Thomas Bates, "PTAG," pp. 119-120.
25. Antonio Gramsci, "Three Principles, Three Orders," History, Philosophy and Culture in the Young Gramsci (St. Louis, 1975), p. 75.

CHAPTER IV:  
FROM WORLD WAR I TO THE RED TWO YEARS

World War I fundamentally restructured the world's political order. The Russian Revolution appeared as a direct contradiction to this emerging order. Socialist revolution was considered a real possibility throughout Europe. World War I accelerated the economic and political decline of the Italian state. In Italy, and especially in Turin, the Russian Revolution had a major impact. Most Italians considered revolution either as imminent or a very real possibility. During this time, Gramsci was increasingly politicized, with new ideas developing in step with the social and political turmoil surrounding the northern industrial cities of Italy.

A constant in Gramsci's thinking remained the belief that progress would result from human will and the force of ideas. Unlike most of his contemporaries, Gramsci did not think progress was naturally inevitable. To achieve any real progress, he thought a greater emphasis must be placed on mass consciousness. Only then could the lessons of the Russian Revolution be applied to modern Italy. During 1918, Gramsci's attention was focused on the relationship between the PSI and the working class; the unity between leadership and the led. His energies were devoted to forging a revolution within the specific context of

Italian history. The task was to create an "open" hierarchy between the masses at the base and the individual at the apex. To succeed, this hierarchy must form a social unity based on "spiritual" authority.<sup>1</sup>

For Gramsci, collectivism is historically superior to individualism. Individual freedoms developed in close association with the breakdown of the feudal hierarchy. In effect, liberalism, the doctrine of individualism, was a political program supporting the emerging order. Originally presented as embodying universal values, liberal theory merged increasingly into a class doctrine. In Gramsci's view, as the capitalist class narrows, the "disinherited" becomes the social majority and the "universal" nature of liberalism wears away: "For the proletariat, organization within its own class necessarily replaces individualism."<sup>2</sup> Through these organizations, this emerging social majority finds a means to resist and protect its interests. Broader notions of freedom must replace what had become, in effect, freedom for the individual capitalists. Freedom for all, then, becomes the guarantee of individual freedoms. As such, "Bourgeois individualism necessarily creates in the proletariat the tendency to collectivism."<sup>3</sup> The proletariat gains its freedom through its own class struggle for the rights of the collective.

For Gramsci, socialism must not simply replace order with order. Instead, it must be "a historical process, a development from one social stage to another that is richer in collective values." It must be primarily concerned with developing the social order as a means to expand individual freedoms and reduce socially imposed constraints.<sup>4</sup> As capitalism concentrated the bourgeoisie, the social majority was transformed from citizens into subjects. Gramsci's socialism seeks to transform these subjects back into citizens. History, however, depends on both the collective will of the many as well as the knowledge and leadership of the few.

Gramsci's view of the Russian Revolution, combined with the PSI's inaction, had convinced him that the ultimate success of socialism is intimately linked with a proper relationship between the leaders and the led. Each is vital to the whole. Within the collective, a specific individual can easily "find reason or truth" much faster than the others. Within the many, there are different elements each capable of specific performance levels related to their particular abilities. Among those who display qualities necessary for leadership, the one who demonstrates this capacity the best should be seen as the most capable leader. For Gramsci, this logic forms the



reason "why the single can be chosen among the most able, among the best to interpret reason."<sup>5</sup>

In order for the individual members to act as one, the collective must have internal agreement and full discussion among the members. The "best prepared" must help the "least prepared" to grasp the situation. Having the "will (a goal) and that the goal be reasonable, true, and not illusory" is not enough. All members of the collective must understand the "rationality of the goal." Imposed discipline either breaks down or presents the "single" as a tyrant: "Whereas the discipline established by the collectivity upon its members, even if late in being applied, seldom fails to be carried out."<sup>6</sup> Complete discussion is the key to lasting discipline. As Gramsci writes:

Through discussion there must come about fusion of souls and wills. The single elements of truth that each may bring must synthesize in the complex truth and be the integral expression of reason. For this to occur and for the discussion to be exhaustive and sincere, maximum tolerance is necessary. Everybody must be convinced that this is the truth, and that consequently it absolutely must be carried out. When it is time to act everyone must be in agreement and solidarity, because in the flow of discussion a tacit consensus has formed and everyone has now become responsible in case of failure.<sup>7</sup>

Gramsci saw this "democratic" relationship within the collective as the means by which to unite socialist thought successfully with mass action. In its essence,

his socialism can be seen as a process which is shaped by this fundamental dialectic. More than anything else, Gramsci's democracy was a way in which to consider people politically. As a political ideal, democracy represents an "ideal progress." As a moral ideal, democracy attempts to make each individual citizen share responsibility for social life. Or, as Gramsci stated, "democracy is thus the attempt to moralize political life." In practical terms, democracy is fundamentally the point of contact between moral doctrine and political life.<sup>8</sup>

For Gramsci, ideals must never be presented as abstractions apart from the historical conditions of the particular social group being discussed. Abstracted ideals which are presented as either universal or as existing only in speech remain locked within the limits of moral doctrine. Only when moral ideals are examined within the context of actual historical and cultural development can they become political ideals. Democracy, as "ideal progress," is a measure, then, by which to examine an existing political system. It is a political ideal to the degree that it becomes a practical guide for action. At this point, a moral ideal goes beyond description to become prescription. In this sense, Gramsci sees socialist democracy as a projection of principles which replace the democratic limitations imposed by capitalism.

The historical task is to actualize this new level of democracy.

In Gramsci's historical class analysis, the specific problems with Italian democracy are more accurately a reflection of the limitations of Italian society than a critique of democracy. The Italian government during Gramsci's early years was headed by Giovanni Giolitti. In 1918 Gramsci described this regime as "despotic rather than parliamentary. It was despotic, however, in a petty bourgeois rather than a capitalist sense."<sup>9</sup> From his socialist point of view, the state represents the economic-political organization of the bourgeois class. Its primary function is to unify opposing interests within the bourgeois class in order to maintain a solid, united class front. Competition between these bourgeois interests focuses at the point of government. Power to shape the specific direction of the government is the prize for victory. The winning interests also have a responsibility to maintain overall class interests by finding "a juridical settlement to internal class disputes."<sup>10</sup>

Historically, the bourgeois class has been able to escape its feudal bonds by proclaiming the ideal of individual freedom as a universal value. As this class secured its political position, the ideals of individual freedom began to operate at the political level. Indi-

vidualism, the essence of liberalism, increasingly became a class doctrine. The universal ideal of freedom became transformed into the political reality of free competition. Out of this development the "minor" sectional disputes "disappear as they are absorbed by higher interests, great parties will form and the era of party government will begin." What emerges is the liberal, "ethical" state which "is ideally above class struggle."<sup>11</sup>

In Gramsci's view, the Italian capitalist state has not yet reached this level of development. The Italian state under Giolitti would be more accurately described as "a bureaucratic, centralized regime." The Italian "despotic" state represents "the narrow political interests of the Piedmont"<sup>12</sup> which maintains a system of colonial domination over the rest of the nation. Italy was kept united through a centralized bureaucratic control rather than a competition between the various bourgeois interests. This condition was directly related to Italian capitalism's immature nature and, correspondingly, to the undeveloped nature of the bourgeois class. Despite the presence of democratic institutions, the substance and framework of this Italian State fell short of bourgeoisie democratic standards. The historical development of Italian capitalism had led to intensified sectional antagonisms. In this atmosphere, World War I quickened the development of

the Italian bourgeois and hastened the decline of "the unchecked dictatorship of the Giolittian groupings."<sup>13</sup> As such, it was only after World War I that Italian democracy began to move toward the standards of a liberal democracy.

For Gramsci, as capitalism develops and its bourgeoisie evolves, the democratic ideal increasingly becomes a limited competition between the capitalist groupings for control of the state. When Gramsci speaks of parliamentary democracy, then, he is primarily identifying it as an expression of the intra-class competition for control of the bourgeois state. The limitations of capitalist democracy are that it questions neither the form nor the substance of the state. Its democratic appeal is "to pure principles" based on a "utopian model" of the state. This "era of party government" was the level of democracy Italy had entered following World War I.

As Italy began the post-war period, Gramsci accelerated his criticism of Italian democracy, although his basic assessment remained unchanged. In his view, a "democratic state" must entail more than individual freedoms limited by their restriction and application solely within the political sphere. The democratic state "is not the product of a kind heart or a liberal education; it is a necessity of life for large-scale production . . . for the concentration of the population

in modern capitalist cities."<sup>14</sup> The modern organization of society requires a higher standard of democracy and the transcending of bourgeois democracy.

Gramsci saw political parties as representing the various groups competing for control of the state. Bourgeois parties are those which represent either the various capitalists' interests or those groupings seeking privileges from the state. The latter have "not the slightest impact on the framework of the State." Their impact can be seen as similar to annoying "coachman-flies" which are primarily occupied with "suck(ing) the honey of favoritism" from the state.<sup>15</sup> The impact these parties have on the majority of the population is, therefore, indirect. In effect, the mass of citizens are viewed primarily as "subjects" of the state's decisions. Gramsci characterized "Italian democracy" in September 1918 as:

still a 'demagogy' since it is not constituted in the form of a hierarchical organism and it does not obey an ideal discipline which is dependent on a program freely adhered to. This means that in Italy democracy is merely a word and a standard phrase . . . . It has not become a faith, it has not created a distinction between classes of citizens and it has not fed the moral passion for political conflict.<sup>16</sup>

Gramsci's socialist party would work to expand the limits of capitalist democracy. As an organization of the emerging majority, it cannot enter the competition for the state without running the risk of being reduced to "a

swarm of coachman flies." Consequently, a socialist party must guard against simple reformism. Its goal must be the establishment of a proletarian state which represents a social advancement from the current historical stage to another. This higher stage must be richer in collective social values as a means to insure greater individual freedom. One measure of this "richer" standard would be the degree to which the masses are transformed from their current existence as "subjects" of the state into "citizens."

To accomplish this goal a socialist party must overcome three basic barriers. One is the creation of a new socialist state and institutions to replace the bourgeois state and its institutions. Whereas capitalist institutions are structured to ensure and promote bourgeois domination, socialism requires its own structure and its own institutions. A second problem is the development of the new social hierarchy upon which the socialist state and its institutions will be based. The third problem is to insure that this new social order remains "open" and that it does not "harden into a class- and caste-order."<sup>17</sup>

The "dictatorship of the proletariat" is the "transitional stage" between gaining state power and the establishment of the new social hierarchy. This dictatorship prevents a "coup d'etat by factious minorities." It is

also the fundamental "guarantee of freedom" during the transition. The guarantee stems from the fact that "it is not a method to be perpetuated." Its purpose is to allow for "the creation and consolidation of the permanent organs into which the dictatorship, having accomplished its mission will be dissolved."<sup>18</sup>

If anything characterizes Gramsci's work, it was his great attention to the specifics of Italian history and culture. His great challenge, therefore, was to overcome these basic problems from within the Italian historical and cultural milieu. One notion Gramsci fostered from his assessment of the Russian Revolution was that "the Soviets and the popular parties" of Russia were "the living nuclei" of the new social hierarchy. He saw this emerging order as "the disorganized and suffering masses at the base, then the organized workers and peasants, then the Soviets, then the Bolshevik Party and finally one man: Lenin. It is a hierarchical gradation based on prestige and trust, which formed spontaneously and is maintained through free choice."<sup>19</sup> In the Soviets, Gramsci found a working model of the basic organization which should be organized and developed in Italy. In the Italian factory councils, Gramsci envisioned an Italian equivalent. The Italian factory councils in Turin established, in practice, the conceptual basis for Gramsci's socialist



revolution. The "Red Two Years" would put Gramsci's vision to the test.

Italy's Biennio Rosso (Red Two Years) was part of a larger wave of social unrest which swept across the European continent following World War I and the Russian Revolution. Although technically one of the victors, Italy's lackluster role in World War I created widespread social dislocation and a severe economic decline at home. Unemployment, inflation, and food shortages were commonplace. By 1917 and 1918, increased militancy had already led to a number of demonstrations, strikes, and land occupations. News of the Bolsheviks' success further encouraged such actions, especially in Turin, by record numbers. By 1919 the working class appeared on the verge of rebellion. The widespread, popular nature of the revolt led many to believe that revolution was at hand.<sup>20</sup>

During the war years, worker dissatisfaction contributed mightily to the growth of the PSI, culminating in the parliamentary elections of 1919, when the Socialists emerged as the largest single national party. During the war, the PSI leadership pursued a reformist policy which sought to mediate any type of mass rebellion by the workers. The Biennio Rosso intensified the internal PSI debate over what role it should play. The party's failure to act, greatly weakened its legitimacy in the eyes of its

followers. And, as Gwyn A. Williams, notes, "a mass movement of workers well to the left of the PSI had suddenly emerged on the streets."<sup>21</sup> As reformist leadership fell increasingly into disfavor, the factory councils became this mass movement's focus of attention and organizational efforts.

Gramsci thought that neither the PSI nor the trade union movement was capable of successfully leading a revolutionary struggle.<sup>22</sup> The PSI's reformism had prevented it from being anything more than another competing political party. Both the party system and the trade union movement were structures of the bourgeois state. They functioned within its domain and, consequently, its rules. As such, they had neither the interest nor the ability to lead the proletarian movement.<sup>23</sup> Gramsci assumed that the Italian state, if not Italian capitalism, was on the verge of collapse during the "Red Two Years." The immediate problem, then, was to prepare and organize the workers to exercise their power and build the New Order. The factory councils were seen as a primary mechanism for implementing the New Order through their proletarian expressions of structure, education, unity, and discipline. As such, the councils represented "the model of the proletarian State. All the problems inherent in the organization of the

proletarian State are inherent in the organization of the Council."<sup>24</sup>

Gramsci thought that through these proletarian institutions "the proletariat and the semi-proletariat" would develop their consciousness and acquire the discipline necessary to transcend bourgeois society. While trade unions and political parties were important as defensive, tactical weapons to protect the proletariat within the bourgeois state, the factory councils were considered strategically important for transcending it. The key reason for this difference stems from the fact that factory councils organized workers as producers, not laborers. He wrote: "Only with this type of organization" will "the unity of labor become aware of its capacity to produce and to exercise sovereignty." Unlike the trade union, "in the factory council the worker takes part as a producer, as a result of his universal character, of his position and his function in society, in the same manner which the citizen takes part in the democratic parliamentary state."<sup>25</sup>

The factory councils, therefore, must oppose any type of co-management or cooperative arrangement. Their aim must be to confront the whole production process as producers. The nucleus of the new state and its economy would originate and develop around the point of production,

although the precise relationship between economic and political struggle is unclear. The factory councils would be the institutions through which economics, politics, and the new culture would emerge. For Gramsci:

There can be no workers' government until the working class is in a position to become, in its entirety, the executive power of the workers' State. The laws of the workers' State need to be executed by the workers' themselves: only this in way will the workers' State avoid the danger of falling into the hands of adventurers of and political intriguers, of becoming counterfeit of the bourgeois State. Hence the working class must train itself and educate itself in the management of society. It must acquire the culture and psychology of a dominant class, acquire them through its own channels and its own systems. . . .<sup>26</sup>

The factory council is Gramsci's model for the proletarian state. The socialist state cannot be accomplished through the existing democratic institutions, since parliamentary democracy is a structure within the bourgeois state. To believe that the form of these democratic institutions can be corrected or that existing structures can be properly administered misses the fundamental point. This "mistaken mentality," assumes "the perpetuity and fundamental perfection of the institutions of the democratic state. In their view, the form of these democratic institutions can be corrected, touched up here and there, but in fundamentals must be respected."<sup>27</sup> Therefore, the creation of the new state entails the creation of new democratic institutions.

As the model for this new state, the factory councils contain the basic elements of Gramsci's proletarian democracy. The starting point for this socialist democracy is, again, the workers' recognition and organization as producers. Unity is created through individual understanding of the "indispensable" position each holds in the production process. "Communist consciousness" is the comprehension of how this represents an historical advancement in terms of social relations. In so doing, workers come to see themselves as the dominant class. As these producers expand their consciousness, they come to grasp and overcome a key fallacy contained in capitalist politics.<sup>28</sup>

Bourgeois society perpetuates the idea that there exists a distinction between the economic and the political. Based upon this split, the state is presented as an instrument created to serve society. Public activities are identified with voluntary associations and citizenship. Private activities are expressions of individual freedom. For Gramsci, socialist politics means that economics entails production as well as social relations. Unlike trade unions and political parties, then, factory councils are not "voluntary" associations. Membership is automatic. It is not determined by either the act of joining or a particular skill. As the point in the

socialist transformation which unites the economic and the political, the social role of the worker changes. The capitalist worker changes into the socialist-citizen. As Frank R. Annunziato notes, "Gramsci insisted that factory councils must be comprised of, and be directly accountable to, the workers at the department level so that the producers would democratically make decisions concerning production and distribution."<sup>29</sup>

The factory councils, then, are truly "public" associations. Within these institutions, democratic relations form the basis of organization. In bridging the distinction between the economic and the political, "communist consciousness" provides the basis for socialist democracy. The association of the factory councils establishes the basis for transcending the limits of bourgeois democracy. The linkage of these institutions into a centralized hierarchy which respects the input of each individual council is, in effect, the creation of a "genuine" workers' democracy. This workers' democracy would stand in direct opposition to the Italian state.

For Gramsci, the creation of the proletarian State was fundamentally a dialectical process of development based on organization and consciousness. However, as the occupation of the factories ended, the factory council movement declined. The initiative was lost. Federico

Mancini writes, "After 1921, for all practical purposes, the councils disappeared from Gramsci's writings."<sup>30</sup> It was more than the failures of the factory council movement, the Bienno Rosso forced Gramsci to evaluate critically the failures of the Italian Socialist Party.

#### NOTES

1. Antonio Gramsci, "The Russian Utopia," Selections From Political Writings 1910-1920 (London, 1977), p. 53. (Hereafter referred to as SPW1.)

2. Antonio Gramsci, "Individualism and Collectivism," in History, Philosophy and Culture in the Young Gramsci (St. Louis, 1976), p. 61. (Hereafter referred to as HPC.)

3. Ibid.

4. Gramsci, "The Russian Utopia," SPW1, p. 53.

5. Gramsci, "Individualism and Collectivism," HPC, pp. 59-62.

6. Gramsci, "Intransigence-Tolerance: Intolerance-Compromise," HPC, p. 58.

7. Gramsci, "Intransigence-Tolerance: Intolerance-Compromise," HPC, pp. 57-58.

8. Gramsci, "Republic and Proletariate in France," HPC, pp. 81-82.

9. Gramsci, "After the Congress," HPC, p. 100.

10. Gramsci, "Class Intransigence and Italian History." SPW1, pp. 39-42.

11. Gramsci views "liberalism (a)s the formula that comprehends a whole history of struggles and revolutionary movements for the achievement of individual freedoms. It is the forma mentis created through these movements. It is the conviction . . . that the secret to happiness lies in the free expression of one's convictions and in unhin-

dered development of the country's productive and legislative forces. Here of course, happiness means that whatever happens that is bad cannot be attributed to single individuals, and that the reason for all failures must be found in the weakness of the initiators who did not yet possess the strength needed to victoriously assert their programs." See; Gramsci, "Three Principles, Three Orders," HPC, p. 72.

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid.

14. Gramsci, "Class Intransigence and Italian History," SPW1, p.42; Also see, Gramsci, "Our Obligation to be Strong," SPW1, pp. 56-58.

15. Ibid.

16. Gramsci, "Italian Democracy," HPC, pp. 115-116.

17. Gramsci, "The Russian Utopia," SPW1, pp. 52-54.

18. Ibid.

19. Ibid.

20. See; Martin Clark, Antonio Gramsci and the Revolution that Failed (New Haven, 1977); Gwyn A. Williams, Proletarian Order (London, 1975); Paolo Spriano, The Occupation of the Factories (London, 1975); Carl Boggs, "Gramsci's Theory of the Factory Councils," Berkeley Journal of Sociology, Vol. 19 (1974-'75), pp 171-187; Alistair Davidson, "Gramsci and the Factory Councils," Australian Left Review, No. 45 (October 1974), pp. 38-48; Alistair Davidson, "Gramsci and the Factory Councils, Part 2," Australian Left Review, No. 46 (March-April 1975), pp. 35-44; Mario Telo, "The Factory Council," in A. S. Sasson's Approaches to Gramsci (London, 1982), pp. 200-210; Franklin Adler, "Factory Councils, Gramsci and the Industrialists," Telos, No. 31 (Spring 1977), pp. 67-90; Antonio Gramsci, "Soviets in Italy," New Left Review, No. 51 (September-October 1968), pp. 28-58; Antonio Gramsci, Turin 1920, Factory Councils and General Strike (London 1970).

21. Williams, Proletarian Order, p. 64.



22. In the spring of 1919, the Italian authorities called out "the Sassari Brigade" to quiet a workers' demonstration in Turin. The Sassari Brigade was comprised of Sardinian peasants. Gramsci would later describe an encounter between a Turin worker of Sardinian ancestry and a Sardinian peasant soldier. Given Gramsci's early experiences of Sardinians being treated similarly by soldiers comprised of the mainland's poor, the fact that Gramsci would describe the encounter illustrates how the notion of class struggle had replaced his Sardinian nationalism.

Worker: What are you going to do in Turin?

Soldier: We have come to shoot the signori who are on strike.

Worker: But it is not the signori who are on strike.

It is the workers and they are poor.

Soldier: Here everyone is a signori. They all wear collar and tie. They make thirty lire a day.

I know the poor and how they dress. . . .

Worker: But I too am a worker and I am poor.

Soldier: You are poor because you are a Sardinian.

Worker: But if I go on strike with the others, will you shoot at me?

Soldier: Listen, when you go on strike with the others, stay at home!

Quote taken from Thomas R. Bates, "The Political Thought of Antonio Gramsci," (Ph.D. Dissertation, 1972), p. 119.

23. On the PSI, Gramsci writes: "Participating in the general activity of human society within the State, the socialists forgot that their role had to be essentially one of criticism, of antithesis. Instead of mastering reality, they allowed themselves to be absorbed by it." Gramsci, "The Conquest of the State," SPW1, p. 75. Trade unions are engaged in "the practice of opportunism -- 'bread and butter' demands. An increase in quantity results in a decrease in quality, and a facile accommodation to capitalist forms; . . . . trade unionism is revolutionary only to the extent that it is grammatically possible to link the two expressions. Trade unionism stands revealed as nothing other than a form of capitalist society." See; Gramsci, "Syndicalism and the Councils," SPW1, pp. 109.

24. Gramsci, "Unions and Councils," SPW1, p.100.

25. Quoted by Frank R. Annunziato, "Gramsci's Theory of Trade Unionism," Rethinking Marxism, 1:2 (Summer 1988), p. 157; Also see, Gramsci, "Unions and Councils," and

"Syndicalism and the Councils," SPW1, pp. 98-102 and 109-113.

26. Gramsci, "Governing Party and Governing Class," SPW1, p. 171.

27. Carl Boggs, Two Revolutions (Boston, 1984), pp. 83-90; Gramsci, "The Conquest of the State," SPW1, p.76.

28. Gramsci, "Unions and Councils," SPW1, p. 100; In June 1919, Gramsci, in collaboration with Palmiro Togliatti, wrote: ". . . the concrete and complete solution to the problems of socialist living can only arise from communist practice: collective discussion, which sympathetically alters men's consciousness, unifies them and inspires them to industrious enthusiasm. To tell the truth, to arrive together at the truth, is a communist and revolutionary act." See, Gramsci, "Workers' Democracy," SPW1, p. 68.

29. Annunziato, op. cit., p. 158.

30. Federico Mancini, "The Theoretical Roots of Italian Communism," in Serfy and Gray's The Italian Communist Party (New York, 1980), p. 10.

CHAPTER V:  
FROM THE PSI TO PRISON

A Marxist concept of a socialist revolution carries with it the notion of a transitional period from capitalism to socialism. The basic task associated with this transition is the dismantlement of the bourgeois state apparatus and establishment of the proletarian state. In order to accomplish this social transformation, the proletariat must at least control political power. This transition period is often referred to as "the dictatorship of the proletariat." In the Critique of the Gotha Program, Karl Marx wrote of this period as: "Between capitalist and communist society lies the period of the revolutionary transformation of the one in to the other. There corresponds to this also a political transformation period in which the state can be nothing but the revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat."<sup>1</sup>

The "dictatorship of the proletariat" is of fundamental importance to the relationship between socialism and democracy. Critics of socialism and Marxism identify this period as one in which monopolistic power is placed in the hands of the state. An imposed rigid centralization is designed to concentrate all power in the hands of a communist party. As such, this collectivist state

stands in direct contradiction to what these critics identify as either a democratic state or a democratic process. For Gramsci, any revolutionary change only has a chance of succeeding if it directly reflects the necessities of proletarian life and the needs of their culture. In his view, the success of this transitional period is directly linked with his vision of its democratic nature.

To fully comprehend Gramsci's notion of this "dictatorship," one should be mindful of the term's etymology. In the modern sense of the word, "dictatorship" denotes an absolute power or authority exercised by the government or a particular group. By definition, then, it stands in direct contradiction to the implication of "democracy." In the original sense, however, "dictatorship" did not carry this sense of tyranny, absolutism, or despotism. In fact, the traditional usage of the term referred to an emergency management of political power designed to preserve the status quo.<sup>2</sup>

The concept of "martial law" can be viewed as a contemporary example of the traditional meaning associated with "dictatorship." Martial law is imposed as a means to preserve a particular status quo which may or may not be democratic. Similarly, the traditional use of a "dictatorship," as an emergency non-normal legal condition, could be used anti-democratically for the purpose of

preserving democracy. By this definition, then, "dictatorship" does not stand in direct opposition to democracy. This older usage was the common implication during Karl Marx's life. By the early twentieth century, however, the distinction between the traditional and modern usage was becoming increasingly blurred.

Gramsci equated "the dictatorship of the proletariat" with the political rule of the proletariat. In his usage the term referred to the transitional workers' state. Gramsci was following Marx's lead in that he saw political power as stemming from the organized power of a class. Since class is fundamentally a relationship and not a thing, political power results in the dominance of a particular class. The state can be identified as the bourgeois state. In contrast, the rule of the proletariat does not mean the rule of one person, a party, or a group within that party; it means the rule of a class. The dictatorship of the proletariat characterizes the nature of the political power exercised in the workers' state. As Gramsci stated:

The dictatorship of the proletariat represents the establishment of a new, proletarian State, which channels the institutional experiences of the oppressed class and transforms the social activity of the working class and peasantry into a widespread and powerfully organized system. This state cannot be improvised: . . . .<sup>3</sup>

In Gramsci's thought, the "conquest of the State" is understood as the replacement of the capitalist state by the new proletarian state. The "dictatorship" is this transitional state. Its purpose is "the establishment of a practice and an economic way of life that are communal."<sup>4</sup> The Italian working class has thus far been organized within the framework of bourgeois democracy. "Communism" cannot be accomplished by this parliamentary democracy because, as an institution of the capitalist state, it cannot challenge the basic activities of that state.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, the "conquest of the state" involves not only the gaining of power for the proletariat, but also the replacement of bourgeois democracy with workers' democracy.

In addition, the experience of existing socialism has further associated "the dictatorship of the proletariat" with the modern usage of the term. This experience has focused on the relationship between the role of the party and the transitional state. In this view, political control is seen as having escaped the working class, and has become an instrument for domination by the party. Rather than withering away, the state has become increasingly strong. In short, the major flaw is that new, more concentrated, centers of power have simply replaced the old powers. The theory of the dictatorship of the

proletariat has resulted in the practice of the dictatorship of the proletarian order under the domination of the vanguard party.

For Gramsci, the vanguard party plays a central role during the rule of the proletarian class. As Gramsci wrote:

. . . the task facing the communist party during the period of the dictatorship is this: it must organize the class of workers and peasants once and for all into the ruling class, ensure that all the organ of the new State actually carry out their revolutionary mission, and destroy the ancient rights and relations connected with the principle of private property. But this destructive and supervisory activity must be immediately followed up by positive achievements of creation and production. If these do not succeed, then political power is to no avail -- the dictatorship cannot survive.<sup>6</sup>

For Gramsci, the vanguard party must exercise leadership within the mass movement, not dictate the movement of the masses. The party is able to accomplish this to the degree that it has become identified with the "historical consciousness" of the mass movement. As such, its governing will then be a reflection of that movement. This "organic" relationship entails a constant "circulation of ideas" between these two components. This relationship will insure "the most effective of dictatorships." He defines this "effective" proletarian rule as:

a dictatorship based on prestige, on conscious and spontaneous acceptance of an authority that workers see as indispensable

if their mission is to be accomplished. It would be disastrous if a sectarian conception of the Party's role in the revolution were to prompt the claim that this apparatus had actually assumed a concrete form, that the system for controlling the masses in movement had been frozen in mechanical forms of immediate power, forcing the revolutionary process into the forms of the Party. The result would be to successfully divert a number of men, to "master" history: but the real revolutionary process would slip from the control and influence of the party, which would unconsciously become an organ of conservatism.<sup>7</sup>

Gramsci believed that the workers' councils were the Italian equivalent of the Russian soviets. By organizing workers as producers, these workers' councils would not only manage production more democratically, but also form the basis for society as a whole. By 1920, however, the revolutionary movement all over Europe had either experienced setbacks or defeat. In Italy, the decline of the factory councils greatly diminished the focus of Gramsci's analysis of the councils. While he never abandoned the concept of the workers' councils, the role of the Italian Socialist Party (PSI) became the center of his concerns. More than anything else, the factory council movement had exposed the limitations of the PSI leadership.

The PSI had been divided into two basic factions. The Left faction believed that the purpose of the socialist revolution was to destroy the institutions of political power and establish new governing bodies



reflecting proletarian views. This position included the option of seizing power by force. The Right defined proletarian rule within the parliamentary system. Their goal was the domination of Parliament by the PSI which would be supported by the majority of society. From this position, the PSI would be able to exercise its political authority based upon the existing democratic means.

Both sides paid scant attention to any notion of a "dictatorship of the proletariat" which included any sense of direct rule by the working class. Unlike Gramsci's usage of the term, these visions confined the workers to their jobs. Whereas Gramsci presented a society in which the whole of life was "dictated" by the proletariat as a class, the Left sought a dictatorship of the party and the Right sought a representative majority dominated by the PSI.

The social transformation that concerned Gramsci was defined precisely by the nature of the change that it involved. Fundamentally, this meant class relationships. The political revolution must be an expression of that social revolution. For him, then, the "conquest" of political power was part of this larger process of revolutionary development. On the one hand, the PSI's Right faction concentrated upon operating within capitalist institutions. On the other hand, the Left focused on

capturing the state. In Gramsci's view, both programs were incomplete. Socialism would have to not only dismantle the bourgeois state, but also transform the economy. The party's primary function was to assist this revolutionary development. It neither creates nor dominates the process. As he wrote:

Communist society can only be viewed as a 'natural' formation inherent in the instruments of production and exchange, and the revolution can be seen as the act of historical recognition of how 'natural' this formation is. Hence the revolutionary process can only be identified with a spontaneous movement of the working masses brought about by the clash of contradictions inherent in the social system characterized by the regime of capitalist property. Caught in the pincers of capitalist conflicts, and threatened by condemnation without appeal to the loss of civil and intellectual rights, the masses break with the forms of bourgeois democracy and leave behind them the legality of bourgeois constitution. . . . The proletariat's organ of struggle are the "agents" of this colossal mass movement, and the Socialist Party is undoubtedly the primary "agent" in this process of destruction and neo-formation -- but it is not and cannot be seen as the form of the process, a malleable and plastic to the leaders' will.<sup>9</sup>

In Gramsci's thought, the major blame for the failure of the post-war revolutionary movement in Italy rests with the national leadership of the PSI. According to Thomas Bates, Gramsci learned two key lessons from the factory council movement: "The first was that a soviet-style movement from below could not carry out the revolution

without the discipline of a strong party. The second lesson was that the P.S.I. was not this party."<sup>9</sup> Dominated by the "reformist" wing, the PSI failed to exploit the post-war social crisis and provided minimal support for the factory council movement. Gramsci conceived of this "inability" as a reflection of the PSI's faulty conception of proletarian power and socialism. In May 1920 he wrote "For a Renewal of the Socialist Party." In it he called for the removal of the reformist PSI elements.

The function of the socialist party was to operate in the political domain in the same way trade unions were to operate in the economic sphere. Through a revolutionary program and leadership, the socialist party would increasingly become identified with the "historical consciousness of the mass of the people" and in that capacity "govern their spontaneous, irresistible movement." The development of this mass identification and consciousness has two important implications. The first is that the socialist party must be a mass party. The second is that "the Socialist Party pulls out from under the bourgeois State apparatus its democratic basis in the consent of the governed."<sup>10</sup>

In Gramsci's estimation, the PSI had failed on both counts. In his view, the PSI, as dominated by the reform-

ists, was politically bankrupt and hence incapable of revolutionary movement. On January 1, 1921, in an unsigned article he wrote:

The Socialist Party has shown that it does not have any ideas of its own concerning the state, that it does not have a programme of its own for revolutionary government. In short, it has shown that it is not a "political party" capable of bearing the responsibility for action . . . but is an association of well-meaning men of good-will gathered together to discuss . . . what verbal significance they should attach to the new political terminology invented by the restless imagination of the Russian Bolsheviks . . . .

The Socialist Party has systematically neglected and ignored each and every movement of the mass of the people, whether they were industrial workers or politically backward peasants. . . . (It is) incapable of forming its own doctrine of national workers' state or of elaborating a plan of action appropriate for attaining the direct goal of its existence, . . . .<sup>11</sup>

After two years of internal dispute, the crisis within the PSI would boil over. The Communist Party of Italy (PCI) was formed when the PSI's left-wing walked out of the National Congress later that January. Amadeo Bordiga was named the PCI's first general secretary. He remained the PCI leader until his arrest in 1923. It was during his leadership that Fascism gained political power in Italy and began the consolidation of that power. Bordiga saw the fascists as a symptom reflecting the larger crisis of Italian capitalism. He thought that capitalism would either collapse or be overthrown in the

near future. In anticipation of this event, the Bordiga faction held that the present situation demanded immediate preparation for armed struggle both as a means to resist the fascists and to capture political power once they collapse. To that degree, Bordiga saw the PCI and its function as that of a politically sophisticated elite which would decisively lead the working class.<sup>12</sup>

During these years Gramsci's thoughts regarding the masses began to shift. By June 1919 his enthusiasm over the news from Russia and the preparation of the Italian masses for the revolutionary transformation began to wane. The Bolsheviks were now being recognized as no longer a mass party, but as an elite. They were being described as a "ruling class of the first order" and an "aristocracy of statesmen." Gramsci admitted that the Bolsheviks were not yet a majority party, but he continued to defend their actions because they "had the support of a social minority possessed of class consciousness . . . the industrial workers."<sup>13</sup>

Because of the recent Italian factory council experience, Gramsci now recognized a need for a national party as a means to coordinate and organize the activities of the working class. Given the inabilities of the reformist PSI and the Italian workers' willingness to end the occupation of the factories, Gramsci now stressed a new func-

tion for the party. Only a strong communist faction within the PSI could overcome its inabilities and properly lead the working class. In his view, the PSI, "which proclaims itself to be the master of the masses, is nothing but a wretched clerk noting down the operations that the masses spontaneously carry out." The socialist revolution must be led by a proletarian elite. This communist faction must act upon the objective conditions of the existing situation. He was moving away from, but not abandoning, his former emphasis on the subjective revolutionary development of the masses. In September 1920, he wrote:

The revolutionary vanguard needs to consider and analyze the events that have just taken place, not according to its own wishes, passions and will, but objectively, as external data to be subjected to political judgement, and as a historical movement susceptible to conscious extension and development. . . . the task of the of the proletarian vanguard (is) to keep the revolutionary spirit constantly awake in the masses, to create the conditions which keep them ready for action, in which the proletariat will respond to the call for revolution.<sup>14</sup>

Another consequence of the occupation of the factories was the stimulus it gave to counter-revolutionary forces. As the PSI's internal dispute moved toward the formation of the PCI, fascism was gaining strength and momentum under Benito Mussolini's leadership. With this

growth of fascism, the "objective" political situation fundamentally changed. Given the reformist PSI leadership, Gramsci struggled within the party to prepare it for the coming struggles. As early as May 1920, he envisioned the consequences implied by fascism's swelling numbers. In his essay "Towards a Renewal of the Socialist Party," he warned that:

The present phase of the class struggle in Italy is the phase that precedes: either the conquest of political power on the part of the revolutionary proletariat and the transition to new modes of production and distribution . . . or a tremendous reaction on the part of the propertied classes and governing caste. No violence will be spared in subjecting the industrial and agricultural proletariat to servile labour: there will be a bid to smash once and for all the working class's organ of political struggle (the PSI) and to incorporate its organs of economic resistance (the trade unions and co-operatives) into the machinery of the bourgeois state.<sup>15</sup>

In his analysis, fascism was more than a reaction to World War I and the social-political crisis which followed. As such, it could not be properly characterized as armed rule by the bourgeoisie. For Gramsci, fascism had very long cultural roots stretching far back into the Italian past. As part of this larger process, its current status emerged from the experience of World War I. Italian fascism developed as the organized mass movement of the petty- and middle-bourgeoisie. Gramsci saw their situation as having become increasingly hopeless in recent

history. Since neither trade unions nor a traditional party could provide a viable option, fascism became their expression. As Gramsci wrote, "The characteristic trait of fascism consists in its success in having created a mass movement for the petty bourgeoisie."<sup>16</sup>

Gramsci's fascism, then, was more than an armed dictatorship of the bourgeoisie. As a movement, fascism was not strictly the product of the struggle between the capitalists and the workers. Fascism emerged as the manifestation of a politically dominant bourgeoisie. The period of fascism's greatest gain coincided with the defeat and division of the proletarian class. After the occupation of the factories ended, this petty- and middle-bourgeois movement surged.<sup>17</sup> As such, Gramsci views the fascists as a complex political force capable of capitalizing on the power vacuum. In effect, the revolutionary opportunities missed by the PSI had encouraged the petty-bourgeois reaction.

Despite his disagreements with Bordiga's analysis of fascism and the anti-united front policy, Gramsci supported PCI policy. His primary motivation was the pressing need for a communist party in the face of fascism's rapid growth. For him:

Those who are not revolutionary communists should be eliminated from the party. The leadership, freed from the preoccupation of preserving unity and equilibrium between the



different tendencies and the various leaders must direct all its energy to the reorganization of the working class forces on a war footing.<sup>18</sup>

In 1922, Gramsci went to Moscow as the PCI's representative to the Comintern. It was during this period that Mussolini marched on Rome. The fascist seizure of power, combined with the wave of arrests that followed, disembowelled the Italian Left. In particular, the PCI found itself weak, disorganized, internally divided, and without support from other anti-fascist groups which it had previously shunned. Following Bordiga's arrest, Gramsci assumed the unofficial leadership of the PCI.

In May 1924, Gramsci returned to Italy and after a political struggle, emerged as the official head of the PCI. Between his return to Italy and his eventual arrest, Gramsci focused on the most immediate, practical problems facing the PCI. In the face of mounting fascist oppression, how should the party demonstrate effective leadership and build its base of support among the working class? It is in this context that the "Lyons Theses" and the "bolshevization of the PCI" took place. The PCI Congress held at Lyons (France) declared that the Party must be part of the working class. In effect, this reversed Bordiga's vision of the PCI as strictly the vanguard for the working class. This represented a political victory for Gramsci's concept of an organic link

between the party and the proletariat. At the same time however, Gramsci argued that the "bolshevization" of the party was the only way to insure its survival in the face of mounting fascist persecution.<sup>19</sup>

In line with Gramsci's analysis of fascism, it was also decided at Lyons that a united left must take advantage of the tensions operating within the fascist movement. In addition to now supporting this "united-front," the PCI decided to take its elected seats in parliament as a voice of opposition.<sup>20</sup> The logic was to use the remaining bourgeois freedoms, like democracy, as a means to save such freedoms from erosion by fascism. The tactic was also part of the larger propaganda effort directed against the Mussolini government.

Gramsci had always recognized the historically positive nature of bourgeois democracy. But by late 1924, fascism had posed a direct threat to its positive aspect. Now, Mussolini was positioned to make good his threat to bring an end to political democracy. In his view, part of the reason for the success of fascism had to do with how bourgeois "democracy" had helped "organized fascism when it felt it could no longer resist the pressure of the working class in conditions even of only formal freedom. Fascism, by shattering the working class, has restored to 'democracy' the possibility of existing."<sup>21</sup> As such,

Italian democracy was becoming an intra-class process. The problem was that fascism, as an evolving force, was on the verge of radically breaking with the traditional considerations given to "formal" democracy and political compromises which had been historically associated with capitalism. As Gramsci stated:

The tendency of fascism which we have attempted to characterize breaks the normal alternation between periods of reaction and periods of 'democracy', in such a way as may at first sight seem favorable to the maintenance of a reactionary line and to a more rigid defence of the capitalist order, but which in reality may resolve itself into the opposite.<sup>22</sup>

It was in this context and against this background that Gramsci was arrested in November 1926 on his way to a parliamentary vote. The rest of his life would be removed from daily struggle for revolutionary change. It was in prison that he turned his attention to an evaluation of his past experiences and ideas.

#### NOTES

1. Karl Marx, "Critique of the Gotha Program," in Robert C. Tucker, The Marx-Engels Reader (New York, 1972), p. 395.

2. See; Hal Draper, Karl Marx's Theory of Revolution: Volume III - The "Dictatorship of the Proletariat" (New York, 1986) and his The "Dictatorship of the Proletariat From Marx to Lenin (New York, 1987).

3. Antonio Gramsci, "Workers' Democracy," Selections from Political Writings 1910-1920 (London, 1977), p. 68. (Hereafter referred to as SPW1.)

4. Gramsci, "The Conquest of the State," SPW1, p. 76.
5. Antonio Gramsci, "The Italian Parliament," Selections from Political Writings 1921-1926 (London, 1978), pp. 29-31. (Hereafter referred to as SPW2.)
6. Gramsci, "Trade Unions and the Dictatorship," SPW1, p. 106.
7. Gramsci, "The Party and The Revolution," SPW2, p. 144.
8. Gramsci, "The Party and the Revolution," SPW1, p. 143; Also see, Carl Boggs, Gramsci's Marxism (London, 1976), pp. 94-96.
9. Thomas R. Bates, "The Political Thought of Antonio Gramsci," (Ph.D. Dissertation, 1972), pp. 171-172 (Hereafter referred to as "PTAG."); Also see his "Antonio Gramsci and the Soviet Experiment in Italy," Societas, 4:1 (Winter 1976), pp. 39-54; Alastair Davidson, "The Russian Revolution and the Formation of the Italian Communist Party," Australian Journal of Politics and History, 10:3 (December 1964), pp. 355-370.
10. Gramsci, "The Party and the Revolution," SPW1, p. 143.
11. Gramsci, "The Workers' State," SPW1, pp. 369-370.
12. Bordiga's position would prove to be disastrous. The Fascists proved to be too strong. The "aborted revolution" amounted to a series of disorganized clashes with either the Fascists or the Italian army. The working class showed itself to be divided and weak. In December 1921 the Communist International launched a "united front" policy. In Italy, this meant that the PCI should work with other left-wing groups (such as the PSI) in opposing Fascism. To the majority within the PCI, this directly contradicted why they had originally split from the PSI. As such, the policy was resisted until the end of 1923. Romano Giachetti, "Antonio Gramsci," in The Unknown Dimension, Edited by Dick Howard and Karl E. Klare (New York, 1972), pp. 158-160.
13. Gramsci quoted by Thomas Bates, PTAG, p. 165.
14. Gramsci, "Political Capacity," SPW1, pp. 347-349. Here Gramsci also writes that:  
 "The leaders of the proletarian movement

(the PSI) base themselves on the "masses," in other words they ask permission of the masses before acting, consulting them in the forms and at the time they choose. But a revolutionary movement can only be based on the proletarian vanguard, and must be led without prior consultation, without the representative assemblies. Revolution is like war; it must be minutely prepared by a working-class general staff, just as a war is by the Army's general staff. Assemblies can only ratify what has already taken place, exalt the successful and implacably punish the unsuccessful."

15. Gramsci, "Towards a Renewal of the Socialist Party," SPW1, p. 191.

16. Wallace P. Sillanpoa, "Gramsci on Italian Fascism," Italian Quarterly, No. 93 (1983), p.92; Mihaly Vajda, Fascism As A Mass Movement (New York, 1976), pp. 43-45; Gramsci, "The Events of 2-3 December (1919)," SPW1, pp. 135-137; Also see; Walter L. Adamson, "Gramsci's Interpretation of Fascism," Journal of the History of Ideas, 40:4 (Oct.-Dec. 1980), pp. 615-633; Tobias Abse, "Syndicalism and the Origins of Italian Fascism," Historical Journal, 25:1 (1982), pp. 247-258; Quinton Hoare, "What is Fascism," New Left Review, No. 20 (Summer 1963), pp. 99-111; John M. Cammett, "Communist Theories of Fascism, 1920-1935," Science and Society, 31:2 (Spring 1967), pp. 149-163; Benito Mussolini, "The Political and Social Doctrine of Fascism," Political Quarterly, 4:3 (1933), pp. 341-356.

17. In August, 1921, Gramsci describes fascism as no longer a fascist movement, but as "The Two Fascisms." See, Gramsci, "The Two Fascisms," SPW2, pp. 63-65.

18. Alberto Pozzolini, Antonio Gramsci (London, 1970), p. 79.

19. James Joll, Antonio Gramsci (London, 1977), pp. 87-93; Thomas R. Bates, "Antonio Gramsci and the Bolshevization of the PCI," Journal of Contemporary History, 11:2-3 (July 1976), pp. 115-131; Alistair Davidson, Antonio Gramsci (London, 1977), pp. 232-238.

20. In June 1924, the PCI along with other anti-Fascist groups walked out of Parliament.

21. Sillanpoa, "Gramsci on Italian Fascism," pp. 96-97; Gramsci, "Democracy and Fascism," SPW2, p. 269.

22. Gramsci, "The Fall of Fascism," SPW2, p. 275.

CHAPTER VI:  
THE PRISON YEARS

Eighteen months after his arrest, Gramsci was brought to trial before the Special Tribunal for the Defense of the State. On June 4, 1928, he was sentenced to twenty years imprisonment. Because of his health, he was sent to the Turi prison in the south of Italy. Within the limitations of his health and prison conditions, he would spend the rest of his life reading and writing. It was not until 1930, however, that Gramsci was allowed to receive permitted books on a regular basis. During his ten-and-a-half-year imprisonment, Gramsci wrote hundreds of letters, mainly to his family. These letters present insights into his life, hopes, frustrations, sufferings, and the ideas which preoccupied his prison years. Between 1929 and 1935, Gramsci produced his "Prison Notebooks." These handwritten notebooks contained his thoughts on history, philosophy, and politics.

Before his imprisonment, Gramsci's writings were produced as contributions to the current political debates. That is, his journalistic writings were intended to be read in the specific context of the particular issue.<sup>1</sup> His imprisonment removed him from this day-to-day political environment. It also meant that he had virtually no contact with his former associates and minimal

information regarding the outside world. This isolation prompted him to work on more theoretical and fundamental issues. He turned his attention to the examination of more general problems and abstract ideas. The raw material for this work would be the activities and ideas of his past. Instead of preventing Gramsci's brain from functioning, imprisonment had exactly the opposite effect.

During these years, Gramsci's primary interest remained the subjective requirements for a successful socialist revolution. While the objective conditions created by capitalism establish the basis for revolution, the subjective responses to those conditions will shape the specific nature of the transition. The success of Gramsci's socialism ultimately depended on the revolutionary consciousness of the masses. He thought that this key required the consensus of the actively involved masses. His prison writings would stress the complex process by which the proletarian class and its allies could become an "historical bloc." This bloc would enable the proletarian class to dominate both economically and politically. As such, his Marxism remains focused on the ideological, or cultural, struggle as a vital component of the class struggle. A successful socialist revolution requires that attention be given to both levels. As he stated:



One must not depend on the spontaneous spirit for the revolutionary struggle; it is not enough: it never carries the working class beyond the limits of the existing bourgeois democracy. What is necessary is the conscious element, ideological knowledge, that is to say an understanding of the conditions in which one is fighting, the social relations in the midst of which the worker lives, the fundamental tendencies which are at work in this system of relations, the processes of development which society goes through on account of the existence within its bosom of irreducible antagonisms. . . .<sup>2</sup>

After the occupation of the factories during the "Red Two Years," Gramsci rarely discussed the factory councils. Given his disappointment with both the PSI and the level of revolutionary consciousness demonstrated by the Italian masses, Gramsci shifted his focus to the role of a vanguard party. He was drawn toward Lenin and the Bolsheviks' example. As Gwyn Williams has observed, Gramsci saw the problem as one of creating "not a 'mass party' but a party which worked to create 'mass conditions' in which all particular problems are resolved in the development of communist revolution."<sup>3</sup>

During his years with the Italian Communist Party, Gramsci had focused on two levels of organization. The first dealt with the internal structure of the party. His "bolshevization" of the PCI can be seen as a response to objective conditions. As such, new party organization was presented as a defensive move against fascism and a possible "bourgeois stabilization."<sup>4</sup> The inherent danger,

however, was that as the function of the party elevated, its leadership position might easily shift from being one of guidance to one of control.

The second level of organization focused on the relationship between the party and the masses. Attention to this relationship would insure an "organic" connection between the them. In principle, Gramsci remained dedicated to the notion of a mass-based, from the bottom-up "organization of the collective will." His concept of democracy was grounded in this context. He did not view "democracy" as something apart from the system in which it functioned. He envisioned socialist democracy as a process aimed at the further democratization of society. The existing level of liberal, parliamentary democracy must be transcended. From this premise, Gramsci's notion of democracy is directly linked with his vision of social revolution. The problem was how to achieve this "democracy," given the present conditions. He was imprisoned at this stage of his evolving political philosophy.

For Gramsci, the creation of a new state was the historical task of the proletarian class -- the emerging majority. A key concept in his strategy was "civil society." The classical Marxist view of the state begins with the statement: "The executive of the modern State is but a committee for managing the common affairs of the

whole bourgeoisie."<sup>5</sup> In this view, the state is the instrument of the ruling class, the bourgeoisie, which rules by virtue of its control of the means of production. Through the state, this economically dominant class exercises its political dominance. To the degree that this concept emphasized "political society," Gramsci thought that it discounted the remaining social elements. In discussing this point, he wrote:

We are still on the terrain of the identification of State and government - an identification which is precisely a representation of the economic-corporate form, in other words of the confusion between civil society and political society. For it should be remarked that the general notion of State includes elements which need to be referred back to the notion of civil society (in the sense that one might say that State = political society + civil society, in other words hegemony protected by the armour of coercion.<sup>6</sup>

By "civil society," Gramsci meant the entire ideological superstructure of society. Whereas Marx referred primarily to society's material superstructure as civil society, Gramsci expanded this notion to include all of the elements which disseminate society's ruling ideas. Methodologically, then, class supremacy is socially expressed in two forms: either through state domination, which includes the coercive elements found in political society, or through the moral and intellectual leadership associated with civil society. Most often, however, it is expressed in a complex interrelationship. In any given

society, then, the actual division between "civil" and "political" society is blurred.<sup>7</sup>

The concept of "hegemony" is the key element associated with Gramsci's civil society. It is the expression of the dominant groups's power exercised as part of daily life. Contrasted with overt domination or coercion, hegemony implies internal consent. He defines it as "the 'spontaneous' consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group."<sup>8</sup> It operates by "bringing about not only a unison of economic and political aims, but also intellectual and moral unity, posing all the questions around which the struggle rages not on a corporate but on a 'universal' plane, and thus creat(es) the hegemony of a fundamental group over a series of subordinate groups."<sup>9</sup>

The class which is able to capture this "ideological" plane is able to exercise its dominance most effectively through consensual agreement. This dominant ideology, in effect, shapes the various wants, expectations, and values into a stabilizing format. To the degree that it becomes internalized, the ruling ideology become the "common sense" of the day. Once a class achieves this passive consent of society, it becomes the hegemonic class.<sup>10</sup> The political struggle for proletarian hegemony in civil

society is the necessary precondition for a successful seizure of state power, not the collapse of capitalism. Therefore, the socialist revolution is not mechanically determined. The specific nature of the transformation will result both from objective conditions and the subjective responses to those conditions.

The exercise of state power results from the establishment of ideological hegemony. A key to winning this struggle is the political work necessary to undermine not only the ruling ideas, but the rival ideologies as well. Gramsci believed that "a social group can, and indeed must, already exercise 'leadership' before winning government power (this indeed is one of the principal conditions for the winning of such power); it subsequently becomes dominant when it exercises power, but even then it holds it firmly in its grasp, it must continue to 'lead' and well."<sup>11</sup>

Before an emerging majority can "dominate," it must "lead." Before it can "lead," the proletariat must develop its class consciousness. For Gramsci, the "philosophy of praxis" (Marxism) was the only vision capable of providing the foundation for a proletarian state based on the democratic organization of the masses. Others, in their practical effect, represent a false consciousness to the degree that they entail either a perpetuation of

bourgeois rule or a regression from existing bourgeois freedoms. On this issue, he writes: ". . . ideologies are anything but arbitrary. . . . (They) must be fought and exposed in order to make the governed intellectually independent of those who govern, in order to destroy one hegemony and create another, as a necessary moment of the revolutionary process."<sup>12</sup> His strategy was one of countering bourgeois hegemony through the development of proletarian class consciousness.

Central to Gramsci's model of hegemony, the development of proletarian class consciousness, and the proletarian revolution is the role that he assigns to the "intellectuals." If the foundation of the socialist revolution is to be the expression of the emerging majority's collective consciousness, then the masses themselves would have to be transformed. Intellectuals are that stratum within a social group "which gives it homogeneity and an awareness of its own function not only on the economic but also in the social and political fields."<sup>13</sup> Intellectuals, then, do not represent an independent social class, but the intellectual leadership of the hegemonic class.<sup>14</sup> As such, the importance he attaches to intellectuals stems from their function as class organizers. Gramsci's focus, then, is on the

intellectual's role as part of the basic political connection between leadership and the masses.<sup>15</sup>

Gramsci's concept of an intellectual did not identify a specialized individual endowed with advanced mental capacities. Instead, he broadly defined a particular social activity involving either the production or maintenance of class unity. For him all individuals have intellectual abilities, but only particular individuals function as intellectuals. Proletarian class consciousness, therefore, requires proletarian intellectuals. Revolutionary consciousness is not something that should be externally imposed by radicalized bourgeois intellectuals. The function of the proletariat's "organic" intellectuals is to actualize the revolutionary consciousness already existing within the workers.<sup>16</sup> He writes that:

the active man-in-the mass has a practical activity, but has no clear theoretical consciousness of his practical activity, which nonetheless involves understanding the world in so far as it transforms it. . . . Critical understanding of self takes place . . . through a struggle of political 'hegemony' and of opposing directions, first in the ethical field and then in that of politics proper, in order to arrive at the working out at a higher level of one's own conception of reality. Consciousness of being part of a particular hegemonic force (that is to say, political consciousness) is the first stage towards a further progressive self-consciousness in which theory and practice finally become one.<sup>17</sup>

Critical to the development of this class consciousness, of organic intellectuals, and the expression of the working class' political hegemony is the function of the modern political party. For Gramsci, Machiavelli's The Prince was identified in terms of his historical project. "The Prince" represents what must be done "if he is to lead a people to found a new State."<sup>18</sup> Where Machiavelli's hero carried out his historical task on behalf of the bourgeoisie, Gramsci's "modern prince" must translate the aspirations of the proletariat into political reality. Where "the Prince" was the heroic individual, the "modern prince" is identified with the revolutionary party. The party envisioned by Gramsci:

cannot be a real person, a concrete individual. It can only be an organism, a complex element of society in which a collective will, which has already been recognised and has to some extent asserted itself in action, begins to take concrete form. History has already provided this organism, and it is the political party . . . .<sup>19</sup>

A political party represents the "collective will" of a particular social class. As an "organizer," Gramsci's "modern prince" is an active historical agent. As such, the role requires being more than just the intellectual elite of the proletarian class. While the "modern prince" is the creation of intellectuals, it is also responsible for expanding its own category of organic intellectuals, developing the hegemonic class, and challenging the dom-



inant class. In describing the revolutionary project and the party's primary task, he wrote:

The modern Prince must be and cannot but be the proclaimer and organizer of an intellectual and moral reform, which also means creating the terrain for subsequent development of the national-popular collective will towards the realization of a superior, total form of modern civilization.<sup>20</sup>

In the party, Gramsci sees an historical agent dialectically linked to the objective situation in order to transform it and to the subjective situation in order to transform the collective will. This potential contradiction meant that attention must be given to two key relationships.<sup>21</sup> On the one hand, he focused on the party's internal structure. History had demonstrated that a revolutionary party must be correctly organized in order to analyze and transform the objective situation. On the other hand, he was very much concerned with the relationship between the party and the masses. History had also shown that revolutionary consciousness is neither automatic nor simply brought to the proletariat. The party must strive to give theoretical understanding to the practical activity experienced by the working class. As the proletariat recognizes its class potential, it also identifies that potential with the leadership of the party. In this context of function versus structure he

observed that while the party is a "part of the masses," the masses are not considered "part of the party."<sup>22</sup>

In Gramsci's analysis, the party is comprised of three basic elements, (1) the mass element, (2) the elite leadership, and (3) the intermediate layer. The mass element is necessary for the party's existence. It brings to the party qualities such as its energy, loyalty, and spontaneity. It becomes a force, however, only when it is organized. The elite organizes and disciplines this membership. It acts as the cohesive element. The middle layer, the party functionaries, link these two elements physically and mentally through their daily activities.<sup>23</sup> While necessary, each element alone does not constitute the party. The party must involve the interaction between all three elements.

Gramsci's concept of "democratic centralism" was the principle applied to properly balance the party's internal organization. It is through this process that the various elements develop the necessary positive cohesion. It is "democratic" in that party decisions require the active participation of all party members. It is "centralism" in that its function is to create cohesion. Gramsci saw this principle as the means by which to overcome the bourgeois division between the individual and society. As such, democratic centralism is the means by which an "organic"

unity is produced between the leaders and the masses. He defined democratic centralism as:

. . . centralism in movement -- i.e. a continual adaption of the organization to the real movement, a matching of thrusts from below with orders from above, a continuous insertion of elements thrown up from the depths of the rank and file into the solid framework of the leadership apparatus which ensures continuity and the regular accumulation of experience. Democratic centralism is 'organic' because on the one hand it takes account of movement, which is the organic mode in which historical reality reveals itself, and does not solidify mechanically into bureaucracy; and because at the same time it takes account of that which is relatively stable and permanent, . . . .<sup>24</sup>

Gramsci's democratic centralism requires a dialectical relationship between the leaders and the led. It is the dialectical nature of this relationship which permits party "unity" from degenerating into uniformity. This negative possibility is characterized by the conformity of the members and the mechanical nature of their relationship. Gramsci's unity is the result of compromises between the various party elements. This dialectical process produces a cohesion, a collective will, which forms the basis of what he also identified as "discipline."<sup>25</sup> For Gramsci this "discipline" is an internally-imposed consent which is arrived at through his "democratic" process. He was very much aware of the negative potential of such an arrangement. In the Prison Notebooks, he commented:

When the party is progressive it functions 'democratically' (democratic centralism); when the party is regressive it functions 'bureaucratically' (bureaucratic centralism). The party in this second case is a simple, unthinking executor. It is then technically a policing organism, and its name of 'political party' is simply a metaphor of a mythological character.<sup>26</sup>

Gramsci also applied this "democratic" principle to the relationship between the party and the other members of society. As noted above, the party's primary function is the establishment of proletarian hegemony as the precondition for the founding of the new state. The precise form this new state would take was viewed as a political question to be determined as part of the transformation process. In Gramsci's model, the emerging proletarian hegemony must be democratically based. He writes that:

Among the many meanings of democracy, it seems to me that the most concrete and realistic one must be connected with the concept of 'hegemony.' In a hegemonic system, democracy exists between the leading group and the groups which are led, to the extent that the development of the economy and therefore legislation, which expresses that development, favors the (molecular) passage from the groups which are ruled to the ruling group.<sup>27</sup>

In this sense, Gramsci envisions a social unity, or cohesion, that also implies compromise with different social groups. The precise form these compromises will be determined by the political process. In principle, then, the compromises will be reached within a

democratic context. The new state must also incorporate democratic centralism. Just as the party's functionaries linked the party elite with its mass base, a state's bureaucracy serves as the linkage between the dominant class and the other social groups. Similar to the party's internal organization, then, the hegemonic party's relationship with these other social groups is structured and mediated through the state's bureaucracy.

Within this politics of mediation, the state bureaucracy is presented as political as well as technical. It is political to the degree that it represents the ruling class. It is also technical because the other social classes expect and demand the bureaucrats' expertise and assistance.<sup>28</sup> At both the inter- and intra-party levels, the breakdown of the "democratic" element encourages the negative aspect of bureaucracy to surface. As Gramsci describes it:

The prevalence of bureaucratic centralism in the State indicates that the leading group is saturated, that it is turning into a narrow clique which tends to perpetuate its selfish privileges by controlling or even by stifling the birth of oppositional forces -- even if these forces are homogeneous with the fundamental dominant interests . . . .<sup>29</sup>

For Gramsci, the concepts of "cohesion" and "discipline" are closely linked. Democratic centralism is the primary means by which to achieve this unity. Within the party, this process is guided by party principles, but

worked out in the historical context. Outside the party, the process is guided by the logic of hegemony. In both instances, democratic centralism is a dynamic, complex relationship. As such, the level of consensual support is in constant motion. Within the party this spectrum is limited by the party's principles. Outside the party the spectrum is much greater because of various social groups involved. As a result, this latter relationship becomes far more complex. In principle, then, Gramsci's democratic centralism, as well as his concept of hegemony and the party, cannot simply be dismissed as "totalitarian."<sup>30</sup>

In Gramsci's vision there exists a clear distinction between class domination and authoritarian government. His concept of "totalitarian" follows the logic of hegemony and the power associated with the "dictatorship of the proletariat." In each case, his starting point is class domination. This domination is grounded in his notion of consensus, which means it must be the expression of the majority. Gramsci's "totalitarianism" implies a condition which emerges once the working class has come to power, rather than the form or the powers assumed by the new state. He remarks that "in those regimes which call themselves totalitarian, the traditional function of the institution of the Crown is in fact taken over by the par-

ticular party in question, which indeed is totalitarian precisely in that it fulfills this function."<sup>31</sup>

Gramsci's view of totalitarianism is primarily a reference to the "cultural unity" associated with the dominant class.<sup>32</sup> It is not by definition a reference to regimentation, the suppression of all opposition, the abandonment of individual liberties or the imposition of a collectivist state. Gramsci also recognized the authoritarian aspects implied by totalitarianism.<sup>33</sup> On the one hand, he recognized coercion as a means to insure the state's authority. In the case of the new proletarian state, such political questions will be addressed, based upon the "progressive" or "regressive" nature of the problem. On the other hand, the use of these state weapons reflects a much larger concern. This represents hegemonic weakness and to that extent a general crisis of the state. For Gramsci, this "crisis of authority" means that "the ruling class has lost its consensus, i.e. is no longer 'leading' but only 'dominant', exercising coercive force alone, . . . ."<sup>34</sup>

Throughout his prison years, Gramsci remained intellectually convinced that the socialist transformation of society must be democratic. That is, he directly linked socialism's success with a consensual base grounded in the daily lives of the majority. The problem was how to

achieve this hegemonic position for the emerging class, the proletariat. Gramsci's prison writings can be read as the attempt to articulate a theoretical model for the further democratization of society.

#### NOTES

1. On his pre-prison writings Gramsci wrote: "In ten years of journalistic activity I've written enough material to make up fifteen to twenty volumes of 400 pages each; however they were ephemeral things, written for a particular day, and in my view they had no business to go on living after that day was over." Also see; Hamish Henderson, Gramsci's Prison Letters (London, 1988), p. 160; Lynne Lawner, Letters From Prison (New York, 1973), p. 203.

2. Romain Rolland, I Will Not Rest (London, 1936), p. 311.

3. Gwyn A. Williams, Proletarian Order (London, 1975), p. 231.

4. Walter L. Adamson, "Towards the Prison Notebooks," Polity, 12:1 (Fall 1979), p. 58.

5. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "Manifesto of the Communist Party," in The Marx-Engels Reader, Edited by Robert C. Tucker (New York, 1972), p. 337.

6. Antonio Gramsci, Selections From the Prison Notebooks (New York, 1971), pp. 262-263. (Hereafter referred to as SPN.) Also see; Norberto Bobbio, "Gramsci and the Conception of the State," in Gramsci and Marxist Theory (London, 1979), pp. 21-47.

7. See, Gramsci, SPN, p. 160. Here he writes that "a distinction between political society and civil society . . . is merely methodological." In part, this distinction serves as an analytical correction to Liberalism's concept of "public" and "private." Also see, Joseph Femia, Gramsci's Political Thought (Oxford, 1981), p. 27.



8. Gramsci, SPN, p. 12; Also see, Gwyn A. Williams, "The Concept of 'Egemonia in the Thought of Antonio Gramsci," Journal of History of Ideas, 21:4 (Oct.-Dec. 1960, p.587. Williams defines hegemony as "an order in which a certain way of life and thought is dominant, in which one concept of reality is diffused throughout society, in all its institutional and private manifestations, informing with its spirit all tastes, morality, customs, religion and political principles, and all social relations in their intellectual and moral connotations."

9. Gramsci, SPN, pp. 180-181.

10. For a discussion of what Gramsci means by "consent," see; Joseph Femia, Gramsci's Political Thought, pp. 35-40. He writes that: "When Gramsci speaks of consent, he refers to a psychological state, involving some kind of acceptance -- not necessarily explicit -- of the socio-political order or of certain vital aspects of that order. Gone are the moral and prescriptive connotations which have traditionally been attached to the term: his conception of consent is purely descriptive, referring to an empirical, if not directly observable, fact. Thus, a hegemonic order need not incorporate liberal institutions and practices; indeed, it may be totalitarian in the strictest sense. To Gramsci, the contemporary liberal assumption that a people without the opportunity to express opposition or dissent cannot truly be said to consent would seem most curious."

11. Gramsci, SPN, pp. 57-58.

12. William J. Hartley, "Hegemony and Cultural Politics," Socialism and Democracy, No. 5 (Fall-Winter 1987), p. 41.

13. Gramsci, SPN, p. 5.

14. See Gramsci, SPN, p. 60. He states: "there does not exist any independent class of intellectuals, but every social group has its own stratum of intellectuals, or tends to form one; however, the intellectuals of the historically (and concretely) progressive class, in the given conditions, exercise such a power of attraction that, in the last analysis, they end up by subjugating the intellectuals of the other social groups; they thereby create a system of solidarity between all the intellectuals . . . ."

15. Gramsci, SPN, p. 334. He notes: "Critical self-consciousness means, historically and politically, the creation of an elite of intellectuals. A human mass does not 'distinguish' itself, does not become independent in its won right without, in the widest sense, organizing itself; and there is no organization without intellectuals, that is without organizers and leaders, in other words, without the theoretical aspect of the theory-practice nexus being distinguished concretely by the existence of a group of people 'specialized' in conceptual and philosophical elaboration of ideas." Also see; Jerome Karabel, "Revolutionary Contradictions," Politics and Society, 6:2 (1976), pp. 152-146; Anne Showstack Sassoon, Gramsci's Politics (New York, 1980), pp. 134-146; Giuseppe Vacca, "Intellectuals and the Marxist Theory of the State," in Approaches to Gramsci, edited by Anne Showstack Sassoon (London, 1982), pp. 44-50.

16. As for "traditional" intellectuals, Anne Showstack Sassoon notes: "If traditional intellectuals wanted to maintain their influence, they ha(ve) to change their way of working and become organizers, that is, undertake cultural activity in a modern form appropriate to advanced capitalism." See; her Gramsci's Politics, 2nd Edition (Minneapolis, 1987), pp. 269-270.

17. Gramsci, SPN, p. 333.

18. Gramsci, SPN, p. 126. In further elaboration, Gramsci adds: "In the conclusion, Machiavelli merges with the people, becomes the people; not, however, some 'generic' people, but the people whom he, Machiavelli, has convinced by the preceding argument -- the people whose conclusions and whose expression he becomes and feels himself to be, with whom he feels identified."

19. Gramsci, SPN, p. 129.

20. Gramsci, SPN, pp. 132-133.

21. See Jerome Karabel, op. cit., p. 144. Karabel identifies the problem as "the contradiction between leaders and led in a party designed to bring into being the birth of a classless society." Also see; Gramsci, SPN, p. 144. Gramsci writes: "In the formation of leaders, one premiss is fundamental: is it the intention that there should always be rulers and ruled, or is it the objective to create the conditions in which this division is no longer necessary?"

22. Quotes borrowed from Thomas Bates, "The Political Thought of Antonio Gramsci" (Ph. D. Dissertation, 1972), p. 399. (Hereafter referred to as "PTAG.")

23. Gramsci, SPN, pp. 152-153.

24. Gramsci, SPN, pp. 188-189; Jerome Karabel, "Revolutionary Contradictions," p. 145; Joseph Femia, Gramsci's Political Thought, p. 157.

25. Gramsci, SPN, p. 198; Anne Showstack Sassoon, "Gramsci: A New Concept of Politics and the Expansion of Democracy," p. 91. Anne Sassoon writes: "Gramsci argues that discipline whose origin is not the result of a democratic exchange and debate in fact reproduces the political divisions in bourgeois society, because the attitude to the leaders becomes one of faith in which the individual feels extraneous to the outcome of a situation, or separated from reality. That is, what a group of leaders does, or the results of a party's policies are not understood as the product of the active intervention of each party member, but appear independent of rank and file activities."

26. Gramsci, SPN, p. 155.

27. Quote provided by Anne Showstack Sassoon, "Gramsci," p. 98, footnote 22.

28. Luis Razeto Migliaro and Pasquale Misuraca, "The Theory of Modern Bureaucracy," in A. S. Sassoon's Approaches to Gramsci (London, 1982), p.74.

29. Gramsci, SPN, p. 189. Gramsci notes that bureaucratic centralism can also result from a lack of attention from below: ". . . it needs to be stressed that the unhealthy manifestations of bureaucratic centralism occurred because of a lack of initiative and responsibility at the bottom, in other words because of the political immaturity of the peripheral forces, even when these were homogeneous with the hegemonic territorial group."

30. For the clearest statement regarding Gramsci's "totalitarian" nature, see; Luciano Pellicani, Gramsci: An Alternative Communism? (Stanford, 1981). For a critique of this position, see; Maurice A. Finocchiaro, "Gramsci: An Alternative Communism?," Studies in Soviet Thought, 27:2 (1984), pp. 123-146.

31. Gramsci, SPN, pp. 147-148.

32. Term borrowed from Joseph Femia. For an excellent discussion of Gramsci's totalitarianism, see his Gramsci's Political Thought, pp. 167-189.

33. Bates, "PTAG," p. 410. Gramsci writes that: "A totalitarian politics tends: (1) to ensure that the members of a certain party find in this one party all the satisfaction which they previously found in a multiplicity of organizations . . . . (2) to destroy all other organizations or to incorporate them in a system of which the party is the sole governor. This happens: (1) when the given party is the vehicle of a new culture, and then we have a progressive phase; (2) when the given party wants to prevent another force, the vehicle of a new culture, from becoming totalitarian, and we have an objectively regressive and reactionary phase . . . ."

34. Gramsci, SPN, pp. 275-276.

## CONCLUSION

Antonio Gramsci's life was dedicated to the transformation of capitalist society into a more just structure representative of the majority proletariat class. His vision of the modern state called for its replacement by a socialism under a proletarian hegemony that was informed by the principles of Marxism. His theory for this socialist transformation was guided by a principle of radical democracy, and his concept of democracy was radical to the degree that it posed a direct challenge to fundamental notions regarding the relationship between democracy and capitalism. It was democratic to the degree that Gramsci remained firmly convinced that this new society must be grounded in both the internal consent and the active participation of the social majority. As Robert A. Dahl notes, "Probably no Marxist went further than Gramsci in replacing coercion with the hegemony of culture and beliefs."<sup>1</sup>

While Gramsci's political thought was guided by this democratic principle, he never viewed "democracy" apart from the society in which it operated. In his view, liberal democracy must be transcended by a higher form of democracy. He envisioned this further democratization as a direct, active, popular involvement directly related to the decisions of everyday life. Gramsci's notion of dem-

ocracy was central to his conceptualization of the problems associated with the acquisition and exercise of power. For him, "the immediate, concrete problem" was "the problem of power:"

. . . the problem of how to organize the whole mass of Italian workers into a hierarchy that reaches its apex in the Party; the problem of constructing a State apparatus which internally will function democratically, i.e. will guarantee freedom to all anti-capitalist tendencies and offer them the possibility of forming a proletarian government, and externally will operate as an implacable machine crushing the organs of capitalist industrial and political power.<sup>2</sup>

Gramsci's answer to this problem begins with the historical task of actualizing a socialist hegemony. Its primary function would be to rearticulate effectively the common sense meanings that people give to their daily experiences. For him, ideas are what give meaning to life. Historically, he saw no reason to assume that socialist ideas would automatically be derived from capitalism. The reliance on such spontaneity was the cultural extension of economic determinism. Whereas economism was premised on the notion that capitalism would mechanically become socialism, spontaneity assumed that socialist ideas would likewise spring from the capitalist experience. For him, the development of the new hegemony involves the process of transcending the dominant hegemony. This process requires the rearticulating of ideas that are historically

linked to capitalist society. In the process, consensus is developed.

Gramsci recognized democracy as one of the fundamental ideas contained within the liberal political heritage. His democracy can be seen as both an end and as the means to insure it. It was an end to the degree that socialism represented a further expansion of democracy. It was a means to the degree that he believed that this end must be based upon the active consent of the majority. As a result, Gramsci's democracy is more than a political method. It also implies the application of a political ideal to a specific society. In Gramsci's Marxism, the task was to reestablish the link between the objective and the subjective lost in economistic interpretations of Marx. In his concept of democracy, the link between theory and practice is also reestablished. Hence, Gramsci's democracy can be seen as an effort to establish a new relationship between leaders and the led, between the masses and politics.

Gramsci's criticisms of "parliamentary democracy" and "liberalism" are not evidence of his disregard for "democracy" or "individual freedoms." They are critiques of the limited forms they assume in bourgeois society. His initial experiences with democracy came in the form of Sardinia's economic and political domination through the

Italian mainland's democratic process. The culture of Gramsci's youth was a constant memory of its limited application. In the context of Sardinian nationalism, his early solution to this domination would be some form of Sardinian self-rule. By removing the "mainlanders," their democratic domination could be replaced with a Sardinian democracy. During his Turin years, Gramsci retained a large portion of this nationalism, while his concept of democracy greatly expanded.

As Gramsci's political philosophy developed, he began to distinguish between "bourgeois democracy" and "socialist democracy." In Turin, as he deepened his familiarity with Marxist analysis, he no longer viewed the democratic ideal apart from the society in which it was applied. Marxist class analysis became his starting point. In his view, bourgeois democracy was clearly a progressive force historically, but in practice it remained a limited application of the principle.

Bourgeois democracy had failed to live up to its own promise. Its fundamental principle was political equality, i.e., the formal equality of all citizens before the law. As articulated by "liberalism," there was little concern for the social rights and freedoms Gramsci thought necessary to insure actual political equality. Since bourgeois ideas and practices were interpreted as



universals, parliamentary democracy and liberalism needed to be transcended. The historical task was to achieve a new radical democracy. The political problem was not just how to achieve it, but also how to insure its legitimacy.

Whereas Gramsci criticized the existing representative political system, he was not opposed to the concept of representation. His focus was on the institutions which would form the basis of representation, not the concept of representation. The questions of socialism cannot be answered on bourgeois terrain. Based upon Lenin's "success" in Russia, Gramsci saw the Italian "workers' councils" as the model for the proletarian state and its institutions. In the workers' councils he saw the means to prepare the workers for becoming the dominant political class and the model for their proletarian state. These workers' council performed essentially the same tasks Gramsci would soon assign to the political party.

Here he demonstrates that while his emphasis is on politics and ideology, he does not divorce them from attention to the political economy. For Gramsci's democracy this importance is noted by John Cammett: "the factory council is 'original' precisely because it arises where the 'political relations of citizen to citizen' do not exist, where 'democracy and freedom' does not exist for the working class but rather the naked economic

relations of exploiter and exploited."<sup>3</sup> Hence, Gramsci's concept involves the expansion of democracy. Through the councils, all workers would actively contribute to decisions that are directly linked to their daily lives. In addition, the councils would form the basis of socialism's legitimacy.

The workers' councils, however, failed to negate bourgeois legitimacy. Instead, the occupation of the factories resulted in Gramsci's diminished appraisal of the workers' revolutionary consciousness and led to his reexamination of the communist party's role. While he would now focus on the organization of the party, he never reduced the political struggle solely to an ideological struggle. The councils continued to form the basis of the new state's economic organization and would provide education for the working masses. A "vanguard" party of the most self-disciplined, class conscious leaders was necessary to provide adequate direction for the class struggle. Gramsci's democratic vision was again demonstrated by the party's internal organization as well as by its relationships with other social groups. His understanding of "bourgeois democracy" as a progressive force is reflected by his actions to prevent its curtailment by Italian fascism.

During his imprisonment, Gramsci concentrated his work on the theoretical aspects of a socialist transformation. He remained committed to transcending liberal democracy. The immediate task was one of preparing the basis for power. He saw legitimacy as a process linked with the particular aspects associated with a given phase of historical development. Key to the new state's legitimacy, then, was the attention given to proletarian hegemony.

In Gramsci's concept of hegemony, the nature of its consensual base, is fundamental. Hegemony is authoritarian to the degree that it must rely on coercion and manipulative strategies. Hegemony is democratic to the degree that it is based on the internal, active participation of the diverse social groups involved. In this context, he can be seen as attempting to create an entirely new relationship between the dominant and subordinate social classes. Initially, this "unity" would be based on their common interest in transcending capitalism.

In the process of giving theoretical meaning to the actual experiences, capitalist hegemony would be rearticulated and proletarian hegemony developed. The new unity is not presented as the conformity of the diverse social groups to predetermined workers' interests. In this

process, political struggles will continue to involve cooperation as well as conflict. This is one reason why Gramsci wrote so little about the institutions of the new state. He saw these as primarily political questions, and as such, to be worked out through the political process. While these political questions would be answered under "the dictatorship of the proletariat," the logic of his hegemony indicates that the transformation of society involves various social groups. His notion of the "dictatorship" does not indicate that proletarian rule means rule by the proletariat alone. In his model, these groups will be committed to the interests that bind them together. In this context, Gramsci's democracy refers to a hegemonic bloc organized by the interests of the proletariat.

Gramsci clearly identifies a successful socialist transformation to include a democratic hegemony. To this degree, his writings emphasize cultural aspects more than the economic base. But his concept of democracy is never isolated from the system in which it operates. For practical reasons, then, Gramsci does not reject the notion of authoritarian hegemony. Therefore, democratic struggles are necessary, but they are not sufficient. Socialism is equally important. While both are necessary for the modern state, neither is sufficient. The fullest expres-

sion of democracy is not possible in a society where the means of production are dominated by an ever-decreasing minority. A fuller expression of democracy is possible when political equality and individual rights are considered through of both the social and economic process.

Through his concept of hegemony, Gramsci stressed the "intellectual and moral leadership" of the proletariat as opposed to emphasizing its domination. Gramsci's politics are distinguished by their consensual basis. For the practical political reasons mentioned, as well as for theoretical reasons, Gramsci does not reject the notion of coercion. For him, the concepts of "consent" and "coercion" are dialectically linked. His notion of consent, therefore, involves the recognition of coercion.

Gramsci's conception of hegemony is a combination of consent and coercion. As such, this relationship is never eliminated. More than any other Marxist theorist, Gramsci answered the questions of political power in terms of consent. His concept of democracy focuses explicitly on the question of consent as the means by which to transform society. At the same time, his concept of democracy was a key measure by which the new society was to be evaluated. In the contemporary world, the basic debate between capitalism and socialism is being increasingly discussed in

terms of "democracy." Antonio Gramsci's concept of democracy examines the head and heart of both systems.

#### NOTES

1. Robert A. Dahl, Democracy and Its Critics (New Haven, 1989), p. 274.

2. Antonio Gramsci, Selections From Political Writings 1910-1920 (New York, 1977), p. 133; Christopher Pierson, Marxist Theory and Democratic Politics (Berkeley, 1986), p. 102.

3. John M. Cammett, "Socialism and Participatory Democracy," in The Revival of American Socialism, Edited by George Fischer (New York, 1971), p. 44.

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APPENDIX I:

ENGLISH TRANSLATIONS OF ANTONIO GRAMSCI

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APPENDIX II:

ANTONIO GRAMSCI:  
STUDIES IN ENGLISH, 1986-1990

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