

Gramsci and Political Theory

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Antonio Gramsci died 40 years ago. For the first 10 of these 40 years he was virtually unknown except to his old comrades from the 1920s, since very little of his writings were published or available. This does not mean that he lacked influence, for Palmiro Togliatti may be said to have led the Italian Communist Party on Gramscian lines, or at least on his interpretation of Gramscian lines. Nevertheless, for most people anywhere until the end of world war II, even for communists, Gramsci was little more than a name. For the second decade of these 40 years he became extremely well known in Italy, and was admired far beyond communist circles. His works were extensively published by the Communist Party, but above all by the house of Einaudi. Whatever

criticisms were subsequently made of these early editions, they made Gramsci widely available and allowed Italians to judge his stature as a major marxist thinker and, more generally, a major figure in 20th-century Italian culture. But only Italians.

For during this decade Gramsci remained for practical purposes quite unknown outside his own country, since he was virtually untranslated. Indeed, attempts to get even his moving *Prison Letters* published in Britain and the USA failed. Except for a handful of people with personal contacts in Italy and who could read Italian—mostly communists—he might as well not have existed this side of the Alps.

During the third decade of these 40 years, there

were the first serious stirrings of interest in Gramsci abroad. They were no doubt stimulated by de-Stalinisation and even more by the independent attitude of which Togliatti made himself the spokesman after 1956. At all events in this period we find the first English selections from his work and the first discussions of his ideas outside Communist parties. As it happens outside Italy, the English-speaking countries seem to have been the first to develop a sustained interest in Gramsci. Paradoxically in Italy itself, during the same decade, criticism of Gramsci became articulate and sometimes shrill, and arguments about the interpretation of his work by the Italian Communist Party developed.

Part of our Intellectual Universe

Finally, in the last decade of these 40 years Gramsci has come fully into his own. In Italy itself the publication of his works was for the first time put on a satisfactory scholarly basis by the complete edition of the *Prison Letters* (1965), the publication of various early and political writings, and above all by Gerratana's monument of scholarship, the chronologically ordered edition of the *Prison Notebooks* (1975). Both Gramsci's biography and his role in the history of the Communist Party now became much clearer, thanks largely to the systematic historical work on its own records promoted and encouraged by the Communist Party.

The discussion continues, and this is not the place to survey the Italian Gramsci debate since the middle 1960s. Abroad translations of Gramsci's writings for the first time became available in adequate selections, notably in the two Lawrence & Wishart volumes edited by Hoare and Nowell Smith. So have translations of important secondary works such as Fiori's *Life* (1970). Here again, without attempting to survey the growing literature about him in our language—representing different but universally respectful points of view—it is enough to say that on the fortieth anniversary of his death there is no longer any excuse for not knowing about Gramsci. What is more to the point, he *is* known, even by people who have not actually read his writings. Such typically Gramscian terms as 'hegemony' occur in marxist and even in non-marxist, discussions of politics and history as casually, and sometimes as loosely, as Freudian terms did between the wars.

Gramsci has become part of our intellectual universe. His stature as an original marxist thinker—in my view the most original such thinker produced in the west since 1917—is pretty generally admitted. Yet what he said and why it is important is still not as widely known as the simple fact that he *is* important. I shall here single out one reason

for his importance: his theory of politics.

It is an elementary observation of marxism that thinkers do not invent their ideas in the abstract, but can only be understood in the historical and political context of their times. If Marx always stressed that men made their own history, or, if you like, think out their own ideas, he also stressed that they can only do so (to quote a famous passage from the *18th Brumaire*) under the conditions in which they find themselves immediately, under conditions which are given and inherited. Gramsci's thought is quite original. He is a marxist, and indeed a leninist, and I do not propose to waste any time by defending him against the accusations of various sectarians who claim to know exactly what is and what is not marxist and to have a copyright in their own version of marxism. Yet for those of us brought up in the classical tradition of marxism, both pre-1914 and post-1917, he is often a rather surprising marxist. For instance, he wrote relatively little about economic development, and a great deal about politics, including about and in terms of theorists like Croce, Sorel and Machiavelli, who don't usually figure much or at all in the classical writings. So it is important to discover how far his background and historical experience explain this originality. I need not add that this does not in any way diminish his intellectual stature.

Background and Historical Development

When Gramsci entered Mussolini's jail, he was the leader of the Italian Communist Party. Now Italy in Gramsci's day had a number of historical peculiarities which encouraged original departures in marxist thinking. I shall mention several of them briefly.

(1) Italy was, as it were, a microcosm of world capitalism inasmuch as it contained in a single country both metropolis and colonies, advanced and backward regions. Sardinia, from where Gramsci came, typified the backward, not to say archaic, and semi-colonial side of Italy; Turin with its Fiat works, where he became a working-class leader, then as now typifies the most advanced stage of industrial capitalism and the mass transformation of immigrant peasants into workers. In other words, an intelligent Italian marxist was in an unusually good position to grasp the nature both of the developed capitalist world and the 'Third World' and their interactions, unlike marxists from countries belonging entirely to one or the other. Incidentally, it is therefore a mistake to consider Gramsci simply as a theorist of 'western communism'. His thought was neither designed exclusively for industrially advanced countries, nor is it exclusively applicable to them.

(2) One important consequence of Italy's

historic peculiarity was that, even before 1914, the Italian labour movement was both industrial and agrarian, both proletarian and peasant-based. In this respect it stood more or less alone in Europe before 1914, though this is not the place to elaborate the point. Still, two simple illustrations will suggest its relevance. The regions of the strongest communist influence (Emilia, Tuscany, Umbria) are not industrial regions, and the great post-war leader of the Italian trade union movement, Di Vittorio, was a Southerner and a farm-worker. Italy did not stand quite so alone in the unusually important role played by intellectuals in its labour movement—largely intellectuals from the backward and semi-colonial South. However, the phenomenon is worth noting, as it plays an important part in Gramsci's thinking.

Italy: Laboratory of Political Experiences

(3) The third peculiarity is the very special character of Italy's history as a nation and a bourgeois society. Here again, I do not want to go into details. Let me merely remind you of three things: (a) that Italy pioneered modern civilisation and capitalism several centuries before other countries, but was unable to maintain its achievement and drifted into a sort of backwater between Renaissance and Risorgimento; (b) that unlike France the bourgeoisie did not establish its society by a triumphant revolution, and unlike Germany it did not accept a compromise solution offered it by an old ruling class from above. It made a partial revolution: Italian unity was achieved partly from above—by Cavour—partly from below—by Garibaldi, (c) So, in a sense the Italian bourgeoisie failed—or partly failed—to achieve its historic mission to create the Italian nation. Its revolution was incomplete and Italian socialists like Gramsci would therefore be specially conscious of the possible role of their movement, as the potential leader of the nation, the carrier of national history.

(4) Italy was and is not merely a Catholic country, like many others, but a country in which the Church was a specifically Italian institution, a mode of maintaining the rule of the ruling classes without, and separate from, the state apparatus. It was also a country in which a national elite culture preceded a national state. So an Italian marxist would be more aware than others of what Gramsci called 'hegemony', i.e. the ways in which authority is maintained which are not simply based on coercive force.

(5) For a variety of reasons—I have suggested some just now—Italy was therefore a sort of laboratory of political experiences. It is no accident that the country has long had a powerful tradition of political thought—from Machiavelli

in the 16th century to Pareto and Mosca in the early 20th; for even foreign pioneers of what we would now call political sociology also tended to be linked with Italy or to derive their ideas from Italian experience—I am thinking of people like Sorel and Michels. So it is not surprising that Italian marxists should be particularly aware of political theory as a problem.

(6) Finally, a very significant fact. Italy was a country in which, after 1917, several of the objective and even the subjective conditions of social revolution appeared to exist—more so than in Britain and France even, I suggest, than in Germany. Yet this revolution did not come off. On the contrary, fascism came to power. It was only natural that Italian marxists should pioneer the analysis of why the Russian October revolution had failed to spread to western countries, and what the alternative strategy and tactics of the transition to socialism ought to be in such countries. That, of course, is what Gramsci set out to do.

Pioneer of Marxist Theory of Politics

And this brings me to my main point, namely that Gramsci's major contribution to marxism is to have pioneered a marxist theory of politics. For though Marx and Engels wrote an immense amount about politics, they were rather reluctant to develop a general theory in this field, largely since—as Engels pointed out in the famous late letters glossing the materialist conception of history—they thought it more important to point out that (I quote) "legal relations as well as forms of State could not be understood from themselves, but are rooted in the material conditions of life" (*Preface to Critique of Political Economy*). And so they stressed above all (I quote) "the derivation of political, juridical and other ideological conceptions from the basic economic facts" (*Engels to Mehring*).

So Marx's and Engels's own discussion of such matters as the nature and structure of rule, the constitution and organisation of the state, the nature and organisation of political movements, is mostly in the form of observations arising out of current commentary, generally incidental to other arguments—except perhaps for their theory of the origin and historic character of the state.

Lenin felt the need for a more systematic theory of the state and revolution, logically enough on the eve of taking power, but as we all know the October Revolution supervened before he could complete it. And I would point out that the intensive discussion about the structure, organisation and leadership of socialist movements which developed in the era of the Second International was about practical questions. Its theoretical

generalisations were incidental and *ad hoc*, except perhaps in the field of the national question, where the successors of Marx and Engels had practically to start from scratch. I am not saying that this did not lead to important theoretical innovations, as it clearly did with Lenin: though these were, paradoxically, pragmatic rather than theoretical, though underpinned with marxist analysis. If we read the discussions about Lenin's new concept of the party, for instance, it is surprising how little marxist *theory* enters the debate, even though marxists as celebrated as Kautsky, Luxemburg, Plekhanov, Trotsky, Martov and Ryazanov took part in them. A theory of politics was indeed implicit in them, but it only partly emerged.

There are various reasons for this gap. In any case it did not seem to matter much until the early 1920s. But then, I would suggest, it became an increasingly serious weakness. Outside Russia the revolution had failed or never taken place, and a systematic reconsideration became necessary, not only of the movement's strategy for winning power, but also of the technical problems of a transition to socialism, which had never been seriously considered before 1917 as a concrete and immediate problem. Within the USSR the problem of what a socialist society would and should be like, in terms of its political structure and institutions, and as a 'civil society' emerged, as Soviet power emerged from its desperate struggles to maintain itself to become permanent. Essentially this is the problem which has troubled marxists in recent years, and which is at issue between Soviet communists, Maoists and 'Euro-communists', not to mention those outside the communist movement.

Political Action

I stress the fact that we are here talking about two *different* sets of political problems: strategy and the nature of socialist societies. Gramsci tried to get to grips with both, though some commentators seem to me to have concentrated excessively on only one of them, namely the strategic. But, whatever the nature of these problems, pretty soon it became and for a long time remained impossible to discuss them within the communist movement. In fact, one might well say that it was only possible for Gramsci to grapple with them in his writings because he was in prison, cut off from politics outside, and writing not for the present but for the future.

This does not mean that he was not writing politically in terms of the current situation of the 1920s and early 1930s. In fact, one of the difficulties in understanding his work is that he took for granted a familiarity with situations and discus-

sions which are now unknown to most of us or forgotten. Thus Perry Anderson has recently reminded us that some of his most characteristic thinking derives from and develops themes which appeared in the Comintern debates of the early 1920s. At all events, he was led to develop the elements of a full political theory within marxism, and he was probably the first marxist to do so. I shall not try to summarise his ideas. Roger Simon has recently dealt at greater length with some of them in *Marxism Today* (March 1977). Instead I shall pick out a few strands and underline what seems to me to be their importance.

Gramsci is a political theorist inasmuch as he regards politics as "an autonomous activity" (*Prison Notebooks*, p. 134) within the context and limits set by historical development, and because he specifically sets about investigating "the place that political science occupies or should occupy in a systematic (coherent and logical) conception of the world" in marxism (p. 136). Yet that meant more than that he introduced into marxism the sort of discussions found in his hero, Machiavelli—a man who does not occur very often in the writings of Marx and Engels.

Politics for him is the core not only of the strategy of winning socialism, but of socialism itself. It is for him, as Hoare and Nowell Smith rightly point out "the central human activity, the means by which the single consciousness is brought into contact with the social and natural world in all its forms" (*Prison Notebooks*, xxiii). In short, it is much wider than the term as commonly used. Wider even than the "science and art of politics" in Gramsci's own narrower sense, which he defines as "a body of practical rules for research and of detailed observations useful for awakening an interest in effective reality and for stimulating more rigorous and more vigorous political insights" (*ibid.*, 175-6).

It is partly implicit in the concept of *praxis* itself: that understanding the world and changing it are one. And *praxis*, the history that men make themselves, though in given—and developing—historical conditions, is what they *do*, and not simply the ideological forms in which men become conscious of the contradictions of society; it is, to quote Marx, how they "fight it out": in short, it is what can be called political action. But it is also partly a recognition of the fact that political action itself is an autonomous activity, even though it is "born on the 'permanent' and 'organic' terrain of economic life" (p. 139-40).

The Construction of Socialism

This applies to the construction of socialism as well as—perhaps more than—anywhere else. You might say that for Gramsci what is the basis for

socialism is not socialisation in the economic sense -i.e. the socially-owned and planned economy—though this is obviously its basis and framework, but socialisation in the political and sociological sense, i.e. what has been called the process of forming habits in collective man which will make social behaviour automatic, and eliminate the need for an external apparatus to impose norms: automatic but also conscious.

When Gramsci speaks of the role of production in socialism it is not simply as a means of creating the society of material plenty, though we may note in passing that he had no doubt about the priority of maximising production (p. 242n). It was because man's place in production was central to his consciousness under capitalism; because it was the experience of workers in the large factory which was the natural school of this consciousness. Gramsci tended to see—perhaps in the light of his experience in Turin—the large modern factory not so much as a place of alienation and more as a school for socialism.

But the point was that production in socialism could therefore not simply be treated as a separate technical and economic problem; it had to be treated simultaneously, and from his point of view primarily, as a problem of political education and political structure. Even in bourgeois society, which was in this respect progressive, the concept of work was educationally central, since "the discovery that the social and natural orders are mediated by work, by man's theoretical and practical activity, creates the first elements of an intuition of the world free from all magic and superstition. It provides a basis for the subsequent development of an historical, dialectical conception of the world, which understands movement and change, which conceives the contemporary world as a synthesis of the past, of all past generations, that projects itself into the future. That was the real basis of the primary school" (34-5). And we may note in passing a constant theme in Gramsci: the continuity of human development through revolution, the unity of past, present and future.

The Conception of Hegemony

The main themes of Gramsci's political theory are outlined in the famous letter of September 1931:

"My study of the intellectuals is a vast project. . . I greatly extend the notion of intellectuals beyond the current meaning of the word, which refers chiefly to great intellectuals. This study also leads me to certain determinations of the State. Usually this is understood as political society (i.e. the dictatorship of coercive apparatus to bring the mass of the people into conformity

with the type of production and economy dominant at any given moment) and not as an equilibrium between political society and civil society (i.e. the hegemony of a social group over the entire national society exercised through the so-called private organisations such as the church, the trade unions, the schools, etc.). Civil society is precisely the special field of action of the intellectuals."

Now the conception of the state as an equilibrium between coercive and hegemonic institutions (or, if you prefer, a unity of both) is not in itself novel, at least for those who look realistically at the world. It is obvious that a ruling class relies not only on coercive power and authority but on consent deriving from hegemony—what Gramsci calls "the intellectual and moral leadership" exercised by the ruling group and "the general direction imposed upon social life by the dominant fundamental group".

What is new in Gramsci is the observation that even bourgeois hegemony is not automatic but achieved through conscious political action and organisation. The Italian Renaissance city bourgeoisie could have become nationally hegemonic only, as Machiavelli proposed, through such action—in fact through a kind of Jacobinism. A class must transcend what Gramsci calls "economic-corporative" organisation to become politically hegemonic; which is, incidentally, why even the most militant trade unionism remains a subaltern part of capitalist society. It follows that the distinction between 'dominant' or 'hegemonic' and 'subaltern' classes is fundamental. It is another Gramscian innovation, and crucial to his thought. For the basic problem of the revolution is how to make a hitherto subaltern class capable of hegemony, believe in itself as a potential ruling class and credible as such to other classes.

Gramsci and the Party

Here lies the significance for Gramsci of the party—"the modern Prince" (p. 129). For quite apart from the historic significance of the development of the party in general in the bourgeois period—and Gramsci has some brilliant things to say about this—he recognises that it is only through its movement and its organisation, i.e. in his view through the party, that the working class develops its consciousness and transcends the spontaneous 'economic-corporative' or trade unionist phase. In fact, as we know, where socialism has been victorious it has led to and been achieved by the transformation of parties into states. Gramsci is profoundly Leninist in his general view of the role of the party, though not necessarily in his views about what the party organisation should be at any given time or about

the nature of party life. However, in my view, his discussion of the nature and functions of parties advances beyond Lenin's.

On Intellectuals

Of course, as we know, considerable practical problems arise from the fact that party and class, however historically identified, are not the same thing, and may diverge—particularly in socialist societies. Gramsci was well aware of these, as well as of the dangers of bureaucratisation, etc. I wish I could say that he proposes adequate solutions to these problems, but I am not sure that he does, any more than, so far, anyone else. Nevertheless, Gramsci's remarks on bureaucratic centralism, though concentrated and difficult (e.g. in *Prison Notebooks*, p. 188-9) are well worth serious study.

What is also new is Gramsci's insistence that the apparatus of rule, both in its hegemonic and to some extent in its authoritarian form, consists essentially of 'intellectuals'. He defines these not as a special elite or as a special social category or categories, but as a sort of functional specialisation of society for these purposes. In other words, for Gramsci all people are intellectual, but not all exercise the social function of intellectuals. Now this is important, in the sense that it underlines the autonomous role of the superstructure in the social process, or even the simple fact that a politician or working-class origin is not necessarily the same as a worker at the bench. However, though it often makes for brilliant historical passages in Gramsci, I cannot myself see that the observation is as important for Gramsci's political theory as he himself evidently did. In particular, I think that his distinction between the so-called 'traditional' intellectuals and the 'organic' intellectuals produced by a new class itself, is—at least in some countries—less significant than he suggests. It may be, of course, that I have not entirely grasped his difficult and complex thought here, and I ought certainly to stress that the question is of great importance to Gramsci **himself**, to judge by the amount of space he devoted to it.

Strategic Theory

On the other hand, Gramsci's *strategic* thought is not only—as always—full of quite brilliant historical insights, but of major practical significance. Now I think we ought to keep three things quite separate in this connection: Gramsci's general analysis, his ideas about communist strategy in specific historical periods, and, lastly, the Italian Communist Party's actual ideas about strategy at any given time, which have certainly been inspired by Togliatti's reading of Gramsci's theory, and by that of Togliatti's successors. I do not want to go into the third of these, because

such discussions are irrelevant for the purposes of the present article. Nor do I want to discuss the second at length, because our judgment of Gramsci does not depend on his assessment of particular situations in the 1920s and 1930s.

It is perfectly possible to hold that, say, Marx's *18th Brumaire* is a profound and basic work, even though Marx's own attitude to Napoleon III in 1852-70 and his estimate of the political stability of his regime were often unrealistic. This does not, however, imply any criticism of either Gramsci's own or Togliatti's strategy. Both are defensible. Leaving aside these matters, I would like to single out three elements in Gramsci's strategic theory.

The 'War of Position'

The first is not *that* Gramsci opted for a strategy of protracted or 'positional' warfare in the West, as against what he called 'frontal attack' or a war of manoeuvre, but *how* he analysed these options. Granted that in Italy and most of the West there was not going to be an October revolution from the early 1920s on—and there was no realistic prospect of one—he obviously had to consider a strategy of the long haul. But he did not in fact commit himself in principle to any particular outcome of the lengthy 'war of position' which he predicted and recommended. It might lead directly into a transition to socialism, or into another phase of the war of manoeuvre and attack, or to some other strategic phase. What would happen must depend on the changes in the concrete situation. However, he did consider one possibility which few other marxists have faced as clearly, namely that the failure of revolution in the West might produce a much more dangerous long-term weakening of the forces of progress by means of what he called a "passive revolution". On the one hand, the ruling class might grant certain demands to forestall and avoid revolution, on the other, the revolutionary movement might find itself in practice (though not necessarily in theory) accepting its impotence and might be eroded and politically integrated into the system. (See *Prison Notebooks*, pp. 106 ff.) In short, the 'war of position' had to be systematically thought out as a fighting strategy rather than simply as something to do for revolutionaries when there was no prospect of building barricades. Gramsci had, of course, learned from the experience of social democracy before 1914 that marxism was not a historical determinism. It was not enough to wait for history somehow to bring the workers to power automatically.

The Struggle for Hegemony

The second is Gramsci's insistence that the struggle to turn the working class into a potential ruling class, the struggle for hegemony, must be

waged *before* the transition to power, as well as during and after it. But (and here one cannot agree with writers like Perry Anderson) this struggle is not merely an aspect of a 'war position', but it is a crucial aspect of the strategy of revolutionaries in all circumstances. Naturally the winning of hegemony, so far as possible, before the transfer of power, is particularly important in countries where the core of ruling-class power lies in the subalternity of the masses rather than in coercion. This is the case in most 'western' countries, whatever the ultra-left says, and however unquestioned the fact that, *in the last analysis*, coercion is there to be used. As we may see in, say, Chile and Uruguay, beyond a certain point the use of coercion to maintain rule becomes frankly incompatible with the use of apparent or real consent, and the rulers have to choose between the alternatives of hegemony and force, the velvet glove and the iron fist. Where they choose force, the results have not usually been favourable to the working-class movement.

However, as we may see even in countries in which there has been a revolutionary overthrow of the old rulers, such as Portugal, in the absence of *hegemonic* force even revolutions can run into the sand. They must still win enough support and consent from strata not yet detached from the old regimes. The basic problem of hegemony, considered strategically, is not *how* revolutionaries come to power, though this question is very important. It is how they come to be accepted, not only as the politically existing or unavoidable rulers, but as guide and leaders. There are obviously two aspects to this: how to win assent, and whether the revolutionaries are ready to exercise leadership. There is also the concrete political situation, both national and international, which may make their efforts more effective or more difficult. The Polish communists in 1945 were probably not accepted as a hegemonic force, though they were ready to be one; but they established their power thanks to the international situation. The German social-democrats in 1918 would probably have been accepted as a hegemonic force, but they did not want to act as one. Therein lies the tragedy of the German revolution. The Czech communists might have been accepted as a hegemonic force both in 1945 and in 1968, and were ready to play this role, but were unable to do so. The struggle for hegemony before, during and after the transition (whatever its nature or speed) remains crucial.

Relations of Class and Party

The third is that Gramsci's strategy has as its core a permanent organised class movement. In this sense his idea of the 'party' returns to Marx's

own conception, at least in later life, of the party as, as it were, the organised class, though he devoted more attention than Marx and Engels, and even than Lenin, not so much to formal organisation as to the forms of political leadership and structure, and to the nature of what he called the 'organic' relationship between class and party.

Now at the time of the October revolution most mass parties of the working class were social democratic. Most revolutionary theorists, including the Bolsheviks before 1917, were obliged to think only in terms of cadre parties or groups of activists mobilising the spontaneous discontent of the masses as and when they could, because mass movements were either not allowed to exist or were, usually, reformist. They could not yet think in terms of permanent and rooted, but at the same time revolutionary, mass working-class movements, playing a major part on the political scene of their countries.

The Turin movement, in which Gramsci formed his ideas, was a relatively rare exception. And though it was one of the main achievements of the Communist International to create some communist mass parties, there are signs, for instance in the sectarianism of the so-called 'Third Period', that the international communist leadership (as distinct from communists in some countries with mass labour movements) was unfamiliar with the problems of mass labour movements which had developed in the old way.

Here Gramsci's insistence on the 'organic' relationship of revolutionaries and mass movements is important. Italian historical experience had familiarised him with revolutionary minorities which had no such 'organic' relation, but were groups of 'volunteers' mobilising as and when they could, "not really mass parties at all . . . but the political equivalent of gypsy bands or nomads" (*Prison Notebooks*, 202-5). A great deal of leftist policy even today—perhaps especially today—is based in this way, and, for similar reasons, not on the real working class with its mass organisation, but on a national working class, on a sort of external view of the working class or any other mobilisable group. The originality of Gramsci is that he was a revolutionary who never succumbed to this temptation. The organised working class as it is and not as in theory it ought to be, was the basis of his analysis and strategy.

Continuity and Revolution

But, as I have already repeatedly stressed, Gramsci's political thought was not only strategic, instrumental or operational. Its aim was not simply victory, after which a different order and type of analysis begins. It is very noticeable that time and again he takes some historical problem

or incident as his starting-point and then generalises from it, not just about the politics of the ruling class or of some similar situations, but about politics *in general*. That is because he is constantly aware that there is something in common between political relations among men in all, or at least in a historically very wide range of, societies; for instance, as he liked to recall (p. 144), the difference between leaders and led.

He never forgot that societies are more than structures of economic domination and political power, that they have a certain cohesion even when riven by class struggles (a point made long before by Engels), and that liberation from exploitation provides the possibility of constituting them as real communities of free men. He never forgot that taking responsibility for a society—actual or potential—is more than looking after immediate class or sectional or even state interests: that, for instance, it presupposes continuity "with the past, with tradition or with the future" (p. 146). Hence Gramsci insists on the revolution not simply as the expropriation of the expropriators, but also—in Italy—as the creation of a people, the realisation of a nation—as both the negation and the fulfilment of the past. Indeed, Gramsci's writing poses the very important problem which has been seldom discussed about what exactly in the past is revolutionised in a revolution, what is preserved and why, and how; of the dialectic between continuity and revolution.

But, of course, for Gramsci this is important not in itself, but as a means of both popular mobilisation and self-transformation, of intellectual and moral change, of collective self-development as part of the process by which, in its struggles, a people changes and makes itself under the leadership of the new hegemonic class and its movement (*cf.* p. 133, para. 2). And though Gramsci shares the usual marxist suspicion of speculations about the socialist future, unlike most of them, he does seek a clue to it in the nature of the movement itself. If he analyses its nature and structure and development *as a political* movement, as a party, so elaborately and microscopically, if he traces, for instance, the emergence of a permanent and organised movement—as distinct from a rapid 'explosion' down to its smallest capillary and molecular elements (as he calls them), then it is because he sees the future society as resting on what he calls "the formation of a collective will" through such a movement, and *only* through such a movement. Because only this way can a hitherto subaltern class turn itself into a potentially hegemonic one—if you like, become lit to build socialism. Only in this way can it, through its party, actually become the 'modern Prince', the political engine of transformation.

And in building itself it will in some sense already establish some of the bases on which the new society will be built, and some of its outlines will appear in and through it.

Crucial Importance of Politics

Let me ask, in conclusion, why I have chosen in this article to concentrate on Gramsci as a political theorist. Not simply because he is an unusually interesting and exciting one. And certainly not because he has a recipe for how parties or states should be organised. Like Machiavelli, he is a theorist of how societies should be founded or transformed, not of constitutional details, let alone of the trivialities which preoccupy lobby correspondents. It is because among marxist theorists he is the one who most clearly appreciated the importance of politics as a special dimension of society, and because he recognised that in politics more is involved than power. This is of major practical importance, not least for socialists.

Bourgeois society, at least in developed countries, has always paid primary attention to its political framework and mechanisms, for historical reasons into which this is not the place to go. That is why political arrangements have become a powerful means for reinforcing bourgeois hegemony, so that slogans such as the defence of the Republic, the defence of democracy, or the defence of civil rights and freedoms, bind rulers and ruled together for the primary benefit of the rulers; but this does not mean that they are irrelevant to the ruled. They are thus far more than mere cosmetics on the face of coercion, or even than simple trickery.

Socialist societies, also for comprehensible historical reasons, have concentrated on other tasks—notably those of planning the economy—and (with the exception of the crucial question of power, and perhaps, in multinational countries, of the relations between their component nations) have paid very much less attention to their actual political and legal institutions and processes. These have been left to operate informally, as best they can, sometimes even in breach of accepted constitutions or party statutes—e.g. the regular calling of Congresses—and often in a sort of obscurity.

In extreme cases, as in China in recent years, the major political decisions affecting the future of the country appear to emerge suddenly from the struggles of a small group of rulers at the top, and their very nature is unclear, since they have never been publicly discussed. In such cases something is clearly wrong. Quite apart from the other disadvantages of this neglect of politics, how can we expect to transform human life, to create a socialist *society* (as distinct from a socially-owned

and managed economy) when the mass of the people are excluded from the political process, and may even be allowed to drift into depoliticisation and apathy about public matters? It is becoming clear that the neglect of their political arrangements by most socialist societies is leading to serious weaknesses, which must be remedied. The future of socialism, both in countries which are not yet socialist and in those which are, may

depend on paying much more attention to them.

In insisting on the crucial importance of politics, Gramsci drew attention to a crucial aspect of the construction of socialism as well as of winning of socialism. It is a reminder that we should heed. And a major marxist thinker who made politics the core of his analysis is therefore particularly worth reading, marking and inwardly digesting today.