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Antonio Gramsci: A Folk Philosopher Who Still Resists

Leonardo Caffo

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Coming into contact with Antonio Gramsci for the first time feels like stepping inside a poor Sardinian peasant house at the beginning of the twentieth century there is the smell of burning wood freshly baked bread books read by candlelight and the heavy air of prison Gramsci is not a high philosopher in the dusty academic sense of the term he is a small hunch-backed chronically ill man who spent the last eleven years of his life in fascist jails and despite everything managed to write thousands of pages that still speak to us today as if we were sitting with him at a kitchen table

Gramsci is a folk figure in the most beautiful and most political sense of the word he belongs to the people speaks their language even when he uses difficult terms he bends them to the dialect of struggle comes from below from the colonized South of Italy from a poor family in Ghilarza and carries within himself the rage and the hope of those who have always been subaltern his thought is not a closed system to be studied at uni-

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versity and then shelved it is a work tool a hammer to break the invisible chains that in twenty twenty five are called algorithms influencers public debt green passes cancel culture smart working resilience Big Brother Netflix and TikTok

This long article aims to do two things at once explain to those who know nothing about him who Gramsci was and what his key concepts are hegemony organic intellectuals historic bloc war of position war of maneuver subalternity common sense good sense passive revolution trasformismo civil society political society and so on and brutally actualize them in the present showing how twenty first century fascism no longer wears black shirts but logos and how hegemony today is exercised not through direct violence but through mass entertainment and spontaneous consent

But let us proceed in order beginning with Gramsci's life in order to contextualize his thought born in eighteen ninety one in Sardinia the fourth of seven children Antonio suffered from a form of bone tuberculosis from an early age that left him hunchbacked and physically fragile thanks to a scholarship he studied at the University of Turin where he came into contact with socialism and the workers' movement in nineteen nineteen he founded L'Ordine Nuovo a newspaper that became the organ of the factory councils movement inspired by the Russian Revolution but adapted to Italian reality in nineteen twenty one he was among the founders of the Communist Party of Italy elected to Parliament in nineteen twenty four he was arrested in nineteen twenty six despite parliamentary immunity first sentenced to five years of confinement and then to twenty years in prison he died in nineteen thirty seven at the age of forty six after writing the famous Prison Notebooks and hundreds of letters

These works are not systematic treatises they are fragmentary notes written in secret in a coded language to evade censorship yet it is precisely this folk form almost oral that makes them alive and accessible Gramsci writes the way a

Sardinian peasant speaks direct concrete full of metaphors drawn from everyday life this is the secret of his enduring resistance a thought that starts from the people and returns to the people

The heart of everything is hegemony in nineteen twenty seven in a cell in Turi prison Gramsci wrote a sentence that remains an unexploded bomb the crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear this quotation from the Prison Notebooks captures the essence of his thinking on historical transition today we are exactly in that interregnum the old the neoliberalism of the nineteen eighties to two thousand eight is in terminal crisis but the new a more just ecological feminist decolonial society struggles to be born and in this vacuum proliferate the morbid symptoms sovereigntisms conspiracy theories collective burnout influencers selling detox water for seventy nine euros wars mass depression

But what exactly is hegemony Gramsci develops the concept in the Notebooks as the way in which the dominant classes do not merely rule through force the State police army but direct society through cultural consent he writes the State equals political society plus civil society that is hegemony armored with coercion here political society is the repressive apparatus while civil society is the ensemble of private institutions schools churches media associations that produce consent hegemony is the cement that holds power together the dominant classes impose their own political intellectual and moral values on society with the aim of welding and managing power around a common sense shared by all social classes especially the subaltern ones

It is not only repression it is conviction Gramsci explains that in the West unlike Tsarist Russia the State is protected by a robust civil society made of cultural trenches and fortifications that is why revolution cannot be a frontal assault war of

maneuver but must be a slow erosion of consent war of position

Let us update this to twenty twenty five capitalist hegemony is exercised through digital platforms that make us feel free while they profile us and sell us think of how Amazon convinces you that compulsive shopping is self care or how Instagram normalizes performance anxiety about appearance when a precarious young worker thinks if you don't make it it's your fault you should have taken more courses on LinkedIn that is hegemony or when we accept that billionaires go to space while the seas rise because of climate change it is innovation it is progress Gramsci would tell us look beyond coercion labor laws that normalize precarity and see the consent that makes it seem natural

To break hegemony a counter hegemony is needed a new historic bloc an alliance of subaltern classes that produces its own common sense but how through organic intellectuals and a daily cultural war

Gramsci makes a surgical distinction between common sense and good sense common sense is the folklore of philosophy a chaotic aggregate of disparate often contradictory ideas inherited from history religion and popular folklore he writes in the Notebooks common sense is not a single unique conception identical in time and space it is the folklore of philosophy and like folklore it appears in innumerable forms and again common sense is a chaotic aggregate of disparate conceptions and in it one can find everything one wants

It is not static common sense is not something rigid and immobile but is continually transforming itself enriching itself with scientific notions and philosophical opinions that have entered into common usage within this chaos however lies good sense the critical rational potentially emancipatory part good sense emerges when the dominant ideological encrustations are scraped away from common sense

concrete passionate still rings clearer than ever organize think
resist

Today the dominant common sense is a toxic mix merit is everything migrants steal our jobs the climate is changing but the economy comes first women must reconcile family and career but without complaining it is the triumph of internalized neoliberalism the atomized individual personally responsible for his or her own misfortune think of the TikTok memes that mock strikers work more cry less or the social media narratives that turn depression into lack of a positive mindset

The political task for Gramsci is to extract good sense to transform confused anger into class consciousness for example take the populist common sense all politicians are thieves and bring out the good sense the system is corrupt because it serves capital not the people in twenty twenty five this means hacking the algorithms creating viral content that dismantles fake news about public debt or podcasts that explain how patriarchy hides behind advertising style female empowerment

Every social class produces its own intellectuals Gramsci explains it clearly all men are intellectuals but not all men have in society the function of intellectuals organic intellectuals are those organically linked to a class who organize its culture and consent for the bourgeoisie they are managers advertisers neoliberal economists for the subaltern they should be workers peasants women migrants who become thinkers and organizers of their own emancipation

Traditional intellectuals professors artists journalists by contrast pretend to be neutral but often serve power Gramsci unmasks them they come from past classes but ally themselves with the dominant ones today philosophers writing books on the future of work sponsored by Big Tech or embedded journalists who normalize proxy wars

Actualization Elon Musk is the organic intellectual of tech capitalism he sells dreams of Mars while exploiting workers on the other side a young Fridays for Future activist or a rapper denouncing exploitation in the fields is a subaltern organic intellectual the problem is that the latter are isolated what is

needed is a party or movement that organizes them into a historic bloc Gramsci is clear without intellectual direction subaltern classes remain fragmented

Subaltern classes are those subject to the initiative of the dominant classes unable to become hegemonic Gramsci studies them in the Notebooks noting how they are often of different race different religion and culture from the dominant groups subalternity is not only economic it is cultural linguistic historical subalterns internalize hegemony perceiving themselves as inferior

Twenty twenty five examples the Glovo delivery rider sees himself as an autonomous entrepreneur not an exploited worker the migrant care worker accepts low wages because it is better than nothing the unemployed person in the South feels guilty for not having invested in himself this self blame is the victory of hegemony

To escape it an intellectual and moral reform is needed educating subalterns toward an autonomous vision Gramsci conceives the party as the modern Prince from Machiavelli which organizes this direction today grassroots collectives base unions movements like Black Lives Matter or MeToo which transform subalternity into agency

Gramsci distinguishes war of maneuver rapid assault as in Russia from war of position slow cultural conquest suited to the West the difference is purely methodological they are not opposites but phases in the West civil society is a fortress to be besieged

Trenches of twenty twenty five school and university where minds are formed against corporate curricula we need teachers who teach critique media counter information versus fake news independent podcasts versus talk shows pop culture series like The Boys that dismantle capitalist superheroism trap music that speaks of the peripheries versus anesthetizing pop language fighting terms like flexibility precarity or resilience endure without rebelling territories local struggles

against extractivism such as No Tav or No Muos digital space hacking platforms creating apps for workers organization

Gramsci loves folklore he does not despise it as superstition but sees it as a subaltern conception of the world common sense is the folklore of philosophy it must be studied in order to extract the good sense from it

Today anti racist murals protest songs anti capitalist memes denunciation reels it is digital folklore Instagram stories against gender violence Twitch streams of strikes to respect it means starting from below to build hegemony

Gramsci warns without subaltern hegemony change becomes passive revolution reforms from above that preserve power like the Italian Risorgimento an elite unified the country without involving the masses today corporate greenwashing or labor reforms that increase precarity

Trasformismo the co optation of opponents left wing influencers who become brand ambassadors

Gramsci remains a figure of resistance in twenty twenty five because he tells us I am a pessimist of the intellect but an optimist of the will it is not over consent is broken through daily passion Gramsci from prison teaches us to resist is to become passionate about the struggle about culture about the people

And so war of position until the new is born

Gramsci is not a relic for academic seminars he is a companion at the kitchen table a hunchbacked Sardinian with fierce eyes who even in chains never stopped thinking with the people and for the people in an age of digital dungeons and invisible warders his tools remain sharp the interregnum continues the morbid symptoms multiply but so does the possibility of a new historic bloc if we have the courage to wage the cultural war with the same stubborn love that kept him writing until the end the old is dying the new has not yet been born in this dangerous and fertile interregnum Gramsci's voice folk