books & ideas.net

Gramsci in the Face of the Great and Terrible World

by Yohann Douet

The life and work of Antonio Gramsci are inseparable. To grasp the coherence and theoretical depth of the *Prison Notebooks*, one must read them in the context in which they were written.

About: Romain Descendre and Jean-Claude Zancarini, *L'Œuvre-vie d'Antonio Gramsci*, Paris, La Découverte, 2023, 567 p., 27 €.

The publication of *L'Œuvre-vie d'Antonio Gramsci* (The life/work of Antonio Gramsci) is particularly welcome at a time of renewed interest in Gramsci, who is now cited by various public figures—whether intellectual or political—especially on the right and far right.[1] If only for this reason, one must recall that Gramsci's thought was anchored in the struggle for the emancipation of the subalterns and the establishment of a communist and democratic society.

Following the "Rhythm of Thought as It Develops"

This book is the result of the work and research Romain Descendre and Jean-Claude Zancarini have conducted on Gramsci over more than a decade.[2] Its originality

[1] See Jean-Claude Zancarini, "L'improbable 'gramscisme de droite,'" AOC, April 2023 [online].

[2] Romain Descendre and Jean-Claude Zancarini lead a research group on Gramsci at the *École Normale Supérieure de Lyon*. This group has been in charge of the seminar "Lire les Cahiers de prison" since 2012 and has published various articles and collective works, including Romain Descendre and Jean-Claude Zancarini (eds), *La France d'Antonio Gramsci*, Lyon, ENS éditions, 2021.

lies first and foremost in the aim pursued by the two authors: to *inseparably* propose—as the title already suggests—a biography of Gramsci and a study of his thought. Incidentally, Jean-Claude Zancarini used this same approach in an intellectual biography of Machiavelli he recently co-wrote with Jean-louis Fournel.[3]

Descendre and Zancarini set out to "produce a meticulous and honest philological work which pays attention to the letter and context of the texts for the purpose of writing a new biography that explores both practical and intellectual activity, by trying to identify the leitmotifs running through the writings and to follow the 'rhythm of thought as it develops'" (p. 7). This last expression was coined by Gramsci himself, who made it a methodological principle for studying the thought of one author in particular: Marx (*Prison Notebooks* 16, §2, June-July 1932).

The book is divided into three parts, each corresponding to a period in Gramsci's life. The first period lasted from 1911—the year he moved from his native Sardinia to Turin in order to pursue his studies—to the end of World War I. Although this was a period of intellectual and political formation, Gramsci wrote extensively from 1914 on as a mainly cultural journalist for Turin's socialist press.

The second period corresponds to Gramsci's activity as a political leader. It began on May 1, 1919, when he and his comrades Angelo Tasca, Palmiro Togliatti, and Umberto Terracini founded *L'Ordine nuovo*, a journal that played a critical role during the *biennio rosso* (the two red years of 1919-1920, marked by intense class struggles in the urban and rural areas of Italy) primarily by promoting and theorizing the experience of factory councils in Turin. Following this, Gramsci co-founded the Italian Communist Party (*Partito comunista d'Italia* or PCd'I) at the Congress of Livorno in January 1921, spent one year and a half (1922-1923) in the USSR as a PCd'I representative to the Communist International (CI), was elected as a deputy to the Italian parliament in May 1924, and then took over the leadership of the party a few months later, with the support of the CI which was dissatisfied with the sectarian line of the previous leader, Amadeo Bordiga. This second period ended on November 8, 1926, when Gramsci was imprisoned by the Fascist regime.

The third and last period was marked by incarceration (and then semi-liberty, as Gramsci remained under close surveillance after he was granted parole in October

[3] Jean-Louis Fournel and Jean-Claude Zancarini, *Machiavel : une vie en guerres*, Paris, Passés/Composés, 2020.

1934). He began writing his *Prison Notebooks* in February 1929, but was forced to stop in 1935 due to his deteriorating health. He died on April 27, 1937.

The authors study the wide range of texts Gramsci produced in his lifetime[4]: journalistic articles; political writings (in particular those internal to the PCd'I); more theoretical works such as *Notes on the Southern Question*; letters he wrote before and especially during the period of imprisonment (including to his sister-in-law Tatiana Schucht, who was in Italy at the time); and, of course, the *Prison Notebooks*. All of these texts are read in the light of Gramsci's personal situation and of the national and international political context. This diachronic study aims to highlight the changes and even the ruptures in Gramscian thought (between or within the three periods identified above), but also some of the continuities. According to Descendre and Zancarini, "diachronicity and historicization are particularly crucial since everything Gramsci wrote, whether before or after his arrest, was rooted in his political struggles" (p. 531). The chapters, however, vary in approach: Some are more "narrative and biographical, others more theoretical and analytical" (p. 10). The latter is especially true of the chapters devoted to the period of imprisonment, at which time Gramsci naturally reduced his practical activities (even as he continued to exchange with his comrades in prison and had indirect contacts with free Communist leaders) and engaged in especially intense theoretical work.

Following André Tosel, one can argue that the *Prison Notebooks* form an "open theoretical network with a partial and practical claim to systematicity"[5]: They clearly do not constitute a complete and finished philosophical system (an impossible feat given the conditions of writing) which is removed from practice, but neither are they a collection of unrelated and fragmentary *ad hoc* reflections. It is important, therefore, to bring out the coherence, and even the relative systematicity of the reflections examined, especially since these respond to specific problems—for instance, the problem of the party (to which I shall return), the more general problem of revolutionary politics, the problem of history and modernity, etc. This method might be described as "reconstructive" insofar as it proposes to recover the coherence of a set of reflections that are often not explicitly articulated with one another. In a way, Descendre and Zancarini's book combines the diachronic and reconstructive methods,

[4] Descendre and Zancarini provide their own translation of these texts, a significant portion of which—including most of the pre-prison writings—have never been published in French. The three volumes of *Écrits politiques* edited by Robert Paris (Gallimard, 1974-1980) are a necessarily partial selection of texts written by Gramsci between 1914 and 1926.

[5] André Tosel, *Étudier Gramsci : pour une critique continue de la révolution passive capitaliste*, Paris, Kimé, 2016, p. 82.

while giving clear primacy to the former—a primacy that is the necessary correlate of the biographical form. One could fruitfully use this combination in other types of works (especially ones focusing on the *Prison Notebooks*), but by giving primacy instead to the reconstructive method: Here one would start from a specific theoretical-political problem and determine the extent to which this standpoint allows one to discern a coherent conception across Gramsci's reflections, while also remaining attentive to the tensions, transformations, and even ruptures in his thought and while ensuring—as he himself insisted—that one is not "importuning the texts" in the service of an arbitrary interpretation (*Prison Notebooks* 6, §198, December 1931).

Be that as it may, it would be futile to attempt to summarize the rich analyses produced by this study of Gramsci's life/work. I will therefore focus on two key elements that illustrate the book's approach and that constitute its main lines of force.

A Critique of the Stalinist Turn

First, the authors formulate the following hypothesis concerning the *Prison Notebooks*: "The main concepts developed by Gramsci stem from disagreements with the line taken by the Communist International at the Sixth Congress in July 1928—a line that the PCd'I adopted, despite some misgivings, in the fall of 1929. At this Sixth Congress, the Communist International (CI), which had come under Stalin's leadership, decided to abandon the united front tactic; from now on, it would be 'class against class,' and all social-democratic or democratic parties or groups would be equated with 'social fascism.' This new political line, together with the abandonment of the NEP [New Economy Policy] in 1929 and the forced collectivization of the countryside at the domestic level, marked a 'turning point'" (p. 269).

This, according to Descendre and Zancarini, was the context for Gramsci's famous thesis that in countries characterized by a complex social structure (especially those with a developed civil society), political struggle must be conceived by analogy with the "war of position" (understood mainly as the long-term struggle for hegemony) rather than with the "war of movement" (or frontal attack).[6] The authors make an important point in this regard: Gramsci wrote his first notes on the war of position in politics at the same time that he was trying to convince his comrades in

[6] An excerpt from chapter 21 of the book, which is devoted specifically to this question, can be found on the website of the online magazine *Contretemps*.

prison of the need to adopt the slogan of a constituent assembly, which was at odds with the sectarian line of the CI. In his view, the democratic objective of a constituent assembly would succeed in mobilizing larger numbers of people in the anti-fascist struggle and the fight for a new hegemony than the prospect of socialist revolution (which nevertheless remained the ultimate goal).

Descendre and Zancarini place the conception of hegemony developed in the *Notebooks* in this same context. Gramsci evidently did not invent the notion of hegemony out of thin air: Before and after the Revolution, Bolshevik leaders had used it to reflect on the need for the proletariat to simultaneously lead and ally itself with the peasantry in societies where peasants were in the majority, as was the case in Russia. Gramsci was not only familiar with these debates, but had adapted the Bolshevik strategy of proletarian hegemony to the Italian situation (characterized by the domination of the North over the South), especially in his *Notes on the Southern Question* of October 1926. It is nevertheless likely that he took up and further developed the notion of hegemony in the *Notebooks* due to—among other things—the CI's adoption of a sectarian political line and its abandonment of the politics of hegemony towards the Soviet peasantry. As the authors point out, "Gramsci's reflection on hegemony allowed him to construct an alternative to the conceptions of the state, the dictatorship of the proletariat, and the role of intellectuals then prevailing in the Soviet Union" (p. 410). The book goes on to trace the various forms taken by Gramsci's radical deepening of the notion of hegemony. First, he detached this notion from the sole proletariat by examining bourgeois hegemony in different historical situations—for instance, Jacobinism in the French Revolution. Second, he rethought class power, presenting it as irreducible to domination and as implying a certain degree of consent. Lastly, he thematized the cultural dimension of hegemony, in particular by highlighting the crucial role played in it by intellectuals (although it would be wrong to reduce the Gramscian conception of hegemony to this dimension alone, as is too often done today).

As regards this last point, the authors show that Gramsci revisited and renewed a question that had been at the heart of his early writings: "the importance of education and culture as vectors of emancipation" (p. 533). This was a "constant" in Gramsci's thought (*ibid*.), one of the continuities that the diachronic study succeeds in highlighting without obscuring how his conception of the relationship between culture and emancipation evolved over time.

Neo-idealism and the Philosophy of Praxis

The book highlights another complex continuity, namely Gramsci's articulation of the intellectual traditions of Marxism and neo-idealism (even as his understanding of these traditions changed over time). Gramsci was initially influenced by the neo-idealism of Benedetto Croce and Giovanni Gentile when he became involved in the socialist movement in 1913. What attracted him to these neo-Hegelian philosophies was the value they placed on culture (in the strong sense of humanity's intellectual self-formation), their refusal to reduce history to a predetermined course of events, and the centrality they accorded to human action. This is why when Gramsci began to take an interest in Marxism in 1917, he read it through a "neo-idealist lens" (p. 96). He wrote at the time that the Russian Revolution had been a "revolution against 'Capital'"[7] insofar as it had represented the triumph of collective action and will and had broken the supposed laws of history that some Marxists had derived from Marx's work: Indeed, the proletarian revolution had been expected to break out after the development of capitalism, not in an economically underdeveloped country like Russia (p. 101).

In the *Notebooks*, Gramsci resumed his dialogue with the neo-idealists while also criticizing them harshly. He attacked them for various reasons, including for their inability to think history and action other than speculatively—despite their claims to the contrary—and for their tendency to misrepresent Marxism in order to reject it. However, Gramsci's evident adherence to Marxism was not dogmatic: He criticized the narrowly mechanistic and rigorously deterministic interpretations of Marxist thought (a critique that Descendre and Zancarini also link to his opposition to the Stalinist turn). For while the "ethico-political" history theorized and practiced by Croce was one-sided in its exclusive focus on worldviews and ideologies, and while it obscured social conflictuality, it nevertheless reminded Marxists that they should not limit themselves to the economic sphere or treat politics and culture as mere epiphenomena. For his part, Gramsci sought to redefine Marxism as a "philosophy of *praxis*" capable of unifying theory and practice, and he attempted to *translate* the different approaches to human societies and their history (economy, politics, culture) one into the other—as opposed to reducing one to the other.

[7] Antonio Gramsci, "The Revolution Against 'Capital'" [5 January 1918], in *Selections from Political Writings, 1910-1920*, New York, International Publishers, 1977, pp. 34-37.

Conclusion

After reading this book, one is left with the image of a thinker and "fighter" (pp. 531-532) who was deeply committed to "real humans" (p. 136) and to the complexity of the "great and terrible world" (p. 5) in which he lived and struggled—to use one of Gramsci's recurrent phrases. This commitment is what enabled him to escape both the mechanistic distortions of Marxism and the sectarian rigidity of revolutionary politics.

In this regard, one can see that the book dwells more on Gramsci's openness and originality than on his fidelity to the line of the PCd'I or the CI. As the authors rightly point out in their discussion of the period 1921-1926, Gramsci had been affected by his participation in the Turin factory council movement of 1919-1920, which helps to explain his sensitivity to the spontaneity of the masses: "We focus on the little music of Turin with a view to identifying, beyond the sectarian tone of many of his articles of the time, the signs that hint at a new thought, one linked to the aspirations carried by the 'Turin movement'" (p. 121). The authors' explicit choice of focus is therefore justified by the fact that it allows to bring out the full creativity of Gramsci's thought.

That said, it would be interesting to explore some of the less open or more questionable aspects of Gramscian thought—both in the pre-prison writings and in the *Prison Notebooks*—as one can assume that this would help to highlight some of the tensions that run through it. I am thinking in particular of the tension between Gramsci's commitment to the democratic emancipation of the subalterns, on the one hand, and the imperative of developing firm, effective, and hierarchical political leadership, on the other. This tension, at least as Gramsci puts it to use in the *Notebooks*, lies at the heart of his reflection on the "problem of the party" and his conception of the revolutionary party as a modern Prince (by analogy with Machiavelli's Prince); more generally, it is central to his thinking about hegemony and revolution.[8] Yet, such a tension no doubt traverses all radical emancipatory movements, since these must accept, for a time at least, to participate in the struggle for power: It is indeed also for this reason that Gramsci's political thought remains profoundly topical to this day.

[8] The reader may refer to Yohann Douet, "Gramsci et le problème du parti," *Contretemps*, March 2017. See also my book *L'Hégémonie et la revolution : Gramsci penseur politique*, Paris, Éditions Amsterdam, 2023, in which I examine the coherence and some of the tensions in Gramsci's political thought.

First published in laviedesidees.fr, 6 September 2023. Translated by Arianne Dorval, with the support of Cairn.info. Published in booksandideas.net, 13 May 2025.