**Encyclopedia entries**

**Antonio Gramsci**

Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) - revolutionary activist, Marxist theoretician, founder of the Italian Communist Party, Parliamentary Deputy - produced a series of important writings between 1929 and 1935 while imprisoned in fascist jails. Gramsci's trial prosecutor had demanded: 'We must prevent this brain from functioning for twenty years'. Partly due to Gramsci's resort to Aesopian language to pass the prison censor the *Prison Notebooks* have become a matter of constant and partisan re-interpretation since their Italian publication in the 1940s.

Influenced by Croce's historicism Gramsci repudiated fatalistic versions of positivistic Marxism, where history was propelled forward by law-like economic forces. For Gramsci the 1917 Bolshevik revolution represented a 'revolution against *Capital*', expressing all that was 'invigorating, immanent' in Marx's own thought. Gramsci dubbed Marxism the 'philosophy of praxis', and adopted Romain Rolland's aphorism: 'pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will'. Gramsci advocated a form of Bolshevism adapted to Italian conditions in the 'Lyons Theses' of 1926.

Italy underwent tumultuous political and industrial upheaval during the 'two red years', 1919-20, followed by fascist reaction and Mussolini's seizure of power in 1922. The 2,848 pages of the *Prison Notebooks* represented Gramsci's efforts to comprehend these developments. Gramsci settled on three principal topics: '($1^{st}$) Italian history of the nineteenth century, with special reference to the formation and evolution of intellectual groups; ($2^{nd}$) The theory of history and historiography; ($3^{rd}$) Americanism and Fordism'. A long sweep of Italian history, from the Roman Republic to the *Risorgimento* of the 1860s, was developed to determine in Crocean fashion the historical forces shaping the construction of the unified State and the shared life of the 'people-nation'. Carried through by 'traditional' cosmopolitan intellectuals the *Risorgimento* was a 'passive revolution' from above; 'passive', because the process of national unification failed to involve the peasantry. As a construct above civil society the Italian state proved vulnerable to fascist reaction at moments of crisis.

Gramsci drew on Hegel's concept of 'civil society' to show the impossibility of the Bolshevik Revolution being replayed in liberal democracies. Gramsci refused to counter-pose State and civil society to each other, stressing their mutual inter-dependency. In liberal democracies a kind of 'spontaneous' consent is generated out of the 'complex structure' of myriad voluntary and private institutions, clubs, associations, groups. 'In the East the State was everything, civil society was primordial and gelatinous; in the West, there was a proper relation between State and civil society, and when the State trembled a sturdy structure of civil society was at once revealed'. In conditions of a vibrant civil society and hegemonic rule, a political organisation, what Gramsci, following Machiavelli, termed 'the Modern Prince', is needed to acquire broad hegemonic leadership of the 'collective, national-popular will'.

Even in the difficult circumstances of imprisonment Gramsci proved alert to the problems and possibilities of the most recent developments. What he termed 'Fordism' in the rationalisation of production was complemented by further rationalisation of civil society, 'Americanism'. Americanism was not exceptional but 'an organic extension and an intensification of European civilisation'. Fordism had 'not yet posed' let alone resolved 'the fundamental question of hegemony'. A new balance of force and persuasion was necessary to create 'a new type of man' where 'the whole life of the nation revolves around production'.
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