

Gramsci and the New American Movement

Carl Boggs

Carl Boggs participated in the New American Movement (NAM) throughout the 1970s, including groups in St. Louis and Los Angeles where he also taught and gave lectures at the Socialist Community School on topics including Gramsci and the blues. In Los Angeles, he was a member of a socialist-feminist group, Solidarity, that refused to go along with the NAM/DSOC merger to form DSA.

Boggs is the author of many books and articles in the areas of social and political theory, European politics, American politics, social movements, and popular culture, notably film. Two of his books, along with several articles, dealt with the Marxism of Antonio Gramsci: *Gramsci's Marxism* (Pluto 1976) and *The Two Revolutions: Gramsci and the Dilemmas of Western Marxism* (South End 1984). He has taught at eleven universities, including Washington University in St. Louis, UCLA, and USC, and is currently professor of social sciences and film studies at National University in Los Angeles.

The prodigious theoretical, journalistic, and programmatic writings that Antonio Gramsci completed before his prison-induced death in 1937, covering a span of barely two decades, amount to one of the most remarkable achievements in European political and intellectual history. Although the most extensive compilation of his works, the *Prison Notebooks*, did not reach a large audience even in Italy before the 1960s, and were scarcely known elsewhere before the early 1970s, they would have a strong influence on the development of the New Left in the United States—perhaps nowhere more visibly than on the short-lived New American Movement that emerged from '60s radicalism. Gramsci's central contributions—his philosophy of praxis, concept of ideological hegemony, theory of organic intellectuals, emphasis on the role of popular consciousness in politics, linkage of culture and politics—all resonated within the membership of NAM, where the idea of a broadened process of socialist transformation gained widespread acceptance.

Those who participated in NAM during the 1970s will remember the organization as embracing a model of politics *sui generis*—that is, an approach to radical change that sought to transcend the limits of both Soviet Communism, with its bureaucratic centralism, and European Social Democracy, with its failure to provide an alternative

WORKS AND DAYS 55/56: Vol. 28, 2010

to welfare-state capitalism. NAM also sought to appropriate the best elements of New Left politics while also going well beyond its fragmented, anarchistic spontaneism that inhibited development of any coherent strategy of social transformation. Toward this objective, it set out to merge electoral politics with emergent grassroots movements that had been so central to '60s radicalism. An organization marked by considerable social and ideological diversity, NAM at no point sought any theoretical orthodoxy, relied upon no set of established texts, and allowed for open debates to a degree rarely experienced in socialist parties that went before it. Indeed, NAM members were fond of referring to their organization as something of a "pre-party" movement. Within this milieu, it could still be argued that NAM followed a broadly "Gramscian" path: the influence of the Italian Marxist was clearly visible in the various NAM publications and exchanges, not to mention the work of the journal *Socialist Revolution*, which at the time was the closest thing NAM had to a theoretical voice.¹

A persistent theme in Gramsci's original Marxism was his effort to merge the sphere of intellectual activity and political struggle—that is to politicize or "democratize" theoretical work that in earlier Marxism was divorced from what Gramsci called the "popular element." For Gramsci, this uniting of theory and practice, thought and action was not merely a guiding methodological principle but was also the driving spirit behind his personal and political life. Social transformation demanded not only cognitive thought but passionate dedication and intense partisanship on the part of the theorist—a partisanship rooted in the rhythm and flow of everyday life. Among leading Marxists, only Lenin devoted as much focus to matters of political strategy; for both, the study of history, philosophy, and culture was meaningful precisely as a guide to understanding the intricacies of revolutionary action. And in the manner of Lenin, Gramsci was able to combine in a single personality the skills of political leadership and capacity for creative theorizing as few others were able to do. But what distinguished Gramsci even further among Marxists (Lenin included) was his relatively humble social background (from rural Sardinia) and the close contact he maintained with working-class life and politics until his death only five days after being released from prison. An ethos of passionate engagement dominated every phase of Gramsci's intellectual work, as a passage from one of his prison letters to sister-in-law Tatiana Schucht revealed: "My entire intellectual formation was of a polemical nature, so that it is impossible for me to think 'disinterestedly' or to study for the sake of studying" ("Letters" 193).

There was in Gramsci's Marxism three distinct but often crisscrossing paths—council democracy, Leninism, and Western Marxism—that do not correspond strictly to any chronological order.² Gramsci's early commitment the factory council movement in Turin, reflected in the Ordine Nuovo period of 1915-1920, represented a broad vision of radical democracy he carried forward into his later writings. From the outset Gramsci wanted to understand the conditions under which a democratic shift toward socialism might be realized—the organizational forms, political tactics and strategy,

leadership styles, role of theory, and view of the state. While other theorists and movements proclaimed democratic ideals, Gramsci's outlook here was rather distinct. In contrast to Karl Kautsky, Eduard Bernstein, and other figures of the Second International, he refused to equate democracy with prevailing liberal-capitalist institutions and practices. He departed from Lenin's famous Jacobin conception, which imputed democratic content to the dictatorship of the proletariat associated with the Bolshevik party-state, insisting that socialism required novel forms of democratic participation. And he found George Sorel's syndicalist emphasis on spontaneous mass activity similarly devoid of political or organizational concreteness. What each of these concepts failed to provide, as Gramsci saw it, was a theory of popular democracy grounded in new forms of authority—not to mention a political strategy commensurate with such aims (Boggs, *Two Revolutions* 267-8). What Gramsci had in mind, especially before the collapse of the *biennio rosso* workers' rebellions in 1920, was an organic process of social transformation that could prefigure the new communist society by gradually extending the domain of egalitarianism, non-bureaucratic social authority and social relations into a mature socialist economic and political system. This concept of social change, though not always drawn immediately from Gramsci, seemed to permeate the trajectory of NAM.

If in the *Prison Notebooks* Gramsci seemed to depart from council-defined politics while shifting toward a more Jacobin (elite-defined) outlook, there can be no question that his most enduring concepts—"ideological hegemony", "social bloc", "war of position", "organic intellectuals"—remained anchored to a still unmistakable democratic outlook. He sought to reconcile familiar antagonisms within the Marxist tradition: party and class, intellectuals and masses, centralized leadership and democracy, etc. Indeed the very language of the *Notebooks* ("consent", "integrated culture", "organic", "ensemble of relations") demonstrates a sensitivity to the dangers of authoritarian politics, to what he sometimes referred to as "bureaucratic centralism." And Gramsci's frequent allusions to a future "national-popular" movement in Italy were strategically tied to the idea of transforming civil society as a precondition of subverting the capitalist division of labor in economic, cultural, and political life.

Yet if in his prison writings Gramsci set out to furnish a theoretical basis of Leninism, he also arrived at his own version of it. He was convinced that historical differences between Russia (where the Bolshevik Revolution took power in 1917) and the West called for entirely different political strategies: the notion of a dictatorship of the proletariat made little sense in Europe where the equilibrium between state and civil society was stronger than in less-developed societies. Thus Gramsci's notions of hegemony and war of position would lead to new ways of thinking about politics and role of the party, introducing a language that was foreign to the Bolsheviks and to what later would be known as "Marxism-Leninism." The party Gramsci envisioned was less a combat apparatus geared mainly to seizure of state power than a "collective intellectual" or "myth prince" designed to carry out ideological functions as part of the war of position. Here it might be argued that Gramsci's all-consuming

aim in the Notebooks was to broaden, enrich, and democratize Lenin's theory of revolution—that is, to render it more applicable to industrialized conditions of the West. Insofar as NAM set forth a theory of party formation, it most closely approximated this articulation of Gramsci's.

The evolution of Gramsci's "Western" Marxist side is best understood in this context: with the paralysis of European Socialism and the collapse of revolutionary hopes after 1923, this theoretical shift was associated with a period of retreat and pessimism and, for Gramsci, the loss of his own freedom at the hands of Mussolini's jailers. Western Marxism involved efforts to reconstruct socialist theory along neo-Hegelian lines, returning to an emphasis on subjectivity, consciousness, and ideology that was missing from an orthodox Marxism still attached to objectivist views of economic crisis. Paralleling the work of Georg Lukács, Karl Korsch, and theorists of the early Frankfurt School, Gramsci's prison writings were directed toward understanding why socialism in general and the working class in particular had suffered defeat in the midst of mounting European crisis. Like these others, Gramsci believed the new historical circumstances demanded a full theoretical reworking of Marxism, but it seems that Gramsci was virtually alone in seizing this opportunity to formulate a new transformative political strategy for the West.

If any single theme can be said to have decisively shaped the *Notebooks*, it was the problem of ideology: hegemony, popular consciousness, culture, social bloc, the role of intellectuals were all dimensions of theory that revolved around this theme, as did his more instrumental focus on strategy. Surely Gramsci's famous concept of ideological hegemony remains the most innovative and far-reaching construct in his body of work. Departing from Lenin's more narrow definition of hegemony as essentially ruling-class propaganda, Gramsci employed it to explore the complex nature of bourgeois domination that he believed was manifest through popular "consensus" throughout civil society as much as through physical coercion by the state-military apparatus. Hegemony took on added meaning in advanced capitalism, where education, mass media, popular culture, and the legal system constituted pervasive ideological forces in support of the status quo. This reality naturally meant that the dictates of revolutionary strategy would have to change accordingly. Here Gramsci theorized prospects for an alternative hegemony—an emergent integrated culture—broad enough to delegitimize the existing power structure and lay the ideological groundwork for a transition to socialism. Consistent with the main premises of Western Marxism, this "war of position" contained two major implications: first, that the transformation of civil society takes place prior to and alongside the contestation for state power and, second, that the new state system must be built upon pre-figurative, non-authoritarian foundations. Gramsci's insights into the state/civil society relationship opened up new areas of theoretical inquiry within and beyond the Marxist tradition—a legacy that remains today. They also paved the way toward new modes of thinking about revolutionary politics in advanced capitalist societies—a phenomenon clearly visible in NAM.

Gramsci's full theoretical impact, as mentioned, would not be felt until well after his death. Since he was a founder of Italian communism, many observers—including leaders and theorists of the Italian Communist Party (PCI)—later identified a "fourth tendency" in his thought: a precursor of 1970s-style Eurocommunism. Any close examination of Gramsci's life and work, however, quickly reveals the falseness of this view. The fact is that none of Gramsci's main ideas can be said to anticipate the PCI's via Italiana strategy ("Italian road to socialism") originated by Palmiro Togliatti in the 1940s and later refined by PCI elites in the 1960s and 1970s. In actuality, each of the currents in Gramsci's Marxism took shape precisely in opposition to the placid social-democratic politics which in the Italy of Gramsci's time most approximated what Eurocommunism later came to represent as a moderate reformist and strictly electoral force. Ironically, much of what Gramsci found anachronistic and debilitating in the old Italian Socialist Party (PSI) would be championed by the PCI in his name fifty years later: scientific Marxism, parliamentary road to socialism, fixation on electoral politics, reformism limited to the existing Italian economy and state. Eurocommunist parties appropriated the stature and memory (but not the theory) of Gramsci in order to legitimate their political claims just as Soviet leaders used images of Marx and Lenin to justify their managerial rule.

The concept of hegemony, referring to processes of ideological and cultural domination that legitimate elite rule, furnished an intellectual matrix of coherence and meaning to the continuous reflections on ideology, politics, culture, and consciousness in the *Notebooks*. It contains not only a powerful critique of simple, mechanistic crisis theories favored by orthodox Marxists—for Gramsci there was no method for predicting the breakdown of capitalism—but also an implicit understanding of the system's capacity to reproduce itself in the face of persistent material contradictions and social conflicts. Theoretical insights into the problem of hegemony (and counterhegemony) therefore suggested that historical change could not be understood simply by looking at dysfunctions in the capitalist mode of production.

Gramsci approvingly referred to Marx's dictum that people develop consciousness and become political actors in the ideological sphere, in support of the notion that consciousness itself is a decisive factor in the outcome of class conflict—not a mere epiphenomenon. Thus: "To the extent that ideologies are historically necessary they have a validity which is 'psychological'; they 'organize' human masses and create the terrain on which men move, acquire consciousness of their position, struggle, etc." ("Study" 377). In this sense Gramsci held that ideas, beliefs, cultural patterns—even myths and superstitions—had a certain "material" reality of their own since in their power to inspire people towards action they help reshape material conditions, which otherwise would exist as empty abstractions. He argued that the contradictions of capitalism do not so much "explode" as they are given cultural and political definition through creative human intervention. Hence the concept of hegemony enabled Gramsci to view change in terms of the larger "ensemble of relations" that incorporated both the material and ideological, objective

and subjective elements of historical experience. All this was consonant with a democratized view of socialist politics that NAM began to articulate in the early 1970s.

Calling attention to the consensual side of politics, Gramsci emphasized that no social order could long sustain itself when relying mostly upon organized state power; what furnished real political durability was the scope of ideological consent or political support. A related aspect of hegemony centered around Gramsci's focus on insurgent movements in their struggle to build consensual legitimacy or counterhegemonic presence in both civil society and the state. For workers and other subordinate groups to gain ascendancy relative to the bourgeoisie would require their elevation to "hegemonic" status, taking it beyond the narrow "economic-corporate" phase of group, sectoral, or even class interests to the political or "universal" phase where a new moral-intellectual organizing principle for society as a whole could be established. In Gramsci's view, the struggle for hegemony on the part of subordinate groups has two phases: to penetrate the false and irrational world of social appearances tied to the dominant order, and to create a new paradigm of beliefs, commitments, lifestyles, and social relations conducive to an emergent democratic socialism. From this standpoint, the arenas of contestation would be exhaustive, extending to the state, media, legal system, schools, churches, and even the family.

Assuming a sharpening crisis of hegemony and spread of counterhegemonic tendencies within society, a crucial question must be posed: through what medium would the various local and dispersed struggles become unified and politicized? Gramsci believed the proliferation of social movements could be expected to reach a "cathartic" phase of upheaval once the old ideological definitions and norms began to disintegrate, allowing for a massive crisis of authority and, ultimately, revolution. Like his European precursors Benedetto Croce, Georges Sorel, and Antonio Labriola, Gramsci paid careful attention to the ideological dimension of popular revolt, to subjective factors like symbols, myths, language, and tradition.

The answer would have to be found in what Gramsci called a "revolutionary historical bloc," or "social bloc"—an epic convergence of counterhegemonic forces largely grounded in civil society but seeking expression on the terrain of state power. The term "bloc" adds conceptual refinement to Gramsci's rather schematic treatment of popular consciousness in the *Notebooks*. He used the notion frequently and in many versions, yet in each case it referred to crystallization of popular groups or movements built around a common ideology or set of historical objectives, calling forth a collective sense of political identity going beyond sociological categories. Gramsci's definition thus went beyond strict material interests, or simple alliances, coalitions, and other loose configurations of social groupings, and it was not confined to the realm of state representation. "Bloc" connoted a broad merging of forces, always shifting and changing, at usually explosive historical junctures, leading to a process whereby "popular feelings became unified" and gave form to mass revolt.³ In this sense, blocs encompassed a concretely "global" dimension to disparate struggles which, otherwise left to

their partial spheres of activity, would probably drift toward reformism and economism—or just disintegrate. The great transformation of the PCI from a tiny, isolated underground organization into a dynamic mass party during the World War II anti-fascist Resistance movements fit this pattern exactly, coming as it did at a moment of unprecedented crisis of hegemony. Similar examples include the Spanish anti-fascist insurgency of 1936-39, the anti-Soviet Hungarian Revolution of 1956, American new-left radicalism of the 1960s and 1970s inspired by the Civil Rights movement and opposition to the Vietnam war, and growth of Polish Solidarity into a mass-based radical formation in 1980-81 made possible by the confluence of (anti-Soviet) nationalism and Catholicism.

The great plurality of social movements typical of the advanced capitalist—commonly referred to as post-Fordist—landscape has indeed given expression to a multiplicity of social forces and political motifs in response to several developments: growth of corporate power, globalization, environmental crisis, bureaucracy, deterioration of urban life, heightened focus on race and gender issues. It calls our attention to a multiplicity of overlapping forms of conflict endemic to this milieu—a tendency broadly anticipated by Gramsci and more clearly articulated within the general trajectory of Western Marxism, Critical Theory, and post-sixties radicalism in Europe and the United States. It is surely possible to situate NAM within this tendency. Against such a backdrop, new forms of opposition inevitably call forth demands for empowerment, more egalitarian allocation of resources and better quality of life. What might be called “post-Fordist” domination generates local resistance in so many directions that it inevitably cuts across class lines, status differences, and material interests.

At the same time, dispersed local forces and interests of this sort—however widespread and militant they might be—do not in themselves necessarily generate any cohesive, unified, or counterhegemonic opposition; they can, and do, lead to something quite different: a splintering of social forces, movements, and interests associated today with postmodern identity politics. This shift, visible in advanced capitalist societies and particularly the United States since the 1960s, derives its massive energy from a sense of difference, plurality, locale, and multiculturalism—a promising outlook where it involves a breakdown of old cultural barriers and a widening of the public sphere, but extremely problematic where discourses of fragmentation, insularity, and “local knowledge” deflect attention away from the familiar “macro” concerns of institutional change and political strategy, which of course were always preeminently Gramscian concerns. In a social order where the symbols and images of a corporate-driven media culture permeate mass consciousness, the splintering of local identities coincides with the decline of political opposition, even where the popular desire for change is resolute. Corporate colonization is left only feebly challenged by the scattering of movements which, in the absence of a cohesive social bloc, become easily assimilated into the all-powerful commodity. Identities become detached from the public sphere while politics is allowed to descend into an endless series of spec-

tacles.⁴ Postmodern tendencies are therefore beset with intractable turbulence, conflict, and sharpened antagonisms do not logically point toward any specific mode of social transformation or historical outcome. Indeed the eventual breakup of NAM by the very early 1980s, at which point the organization could no longer sustain a proliferation of outlooks and tendencies, can be understood in this historical context.

At this juncture Gramsci's concept of social bloc is once again suggestive—both as critique of postmodern fragmentation and as outline of a counterhegemonic politics for the post-Fordist milieu that NAM embraced at its founding. Where dispersed identities, constituencies, and movements run up against the imperatives of effective political action, the very development of a social bloc implies a transcendence of this impasse, an historical coalescing of local struggles into a viable oppositional politics endowing the “war of position” with ideological coherence—indeed, permitting a shift from “war of position” to “war of movement” (the battle for institutional and above all state power). Trends in the U.S. since the 1970s have worked in precisely the opposite direction, hastened along by the familiar decline of Marxism and the general depoliticization of society. Gramsci, as we have seen, looked to epic historical rallying points as the source of unifying social mobilization. In recent times perhaps the main glimmer of political hope on the horizon has been a series of well-planned, dedicated grassroots struggles against corporate-managed globalization—first visible during the Seattle events of late 1999—which, at least for the short term, was able to bring together representations of labor, community groups, NGOs, and the new social movements. The advantage of this development is that globalization by definition has universal consequences, will only deepen as a problem for the twenty-first century, and exerts its destructive impact on virtually every region of social life. As a focal point of domestic and international popular mobilization, however, the issue may turn out to be much too remote from people's daily lives to sustain the necessary sense of psychological and social immediacy which, as Gramsci stressed, is the *sine qua non* of social bloc formation. A further problem is that movement linkages within the anti-globalization campaigns have been to date tenuous and fragile, a limitation sharpened by the absence of anything resembling a cohesive counterhegemonic ideology.

Given the inevitable historical pressures and limits imposed on his theorizing, and taking into account the fragmentary, sketchy, and tentative character of his work, Gramsci's legacy must be viewed today as profoundly divided, a reality made all the more salient by the gradual erosion of Marxism itself as a source of theoretical coherence and political strategy. In many respects Marxism has been discredited—if not as a source of analysis then at least as the basis of social organization and political action. Still, Gramsci's rich and complex body of writings—especially that part belonging to the Western Marxist tradition—does continue to suggest the outlines of a general democratic-socialist transformation that, under more promising circumstances, could give substance to oppositional politics.⁵ The guiding concepts explored here point toward a model combin-

ing radical insurgency with democratic sensibilities, something essentially lacking from earlier leftist approaches that wound up either marginalized or integrated. NAM, as we have seen, set out to appropriate those sensibilities but, for a variety of reasons too complex to elaborate upon here, eventually failed to give them political sustenance. Regardless of the fate that befell NAM, the very fact Gramsci's work is still widely respected and influential among new generations of intellectuals, many decades after his death, testifies to the great elasticity, perhaps even universality, of these concepts. Taken together these concepts were, during Gramsci's life at least, inspired by a profound sense of political optimism ("actuality of the revolution") along with a commitment to radically democratic ideals and practices.

We can see more clearly with historical hindsight just how partial and uneven was Gramsci's critique of capitalist domination, just as we can better appreciate the partiality and unevenness of the entire Marxist tradition. In the end, and despite his sharpened theoretical lenses, Gramsci focused his analysis largely on the factory, on the newly evolving Fordist workplace, all the while assuming that modernity could simply be turned around largely through the historical struggles of proletarian emancipation—the Marxist variant of Enlightenment rationality. Gramsci was surely right about the crippling effects of rationalization. However, he did not draw conclusions from this regarding the imposing material and ideological obstacles that faced not only workers, but all groupings in advanced capitalism along the path to far-reaching social transformation. Immersed in the idea of socialism as a radical extension of the Enlightenment, he had no critique of modernity that went beyond the factory-based system of exploitation and, as we have seen, his view of rationalization never incorporated those global hegemonic influences that later became so decisive: the expansive domain of commodity culture, consumerism, technological rationality, mass media. But Gramscian perspectives do allow for, indeed encourage, theoretical discourses that move in such directions, still an astonishing legacy for a thinker whose most important writings were furtively scribbled on scraps of paper during the many painful years he spent in fascist prisons.

Notes

¹ See, for example, the two-part article I authored on Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*, in numbers 11 and 12 of *Socialist Revolution* (1972). The journal was later renamed *Socialist Review*.

² For a more elaborate discussion of the "three faces" of Gramsci, see Carl Boggs, *The Two Revolutions: Gramsci and the Dilemmas of Western Marxism* (Boston: South End Press, 1984), ch. 1.

³ Gramsci viewed the concept of "historical bloc" or "social bloc" as reflecting the "unity between nature and spirit", that is, between the subjective and objective dimensions of politics. See "Modern Prince", *SPN*, p. 137.

⁴ On the process of depoliticization in post-Fordist society, see Carl Boggs, *The End of Politics: Corporate Power and the Decline of the Public Sphere* (New York: Guilford, 2000), ch. 1.

⁵ On the motif of democratization in both Gramsci and the Marxist tradition more generally, see Joseph V. Femia, *Marxism and Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), ch. 3.

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