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The Legacy of Antonio Gramsci

Joseph A. Buttigieg

I view everything with a cold eye and with tranquillity
and although I do not entertain childish illusions I am
firmly convinced that I am not destined to rot in prison.

A. Gramsci: Letter to Tatiana Schucht;
19 March, 1927

The eighteenth-century British moralist and belletrist nonpareil, Joseph Addison, declared somewhere in his *Spectator* essays that “Books are the legacies that a great genius leaves to mankind.” When Antonio Gramsci died on April 27, 1937 he had not written any books. In spite of some glowing obituaries and elegaic testimonials that appeared in a few Italian clandestine journals and other leftist publications, there was no reason to believe fifty years ago that Gramsci had left behind him a lasting legacy. His death, it seemed, had brought to an end a painful life of selfless commitment to the socialist vision; of great expenditures of energy on behalf of the Italian Communist Party (PCI) he helped found; of unwavering dedication to the cause of the oppressed; of brave, unyielding and very costly defiance of the Fascist dictatorship; and of—failure. Like Giacomo Matteotti, Giovanni Amendola, and Piero Gobetti more than a decade before him and Carlo

Rosselli very soon after him, Gramsci was an anti-Fascist martyr; but so were many others whose names remain largely unknown. Unlike Matteotti and Rosselli whose gruesome assassinations drew widespread public attention and revealed fully the terrifying ruthlessness of Mussolini's regime, Gramsci died quietly in his bed at a clinic in Rome after years of excruciating physical deterioration and mental anguish.

For ten and a half years Gramsci had been exiled from public life and while he was not totally forgotten—in 1934 Romain Rolland and others called attention to his plight and issued demands for his release—even his Italian Communist comrades apparently lost contact with him as the years wore on although he still remained, at least nominally, their leader. With his wife and two sons (one of whom he had never nor would ever see) far away in the Soviet Union and most of his close relatives in the isolated interior of Sardegna, Gramsci was hardly able to sustain any tangible links with the world beyond the cordon of surveillance that encircled him. The devastating loneliness of his last few years was relieved only on a handful of occasions when his faithful friend Piero Sraffa, who was already living in England at the time, managed to see him and by several visits from his brother Carlo. Otherwise, Gramsci had to depend entirely, as he did throughout his incarceration, on the extraordinarily generous attention of his sister-in-law Tatiana Schucht who devoted several years of her life almost exclusively to his care. At the funeral, held as quickly as possible on April 28, 1937 the watchful police guards far outnumbered the mourners—Carlo Gramsci and Tatiana Schucht were the only ones in attendance.

Almost as soon as Gramsci's funeral was over, Tatiana Schucht started making the necessary plans and arrangements to salvage and preserve his legacy. For although Gramsci never wrote any books, he did leave thirty-three exercise books which he filled during his prison years with notes, drafts, jottings and some translations. She had encouraged Gramsci with his writing and probably she alone appreciated fully, at that time, the value of these papers. Two weeks after the funeral, Tatiana Schucht wrote Piero Sraffa at King's College, Cambridge a long narrative letter providing him with the details of Gramsci's final collapse, his death, the funeral, and so on. Uppermost in her mind, however, were Gramsci's prison notebooks; they were the very first thing she brought up in her letter after the opening epistolary formalities:

Dearest friend,

please do not be angry at me for having taken so long to answer or rather to write to you with the details of the great misfortune.

But, first of all I want you to write to me whether you think it is useful and even absolutely necessary that you should put Nino's manuscripts in order. Undoubtedly this work must be carried out only by a competent person. On the other hand, it was also Nino's wish that I pass on everything to Giulia [Schucht, Gramsci's wife], to entrust everything to her until he

gave further instructions. I thought it best to postpone sending anything until I hear from you whether you want to undertake the task of arranging these materials with the help of one of us in the family. Then I want to let Giulia know of my intention to send her all the writings so that she will collect them and ensure that nothing gets lost and that nobody interferes . . . !

Sraffa thought that Gramsci's papers had better be entrusted to the leaders of the PCI. Tatiana Schucht, therefore, placed the manuscripts in a bank vault in Rome and set out to determine a safe and reliable way to send them to Moscow. In the meantime she numbered the notebooks and started to prepare a catalogue of their contents. The manuscripts eventually reached Moscow in 1938. Gramsci's legacy would never have been available to us were it not for Tatiana Schucht. As Valentino Gerratana pointed out in the introduction to his masterful critical edition of Gramsci's *Quaderni del carcere*: "Much is owed to the selflessness and the spirit of sacrifice of this woman: through her silent and discrete activity she thwarted the earliest and most serious dangers that threatened the survival of Gramsci's work. If these manuscripts had not been saved, Gramsci would have been remembered largely as a legend."² Instead of a Gramscian legend we now have Gramsci's legacy in the form of books—even though he never actually wrote any books.

II

Gramsci himself had little idea that he was leaving behind him what Togliatti would later call a "literary legacy." Indeed, prior to his imprisonment Gramsci positively resisted suggestions, invitations and opportunities to publish his writings in book form. Once in prison, Gramsci thought of transforming the enforced vacuity of his isolation into an advantageous occasion for systematic study and reflection on a series of topics that had long interested him. He even contemplated the possibility of producing the kind of scholarly work—in the shape of monographs and essays—which his journalistic deadlines, party duties, and incessant organizational activity had prevented him from undertaking while he still enjoyed his freedom. Before too long, however, Gramsci realized that his limited access to primary research materials made it impossible for him to conduct his studies with the rigour and thoroughness which he believed necessary if they were to have any lasting value.

At one point in 1931, when Gramsci had already drafted some of the most important notes found in the *Quaderni*, Tatiana Schucht tried to encourage him by suggesting that his work on the question of the intellectuals was valuable notwithstanding the limitations which circumscribed its composition. While conceding a point Gramsci had reiterated in his letters, namely that his projects necessitated much archival research before they could be satisfactorily completed, she

sought at the same time to dissuade him from being overly scrupulous. "Certainly, in order to produce a *perfect* history of intellectuals one must have a great library at one's disposal. But why not make it imperfect for the time being and then perfect it later when you have free access to libraries." She reminded Gramsci that he had reprimanded Piero Sraffa for allowing his excessive scrupulosity to prevent him from writing. She also exhorted Gramsci to recall how he had once written "to an imprisoned friend, explaining that with determination and methodical study one can make use of even the most inadequate materials and you indicated to him how to use the prison library." In mock exasperation, Tatiana Schucht asked Gramsci: "Is it possible that ten years of journalism have not cured you?" (*LC*, 482-83n).

Tatiana Schucht's letter elicited from Gramsci an exceedingly informative and illuminating response which besides a self-assessment of his earlier and current writing contains a valuable explanation of his overall approach to the study of intellectuals. In his letter of September 7, 1931 to Tatiana Schucht, Gramsci first looks back on his prodigious journalistic output. Those articles, he observes, were written to meet the requirements of the day, not for posterity. He tells her how twice he was importuned to publish a selection of his articles. In both instances he had declined although at one point in 1921 he had gone along so far with the idea that he ended up reclaiming the manuscript at the last minute and "paying the costs of the part already printed" (*LC*, 480). He was also given an opportunity to write a book for guaranteed publication; this too he turned down but looking back he wonders whether he had made the right decision in that particular instance. In retrospect he suspects that perhaps in a somewhat mischievous or impish way he should have exploited the situation to his advantage. He recounts the circumstances to Tatiana Schucht: "Again in 1924 Franco Ciarlantini proposed that I write a book about the 'Ordine Nuovo' movement which he would have published in a series that already included books by [J. Ramsay] MacDonald, Gompers, etc. He pledged not to change even a comma and not to add any preface or polemical gloss to my book. It was very enticing to publish a book with a Fascist publisher under these conditions, and yet I refused. Now, I think that perhaps I would have done better to accept" (*LC*, 481).

Gramsci then goes on to describe the enormity of his project on the intellectuals as he envisaged it in its complex totality. At this point the letter takes a remarkable turn. Gramsci ostensibly wants to persuade his sister-in-law that, unlike Sraffa, he has a solid justification for not completing his work. He points out to her that the material he requires for his research "is scattered in an infinite number of periodicals and local historical archives." What immediately follows, however, reads like anything but a lamentation. Rather, he offers a summary of the main features of what would have been, had he ever had the chance fully to pursue it, a magisterial scholarly work. As he traces the broad outlines of his grand design, Gramsci's tone borders on the enthusiastic; one detects a sense of excitement generated in him by his ideas and by his plans to give shape and order to those ideas. His

irrepressible intellect takes over and he boldly sketches a study of immense, almost impossible dimensions. He starts off by declaring that his intended work differs from anything previously attempted because of the broader compass he ascribes to the term “intellectual.” Gramsci’s enlargement of the terrain he meant to cover under the general rubric “intellectuals” is linked to his conceptualization of the State which in turn is closely connected to his understanding of hegemony. In one long—and not altogether elegant—sentence he explains how questions about intellectuals, the distinguishable spheres of political and civil society, and the operations of hegemony are woven together.

... I greatly extend the concept of intellectuals and do not limit myself to the current notion which refers to the great intellectuals. This study also leads to certain definitions of the concept of the State which is normally understood as political society (either dictatorship or the coercive apparatus by which the popular masses are made to conform with a given mode of production or economy) and not as an equilibrium between political society and civil society (or the hegemony of one social group over the entire nation exercised through the so-called private institutions like the Church, trade unions, schools, etc.) and it is precisely within civil society that the intellectuals carry out their special work (Ben. Croce, for ex., is a kind of lay Pope and a most effective instrument of hegemony even though sometimes he may be at odds with this or that government) (LC, 481).

Gramsci’s general view of the status and role of intellectuals in civil society enables (and is simultaneously reinforced by) a series of considerations about Italian history—which he immediately proceeds to delineate in the same letter. He wants to look closely at the political developments in Italy from, at least, the Middle Ages through the Risorgimento to the present. From the next few sentences one can obtain, also, a good idea of how several themes that figure prominently throughout the *Quaderni del carcere*—the relation between past and present, Machiavelli’s politics, the non-national-popular character of Italian culture, Jacobinism—cohere in Gramsci’s mind and form part of his general inquiry on the intellectuals.

This concept of the function of intellectuals, in my view, sheds light on the reason, or one of the reasons, for the fall of the medieval communes, that is of the government of an economic class that did not know how to create its own category of intellectuals in order to exercise a hegemony besides a dictatorship. Italian intellectuals did not have a national-popular character but a cosmopolitan character on the model of the

Church. Leonardo could sell the plans for the fortifications of Florence to Duke Valentino with indifference. So, the communes were a syndicalist State, unable to go beyond this phase and become a unified State as Machiavelli kept pointing out in vain. Through the organization of the military, Machiavelli wanted to bring about the hegemony of the city over the countryside and for this reason he may be called the first Italian Jacobin (the second was Carlo Cattaneo but he was too full of chimeras). From this it follows that the Renaissance must be regarded as a reactionary and repressive movement when compared with the development of the communes. I mention these things in order to persuade you that every period of Italian history, from the Roman Empire to the Risorgimento must be examined from this monographic viewpoint (LC, 481-82).

Gramsci would most probably have expounded his ideas further were it not for the limits the prison authorities imposed on his correspondence. However, he does promise Tatiana Schucht a fifty-page prospectus for his study on the history of the intellectuals as well as a plan for an essay on the tenth canto of Dante's *Inferno*. He also reassures his sister-in-law that he fully intends to persevere with his studies and that he still possesses a lively and inventive intellect which responds actively to the books and essays he reads. At the very end of the letter Gramsci resorts to some playful and mild expressions of self-deprecation, as if to control his mental exhilaration. "... I limit myself to writing on philological and philosophical topics of the sort about which Heine said: they were so boring that I fell asleep but the boredom was so acute that it compelled me to wake up again" (LC, 482).

Gramsci's letter of September 7, 1931, like several others, vividly records the determination with which he persisted in the serious elaboration of his ambitious projects in spite of the severe constraints of prison life and his physical frailty. More importantly, perhaps, it also provides a general sense of the scope, intricacy and direction of Gramsci's political, social, cultural and historical analyses. The quick exposition which Gramsci formulates for his sister-in-law is fairly indicative of the general unity of purpose underlying the heterogeneous and fragmentary materials that constitute the *Quaderni del carcere*. This is not to say that the notebooks are held together by a single thesis; indeed, the diversity of issues and topics touched upon in the notebooks is itself a distinctive timbre of Gramsci's mind. He strove to understand as comprehensively as possible and in the minutest detail the complexity of the networks through which power is exercised and sustained in society. To achieve this he needed to grasp the intricate relations among individuals, institutions, social groups, cultural traditions, economic structures, forms of government, and so on. Furthermore, since he was not interested in producing a grand theory or a



metaphysics of power but rather in the material political significance and consequences of the distribution and exercise of power in specific societies at given moments, he also had to remain unerringly faithful to rigorously historical and materialist procedures. From these various explorations he was able to develop his concept of hegemony. The enormity of Gramsci's task, its almost boundless range manifests itself in the diversity of the seemingly disconnected materials contained in the notebooks. When viewed in their original state, the notebooks resemble a huge formless mosaic made up of an indeterminate number of parts that can be shifted around in numerous configurations while retaining their relationship to one another—the character of the whole mosaic, though, is ruined whenever a group of seemingly related notes are culled from them and considered autonomously. Not the least remarkable aspects of the notebooks is the example they embody of an intellect working on a number of different fronts at once without ever abandoning or losing sight of the political praxis by which and towards which it is directed.

In his letters, Gramsci sometimes vents his frustration at the insurmountable hurdles inhibiting progress with his study; more often, however, he communicates the intellectual stimulation he derives from the prospect of elaborating his intricate and original views. To be sure, Gramsci's total political commitment to the Communist cause made it imperative that he persist in his scholarly labours. He *had* to produce a thorough description of the many faces of power and its manifold loci in order to devise an effective strategy for the overthrow of the existing hegemonic order and for the establishment of a counter-hegemony—the very notion of the war of position and its successful outcome depend entirely on such a description. Undaunted by overwhelming obstacles, therefore, Gramsci adhered for as long as he was physically capable to his self-imposed, politically inspired scholarly project with whatever means he had available. As a result, his drafts, plans, sketches and notes for the books he never had a chance to write make up, when taken as a whole, a legacy as rich and valuable as that bequeathed by many authors who exercised full control over the shape and contents of their works.

III

Notwithstanding Gramsci's adamancy about the scholarly insufficiency of his prison researches and the evident fragmentariness and provisional nature of his manuscripts, the exiled leaders of the Italian Communist Party recognized the importance of Gramsci's prison writings the moment they saw them after their consignment to Moscow. Still, there was little they could do while war devastated Europe and Fascism maintained its stranglehold over Italy. Between 1939 and 1943 only one article appeared on Gramsci; it was published in *Lo Stato Operaio* (1942) which at that time was brought out in New York. Its author, Mario Montagnana, had worked closely with Gramsci in the Turin labour movement. Montagnana's brief article contains the first general public

indication of the existence of Gramsci's prison notebooks.³ Once the PCI leaders returned to Italy and even before the end of the war, plans to publish Gramsci's prison writings proceeded quite rapidly although much editorial work needed to be done. On April 30, 1944, the seventh anniversary of Gramsci's death, Palmiro Togliatti, who was by then established as the leader of the PCI, provided the readers of *L'Unità* with a general description of "Gramsci's literary legacy" and announced that preparations for the publication of the notebooks were well under way.⁴ Two years later, in April 1946, Felice Platone, the editor in charge of the first edition of Gramsci's manuscripts, gave a more detailed account of the prison notebooks in *Rinascita*, the PCI periodical founded by Togliatti. Platone, like Togliatti, referred to the notebooks as Gramsci's literary legacy—"l'eredità letteraria di Gramsci." The subtitle of Platone's article alluded to an aspect of Gramsci's notes that later was to attract special attention—"Per una storia degli intellettuali italiani" ("Towards a History of Italian Intellectuals").⁵

The publication of the first book bearing Gramsci's authorship—the first edition of *Lettere dal carcere* (*Prison Letters*)—coincided with the tenth anniversary of his death. A year later, the first of six volumes that make up the original edition of the *Quaderni del carcere* was brought out.⁶ The final volume appeared in 1951. The tremendous interest inspired by these works generated another ambitious project. In 1954 the first volume of Gramsci's pre-prison writings was published. Gramsci's prodigious output between 1914 and 1926 filled five volumes when they were collected.⁷ In subsequent years, philologically accurate and reliable critical editions of the *Lettere dal carcere* and the *Quaderni del carcere* were prepared. Currently, the pre-prison writings are also being re-published in a critical edition, the first three volumes of which are now available.⁸

It has taken fifty years to put Gramsci's "literary legacy" in order and still some of the editorial and textual work remains incomplete. For anglophone readers the process has been even slower. Gramsci had been dead twenty years when the first small selection of his writings in English was published.⁹ It was superseded in 1971 by the more substantial *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*.¹⁰ A modest and uneven selection from the *Prison Letters* appeared in 1973.¹¹ In 1975 some of Gramsci's journalistic writings were collected and translated under the heading *History, Philosophy and Culture in the Young Gramsci*.¹² Two very useful anthologies appeared in quick succession in 1977 and 1978 marking the fortieth anniversary of Gramsci's death.¹³ More recently Gramsci's articles and notes on literature, popular culture, language and folklore were gathered in a single volume, *Selections from Cultural Writings*.¹⁴ To most English speaking readers with no knowledge of Italian, then, Gramsci is still known only in bits and pieces through selections stitched together and given a measure of coherence by well-intentioned editors and translators. Perhaps this has been inevitable given the limited interest in and general lack of knowledge about matters Italian in the English speaking world. Not even Gramsci's work could transcend the laws of the publishing-reading marketplace. For

the time being, therefore, the non-specialist anglophone reader has direct access only to a partial and somewhat disjointed version of Gramsci's "literary" legacy.

The peculiar nature of Gramsci's legacy—most notably the fact that the books containing his thought are not books he actually composed as books—makes it imperative that his writings be preserved and transmitted in a manner that conveys as fully as possible the material socio-political and cultural history actually inscribed in them as well as the physical and intellectual processes, circumstances and conditions of their production. It is virtually impossible to exaggerate the importance of treating Gramsci's texts with the utmost philological care and critical editorial thoroughness. Valentino Gerratana's masterful critical edition of the *Quaderni del carcere* not only exemplifies the rigour that should attend the handling of Gramsci's legacy but also reveals, especially when juxtaposed to other complete or partial editions of the *Quaderni*, why and how Gramsci's texts demand procedures of reading and interpretation substantially different from those normally employed in conjunction with other more "definitive" works—including even such works as private diaries or posthumous publications which bear superficial resemblances to the *Quaderni*.

When emphasizing the special attention and care that must be accorded Gramsci's texts, however, one must also warn against the attendant danger of transforming Gramsci's legacy into a literary memorial for reverential self-indulgence or into a codex for the gratification of antiquarians. Indeed, nothing would more surely render Gramsci's writings utterly useless and irrelevant than their apotheosis into "monuments of unaging intellect." If Gramsci's legacy is to be preserved in any meaningful way, his editors, interpreters and readers must ensure that his writings do not get consigned to the museum of the history of ideas where they will exist to satisfy the contemplative epicurism of archival custodians and detached academic gazers. Within the museum of masterpieces and ideas Gramsci's books will become as sterile as the funerary urn that contains his ashes.

In order for Gramsci's legacy to have any lasting effectiveness, it must remain anchored in history; its contestatory, polemical, worldly character should neither be diluted nor camouflaged. Gramsci's writings should be allowed to continue attesting to his total commitment to political engagement in his wide ranging, independent intellectual explorations. In the case of Gramsci's texts, it would be most inappropriate to ask: "What matter who's writing?" Who is writing, to whom, when, where and in what circumstances, with what purpose—all of this matters enormously because Gramsci's legacy would be distorted and betrayed if it were to become a repository of ahistorical verities or a record of Olympian sagacity. For one element which perhaps more than any other makes Gramsci's legacy special is the worldiness of his intellectual work. He never withdrew from the confusing and contradictory world of social, economic, cultural, and political struggle. The Fascist prosecutor who deemed it necessary to "prevent [Gramsci's] brain from functioning for twenty years" ultimately

failed—although, as it turned out, Gramsci's prison writings started reaching the public no sooner than twenty years from the time of his arrest—not simply because Gramsci's mind continued to function during his imprisonment but also, and more importantly, because notwithstanding his isolation Gramsci's thinking never lost touch with the fundamental political realities beyond his prison cell. Even in his extensive philosophical reflections, Gramsci did not seek intellectual consolation, instead he continually strove to solidify the relationship between theory and practice. Whether he was hastily writing an article for one of the socialist or communist journals during his years in Turin or endeavouring to articulate his own thought in his notebooks while in prison, Gramsci never lost sight of the guiding principle of the "philosophy of praxis," namely that one labours to describe and explain the world as thoroughly as possible in order to be better able to change it. For this reason Gramsci forswore the role of the detached intellectual although he never tired of reiterating the overwhelming importance of intellectual work for the socialist revolutionary project.

IV

Gramsci's intellectual curiosity appears to have been insatiable, his critical energies inexhaustible, his penchant for analysis and argumentation boundless. These qualities helped save him from indolence and despair during the miserable years of imprisonment. Almost immediately after his arrest he started asking for books and communicating his study plans. In his very first letter from prison—which the police seized and so never reached its destination—he requested his landlady to send him three books:

1. the German Grammar which was in the bookshelf next to the entryway.
2. the *Breviario di linguistica* [*Compendium of Linguistics*] by Bertoni and Bartoli which was in the cabinet in front of the bed.
3. I would be most grateful if you would send me an inexpensive copy of the *Divine Comedy* because I have loaned my copy (LC,3).

On December 9, 1926, two days after his arrival on the island of Ustica, he wrote his first letter to Tatiana Schucht describing his experiences and travels as a prisoner and announcing his plans; "1. to stay well in order to be always in good health; 2. to study German and Russian systematically and regularly; 3. to study economics and history." He also asked her to send him some personal necessities and books:

Send me soon, if you can, the German grammar and a Russian grammar; the small Ger-Ital. and Ital-Ger. dictionary and some books (*Max und Moritz*—and the history of Italian literature by Vossler, if you can find

it among the books). Send me that large volume of articles and studies on the Italian Risorgimento which, I believe, is entitled *Storia politica del secolo XIX* [*Political History of the Nineteenth Century*] and a book by R. Ciasca called *La formazione del programma dell'unità nazionale* [*The Development of the Programme of National Unity*], or something like that (LC, 11-12).

Likewise, in his first letter to Piero Sraffa from prison, Gramsci asked for reading material. "I would like to have a good treatise on economics and finance to study: a basic book which you may choose. When you can, send me some books or journals of general culture which you think would interest me" (LC, 15). Gramsci's voluminous reading became more focused and purposeful as he modified and clarified his study and research plans enlarging the ground he wished to cover and articulating increasingly elaborate designs for systematically addressing the issues that most concerned him.

While still awaiting trial in Milan and two years before the first entries (which consist in a list of topics he hoped to explore) in the notebooks, Gramsci wrote a letter to Tatiana Schucht— a letter that has since become famous because in it he announced his intention to produce something *für ewig*. The phrase *für ewig* appears three times in the letter of March 19, 1927 wherein Gramsci tells Tatiana Schucht that in response to the monotony of prison life he needed to undertake a project of such seriousness and magnitude that it would provide a stable focus to his mental life. Gramsci is here thinking of embarking on a well planned and defined intellectual project that would function as the anchor of psychological stability and purposefulness with which to counter the destructive aimlessness and the corrosive meaningless regimen of incarceration. He justifiably feared mental collapse, especially since he had good reason to believe that he would be receiving a long prison sentence; he realized that he could not ward off the danger simply by taking refuge in the distractions of voracious reading. By setting down his study plans, Gramsci was, among other things, preparing his defensive strategy against the psychological siege that the Fascist judicial and penal system intended to lay on him.

My life goes on with the same unrelieved monotony. Even studying is much more difficult than it might seem. I received some books and I really read a great deal (more than a book a day besides the newspapers); but this is not what I'm talking about, I mean something else. I am seized by this idea (a common phenomenon among prisoners, I believe): one must achieve something *für ewig*, to cite a complex notion of Goethe's which, I remember, greatly tormented the Italian [poet] Pascoli. In short, I would like by way of a pre-established plan, to occupy myself intensely and

systematically with some subject that would absorb me and centralize my inner life (LC, 58).

At that time Gramsci had in mind four topics around which he resolved, at least provisionally, to gather his thoughts: (a) “a research project on the formation of the public spirit in Italy during the last century; that is, research on Italian intellectuals, their origins, their groupings in relation to cultural currents, their various modes of thinking;” (b) “a study of comparative linguistics;” (c) “a study on the transformation of theatrical taste in Italy which Pirandello represented and helped bring about;” (d) “an essay on serialized fiction and popular taste in literature” (LC, 58-59). These four lines of inquiry were held together, in Gramsci’s mind, by an overarching theme or a common motif, namely the “popular creative spirit in its diverse phases and stages of development.” Gramsci had been interested in these subjects and written extensively on some of them before his imprisonment but he never had the time or opportunity to treat them systematically, much less exhaustively. Immersion in political activity compelled him to abandon his study of linguistics at the University of Turin; the relatively brief journalistic “cronache teatrali” he wrote hastily against constraining deadlines for the popular socialist press were an inadequate vehicle for expounding his views on Pirandello; his arrest truncated the sustained exposition of his thesis on the function of Italian intellectuals which he had started in the draft of an essay on the “Southern Question.” Once he found himself in prison with an abundance of time—and little else—at his disposal, Gramsci thought of preventing his intellect from falling into desuetude and his spirit into despair by picking up the threads of his unfinished work.

Although he culled the phrase *für ewig* from Goethe, there can be little doubt that Gramsci conceived of his project in terms which bear only an ironic resemblance to Goethe’s. Gramsci had no intention of producing an aesthetic monument that would serve as both a legacy and a memorial; rather, he envisaged studying and writing in a thorough and sustained manner on topics of special interest to him. Since it was not possible for him to address any audience, since he could not be directly engaged in polemic or in any public exchange of whatever kind, and since he had no deadlines to meet and no particular political activity to which he could directly contribute—since, in other words, he was totally cut off from the immediate requirements and obligations of political, social and cultural struggle, Gramsci channelled his energies into the rigours and discipline of scholarly investigation. For this reason he uses the word “disinterested” in conjunction with the phrase *für ewig* when explaining to Tatiana Schucht the nature of his proposed study on the intellectuals. “Do you remember that very hasty and superficial essay I wrote on southern Italy and the importance of B. Croce? Well, I would like to develop extensively the thesis I had sketched there, from a ‘disinterested’ point of view *für ewig*.” He employs exactly the same vocabulary two sentences later when he rhetorically asks Tatiana Schucht, a propos of his proposed study of comparative

linguistics, “What could be more ‘disinterested’ and *für ewig* than that?” (LC, 58).

The word “disinterested,” which Gramsci both times encloses within inverted commas, has nothing to do in these instances with the notion of detachment normally associated with a posture of aesthetic distance or philosophical indifference. Gramsci’s philosophy of praxis demanded a criticism full of passionate intensity, a criticism that takes sides—not only could he not have endorsed the cultivation of Olympian serenity common among intellectuals, but he actually berated Croce for affecting it. In order to be “disinterested” in the common sense of the term, Gramsci would have had to conduct his studies in an apolitical key; this he could never do. What he could do, though, was conduct his research and writing on the topics that concerned him in a broader context and over a more expansive terrain than he could previously afford to do when writing for the papers and journals of a fractious Socialist Party and later an embattled Communist Party while simultaneously combatting Fascism. When he wrote about the Italian intellectuals in “Some Aspects of the Southern Question,” Gramsci was intervening in a very specific polemic about the relationship of his Party to the peasants and he was also arguing for a political alliance between the peasants and the proletariat. His analysis of the function of intellectuals in that essay, then, is framed by other issues. Once he found himself exiled from the political arena, Gramsci wanted to pursue the same topic on a much larger scale, unconstrained by the tactical needs of the moment—hence the plans to examine the role played by intellectuals over six centuries of Italian history, their contribution to the formation of social groups and classes, their solidarity with each other, their function in sustaining the existing hegemony, their various types and their changing status in an industrialized society, and so on. An inquiry of these dimensions requires a very broad perspective, a virtually boundless investigative range, a special vantage point—in this sense, then, a “disinterested” point of view.

Gramsci held fast to his scholarly plans and although he never completed any of them he did produce a body of work *für ewig*—the prison notebooks. The nature of this legacy, however, is so unconventional that not only was Gramsci himself unaware of its value to subsequent generations, but the most eminent intellectual of his time, Benedetto Croce, failed to recognize its significance. Interestingly, Croce’s summary dismissal of the *Quaderni del carcere* emanated from a fierce allegiance to the traditional notion of “disinterest.” Commenting on the appearance in 1950 of a volume of the *Quaderni—Note sul Machiavelli*—Croce wrote: “. . . Gramsci could not create a new mode of thought nor accomplish the wonderful revolution attributed to him because . . . his only goal was to establish in Italy a political party, a function which has nothing to do with the dispassionate search for truth.”¹⁵ It is not the fragmentariness of the notebooks that bothered Croce but the unconcealed political programme inscribed in them. There is a measure of insight in Croce’s blindness because Gramsci’s writings do indeed remain political and politicized throughout and thus fail to

meet the criterion of “disinterest” by which the traditional humanist determines whether a given work merits induction into the pantheon of the *für ewig*. Furthermore, the politics of Gramsci’s work, in effect, rearranges the traditional relationship between scholarship—i.e., the system for the production of knowledge—and “truth” in a manner that directly threatens what Foucault calls the regime of truth. Therefore, Gramsci’s legacy does not belong in the pantheon of “disinterested” masterpieces, in any case, even though some of the critics and scholars who admire and use it demonstrate scant commitment to Gramsci’s political practice and in spite of the fact that it has often been treated respectfully in learned studies that bear a closer affinity to Croce’s ideal of “disinterest” than to Gramsci’s philosophy of praxis.

The enormous body of literature that now surrounds and even threatens to obscure Gramsci’s work is proof enough that his legacy has been and continues to be recognized and appreciated. Whether it will last *für ewig* matters little. What should matter is the way in which Gramsci’s legacy gets interpreted, transmitted and used so that it would remain an effective tool not only for the critical analysis of hegemony but also for the development of an alternative politics and a new culture. The main question should not be whether Gramsci’s “literary legacy” amounts to a monument *für ewig*—i.e., whether it deserves the status of a classic as, say, Goethe’s work does—but rather how it could be read today in order that it may inspire, reinforce and help direct current struggles against the forces of domination, the concealed nexuses of power and privilege, and the unequal distribution of spiritual and material wealth.

Reading Gramsci effectively and politically presents an exceedingly difficult challenge that calls for a sturdy adherence to the worldly goals of oppositional, even revolutionary practice as well as the development of new analytical and critical skills appropriate to the special character of Gramsci’s writings. The ideal treatment of Gramsci’s legacy on a scholarly level would entail at least four inter-related phases or spheres of analysis and criticism: (a) an historical investigation of the social, cultural, economic and political context within which Gramsci carried out his work; (b) a careful reading and rigorous textual scrutiny of all his writings; (c) a thorough study and interpretation of the ideas, views and concepts he articulated at various times and in different ways and for different purposes in articles, Party documents, letters and notebooks, and (d) a continuation and extension of his efforts by way of a sustained critique of hegemony at the present time, a critique that, while holding fast to Gramsci’s ineluctably historical and materialist approach, examines contemporary phenomena, problems, issues and practices to which Gramsci did not or could not address himself. While many scholars and commentators have traversed a considerable area of the terrain I have just outlined, much work still needs to be done. One must also hasten to add that the analysis, interpretation, and criticism of Gramsci’s work can never be truly completed—there exists no point of arrival. Gramsci’s legacy represents a *terminus a quo*, unless it falls into the hands of antiquarians

keen upon recuperating the “true” or “original” Gramsci, or unless it is transformed into a doctrinal and dogmatic orthodoxy, a repository of authoritative answers for the solution of questions old and new. Hence the overwhelming importance of reading Gramsci attentively, but also critically; there are certainly many incorrect ways of reading Gramsci but there is, equally certainly, no single correct way of interpreting him.

The essays collected in this volume do not stem from a common interpretation of Gramsci although all of them, in different ways, manifest their authors’ conviction that Gramsci’s legacy has a distinctly political character. Taken as whole these essays reflect the range of Gramsci’s thinking and are indicative of the intricate web of relations connecting his various lines of inquiry. Some of the essays offer fresh considerations of well known features of Gramsci’s work, such as his treatment of hegemony and his discussions on intellectuals. Others focus on aspects of Gramsci’s work with which, generally speaking, anglophone readers are not very familiar; for example, the pre-prison writings, the essays on the theatre, the notes on Dante. Still others make use of a Gramscian perspective and critique to address such diverse issues as democracy and the politics of American literary criticism. All of them invite further critical explorations of Gramsci’s legacy.

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NOTES

- 1 Antonio Gramsci, *Lettere dal carcere*, ed. Sergio Caprioglio and Elsa Fubini (Torino: Einaudi, 1965), p. 915. Hereafter cited as *LC*.
- 2 Antonio Gramsci, *Quaderni del carcere*, 4 vols. ed. Valentino Gerratana (Torino: Einaudi, 1975), p. xxix. Hereafter cited as *QC*.
- 3 Mario Montagnana, “Gli scritti di A. Gramsci,” in *Lo Stato Operaio*, II, no. 3-4 (March-April, 1942), pp. 80-82.
- 4 Palmiro Togliatti, “L’eredità letteraria di Gramsci,” *L’Unità*, 30 April, 1944.
- 5 Felice Platone, “Relazione sui quaderni del carcere,” *Rinascita*, III, n. 4 (April, 1946), pp. 81-90.
- 6 *Lettere dal carcere* (Torino: Einaudi, 1947). The first edition of the *Quaderni del carcere* consisted of six volumes all published in Turin by Einaudi: *Il materialismo storico e la filosofia di B. Croce* (1948); *Gli intellettuali e l’organizzazione della cultura* (1949); *Note sul Machiavelli, sulla politica e sullo Stato moderno* (1949); *Letteratura e vita nazionale* (1950); *Passato e presente* (1951).
- 7 All five volumes of the original edition of Gramsci’s writings were published in Turin by Einaudi: *Scritti giovanili: 1914-1918* (1958); *Sotto la Mole: 1916-1920* (1960); *L’Ordine Nuovo: 1919-1920* (1954); *Socialismo e fascismo, L’Ordine Nuovo: 1921-1922* (1966); *La costruzione del Partito comunista: 1923-1926* (1971).
- 8 All three volumes completed thus far are edited by Sergio Caprioglio and published in Turin by Einaudi: *Cronache torinesi: 1913-1917* (1980); *La città futura: 1917-1918* (1982); *Il Nostro Marx: 1918-1919* (1984).

- 9 Antonio Gramsci, *The Modern Prince and Other Writings*, ed. and trans. Louis Marks (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1957).
- 10 *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971).
- 11 Antonio Gramsci, *Letters from Prison*, ed. and trans. Lynne Lawner (New York: Harper and Row, 1973).
- 12 Ed. Pedro Cavalcanti and Paul Piccone (St. Louis: Telos Press, 1975).
- 13 *Selections from Political Writings: 1910-1920*, ed. Q. Hoare, trans. John Mathews (New York: International Publishers, 1977) and *Selections from Political Writings: 1921-1926*, ed. and trans. Q. Hoare (New York: International Publishers, 1978).
- 14 Ed. David Forgacs and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, trans. William Boelhower (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1985).
- 15 Benedetto Croce, "Un giuoco che ormai dura troppo," *Quaderni della Critica* (17-18 November, 1950), p. 231.

