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An Introduction to Gramsci's Life and Thought

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Antonio Gramsci was born on January 22, 1891 in Ales in the province of Cagliari in Sardinia. He was the fourth of seven children born to Francesco Gramsci and Giuseppina Marcias. His relationship with his father was never very close, but he had a strong affection and love for his mother, whose resilience, gift for story-telling and pungent humor made a lasting impression on him. Of his six siblings, Antonio enjoyed a mutual interest in literature with his younger sister Teresina, and seems to have always felt a spiritual kinship with his two brothers, Gennaro, the oldest of the Gramsci children, and Carlo, the youngest. Gennaro's early embrace of socialism contributed significantly to Antonio's political development.

In 1897, Antonio's father was suspended and subsequently arrested and imprisoned for five years for alleged administrative abuses. Shortly thereafter, Giuseppina and her children moved to Ghilarza, where Antonio attended elementary school. Sometime during these years of trial and near poverty, he fell from the arms of a servant, to which his family attributed his hunched back and stunted growth: he was an inch or two short of five feet in height.

At the age of eleven, after completing elementary school, Antonio worked for two years in the tax office in Ghilarza, in order to help his financially strapped family. Because of the five-year absence of Francesco, these were years of bitter struggle. Nevertheless, he continued to study privately and eventually returned to school, where

he was judged to be of superior intelligence, as indicated by excellent grades in all subjects.

Antonio continued his education, first in Santu Lussurgiu, about ten miles from Ghilarza, then, after graduating from secondary school, at the Dettori Lyceum in Cagliari, where he shared a room with his brother Gennaro, and where he came into contact for the first time with organized sectors of the working class and with radical and socialist politics. But these were also years of privation, during which Antonio was partially dependent on his father for financial support, which came only rarely. In his letters to his family, he accused his father repeatedly of unpardonable procrastination and neglect. His health deteriorated, and some of the nervous symptoms that were to plague him at a later time were already in evidence.

1911 was an important year in young Gramsci's life. After graduating from the Cagliari lyceum, he applied for and won a scholarship to the University of Turin, an award reserved for needy students from the provinces of the former Kingdom of Sardinia. Among the other young people to compete for this scholarship was Palmiro Togliatti, future general secretary of the Italian Communist Party (PCI) and, with Gramsci and several others, among the most capable leaders of that embattled Party. Antonio enrolled in the Faculty of Letters. At the University he met Angelo Tasca and several of the other men with whom he was to share struggles first in the Italian Socialist Party (PSI) and then, after the split that took place in January 1921, in the PCI.

At the University, despite years of terrible suffering due to inadequate diet, unheated flats, and constant nervous exhaustion, Antonio took a variety of courses, mainly in the humanities but also in the social sciences and in linguistics, to which he was sufficiently attracted to contemplate academic specialization in that subject. Several of his professors, notably Matteo Bartoli, a linguist, and Umberto Cosmo, a Dante scholar, became personal friends.

In 1915, despite great promise as an academic scholar, Gramsci became an active member of the PSI, and began a journalistic career

that made him among the most feared critical voices in Italy at that time. His column in the Turin edition of *Avanti!*, and his theatre reviews were widely read and influential. He regularly spoke at workers' study-circles on various topics, such as the novels of Romain Rolland, for whom he felt a certain affinity, the Paris Commune, the French and Italian revolutions and the writings of Karl Marx. It was at this time, as the war dragged on and as Italian intervention became a bloody reality, Gramsci assumed a somewhat ambivalent stance, although his basic position was that the Italian socialists should use intervention as an occasion to turn Italian national sentiment in a revolutionary rather than a chauvinist direction. It was also at this time, in 1917 and 1918, that he began to see the need for integration of political and economic action with cultural work, which took form as a proletarian cultural association in Turin.

The outbreak of the Bolshevik revolution in October 1917 further stirred his revolutionary ardor, and for the remainder of the war and in the years thereafter Gramsci identified himself closely, although not entirely uncritically, with the methods and aims of the Russian revolutionary leadership and with the cause of socialist transformation throughout the advanced capitalist world.

In the spring of 1919, Gramsci, together with Angelo Tasca, Umberto Terracini and Togliatti, founded *L'Ordine Nuovo: Rassegna Settimanale di Cultura Socialista* (The New Order: A Weekly Review of Socialist Culture), which became an influential periodical (on a weekly and later on a bi-monthly publishing schedule) for the following five years among the radical and revolutionary Left in Italy. The review gave much attention to political and literary currents in Europe, the USSR, and the United States.

For the next few years, Gramsci devoted most of his time to the development of the factory council movement, and to militant journalism, which led in January 1921 to his siding with the Communist minority within the PSI at the Party's Livorno Congress. He became a member of the PCI's central committee, but did not play a leading role until several years later. He was among the most

prescient representatives of the Italian Left at the inception of the fascist movement, and on several occasions predicted that unless unified action were taken against the rise of Mussolini's movement, Italian democracy and Italian socialism would both suffer a disastrous defeat.

The years 1921 to 1926, years "of iron and fire" as he called them, were eventful and productive. They were marked in particular by the year and a half he lived in Moscow as an Italian delegate to the Communist International (May 1922- November 1923), his election to the Chamber of Deputies in April 1924, and his assumption of the position of general secretary of the PCI. His personal life was also filled with significant experiences, the chief one being his meeting with and subsequent marriage to Julka Schucht (1896-1980), a violinist and member of the Russian Communist Party whom he met during his stay in Russia. Antonio and Julka had two sons, Delio (1924-1981), and Giuliano, born in 1926, who lives today in Moscow with his wife.

On the evening of November 8, 1926, Gramsci was arrested in Rome and, in accordance with a series of "Exceptional Laws" enacted by the fascist-dominated Italian legislature, committed to solitary confinement at the Regina Coeli prison. This began a ten-year odyssey, marked by almost constant physical and psychic pain as a result of a prison experience that culminated, on April 27, 1937, in his death from a cerebral hemorrhage. No doubt the stroke that killed him was but the final outcome of years and years of illnesses that were never properly treated in prison.

Yet as everyone familiar with the trajectory of Gramsci's life knows, these prison years were also rich with intellectual achievement, as recorded in the Notebooks he kept in his various cells that eventually saw the light after World War II, and as recorded also in the extraordinary letters he wrote from prison to friends and especially to family members, the most important of whom was not his wife Julka but rather a sister-in-law, Tania Schucht. She was the person most intimately and unceasingly involved in his prison life, since she had resided in Rome for many years and was in a position to provide him

not only with a regular exchange of thoughts and feelings in letter form but with articles of clothing and with numerous foods and medicines he sorely needed to survive the grinding daily routine of prison life.

After being sentenced on June 4, 1928, with other Italian Communist leaders, to 20 years, 4 months and 5 days in prison, Gramsci was consigned to a prison in Turi, in the province of Bari, which turned out to be his longest place of detention (June 1928 -- November 1933). Thereafter he was under police guard at a clinic in Formia, from which he was transferred in August 1935, always under guard, to the Quisisana Hospital in Rome. It was there that he spent the last two years of his life. Among the people, in addition to Tania, who helped him either by writing to him or by visiting him when possible, were his mother Giuseppina, who died in 1933, his brother Carlo, his sisters Teresina and Grazietta, and his good friend, the economist Piero Sraffa, who throughout Gramsci's prison ordeal provided a crucial and indispensable service to Gramsci. Sraffa used his personal funds and numerous professional contacts that were necessary in order to obtain the books and periodicals Gramsci needed in prison. Gramsci had a prodigious memory, but it is safe to say that without Sraffa's assistance, and without the intermediary role often played by Tania, the [Prison Notebooks](#) as we have them would not have come to fruition.

Gramsci's intellectual work in prison did not emerge in the light of day until several years after World War II, when the PC began publishing scattered sections of the [Notebooks](#) and some of the approximately 500 letters he wrote from prison. By the 1950s, and then with increasing frequency and intensity, his prison writings attracted interest and critical commentary in a host of countries, not only in the West but in the so-called third world as well. Some of his terminology became household words on the left, the most important of which, and the most complex, is the term "hegemony" as he used it in his writings and applied to the twin task of understanding the reasons underlying both the successes and the failures of socialism on a global scale, and of elaborating a feasible program for the realization of a socialist vision within the really existing conditions

that prevailed in the world. Among these conditions were the rise and triumph of fascism and the disarray on the left that had ensued as a result of that triumph. Also extremely pertinent, both theoretically and practically, were such terms and phrases as "organic intellectual," "national popular," and "historical bloc" which, even if not coined by Gramsci, acquired such radically new and original implications in his writing as to constitute effectively new formulations in the realm of political philosophy.