

# Rethinking Antonio Gramsci's Thought and Legacy

Monday 24 February 2014, by [SEN Arup Kumar](#) (Date first published: 15 February 2014).

***The Gramscian Moment: Philosophy, Hegemony and Marxism* by Peter D Thomas (Delhi: Aakar Books), 2013; pp xxv + 477, Rs 495.**

Antonio Gramsci was one of the great Marxist thinkers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, his legacy carries multiple meanings. While revisiting his legacy at the beginning of the new millennium, the eminent Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm argued that the international fortunes of Gramsci's work fluctuated with the changes in fashion of the intellectual left. He lamented that in the 1990s, leftists-turned-neo-liberals no longer cared to be reminded of anything that recalled old enthusiasms. For Hobsbawm, Gramsci was "par excellence the philosopher of political praxis". [1]

In fact, there are many readings of Gramsci. Gramsci's name and ideas started circulating with increasing frequency during the late 1960s and the 1970s throughout Europe, Latin America, North America and elsewhere too. The various currents associated with Euro-communism and the "New Left" contributed immensely to Gramsci's rise to prominence during this period. Gramsci's influence became more pronounced in the 1980s with the spread of cultural studies, the growing fascination with the question of power and the greater attention that scholars from different disciplines were devoting to the relations between culture, society and politics. The rapid decline of interest in Marxist thought, following the events of 1989, had no effect on Gramsci's "fortunes". [2].

Gramsci was born in Sardinia, in southern Italy, in 1891 and died in 1937, shortly after being released from prison, where he was imprisoned by fascists. Most of Gramsci's seminal ideas are contained in his Prison Notebooks (PN). However, there are two major complications associated with PN - the fragmentary character of the writings themselves and the uncertain status of the notebooks in Gramsci's intentions. Keeping these complications in mind, the editors of PN warned:

*"...any unequivocal assertions about the aim and status of Gramsci's theoretical project as contained or sketched out in the Notebooks are necessarily speculative and must be recognised as such."* [3]

The present study by Peter D Thomas proposes to make a contribution to the philological reassessment of Gramsci's legacy in the perspective of the contemporary revitalisation of Marxism. The author has categorically stated that the study consciously assumes a "partisan" position in contemporary debates about the future of Marxism and Gramsci's relation to it. He has identified three components of Gramsci's "philosophy of praxis" in the notions of an absolute "historicism", absolute immanence and absolute humanism.

In the first chapter of the book, the author has interrogated the French Marxist-thinker Althusser's critical reading of Gramsci. He notes in this connection that Althusser's *Reading Capital* published in 1965 initially seemed to speak of Gramsci with the highest praise. However, it became quickly clear that "Althusser had come not to praise Gramsci, but to bury him" (p 2). The author did not fail to

note in this connection that “classical” Althusserianism exerted a profound influence of renewal and regeneration of Marxist theory in diverse national cultures and a wide range of academic disciplines.

Thomas feels that Althusser’s critique was not without serious limitations and fundamental misunderstandings of Gramsci’s positions. But, he did not hesitate to state that both Gramsci and Althusser, each in his own way, affirmed the continuing importance of philosophy for Marxism. Moreover, argues Thomas, the importance that Althusser ascribed to philosophical questions for the Marxist tradition represented a clear departure from Stalinist “normalisation” or “quarantine”.

The second chapter of the book is concerned with a critical reading of Perry Anderson’s famous article, “The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci”, carried in *New Left Review* in 1976. The author opines that many of Anderson’s presuppositions and conclusions are very close to those of Althusser’s critique in *Reading Capital*. He chose this text of Anderson because, “it still remains today among the most well known and influential of all studies of Gramsci in English” (p 47).

The formal and substantial distinctiveness of the PN has been explored in chapter three on the basis of philosophical foundations of the texts. The author has drawn our attention in this context to Gramsci’s redefinition of the Marxist concepts such as the base and superstructure metaphor. Gramsci spoke of superstructures in the plural. For Gramsci, there is no knowledge outside the superstructures or the ideologies. He insisted that philosophy too is a superstructure or an ideology, without in any way undervaluing its “truth”. He viewed the superstructures not as mechanically derived from an originary “base” and comprehended the superstructures or ideologies in a non-reductive sense. For him, “science is [also] a superstructure”.

Chapters four, five and six provide “an alternative reading of the theoretical and historical context of Gramsci’s thought” (p xxi). Chapters seven, eight and nine are aimed at providing a detailed reconstruction of the elaboration of Gramsci’s “philosophy of praxis”, viewed in terms of its “three component parts” identified by the author. It is not possible in the structure of this review to project in detail the lanes and byways of the author’s theoretical journey. However, the major arguments put forward by the author in the last three chapters are summarised below, as they have identified the major pathways of Gramsci’s political thought and philosophy.

Chapter seven discusses in detail Gramsci’s critique of the grand Italian intellectual and a leading figure of Italian cultural and political life, Benedetto Croce, and Nikolai Ivanovich Bukharin, the eminent theorist of Soviet Marxism. Gramsci criticised Bukharin for reducing the philosophical dimension of Marxism to a version of vulgar materialism. On the other hand, according to Gramsci, Croce’s thought remained essentially speculative because of its “incomplete” historicism. The author reminds us that “subterranean currents” of popular social and political movements of his time played an important role in Gramsci’s thought.

Chapter eight has explored the philosophical foundations of Gramsci’s “philosophy of praxis”. Althusser opined that Gramsci was “little concerned with science”. The author argues that Gramsci did not make any distinction between science and ideology and reduced every form of knowledge to ideology or, in other words, to superstructures. According to Gramsci, modern science made a decisive contribution to the elaboration of the philosophy of praxis. The philosophical concept of immanence was a fundamental category in Gramsci’s thought. He gave a new meaning to the concept and made a decisive break with the earlier philosophical traditions, argues the author. The “earthliness” of Gramsci’s thought lies in his critical act of production of a theory, which is a “practice within a practice”.

Chapter nine is concerned with Gramsci’s concept of subject and intellectuals. Althusser’s famous essay, “Marxism and Humanism”, advanced the thesis that Marx’s thought had been constituted by a

radical break in 1845 with “every theory that based history and politics on an essence of man”. From this perspective, Althusser rejected Gramsci’s “absolute humanism of history”. The author reminds us in this context that far from presupposing the classical (Cartesian) theory of the subject, the PN continuously interrogated the political presuppositions of such a conception. Gramsci categorically stated that there is no abstract “human nature”. For him, “human nature is the ensemble of historically determined social relations”. The reader will get in this chapter detailed discussion of Gramsci’s discourse on intellectuals including his distinction between traditional and organic intellectuals. The interconnections Gramsci developed between humanism, Marxism, intellectuals and “hegemony” are also explored. At the end of the chapter, the author laments that of all the themes explored in the PN, few are as little discussed today as Gramsci’s theory of the working-class political party as an “organisation of struggle”.

In concluding the book, the author argues that we encounter the Prison Notebooks today as a potential future in the past, which may offer us a possible point of orientation for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. He further clarifies that the renewal of the Gramscian moment today must ultimately be practised as a critical intervention into the revitalisation of a Marxism that strives to become an “alternative conception of the world”.

The book under review is a monumental study of Gramsci’s thought from a “partisan” standpoint. It should be mentioned in this connection that Gramsci was critical of political parties and trade union politics of his time, as these organisations are born on the terrain of bourgeois democracy and political liberty. He identified Factory Council as the site of workers’ democracy as its formation signifies consciousness of the workers in pursuit of autonomous emancipation from the rule of Capital. Gramsci’s insights are relevant in imagining counter-hegemonic struggles of workers and their organisational forms in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Moreover, Gramsci’s legacy is a contested terrain and it has many possibilities. His theoretical insights can enrich our understanding of new social movements and transformative politics of our time. Moreover, Gramsci is still relevant in diverse areas of contemporary social and political thought. This is evident in the fact that a recent seminal work on Gramsci (Language and Hegemony in Gramsci, Peter Ives, 2004) was addressed to readers with diverse interests including Marxism, critical theory, cultural studies, post-modernism, multiculturalism, nationalism, colonialism, post-colonialism, new social movements, deliberative democracy and globalisation.

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\* Economic & Political Weekly (EPW), February 15, 2014, vol xlix no 7.

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## **Footnotes**

[1] E J Hobsbawm’s “Introduction” in David Forgacs (ed.), The Gramsci Reader: Selected Writings, 1916-35, New York University Press, 2000, p 12

[2] See Joseph A Buttigieg, “Reading Gramsci” in Peter Ives, Language and Hegemony in Antonio

Gramsci (London: Pluto Press), 2004, pp viii-ix. Quentin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (ed. and translated)

[3] Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci (London: Elec- Book), 1999, p 16.