

# ANTONIO GRAMSCI: AN INTERROGATIVE PHILOSOPHER . 1

by  
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It is generally agreed by universal consent that Antonio Gramsci, one of the founding members of the Italian Communist Party (founded in 1921), was probably the most important and brilliant Marxist philosopher of the twentieth century. His book, **Quaderni del Carcere ( Prison Notebooks )**, has had few rivals in analytical depth, historical sweep and cultural vision within the tradition of Western Marxism, rivaled only by Georg Lukacs's **History and Class Consciousness**, a book which was also central in the founding of this Marxist intellectual tradition. Gramsci's book, consisting of 32 notebooks having 2,848 pages, articulates an impressive list of complex themes evolving around these topics: Italian history, education, culture, philosophy, the role of intellectuals, theory of the state, the rationalization of capitalist production, Catholicism, the family and sexuality. In one of his prison-letters to his sister-in-law, Tatiana Schucht, and assembled in **Letters from Prison**, Gramsci formulated his philosophical and methodological approach in the following words: "My entire intellectual formation was of a polemical nature, so that it is impossible for me to think 'disinterestedly' or to study for the sake of studying. Only rarely do I lose myself in a particular strain of thought and analyze something for its own inherent interest. Usually I have to engage in a dialogue, be dialectical, to arrive at some intellectual stimulation." It would seem that it is the structure of dialogism in Gramsci's critical thinking, the dialogism that Mikhail Bakhtin found in the writings of Dostoevsky, that accounts for the unparalleled breakthroughs he has effected in Marxist epistemology.

Probably the most singular achievement of Gramsci, among many other remarkable achievements, was to be able to conceptualize on a political plane the historical differentiation between the East (Russia) and the West (Italy, France, England and Germany), following the victory of the Russian Revolution in 1917 and the failure of the German revolution in 1918-19 and the Turin's workers' council in 1920. Gramsci confronted the question of the reason why the revolution had triumphed in the East and failed in the West. In the East the state predominates over civil society, whereas in the West the state is submerged in civil society. In the East while the state subordinates civil society to its authority through force and coercion, in the West the state is submerged in civil society and rules it through consent. In the West this consent is won through cultural hegemony; in other words, in the West the bourgeois class is stronger ideologically and thus can dispense with coercion, while in the East was very

weak, if existant at all. The strategy for overthrowing class rule in each zone was naturally different. Hegemony is a concept whivh has won tremendous favour with intellectuals in many parts of the world. It is Gramsci who profoundly established this concept as an instrument of historical explanation.

Pier Paolo Pasolini, the great Italian pot, better known as a film-director, has presented a new reading of Antonio Gramsci: namely, the establishing of languages that informed Gramsci's investigations and formulations. By dedicating one of his volume of poetry, **Le Cenere di Gramsci ( The Ashes of Gramsci )**, to Gramsci, Pasolini not only affirms his alignment with this intellectual tradition, but also pays tribute to Gramsci's reconceptualization of the problematics of national culture and popular culture. A line in one of the poems in this collection reads: "The shame of self-contradiction, to be/with you and against you in visceral darkness." In England also, Gramsci has inspired artists: both the novel by John Fowles, **Daniel Martin** , and the dramatic play by Trevor Griffiths, **Occupations** , are inspired by the work of Antonio Gramsci.

In a short, brilliant essay, "On Gramsci's Language", Pasolini deconstructs the philological and phonological ensembles of written Italianisms in gramsci's writings. With remarkable precision, he analyses the simultaneous and/or sequential enfolding of complex linguistic structures in the writings of Antonio Gramsci: from the collocation of the Sardinian language and classical Italian, through the adoption of the irrationalism of the literary language of the Italian bourgeoisie since the moment of national unification, to the emergence of the language of Marxist humanism and the incorporation of progressive French scientific thought. The real merit of Pasolini's essay, besides its superlative reading of cultural formations and structures in Gramsci, is its suggestive indication or implication that Gramsci's analyses of various cultural objects should be grasped as hierarchical system of relationships .

Gramsci theorized the components of popular culture or the hegemonic subordination of popular culture to dominant culture (elite culture) as constituting the hierarchical systems of historical relationships. Though Gramsci was centrally concerned with folklore as a conception of the world , a popular perspective in opposition to the official perspective of the hegemonic culture, his theorizations have deep implications for dance culture, in that dancing too could, or should, be seen as expressive of certain unstated ideological perspectives and horizons. In other words, dancing is a structure of bodily movements which are in themselves ideological, as much as they are expressive of particular ideological constestations within a particular national culture and political space. Dancing exists inside historical processes, inside political structures and inside ideological systems. The different dance forms and various dance traditions within a particular national territory are implicitly or covertly at war with each

other for the occupation and control of the national cultural space. The economic returns and ideological satisfactions (the fulfillment of unquenchable desires) to be had from the hegemonic control of dance space within a national culture are enormous, as ballet has been teaching us for a couple of centuries. Modern dance has not let this lesson pass unnoticed.

Following closely on the logic of Gramsci's political reading and articulation of popular culture, the various dance forms within a national culture (ethnic dance, folk dance, modern dance, ballet, war dance, etc.) constitute collectively a hierarchical system of relationships (of subordination, of domination, of hegemonic supersession) and constitute singularly particular conceptions of the world. In order to understand these complex relationships and conceptions to be apparent or evident, the formal qualities and material content of the various dance forms would have to be examined in their detailed compositions.

1 The essay was commissioned by *Tanz Aktuell* in 1988 but was not published.