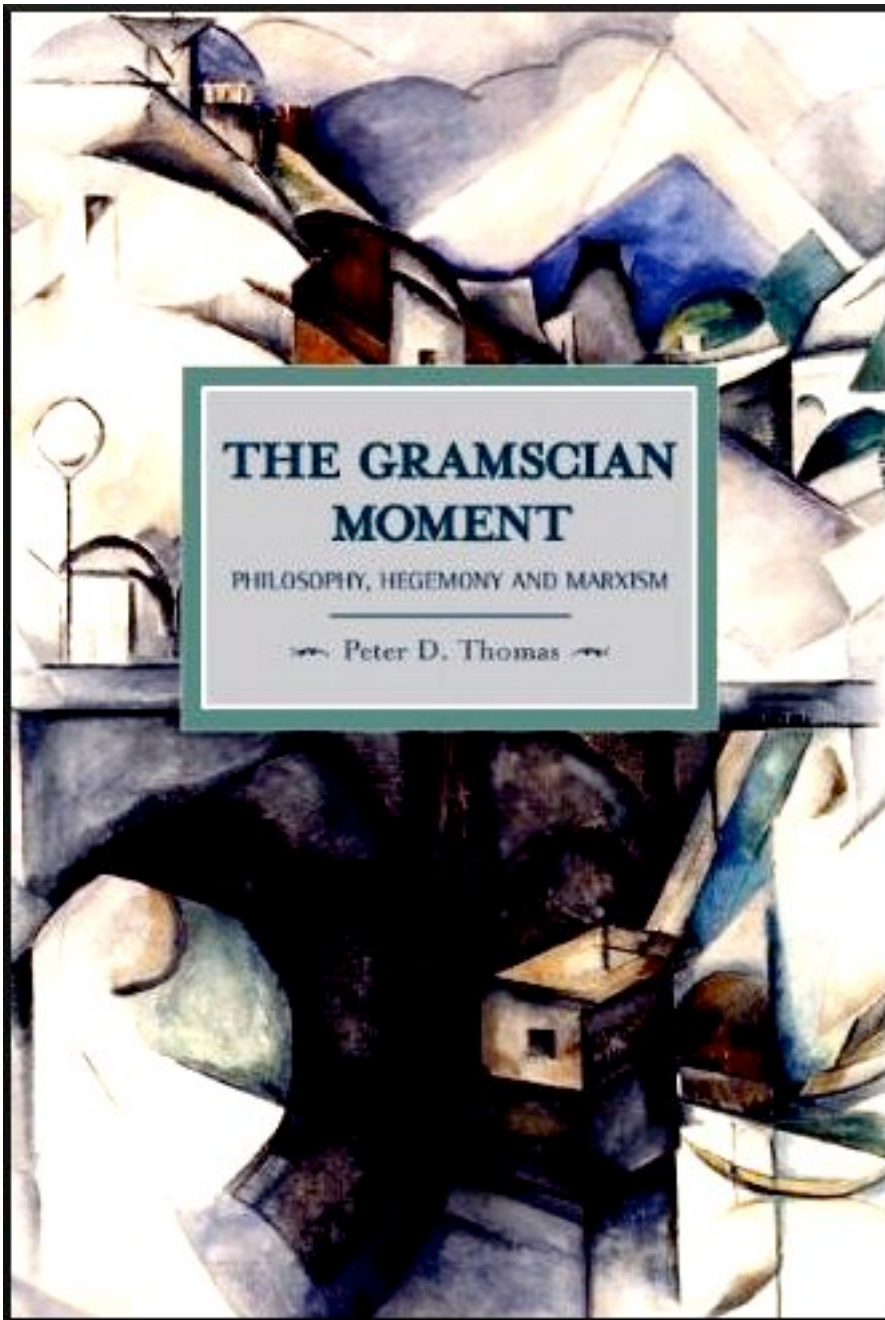


The revolutionary socialist as democratic philosopher

Review by Martin Thomas of Peter Thomas's "The Gramscian Moment"



Antonio Gramsci was an Italian Marxist, a founding member of the Italian Communist Party in its revolutionary period of the 1920s, and chief leader of the CP from about 1923 to 1926.

Jailed by Mussolini's fascist regime from 1926 until shortly before his death in 1937, Gramsci wrote Prison Notebooks which have gradually become, so Peter Thomas notes, "a classic of twentieth-century social theory".

The Notebooks were first published in Italy in 1948-51, by an Italian Communist Party which by then was thoroughly Stalinist. It used them to back up its "national-popular" (reformist, class-collaborationist) strategy. The Notebooks were, after all, notebooks, not texts finished for publication. And, since Gramsci

became very ill in prison, and often had to break off writing, they are mostly fragmentary.

That made them cryptic enough for the Communist Party to exploit them. From early on, dissidents criticised the Communist Party's interpretation and argued that Gramsci should properly be read as a revolutionary working-class socialist who never abandoned his principles of the early 1920s.

The influence of the Notebooks spread gradually. A selection was translated into English in 1971 (the Further Selections, published in 1995, and the complete translation being done by Joseph Buttigieg, are still difficult to obtain). Translations into French were published from 1978 onwards (with a compact

volume of selections edited by André Tosel coming out in 1983); translations into German, from 1991.

Today, in Peter Thomas's words, Gramsci's Notebooks are "a significant point of reference in such diverse fields as history, sociology, anthropology, literary studies, international relations, and political theory". In the universities, Gramsci is referred to more than any other Marxist writer, maybe even more than Marx himself. Students in any one of a wide range of courses of study will come across Gramsci even if they come across no other Marxist writer.

That is partly because there are now many more "Gramscis" than the old Communist Party "Gramsci" and the revolutionary Marxists' "Gramsci". A whole school of writers, mostly moving on from some background in or around the old Communist Parties, have made of Gramsci a bridge from socialist concerns to varieties of "post-Marxism" (in politics, varieties of liberalism), more or less imbued with post-modernism.

Gramsci's best-known concept, "hegemony", has been amputated from its basis in working-class politics, and turned into a puff-word for all manner of nondescript alliances.

Peter Thomas has written a book about Gramsci that both understands his thought as based in the great mass revolutionary socialist workers' movement that flowered briefly between the Russian Revolution of 1917 and the triumph of Stalinism, and explores his originality. The book both covers well-trampled ground (hundreds of articles and books about Gramsci now appear every year), and traverses it in a new direction (no other comprehensive book on Gramsci has approached the Prison Notebooks from the same angle).

It is well worth the effort of reading it. It is an effort. Though Peter Thomas can write well, on the whole the book bears the marks of its origins in a PhD thesis. When working on Capital, Marx wrote to Engels that he was "expanding" the book "since those German scoundrels estimate the value of a book in terms of its cubic capacity". The PhD mill of today's universities seems to estimate value in terms of volume of references and footnotes.

Thus the book starts not with Gramsci, but with a discussion of the old French Communist Party philosopher Louis Althusser and his criticism of Gramsci. Less respectful of Althusser than Peter Thomas is, I see this starting point as like trying to get a first overview of an inspiring building by crawling into it through its drains.

Moreover, even if one were more respectful of Althusser, his critique of Gramsci is only a few pages in his book *Reading Capital*, and in them "Gramsci" functions more as a straw man for Althusser's own concerns than as a real figure.

Peter Thomas's next approach is through a side-door: a discussion of Perry Anderson's critical essay of 1976, *The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci*. Critique of Anderson is the headline feature of chapter two, and a major organising theme of much of the first half of the book.

The obliquity of approach is still unfortunate, but not because Anderson's essay is of little worth. On the contrary: despite reading and re-reading Peter Thomas's chapters, I am still not convinced that he

has shown more than minor errors in Anderson's essay. I have discussed this elsewhere [1].

From about chapter five, Peter Thomas gets into his stride.

He demystifies the concept of "hegemony" in Gramsci, from which so many speculations are spun, showing that it meant nothing other than working-class political leadership, achieved through sound use of united-front tactics.

He defines united front tactics as "the final strategic advice of Lenin to the Western working-class movement before his death", "the only possible foundation for a realistic and responsible socialist politics" - and radically different from "the nationalist and non-class-based perspective of a 'popular front'," i.e. the sort of strategic alliance with bourgeois forces enforced by the Stalinist parties in the 1930s. He shows that Gramsci was won over to united-front tactics by Trotsky while Gramsci was in Russia in 1922-3, and further that Gramsci's views were deeply influenced by Lenin's efforts, in his last years, under the New Economic Policy, to find a sound political basis, free of the abruptnesses of "war communism", for an alliance between the Bolshevik leadership, the broader working class, and the USSR's peasant majority.

Gramsci's innovation, so Peter Thomas shows, was not the introduction of the concept "hegemony", but his ideas about building what Gramsci calls a working-class "hegemonic apparatus", which fights to win a working-class majority and working-class political power utilising the principles of the united front.

"A class's hegemonic apparatus is the wide-ranging series of institutions and practices - from newspapers to educational organisations to political parties - by means of which a class and its allies engage their opponents in a struggle for political power".

Where Gramsci discusses "consent" and "coercion" as aspects of leadership, his social-reformist interpreters have presented "consent" and "coercion" as mutually-exclusive alternatives. They have then argued that modern capitalist rule rests very largely on "consent" and claimed that therefore that all strategy must be directed at "consent". They conclude that winning wide "consent" by a sort of diffuse cultural coalition-building is what "hegemony" really means.

Peter Thomas point out that for Gramsci, "leadership [or, what for him was pretty much a synonym] hegemony and domination are [only] strategically differentiated forms of a unitary political power". For the workers' party to win "consent" from the poorer classes is not an alternative to it mobilising class-struggle "coercion" against the wealthy classes. On the contrary: "A class's ability... to secure the consent of allies... also relies upon its ability to coordinate domination over the opponents of this alliance".

Or again: "Without an attempt to transform leadership in civil society into a political hegemony or into the nascent forms of a new political society, civil hegemony itself will be disaggregated and subordinated to... the existing political hegemony of the ruling class"..

He succinctly defines Gramsci's concept of hegemony as "a Marxist theory of the constitution of the political".

For Peter Thomas, the building-up by the working class of a "hegemonic apparatus" is its counterpoint to the organisation by the capitalist class of "the integral State". He contends that "the concept of the integral State" is Gramsci's real "novel contribution to Marxist political theory".

"With this concept, Gramsci attempted to analyse the mutual interpenetration and reinforcement of 'political society' and 'civil society' (to be distinguished from each other methodologically, not organically) within a unified (and indivisible) State form. According to this concept, the State (in its integral form) was not to be limited to the machinery of government and legal institutions (the State understood in a limited sense). Rather, the concept of the integral State was intended as a dialectical unity of the moments of civil society and political society.

"Civil society is the terrain upon which social classes compete for social and political leadership or hegemony over other social classes. Such hegemony is guaranteed, however, 'in the last instance', by capture of the legal monopoly of violence embodied in the institutions of political society".

"Eurocommunists" and "contemporary advocates of a nebulously defined radical democracy" fail to understand this when they "attempt to confine Gramsci's theory of hegemony to a war of position in the trenches of civil society. It is only within the problematic of the integral State as a dialectical unity of both civil society and political society that Gramsci's theory of proletarian hegemony becomes comprehensible, as a theory of the political constitution of an alliance of subaltern classes capable of exercising leadership over other subaltern social groups and repression against its class antagonist, necessarily progressing to the dismantling of the State machinery..."

Peter Thomas's argument about "the integral State" is basic to his criticism of Anderson. But I think he tries to get too much service out of the word "dialectical"; and the airy phrase "dialectical unity" glosses over one of Anderson's main points: that there is a specific form of interrelation of civil society and State in bourgeois democracy.

It is one which includes boundaries between the two - relative separations of politics and economics, and of public and private.

Those relative separations of politics and economics, and of public and private, in bourgeois democracy, allows the working class to win what Trotsky described as "bases of proletarian democracy" within bourgeois society. If all institutions are lumped together into one "dialectical unity" of the "integral State", then this built-in tension, the development of which is vital to working-class politics, is lost from sight, or at least shielded from sight.

It is odd that Gramsci, writing in a fascist jail, and lucidly hostile to Stalin's "Third Period" rhetoric about fascism and social democracy being "twins", did not explore the difference between bourgeois democracy and fascism in much detail; but he didn't, and the "integral State" concept blurs that difference rather than elucidating it.

Peter Thomas takes up a phrase used (as he himself notes) only once by Gramsci, "the democratic philosopher", and convincingly makes it the fulcrum

of the later chapters of his book. Gramsci argued that everyone is a "philosopher", the question only being how conscious and "coherent" the philosophy (the overview of the world and history) is. Peter Thomas discusses exactly what "coherent" means here.

He argues that Gramsci's famous term "philosophy of praxis" is not just a euphemism which he used in his Prison Notebooks, for fear of censorship, in place of writing bluntly "Marxism". Gramsci, he writes, offers a new conception of philosophy - "as a relationship of hegemony"; as a "conception of the world" developed in dialogue with the "senso comune" (roughly, common sense) of a definite social class.

The "democratic philosopher" is the purposeful, educating and self-educating, socialist activist. "The older 'form' of philosophy" is "superannuated" and must be "replaced by new practices of the socialist movement".

This is, so to speak, a democratic and republican conception of philosophy rather than the absolute-monarch conception of earlier ages, or the constitutional-monarch conception which arises when scientific development has quelled some of the pretensions of speculation.

Rather than having "philosophers" operating on a different plane from everyday people, who are left to the improvisations of "common sense", or using the constraints of mass "common sense" to censor the "philosophers" (as the Catholic Church does), the "dialectical pedagogy" of "the democratic philosopher as collectivity" seeks, in Gramsci's words, "to construct an intellectual-moral bloc that renders politically possible a mass intellectual progress and not only a progress of small intellectual groups".

The "intellectuals" - of worker or of better-off background - must be "permanently active persuaders" in the mass movement, operating "in a reciprocal relationship of 'democratic pedagogy' in which those 'intellectuals'... are at least as often 'the educated' as 'the educators'."

It is "a project of democratic expansion" - "or, as Gramsci wrote in the depths of [Stalin's] Third Period [1928-34], 'in politics of the masses, to say the truth is a political necessity, precisely'."

In some passages of the Prison Notebooks, Gramsci writes as if there is an absolute unity of theoretical understanding and practical activity - as if "philosophical" perception is impossible without being "an historic, political achievement of a [whole] class" engaged in actively changing the world.

"Unity of theory and practice" is often said to be a Marxian idea. But, as Peter Thomas points out, it is much older than Marx; and, as he does not point out, the phrase was nowhere used by Marx.

I do not know when the phrase was lifted from older writers (such as Hegel) and dropped into Marxist discourse. George Lukacs used it a lot, but I doubt he was the first. It became a "conventional wisdom" with Stalinism.

The phrase "unity of theory and practice" is often interpreted as meaning such things as that practice should be guided by theory and theory should be translated into and tested by practice, which are indeed good sense; and so it has usually been accepted by anti-Stalinist Marxists.

But "unity of theory of practice" is a bad way of expressing that good sense. The necessary and

proper linkage of theory and practice does not merge them into a single unity. They remain distinct. Practice will always be richer and more complex than theory; theory will always run ahead of practice, to some degree or another. Much theory has only a very distant relation to "practice" in the sense of political activity. Disunity of theory and practice - that is, scope for "provisional thinking", autonomous from immediate practical imperatives - is necessary for intellectual progress.

As Theodor Adorno, refusing to knuckle under to Stalinism, wrote: "The call for a unity of theory and practice has increasingly demoted theory to the status of handmaiden... The practical identifying mark that was being demanded of all theory has also become a stamp of censorship... Theory... became a part of the very politics from which it was intended to find a way out".

The catchcry "unity of theory and practice" has had malign effects in the anti-Stalinist left too. The idea that any theoretical dissent is idle chatter unless it can show quick practical conclusions has stifled thought; so has the habit of quickly shutting off any unfamiliar thought by "tagging" it with an uncongenial practical conclusion. ("If you say that the Stalinist states were worse for the working class than ordinary capitalism, then you end up backing US foreign policy" - that sort of argument).

Gramsci accepted the formula "unity of theory and practice", and even sharpened it to "identity of theory and practice". It is not clear, but it seems that he conceived of this identity as belonging to a "modern Prince", a "hegemonic apparatus", which "remained no more than a proposal for the future, not a concrete reality, in his time - or in our own" (Peter Thomas's words).

What, then, can be done in actual time, Gramsci's or our own? Gramsci, I think, and rightly, saw his "proposal for the future" as not something to be waited for, but something to be worked for, starting now. The sharpening of the formula "unity of theory and practice" to "identity of theory and practice" indicates that, even if you think it possible, it cannot be a precondition for action, but rather something to be worked towards.

"The most important observation to be made about any concrete analysis of the relations of force is the following: that such analyses cannot and must not be ends in themselves (unless the intention is merely to write a chapter of past history), but acquire significance only if they serve to justify a particular practical activity, or initiative of will. They reveal the points of least resistance, at which the force of will can be most fruitfully applied; they suggest immediate tactical operations; they indicate how a campaign of political agitation may best be launched, what language will best be understood by the masses, etc.

"The decisive element in every situation is the permanently organised and long-prepared force which can be put into the field when it is judged that a situation is favourable (and it can be favourable only in so far as such a force exists, and is full of fighting spirit). Therefore the essential task is that of systematically and patiently ensuring that this force is formed, developed, and rendered ever more homogeneous, compact, and self-aware..."

"The protagonist of the new Prince could... only [be] the political party".

The process of assembling and preparing the party starts long before it can become a decisive mass movement and, by the richness of its theory and the power of its practice, come close to at least a metaphorical sort of "unity of theory and practice". Gramsci analysed three elements required to form a party - mass membership, "principal cohesive element", and intermediate cadres. He wrote of the second element, "numerically weak", that it cannot "form the party alone", but "it could do so" - i.e. make a start at forming a party - "more than could the first element". And, by obvious implication, it should do so. It should assemble a nucleus even before a mass membership is possible; and without such a nucleus, developed in advance, mass membership alone cannot form a party.

Gramsci's arguments point to starting the work of party-building now, even if only a small and primitive scale.

The question of the revolutionary working-class party is strangely marginalised in Peter Thomas's book (there is not even an index entry for "party"). It is as if accepting the "identity of theory and practice" as the true shape of a "hegemonic apparatus" of the working class leads to concluding that when that full "identity" (or anything that could metaphorically be called that) is impossible, no lesser linkage of theory and practice is much worth bothering with.

Near the end of the book, he says of Gramsci: "His insights into the forms of a possible proletarian hegemony retain today their fertility for further theoretical and practical investigation, awaiting the energies and initiatives of a reviving working-class movement which alone will be able to confirm and, if necessary, to transform them in practice".

Insights are not things that can "await". Or is that the people who have the "insights" should "await"? Until they can be mobilised by "energies and initiatives of a reviving working-class movement"? In that scheme, instead of the "intellectuals" (of worker and other origin) providing "initiative", it is the job of the generally relatively passive mass to do that...

Peter Thomas brings an array of talents to this book. He came into radical politics at the University of Queensland, in Australia, where he studied from 1992 to 2000. The first name mentioned in the acknowledgements in the book, and rightly so, is that of Dan O'Neill, his teacher in the English department at UQ, a veteran of the Brisbane left, and still active today after retirement from the university.

(Dan hosted and became the mainstay of the Gramsci reading group set up in Brisbane, on the initiative of Workers' Liberty, from 2008, in response to the first draft of Peter Thomas's book).

From Dan, I think we can say at a minimum, Peter Thomas got a scrupulousness about texts, a respect for the classics, a breadth of inquiry, and, in short, a fundamental opposition to all the shoddinesses of post-modernism.

Though never joining a Trotskyist group, Peter Thomas worked closely in campaigns and study groups with Trotskyists such as Murray Kane, Melissa White, and myself: he was surely, by the time he left Brisbane, a Trotskyist of some sort.

With remarkable energy, he got a series of grants enabling him to study in Berlin, in Naples, in Rome,

and in Amsterdam. Much unlike the ordinary run of English-speaking academics, he writes with a fluent command of the literature, and a first-hand knowledge of the debates, in Italian and German as well as English.

I can't help but think that there have been downsides in the transition from political activist to cosmopolitan academic. For example, the discussion of Anderson starts by accepting Fabio Frosini's contention that Anderson's work was "shown to be false by Gianni Francioni as early as 1984, and in Italy, among Gramsci scholars, has lost all credibility; no one today would dare to quote it". It does not even mention as a relevant (though, of course, not decisive) consideration the fact that Anderson's essay on Gramsci was written by an Anderson close to revolutionary Marxism, earnestly concerned to unravel his own earlier "Gramscian" reformism; while Francioni wrote from a standpoint in the orbit of the old Italian Communist Party.

The book is structured at odds with the dialogic conception of philosophy which it argues. Rather than engaging with the interactions, fruitful or botched, of the revolutionary Marxists with the "senso comune" (common sense) of the working class, it takes its markers from the debates in Marxist, post-Marxist, and Marxisant academia and within the old official Communist Parties, as if those constituted the universe of "Marxism", in abstraction from political practice.

The book remains recognisably Trotskyist. Fabio Frosini, the commentator on Gramsci who gets by far the greatest number of favourable references in the book, testifies to this when, in a generally warm review of it, he comments disapprovingly that he finds its discussion of Gramsci's affinity to Trotsky and hostility to Stalinism the least convincing element.

Despite all criticisms, this is a rich and valuable text, a source of many more ideas than can be mentioned in a short review.

More on Gramsci, including an interview with Peter Thomas: workersliberty.org/gramsci [2].

Other reviews of *The Gramscian Moment*

Fabio Frosini [3]

Toni Negri [4]

Daniel Hartley [5] (KULT_online)

Jelle Versieren [6] (RRPE)

Alistair Davidson [7] (Thesis Eleven)

Chris Nineham [8] (Counterfire)

Chris Bambery [9] (International Socialism journal)

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Links:

[1] <http://gramscinotebooks.wordpress.com/2010/07/04/anderson-and-gramsci/>

[2] <http://www.workersliberty.org/gramsci>

[3]

http://uniurb.academia.edu/FabioFrosini/Papers/592616/GRAMSCI_NON_CONTEMPORANEO._SUL_RECENTE_LIBRO_DI_PETER_THOMAS

[4] <http://www.historicalmaterialism.org/journal/online-articles/reading-gramsci-anew>

[5] http://kult-online.uni-giessen.de/wps/pgn/kd/det/KULT_online/1/2772/thomas-peter-d-the-gramscian-moment-philosophy-hegemony-and-marxism-leiden-brill-2009/

[6]

http://independent.academia.edu/JelleVersieren/Papers/448585/_Review_The_Gramscian_Moment_Philosophy_Hegemony_and_Marxism

[7] <http://the.sagepub.com/content/105/1/134.full.pdf+html>

[8] <http://www.counterfire.org/index.php/theory/79-gramsci/3454-gramsc-hegemony-and-the-united-front>

[9] <http://www.isj.org.uk/index.php4?id=667&issue=127>