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The strange afterlife of Antonio Gramsci's "Prison Notebooks"

Groups from across the political spectrum have drawn on the Marxist theorist's ideas



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“FOR 20 years we must stop this brain from functioning,” intoned the prosecutor at Antonio Gramsci’s trial in 1926. Benito Mussolini’s nascent fascist regime (at that point only two years in power) had decided that Gramsci, a prolific journalist and high-ranking communist, was a danger to the state. Yet despite the courtroom declaration, Gramsci was allowed to write during his incarceration. The result was the “Prison Notebooks”, a wide-ranging collection of musings that have gone on to have a strikingly diverse and enduring influence. Their story is explored at the [Italian Cultural Institute in London](#)

(http://www.icilondon.esteri.it/iic_londra/en/gli_eventi/calendario/i-quaderni-del-carcere-di-antonio.html) , which is putting the original notebooks on display for the first time outside of Italy.

Gramsci's legacy is an unusual one for a Marxist political theorist, in that people of many different political stripes have made use of his writings in the years since his death in 1937. His ideas underpinned one of the largest communist movements outside the Soviet Union: the "Euro-communists" or "Gramscians", who gained many adherents in the 1970s and 80s. It was, at the time, referred to as a "Gramsci boom": ideas in the notebooks were taken up by Stuart Hall, a left-wing scholar, and would eventually go on to influence the ascendant political force of New Labour. At the same time, far-right groups in France and Belgium—Nouvelle Droite and Vlaams Blok, respectively—were inspired by Gramsci's analyses. In the 21st century he has been name-checked by Podemos in Spain, and even by Michael Gove, a British Conservative cabinet minister who said in 2013 that the Italian communist was a major influence on his educational policy.

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The most popular notion to emerge from the "Prison Notebooks" was Gramsci's formulation of the idea of "hegemony": that political success depends on a consensus of opinion in the cultural, social and economic worlds as well as good governance or successful parliamentary machinations. To give an impression of consensus across these different spheres, as Hall argued Margaret Thatcher had achieved, was key to being able to make

lasting changes to society. Hall described Thatcherism as a project to "reshape common sense", and argued in the late 1970s that left-wingers had to develop a similarly panoptic programme if they were ever to win power.

In one sense it is obvious why various political movements might find the idea of hegemony attractive: for the ambitious it can represent a roadmap to power, and for the thwarted it can provide a logical explanation for a lack of success. Indeed, there is a general sense that the persistence of Gramsci's writings is partly because they can offer so many things to so many different people. Sometimes written in deliberately ambiguous language to frustrate fascist censors, the notebooks are

voluminous and fragmentary. They cover countless topics, from the effects of labour automation in America to the philosophy of Benedetto Croce, the works of Machiavelli and the essential elements of a state education system.

The latter topic, of course, is where Mr Gove and this Italian Marxist found some agreement. Gramsci, who escaped from grinding poverty in rural Sardinia through stunning success in the early 20th-century schooling system, believed in a rigorous education in the classics. For Mr Gove, this story of social mobility enabled by traditionalist education was an inspiring parable (that Gramsci's education had led him to question the very basis of conservative society was beside the point).

The tussle over who can lay claim to Gramsci's legacy is still very much alive today, as evidenced at the launch of the exhibition in London. Silvio Pons, the president of the Gramsci Foundation in Rome, gave a talk in which he warned against the decontextualised and ahistorical use of Gramsci to score contemporary political points. He was followed by the Italian Ambassador to Britain, Pasquale Terraciano, who energetically argued that Gramsci would have opposed Brexit, eliciting loud applause in the packed room (Mr Pons, standing behind the ambassador, did not clap).

After both talks, a young Italian man named Alfredo, who described himself as a Marxist-Leninist, fulminated outside that the smartly suited men in the grand Belgravia building were trying, in his opinion, to present Gramsci as "some kind of centrist social democrat". A grey-bearded man selling the Worker's Liberty newspaper nodded in quiet agreement. "He was a revolutionary Communist!" Alfredo insisted.

Such vexed questions of ownership and identity are, of course, simply less fruitful and less interesting than the bare facts of the notebooks' existence. Written in desperately defiant circumstances, as Gramsci's health sharply deteriorated, they have gone on to have a remarkable effect on global political history. For the general reader, Marxist-Leninist or not, their energy and erudition are evident today.

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