GRAMSCI, Antonio (1891-1937)

Antonio Gramsci is among the most influential political and cultural theorists of the twentieth century and one of the most important Marxists after Marx. Born in Sardinia, he helped found the Italian Communist Party in 1921, became its leader in 1924, and was sent to prison by the fascist regime in 1926, where he spent virtually the rest of his life. During his lifetime Gramsci was known as a journalist, revolutionary, and opponent of fascism. Following WWII his fame spread with the gradual publication of his prison writings: the 3000 pages known as *The Prison Notebooks* and the more than 500 *Prison Letters* written to friends and family members. Both have been published in numerous edited editions and translations. Gramsci’s significance lies in his interpretation of modern Italian history, his understanding of Americanization and Fordism, and his analysis of “subalterns,” oppressed people (such as Italian peasants in the South) who lacked a political voice of their own. But he is best known for recasting Marxism and through the idea of hegemony. Although an admirer of Vladimir Lenin, Gramsci believed that revolutionary strategy in Western Europe, with its elaborate civil society, had to differ from that developed by the Bolsheviks, who confronted weak social institutions and an elaborate state apparatus. Rather than the revolutionary onslaught or “war of maneuver” that succeeded in the East, Gramsci advocated an ideological and cultural struggle, or “war of position.” For Gramsci, Marxists too often assumed that exploitative class relations guaranteed proletarian triumph, but in fact political dominance or “hegemony” was won and lost on the cultural and political battlefield. It was never homogeneous or all encompassing, and involved both coercion and consent. It was also subject to passive and active forms of resistance. Gramsci argued that in order to triumph, the working class had first to win the battle of ideas. It had to capture the “common sense” of society. He accordingly analyzed those central to creating and articulating this common sense: the intellectuals. On the one hand, he had a populist view of intellectuals, famously proclaiming that everyone was one. On the other hand, he distinguished between “traditional” and “organic” intellectuals, that is, between those who thought of themselves traditionally as an independent caste and those who organically articulated class interests from within the class. Gramsci’s ideas influenced both political and intellectual life after 1945, articulating (parallel to the early Georg Lukács’s work on “reification”) what might be called a Western Marxism. His ideas helped to shape the postwar Italian Communist Party, which followed Gramsci’s stress on cultural and ideological contestation and accepted the ground rules of parliamentary democracy. His ideas also played a prominent role in subsequent cultural studies, notably in the writings of Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall, Edward Said, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, who used the idea of hegemony to analyze the relationship between culture and power. Grasmci was the original inspiration for the South Asian historians of the Subaltern Studies Group, who rethought modern India from the point of view of the oppressed.

Bibliography: International Gramsci Society, Gramsci Bibliography <http://www.internationalgramscisociety.org/resources/recent_publications/index.html>

Dennis Dworkin, University of Nevada, Reno