



Selections from the Prison Notebooks

Antonio Gramsci , Geoffrey N. Smith (Translator) , Quintin Hoare (Translator)

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An extensive anthology, including his most important writings while in prison on philosophy, history, Communist Party formation, the intellectuals, and other subjects.

Selections from the Prison Notebooks Details

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From Reader Review Selections from the Prison Notebooks for online ebook

Christoph says

The Italian fascist regime wanted to shut down Gramsci's brain when they imprisoned him. They failed.

Zornitsa Dimitrova says

this is a very pleasant book. it helps a lot if you read it while writing job applications. of course it also makes you want to go to prison but let's stop here.

Adi Onggoboyo says

Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) adalah seorang intelektual berkebangsaan Italia yang dipenjarakan selama 10 tahun oleh rezim fasis Mussolini. "Kita harus menghentikan otak ini untuk bekerja selama 20 tahun" demikian ujar jaksa pada saat pengadilan terhadapnya (Wikipedia). Yang terjadi justru sebaliknya, saat-saat pemerintahan itu lah ia kemudian melahirkan karya besarnya yang dirangkum dalam sebuah buku The Prison Notebooks. Kolakowski menyebutnya sebagai teoritis politik paling orisinil sesudah Lenin yang mencoba mengkritisi kelemahan-kelemahan Marxisme dan melakukan analisis terhadap penyebab kegagalan revolusi proletariat (Huda:2006).

Gagasan sentral pemikiran Gramsci ialah konsep tentang Hegemoni. Ia menuliskan pemikirannya dengan bertitik tolak pada kritiknya terhadap pandangan marxisme ortodoks, terutama kerangka teoritis Nikolai Bukharin dalam sebuah buku The Theory of Historical Materialism. Buku tersebut sesungguhnya bertujuan sebagai textbook yang berisi ajaran-ajaran Marxisme-Leninisme sebagai pandangan dunia proletariat.

Owen says

Italian marxist, predecessor to cultural studies. An invaluable conceptualization of hegemony. One of my favorite quotes of all time - we have to create an inventory of all the traces historical processes have left upon us in order to begin critical elaboration to understand ourselves and the world

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Andrew says

What's strange about Gramsci is the way he works within a very Marxist-theory framework (discussion of whether or not Americanism can constitute a historical epoch, for instance) but whole huge sections of work draw conclusions about the nature of fascism and Italian history are by no means explicitly Marxist. I suppose that's what's so appealing about all the more liberatory, less orthodox, less deterministic Marxist thinkers.

The cultural turn is wonderful, and his criticism of "common sense" is just as forceful today as it was then. Hegemony, intersubjectivity, these are all fascinating topics, and it's easy to see how Gramsci's writing became the seedbed of cultural studies.

I must say though, he's very fixed in his time period, especially when he talks about the shocking immorality of the rich. Oh, the horrors of the wealthy sodomite!

He's also-- and I can't tell if this is humility or just laziness-- happy to posit questions without providing answers. But I think that's OK. We read Gramsci, and we see the birth of Western Marxism. For followers of Negri, Adorno, Benjamin, Lukács, Castoriadis, Marcuse, Althusser, Jameson, you're all on board with this dude, no?

Ingrid says

These took me a long time to read and were labor intensive to read but were well worth the effort. They are very smart texts with very important ideas such as his view that revolution failed because it did not include the exploited classes. Gramsci deals with people's drive for power and imposing various paradigms on society and the impact of these attempts, etc. Definitely an interesting, worthwhile read.

Leah says

-this was my second read on part of it, first read on more than half though

-i thought that the preface by the editors was really interesting and helpful
-favorite part this time around was the section on conjunctural analysis as a method, except he doesn't call it that.

Noor Sabah says

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Desy Budi Utami says

I decided to read this book in order to presenting a simple essay for "Critical Theory" subject at my university. Gramsci was a Neo-Marxist, he writes all the essay when he was at prison. In the beginning of chapter you will see Gramsci's brief biography. The translator nicely tells us the history and background of Gramsci's writing.

Gramsci notable work was his theory about "Hegemony", but you will never found a chapter about hegemony itself. He was spread the hegemony words in every single pages of this book. Although in his writing Gramsci never ever mentioned "The Role of Media", many scholar (who I assume never read this book) often mentioned Gramsci's Hegemony was all about media. To be able understand Gramsci's writing you should read the first chapter of this book, titled "Intellectual Organics". Then you will understand the entire process of hegemony. Gramsci's writing is related to political studies, but you can also relating his works with media as case study. Happy reading!

Colm Gillis says

Although not a Marxist, I found this to be a masterpiece. The work itself are notes collected from the authors time in prison under Mussolini. So many topics are covered outside of the economy and revolution. There are a variety of interesting theories and the author subjects even points of view close to him to criticism. He raises many issues and identifies various problems with strands of philosophy. There is some Marxist dogma and some of his views do suffer from a materialist rigidity but there is generally so much to recommend.

Shannon says

Reading this today for my orals exam. Not understanding it at all and don't have the energy to try harder. I think I'm just going to hope that no one asks me questions about this one...

Perspective Daily says

»Gramsci ist der wichtigste Linke Intellektuelle, den man nicht kennt. Von den Faschisten in Italien eingekerkert und viel zu früh verstorben ist sein Einfluss auf linkes und sozialistisches Denken heute leider begrenzt, seine Gedanken und Einsichten bleiben aber im höchsten Maße relevant. Wer jenseits kommunistischer Parolen und sozialdemokratischer Mitte nach Inspirationen für progressives politisches Handeln sucht, sollte sich mit Gramsci vertraut machen.«

– Peter Dörrie (PD-Autor)

sologdin says

one of the key leftist texts. author develops a number of innovative ideas within the context of Marxism. hard to overstate the value.

David says

Gramsci was one of the most important, original and influential marxist writers of the 20th Century. He wrote extensively on the role of intellectuals, on education, history, politics, culture, the modern state and philosophy. The Prison Notebooks was written between 1929 and 1935, when Gramsci was a prisoner of the Italian fascist state under Mussolini. He developed the concept of 'hegemony', arguing that the ruling class sustained its control of society and the state through hegemonic domination of education, culture, sport, religion etc. Working class revolution whould therefore only succeed if the struggle was broadened from that in trhe work place to a broad based struggle involving the contestation of control and space in education, culture, sport, the community etc.

Andrea says

The sense of achievement after finishing this is similar to that of finishing Capital...it is massive and, given its fractured nature, I'd say even more challenging. Gramsci is so often referenced, however, I took many of his ideas rather for granted. After reading him for myself, I'd say there is more of interest here, and more that I find problematic than I'd ever expected...and is definitely a book to think over and pick up again. Hegemony and common sense, political struggle, popular education (and not so popular education), it's all here...

David Anderson says

This is another of those classics of Marxist thought that I'd never got around to reading, though I was acquainted with ideas and passages from it in other sources, much like Marx's Capital. Having finally studied

all three volumes of that over the past couple of years (with the help of David Harvey's video lectures), I decided I needed to tackle Gramsci next. It was definitely worth the time and effort. I was acquainted with certain Gramscian concepts through secondary sources, such as "cultural hegemony" and "organic intellectuals" and "passive revolution." But I did not know about his thorough critique of trends in Marxist thought, such as the vulgar interpretations of historical materialism and the crudely reductionist economic determinism proposed by Bukharin and many others since. The static and fatalistic vision of laws of history existing outside human activity and acting on their own was already challenged by Engels himself at the end of his life, and Gramsci picks up right where he left off. By stressing that only mankind itself can set into motion the laws of historical materialism, Gramsci brings back the importance of human agency and praxis into Marxist ideology. Most of the final section "The Philosophy of Praxis" is devoted to this and it is my favorite section of the book. I would recommend that everyone should at least read that part of the book if nothing else.

Andrew says

There's so much in Gramsci's Prison Notebooks. Italian history, practical Marxism, a 1920's Italian perspective on American business. How could you not want to read it?

Gramsci's writings cover a wide ground. He interprets Machiavelli in a modern context, describing political parties as "the modern Prince" and explores the opportunities consequences that follow. He muses about America's capitalistic spirit, its connection to Taylorism, and if Ford's invasive approach to managing personal morality in employees' lives will come to affect Europe. He discusses Italian history in depth, particularly exploring the city-countryside conflict and how regional differences between northern and southern Italy affect political movements.

Where his writing remains the most relevant a century later, though, is his "Study of Philosophy". Gramsci is intensely focused with the practical application of philosophical theory. How are new philosophical conceptions of the world accepted into "common sense"? How are masses of people turned into active citizens interested in revolution? Certainly his own experience as political activist and leader contributes.

For a mass of people to be led to think coherently and in the same coherent fashion about the real present world, is a "philosophical" event far more important and "original" than the discovery by some philosophical "genius" of a truth which remains the property of small groups of intellectuals.

Gramsci explores how a new conception takes hold of a social group, comparing a rational approach to an authoritative one, and instead making a more sociologically-based conclusion in the power of groups. "Philosophy can only be experienced by faith", faith "in the social group to which [someone] belongs". And in fact, Gramsci makes a highly rational case for the "man of the people" to trust his social group above others:

Anyone with a superior intellectual formation with a point of view opposed to his can put forward arguments that he can really tear him to pieces logically and so on. But should the man of the people change his opinions just because of this? In that case he might find himself having to change every day, or every time he meets an ideological adversary who is his

intellectual superior. [...] The man of the people thinks that so many like-thinking people can't be wrong [...] and he remembers, indeed, hearing expounded, discursively, coherently, in a way that left him convinced, the reasons behind his faith.

How, then, to spread ideas? Gramsci draws from the history of organized religion, which "maintains its community of faithful" by "indefatigably repeating its apologetics... and maintaining a hierarchy of intellectuals who give to the faith... the dignity of thought", and turns his observations into recommendations for cultural movements:

1. Never to tire of repeating its own arguments (though offering literary variation of form): repetition is the best didactic means for working on the popular mentality.
2. To work incessantly to raise the intellectual level of ever-growing strata of the populace, in other words, to give a personality to the amorphous mass element. This means working to produce élites of intellectuals of a new type which arise directly out of the masses, but remain in contact with them to become, as it were, the whalebone in the corset.

This latter point relates closely to the concept of "organic intellectuals", a key element in Gramsci's model?—?a role involved at a local, community level, diffusing ideas among people who wouldn't encounter them otherwise. Gramsci lists occupations that typically fill this role: politicians, priests, administrators, in addition to the traditional intelligentsia. Today this seems close to occupations we'd call "knowledge workers".

However, Gramsci is careful to separate this role from that of traditional intellectuals. He emphasizes "contact with the 'simple'" as an antidote for "creating a specialised culture among restricted intellectual groups". He later goes further, criticizing common trends among intellectuals:

The popular element "feels" but does not always know or understand; the intellectual element "knows" but does not always understand and in particular does not always feel. The two extremes are therefore pedantry and philistinism on the one hand and blind passion and sectarianism on the other. Not that the pedant cannot be impassioned; far from it. Impassioned pedantry is every bit as ridiculous and dangerous as the wildest sectarianism and demagogery. The intellectual's error consists in believing that one can know without understanding and even more without feeling and being impassioned. [...] One cannot make politics-history without this passion, without this sentimental connection between intellectuals and people-nation.

This is a critical conclusion with relevance far beyond the time Gramsci was writing for. Pedantry and hyper-rationalism abound, particularly in debates online: writers and commenters vie for the most logical and rational argument and are shocked when it rarely convinces. Gramsci's critiques show us that these fallacies are anything but new, while pointing in a better direction.

Taken as a whole, the book contains a challenging set of writings to get through. Gramsci's reference points fit typically within 19th- and 20th-century Italian (and sometimes French) history. Quirks in the writing are, according to the editor, typically due to circumventing the censor, given Gramsci's circumstances?—?these include misattributed quotes and articles to a list of euphemisms that grows the longer you read. The editor could have found-and-replaced all instances of "the founder of the philosophy of praxis" with "Marx", but

instead leaves the euphemistic verbosity to the reader's experience.

Edward Said frequently cites Gramsci's concept of "organic intellectuals" and describes his geopolitical emphasis in history as particularly influential. Gramsci's Prison Notebooks don't contain a system for geopolitical thinking as much as they do examples, but his concepts clearly had an impact on Said's thinking and writing.

In conclusion: Gramsci's ideas on public discourse and changing the contents of "common sense" alone make his notebooks worth reading, even if you skip past the Italian history. But don't skip it if you can help it.

John Hess says

A very important read, but for a "selections" volume this edition still features a lot of material that could only be considered extraneous.

Sarah Jaffe says

I mean, it's Gramsci.

Which means there's a lot of stuff that feels dated and it's a slog to get through but at the end you feel smarter and better prepared for struggle.

Do wonder why we don't have a more updated Selections, but...
