

**Intellectuals and the Historical Construction of  
Knowledge and Identity:  
A Reappraisal of Gramsci's Ideas on Leadership**

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**Abstract**

This essay investigates Gramsci's theory of intellectuals alongside coterminous question of knowledge and identity construction. It will be found that the concept of self is mediated in historical processes characterised by iniquitous social relations. It is not just a question of "who we are" but also to what do we attribute our loss of self? Gramsci's answer is that we cannot know who we are until we are all equally free to make our own destiny, but that this is not possible under capitalist social relations. In any age, human identity is malleable and subject to cultural construction, always underpinned and underwritten by organic economic practices and

social relations of production. Intellectuals are vital functionaries in reinforcing the culture in which oppressive capitalist conditions gain ideological acceptance. Intellectuals have had a vital role in history but this function reaches a zenith of sophistication in the capitalist era. There can be little possibility of identifying a stable anchorage for human identity. This is why it has proved elusive throughout history to locate a so-called theory of “human nature.” It is more fruitful to analyse the question from a historiological perspective. For Gramsci we are “makers of ourselves,” but what have we made? Self-knowledge depends in turn on gaining knowledge of the historical processes in which our identity is constructed.

***Keywords: transcendent intellectuals, hegemony, historical bloc, organic/traditional intellectuals, common sense, good sense.***

## **Introduction**

This essay explores Gramsci’s commentary on the role of intellectuals in society. He provides rich insights into the historical processes in which conceptions of self in time and space are generated and maintained. Humans are self-made and there is no pre-determining dynamic outside the historical process. Yet, that said, this does not mean that humans are masters of themselves. For Gramsci, knowledge, particularly self-conscious knowledge, is the key to progress. However, this knowledge is cultivated historically under conditions of oppressive social relations, and these have a vital role in upholding them. It is inevitable, therefore, that the first step in seeing one’s way through to the truth of one’s life should involve extremely complex historical and social factors.

Antonio Gramsci was born on the island of Sardinia in 1891 and died in a Rome clinic in 1937. He spent the last decade of his life in a fascist gaol. It is here that he produced a series of notebooks on a variety of themes. His main concern was to investigate why Italy had not gone the way of the Soviet Union in 1917 and had turned to fascism instead. In what remains a stunning feat of intellectual prowess and sheer tenacity, his interlinked theories of intellectuals and hegemony comprise the centre-piece of his prison work.

Gramsci subscribed to the basic precept of historical materialism which holds that human relations in any age are always constructed on the basis of the needs of material production and, moreover, that this process dictates that one section of society assumes a position of ascendancy over another. Moreover, on the question of consciousness, he accepted the Marxian canon that the leading economic forces in any age are simultaneously the leading intellectual forces. However, within western Marxist circles current at the time and notwithstanding one or two notable exceptions, the latter precept suffered from curious ambivalence at best and outright neglect at worst.

Out of admiration for Lenin, Gramsci attaches great significance to consciousness (politics) in history. Readmitting critical aspects of Hegelianism into historical materialism, Gramsci sees “civil society” as gaining limited autonomy from the legal political state and the economy in western liberal systems. Civil society becomes a locus where moral outlooks are forged and humans acquire a sense of self-consciousness, which in turn informs action. Historiologically, consciousness is a sort of signpost attached to the movement of those “organic” processes that are responsible for initiating pressures and “necessities” on human relations. Roughly stated, the question of “identity,” or “self-consciousness,” cannot be separated from history and an ongoing struggle for education and emancipation from the contradictions of social relations.

These relations hold the key to identity. Gramsci’s great contribution to Marxism was to illustrate how oppressive economic practices are given moral legitimacy through a process of ideological exchange whereby the oppressed become instrumental in their own oppression. Together with a corporate struggle between class-forces in the economic domain there exists an arena of ideological exchange and transfer in the civil. This serves dominant interest groups by propagating a certain kind of truth relative to those interests and by blocking the formation of truth conceptions which might offer the oppressed a historical account of itself necessary for its self-emancipation.

Gramsci referred to this manipulation of consciousness as “hegemony.” Thus, he introduces the concept of consent into the Marxist schema as a form of instrumental power where hitherto there was really only force. Hegemony conditions the human mind in certain ways through the absorption of ideas and values. The

essential question posed by Gramsci was, therefore, whose ideas and values are we discussing? It is this question that prompted him to consider in detail the topic of intellectuals and their function in the “historical bloc” (civil society + legal state + economy). Intellectuals, he finds, are the constructors of “reality” through which people acquire a sense of themselves and their place in the world. To rephrase Hegel, intellectuals turn the “real into the rational.” But this is no arbitrary, voluntary or abstract construct. Intellectuals are instrumental in securing the ideological conviction of civil society necessary for the enactment and maintenance of a certain level of historical civilisation.

### **Historical Materialism**

When Marx inverted the Hegelian method to achieve “man standing on his feet,” the concept of progress changed with it. In *The German Ideology*, Marx proceeds to discuss different historical modes of production. He goes on to show that in each there is a unique division of labour and appropriation of the produced goods that in time becomes institutionalised. At any time there will be opposing groups that stand in objectively different relationships to the means and products of material production. These groups are, of course, classes and in any epoch class is defined according to which group owns and controls the means of production and which is reduced to supplying labour. In the capitalist era Marx dubbed the first group “bourgeoisie,” the second, “proletariat.”

Now, this is further complicated in that society is evolving. Since we are talking of humans and humans, as Marx indicates, can be differentiated from animals on a number of conscious levels, there is an inherent capacity to reflect and improve on production techniques.<sup>1</sup> This institutes change to working practices that effect changes in labour relations also. Eventually the political institutions that have evolved around the development of class relations begin to obstruct the further development of production techniques and these become “fettered.” At this point, if it has not occurred sooner, society becomes conscious of itself. The class elements glimpse their respective socio-locations and the rising or historically privileged class leads the fight to establish new institutions to allow for further, necessary productive

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<sup>1</sup> Marx 1977, p. 160.

changes.

In the Preface to *A Critique of Political Economy* of 1859, Marx offers a synopsis of his method:

[i]n the social production of their life, men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces. The sum of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political, and intellectual life process in general. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness.<sup>2</sup>

However, it is important to appreciate that whilst the material process operates independently of the “will” of its social actors, this has to be distinguished from periods when the actors come to sense their historical situation and act upon it. Marx continues:

a distinction should always be made between the material transformation of the economic conditions of production, which can be determined with the precision of natural science, and the legal, political, religious, aesthetic, or philosophic – in short, ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out.<sup>3</sup>

For Marx consciousness has a dual function. Firstly, it is instrumental in disguising the true character of social relations. Secondly, it is vital at certain periods in bringing about institutional changes necessary for the expansion of economic forces. Excluding such exceptional periods, the determinist reductionism that emerges from the Preface holds to an economic causation of all intellectual phenomena, including the political – where the concept of self is reflected. On this reading politics is depicted as a reliable replication (superstructure) of economic

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<sup>2</sup> Marx 1977, p. 389.

<sup>3</sup> Marx 1977, pp. 389-90.

activity (infrastructure). All processes begin with economic activity from which a political culture spontaneously arises. Another way to say this is that politics is an inverted expression of life practices and has little positive potential other than during revolutionary conditions when productive conditions are simultaneously swept away. For the most part, ideology is merely an exercise in deception; as an excusing mechanism for capitalist relations.<sup>4</sup>

For Gramsci, two problems arise. Firstly, Marx conflates the ideological and the legal within the enclosure of the superstructure and this fails to differentiate between moments of “force” and “consent.” For the maintenance of oppressive social relations, liberal capitalist systems do not rely on force alone and this is because, secondly, ideology is not merely a passive psychological condition. Ideology takes on hegemonic properties when it becomes the active “cement” that binds together the different characteristics of the relations of production.<sup>5</sup> The consequence of Gramsci’s amendment is that the economic, civil and legal become three vital and mutually supportive elements of the historical bloc. The superstructure is not passively generated by production. Indeed, it takes a leading role in supporting production. One can still refer to the “superstructure” certainly, and Gramsci often does, but he created a didactic distinction between the political characteristics of consent and force so that the particular processes of the civil could be observed.

Gramsci thus amends the *camera obscura* version of ideology of Marx by arguing that hegemony intervenes into the space between the world and the proletarian experience of it by “semi-voluntary” means. The capitalist world remains distorted as a means to truth and disunited but the proletariat is somehow recruited into the capitalist project to make it appear to all as though it is not. In other words, the worker, engulfed in antithetical culture, becomes far more active in creating self-deception by imbibing partial bourgeois truth through art, the media, an array of voluntary civil institutions and even trade unions. The point is this is not a spontaneous occurrence; rather it is the result of considerable active social engineering. Gramsci became particularly aware of this when analysing the Italian state and the contrasting historical roles of Niccolò Machiavelli (1469-1527)<sup>6</sup> and his (Gramsci’s) celebrated contemporary Benedetto Croce (1866-1952).

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<sup>4</sup> Larrain 1979, p. 173.

<sup>5</sup> Gramsci 1995, p. 474.

<sup>6</sup> The Machiavellian influence on Gramsci’s theory of hegemony is emphasised in Femia 1998. This is

## Croce and Intellectualism

Whilst almost alone in his view at the time, Gramsci had great respect for Machiavelli. He considered it peculiar, though, that Machiavelli's *The Prince* should seek to provide advice for a ruling dynasty (the Medici family) that had already demonstrated great prowess in statecraft. Judging from this, and pronouncements he made elsewhere, it was evident to Gramsci that Machiavelli was actually seeking to communicate in an underhanded way the elemental features of government and politics to the Medici regime's opponents and the embryonic forces of Italian republicanism. Gramsci writes:

Machiavelli himself remarks that what he is writing about is in fact practised, and has always been practised, by the greatest men throughout history. So it does not seem that he was writing for those who are already in the know; nor is his style that of disinterested scientific activity; nor is it possible to think that he arrived at his theses in the field of political science by way of philosophical speculation – which would have been something of a miracle in that field at the time, when even today he meets with such hostility and opposition.<sup>7</sup>

By surreptitious means, which have since become synonymous with him, Machiavelli thus “gave the game away.” In what amounts to a massive leap forward in knowledge, Machiavelli slips into the public domain the secret techniques underpinning the political domination of the De Medici family in 15<sup>th</sup> century Florence. Gramsci is implying here that once this differential in knowledge between leader and led is removed, the source of political oppression will be nullified and this amounts to the fostering of a revolutionary situation – one Machiavelli was conscious was “necessary,” in the Marxian sense of the term (to facilitate the transition from

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in contrast to Anderson 1976-7:15-7 and Anderson 1976-7, who locates the source as the 19<sup>th</sup> century Russians Plekhanov, Axelrod, Martov, Lenin and even Bukharin. In fact, in terms of influence, both are correct, but Gramsci's preoccupation with Lenin and the Russians marks his earlier work (the value of which Femia largely dismisses), whilst Gramsci's interest in Machiavelli can be traced to his early prison writing which Femia regards as occurring after an effective “epistemic break.” This is unsustainable (Greaves 2005). The best two biographies of Gramsci state the following: “[there was] no stupendous rupture in Gramsci's intellectual development since 1919-20” (Davidson 1977, p. 242) and “[Gramsci] did not change his mind in prison” (Spriano 1979, p. 67).

<sup>7</sup> Gramsci 1971, p. 135.

feudalism to mercantilism in Italy).<sup>8</sup> In essence, Machiavelli grasped both the nature of his historical location and its “necessities” (those things demanded of it). It is not historically accurate to say that Machiavelli was a nationalist and in every sense conscious of the necessity to create the conditions for the spread of overseas trade but, as is evident from a cursory reading of the *The Prince*, Machiavelli nonetheless sensed the need for politics to adapt to changing economic conditions.

Something less revolutionary but equally clandestine was happening in Italy during Gramsci’s period. During the early decades of the twentieth century the neo-Hegelian philosopher Benedetto Croce was Italy’s most celebrated intellectual. He basked in an aura of aloof inscrutability. Croce was a *de facto* member of an unofficial club of great liberal intellectuals spread throughout the so-called free world which considered itself reborn in the modern era according to the defence of time-honoured values of erudition and civilisation. As Gouldner puts it, the intellectuals enjoyed the self-appointed status of “philosopher kings”.<sup>9</sup> The key underlying political characteristic of this group was its paternalistic elitism, and a characteristic distrust and fear of the masses.

In the Hegelian tradition, Croce presented the picture that, due to the dialectical motor provided by, what amounts to, the internal contradictions of intellectual life, intellectuals should be regarded as historically seamless and transcendent. Intellectuals provide constancy and continuity in any age and are generally given to guide the historical process forward by correcting human error. Croce writes: “[w]e must trust the class called the ‘intellectuals,’ as Hegel acknowledged by calling them the ‘universal class’ or ‘the unclassed.’”<sup>10</sup>

Croce launched a fierce denunciation of Marxism in a variety of journals around the turn of the century. This “campaign” held a clue for Gramsci as to his (Croce’s) social location and sense of historical necessity. In light of Gramsci’s claim that Marxism was the most advanced philosophy of the capitalist era, to what did Croce’s objections amount? Croce criticised classical Marxism as an unworkable combination of science and ideology. However, Croce had nothing at all to say about the corrective to this criticism offered by the Italian Marxist scholar Antonio Labriola (1843-1904).

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<sup>8</sup> Note, for example, his comments in *The Prince* on colonial management (1999:13-27).

<sup>9</sup> Gouldner 1979, pp. 65–81.

<sup>10</sup> Croce 1949, p. 90.



Borrowing heavily the theme of Marx's Theses on Feuerbach, Labriola dubbed Marxism "a philosophy of praxis." Praxis involves bringing into concert the concrete historical conditions humans had created for themselves, in effect, ways of actively living, the humanly objective (economics), and subjective reflections upon them (politics/ideology). Praxis rectifies the monism of crude materialism and abstract idealism whilst avoiding Cartesian dualism. Mind and matter reciprocate. It works in the following way. The attempt to change the world will furnish knowledge not only of the world itself but of the exact task it will become necessary to do in order to change it. The implication is that in the process of changing the world, humans too become changed in relation to that thing seemingly outside of themselves they have changed, and so on. On this account, humans gradually humanise the external world as they grow to know it, and humanising *it* will further humanise *them*. Hence, the value of praxis lies in its mass educational potential. Consider, therefore, Croce's likely reaction to this programme. It threatened the entire culture that conferred his intellectual status.

Croce's great philosophical mission was the restoration of Hegelian idealism but this seemed to Gramsci to be somewhat disingenuous. For all his Olympian idealism there was in fact an element of Machivelli's materialism about his practical politics. As Bellamy claims, although Croce's ideas were couched in obscure jargon, he nevertheless attempted to diffuse the social tensions associated with Italy's modernising economy.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, Croceanism had resulted in an indirect attempt to make moderate political and economic liberalism popular in Italy. Whilst on the one hand few could fully understand Croce's work, or had the time or inclination to study it, on the other, he regularly dispensed with pedantry to fulfil a vital societal role. Gramsci writes:

I feel that Croce's greatest quality has always been his ability to get his conception of the world into general circulation. . . . Croce's solutions to a vast number of problems in the end become common currency, and circulate anonymously; they get into newspapers, and into everyday life, with the result that there are a lot of "Croceans" who are unaware of the

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<sup>11</sup> Bellamy 2002, p. 135.

fact that they *are* Croceans, and maybe don't even know that Croce exists.<sup>12</sup>

Hence, Croce's account of history as a transcendent, classless story of the search for freedom among an elite group actually contained a good deal of materialism. This served a distinctly conservative historical necessity – when taken from the standpoint of the class forces he opposed. In creating a sort of philosophical distraction, Croce fulfilled a historical need in attempting to legitimise Italy's capitalist forces at a time when the gains of Italy's bourgeois revolution of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century were under threat from communists armed with potent Marxist doctrine on the one hand and fascist anti-intellectual philistinism on the other. Croce was in effect a post-revolutionary consolidator for the forces of liberal capitalism. The inherent contradiction was not lost on Gramsci. He writes:

Croce in particular feels himself closely linked to Aristotle and Plato, but he does not conceal, on the other hand, his links with senators Agnelli and Benni, and it is precisely here that one can discern the most significant character of Croce's philosophy.<sup>13</sup>

From an apparently disinterested philosophical standpoint elements of Croce's liberalism steadily leached into the Italian superstructure and became ideological currency, but what is the psycho-political mechanism?

### **What is Philosophy?**

For Gramsci, no human society was ever brought into existence, or maintained, without some form of shared popular philosophical outlook. Any society requires an account of itself and its activity and formal philosophy has a role in this process.

Philosophers stand at the apex of intellectual life. They study philosophy, are trained in thinking philosophically and are thus confined to specialist groups. Yet, it

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<sup>12</sup> Gramsci 1988, p. 212.

<sup>13</sup> Gramsci 1971, p. 8. Senators Agnelli and Benni were respectively company directors of Fiat Motors and Montecatini Chemicals.

is not immediately apparent how or why the questions discussed by philosophers ultimately differ in substance from the reflections undertaken by “non-philosophers.” Gramsci writes:

[i]t is not possible to separate what is known as “scientific” philosophy from the common and popular philosophy which is only a fragmentary collection of ideas and opinions.<sup>14</sup>

In this sense, what unites philosophy with the mass is social activity.<sup>15</sup> If, however, philosophy is an integral characteristic of the social condition, but only an elite group are trained in it, how does it reach and inform those who have neither the time nor the inclination to study it formally?

Croce distanced himself from the mass but that in itself supported his social credibility as a philosophical “clean pair of hands.” His idealism depicted history as a story of philosophy and the evolution of the quest for truth.<sup>16</sup> Thus, the masses are given to act merely on the basis of the information they receive from philosophers. There is no sense in Croce, therefore, that the philosopher has a necessary relationship with his audience other than that of a sort of patronising monologue from above – with the added insult of it not being consciously informed by the same life conditions.

Croce was content to keep the masses at arm’s length from higher philosophy. Left in this condition, a spontaneous, makeshift world-view arises in the mass derived from the environment. This outlook Gramsci refers to as “common sense” (*senso comune*).

Common sense is not a single unique conception, identical in time and space. It is the “folklore” of philosophy, and, like folklore, it takes countless different forms. Its most fundamental characteristic is that it is a conception which, even in the brain of one individual, is fragmentary, incoherent and inconsequential, in conformity with the social and cultural position of those masses whose philosophy it is.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Gramsci 1971, p. 328.

<sup>15</sup> Gramsci 1971, p. 344; Gramsci 1995, p. 386.

<sup>16</sup> Gramsci 1995, p. 387.

<sup>17</sup> Gramsci 1971, p. 419.

Common sense is a compound theory of reality drawn from the imprecise corpus of ideas circulating the superstructure. It is eclectic and uncritically absorbed, it contains contradictory elements, is wayward and lacking in rigour. As we have seen, whilst Croce took no direct interest in the education of the masses, he had nonetheless established a sort of “drip-feed” into the Italian superstructure for his liberal philosophy. Hence, for Croce to do this, his ideas had to make some sense in terms of ways of living to those in receipt of them; that is, despite the paradox that under his appropriation of Hegelian dialectics the necessity for it was unexplainable.

Gramsci explains this apparent contradiction by pointing to the larger contradiction of worker consciousness. The worker is in effect caught in two minds; one aspect of mind is stimulated industrially, so to speak, through the conditions and spontaneous experience of labour, whilst the other consciousness derives from received information from the capitalist intellectuals.<sup>18</sup> Of course, Marxism was deemed to be the cure for this peculiar psychological affliction.

Indeed, Gramsci contrasts “common sense” with what he calls “good sense.” He conceives of good sense as a latent critical faculty in all humans, but it is one that suffers from underdevelopment and becomes choked in a bewildering superstructural babble created by the class opponent. The most important feature of good sense is the critical relationship it bears to practical activity. Gramsci states that good sense depends upon:

overcoming bestial and elemental passions through a conception of necessity which gives a conscious direction to one’s activity. This is the healthy nucleus that exists in “common sense,” the part of it which can be called “good sense” and which deserves to be made more unitary and coherent.<sup>19</sup>

Gramsci’s overall point is that when one becomes conscious of the class function of ideas it is indeed possible to extricate good sense from common sense. Good sense exploits the faculties employed by formal philosophy, such as the ability to structure the mind logically and coherently, to think hygienically, interpret empirical data, and so forth. This does not mean everyone can become a great philosopher, but everyone

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<sup>18</sup> Gramsci 1971, p. 333.

<sup>19</sup> Gramsci 1971, p. 328.

can certainly come to a more systematic assessment of his or her social position in the world. Good sense is therefore loaded with historical potential. Gramsci writes:

[i]n acquiring one's conception of the world one always belongs to a particular grouping which is that of all the social elements which share the same mode of thinking and acting. We are all conformists of some conformism or other, always man-in-the-mass or collective man. The question is this: of what historical type is the conformism, the mass humanity to which one belongs? When one's conception of the world is not critical and coherent but disjointed and episodic, one belongs simultaneously to a multiplicity of mass human groups. The personality is strangely composite: it contains Stone Age elements and principles of a more advanced science, prejudices from all past phases of history at the local level and intuitions of a future philosophy which will be that of a human race united the world over. To criticise one's own conception of the world means therefore to make it a coherent unity and to raise it to the level reached by the most advanced thought in the world.<sup>20</sup>

Nowhere does Gramsci suggest that it is necessary for the working class to become philosophers in order to bring on a revolution, but it is necessary to discover those elements of common sense that speak for the worker's organic condition. Thereafter, the historical dross of other classes, the psychic elements of one's own oppression, can be largely eliminated. As Gramsci understood it, the Factory Council supplemented by the Italian Communist Party (Modern Prince), was to embody these critical educational qualities, as we shall see later.

### **Intellectuals and Production**

Whilst intellectuals are depicted by Croce as somehow above it all or classless, Gramsci, then, uncovers a confidence trick. He argues that intellectuals must be "studied concretely," by which he means in the context of living social reality.<sup>21</sup> He dismisses Croce's Hellenistic assessment of intellectuals as false: "there

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<sup>20</sup> Gramsci 1971, p. 324.

<sup>21</sup> Gramsci, 1971, p. 6.

does not exist any independent class of intellectuals, but every social group has its own stratum of intellectuals, or tends to form one.”<sup>22</sup> Gramsci begins by attacking Croce’s intellectual transcendentalism and dismantling the conventional separation of the intellectual from the rest of labouring humanity.

Ironically, Gramsci derives the idea from Croce that “[all] men are intellectuals . . . but not all men have in society the function of intellectuals.”<sup>23</sup> Croce formulated the notion according to his liberal idealism that all humans are (at least in theory) capable of choosing to pursue and exploit their intellectual faculties. Thus, humans can break free of social structures by grasping the timeless essence of history – the “search for liberty.”<sup>24</sup> Gramsci agrees that all men are intellectuals but their distinguishing characteristic is their social function. To begin with, we do not find the distinction between intellectual and non-intellectual in the raw process of labour itself, since it is not possible to produce at all without intellectual calculation. Gramsci argues:

[w]hen one distinguishes between intellectuals and non-intellectuals, one is referring in reality only to the immediate social function of the professional category of the intellectuals, that is, one has in mind the direction in which their specific professional activity is weighted, whether towards intellectual elaboration or towards muscular-nervous effort. This means that, although one can speak of intellectuals, one cannot speak of non-intellectuals, because non-intellectuals do not exist.<sup>25</sup>

In terms of the generic human organism, the notion of non-intellectual labour is false. Everyone does it; any mental activity that involves the stringing together of thoughts in an organised way is an intellectual process, and the productive sphere involves such cognition at all levels.<sup>26</sup> In speaking of the intellectual, then, we refer to a conventional phenomenon and not objective facts derived necessarily from any specific personal qualities that person might possess. As Showstack Sassoon reminds us, the act of frying an egg or sewing on a button from time to time does not make us

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<sup>22</sup> Gramsci 1971, p. 60.

<sup>23</sup> Gramsci 1971, p. 9.

<sup>24</sup> Croce 1941, p. 59.

<sup>25</sup> Gramsci 1971, p. 9.

<sup>26</sup> Gramsci 1971, p. 8.

“cooks or tailors.”<sup>27</sup> It is meaningless to define ourselves in these terms unless we contribute to society a specific type of labour. If a factory worker, for example, writes poetry for pleasure, enjoys classical music and literature, that person might be intellectual in a confined sense, but there is no necessary social component or impact to this activity. Gramsci is therefore trying to fix the meaning of the term intellectual in the modern world to productive specialisms and supporting cadres created by an extremely complex division of labour. Gramsci states:

[i]n the modern world, technical education, closely bound to industrial labour even at the most primitive and unqualified level, must form the basis of the new type of intellectual.<sup>28</sup>

Firstly, then, Gramsci denigrates the cultural atmosphere of mystique that affords a place for intellectuals as a “class in themselves”; insofar as everyone works, everyone thinks. Intellectuals, Gramsci finds, are no different from workers of any kind, until, that is, production ascribes them a specific role and function. The intellectual and non-intellectual become distinguished only according to a division of labour. In other words, it is only in the context of productive discipline that the term intellectual gains any substantive meaning. There is no possibility, then, of creating a genealogy of the intellectual in isolation of the historical labour process. Gramsci elaborates here a theme first identified by Marx in *Capital*.

The separation of the intellectual powers of production from the manual labour, and the conversion of those powers into the might of capital over labour, is . . . finally completed by modern industry.<sup>29</sup>

Having collapsed the distinction between intellectual and non-intellectual according to the involvement of the intellect in all kinds of generic labour, the distinguishing characteristic of intellectuals must be found in socialised labour. The distinction then, is conventional and functional, but is accorded by Gramsci a vital and unique role in the maintenance of capitalist production.

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<sup>27</sup> Showstack Sassoon 2000, p. 46.

<sup>28</sup> Gramsci, 1971, p. 9.

<sup>29</sup> Marx 1998, p. 607.

## Intellectuals and the Superstructure

The function of intellectuals can be set apart from other workers in two closely related senses: the disciplinary and the educational. Intellectuals educate and discipline the entire culture in which the conflictual labour process operates by projecting the specific realities of production as though these are trans-historical certainties common to all, and are therefore indisputable, moral, just and so on. In other words, intellectuals are defined according to hegemonic function. The significance of the intellectual is one of promoting a workable moral totality from an economically fragmented society in which the need for coercion is minimised. Hence, the intellectual becomes distinguishable in that his/her work is located for the most part in the superstructure, but this is linked fundamentally to production. Gramsci writes:

[e]very social group, coming into existence on the original terrain of an essential function in the world of economic production, creates together with itself, organically, one or more strata of intellectuals which give it homogeneity and an awareness of its own function not only in the economic but also in the social and political fields.<sup>30</sup>

Carl Boggs is right to state that intellectuals are both technocrats and social critics.<sup>31</sup> They often have a high level of technical expertise on the one hand and this places them in social positions in which the industrial rationale is imparted – managers, supervisors, etc. On the other hand, the social critic engages in necessary superstructural maintenance work on behalf of capitalists who have neither the time nor expertise to do it themselves.

For Gramsci, the notion of the historical continuity of intellectuals merely reflects a historical necessity. In any epoch intellectuals deputise for the leading economic forces by engaging in vital superstructural work. Gramsci states:

[t]he intellectuals are the dominant group's "deputies" exercising the subaltern functions of social hegemony and political government. These

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<sup>30</sup> Gramsci 1971, p. 5.

<sup>31</sup> Boggs 1993, p. 3.



comprise: . . . The spontaneous consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant group; this consent is “historically” caused by the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production.<sup>32</sup>

Gramsci therefore expands our understanding of intellectuals to encompass a range of occupations that are not normally considered intellectual at all. Those we commonly understand as “intellectual,” such as philosophers, artists, academics and writers, find themselves grounded in the same socio-economic project as engineers, lawyers and doctors, etc in civil society, and state professionals, such as clerks, policemen, teachers and civil servants in the state/political sector. All contribute to the creation of a culture that seeks direct or indirect harmony with production. Teachers, for example, have an obvious educational/disciplinary role in modern capitalist states. Not only do they pass on state curricula but, in a number of ways, transmit culture consistent with gearing children toward a later role in the capitalist world.<sup>33</sup>

The case of artists is perhaps more complex but there are two general points to make – beyond that of the obvious inability to shield art from the market and commodification. Firstly, Gramsci sees the essential function of hegemony as creating a necessary socio-historical equilibrium. Hence, there is the functional argument that art is hegemonic since it creates the impression that all humans enjoy the same kinds of things, have similar tastes, etc. Indeed, art affects a necessary level of cultural homogenisation where there is otherwise none. For example, in his cultural writings, Gramsci makes copious reference to the role of Italian opera – i.e., the adopted art form of the northern Italian bourgeoisie – in securing a cohesive national identity necessary for the functioning of the capitalist state.<sup>34</sup> In other words, national identity was advanced through the social monopolisation of a popular art form.

There is also the sense in which, as Gramsci notices, Croce attempts to take from the classics, and Dante especially, intellectual authority which helps him (Croce)

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<sup>32</sup> Gramsci 1971, p. 12.

<sup>33</sup> The classical argument of this kind remains: Bowles & Gintis 1976.

<sup>34</sup> Gramsci 1999, p. 343.

climb to a position of respect and cultural dominance in Italy. In other words, in finding cultural affinity with Dante, Croce finds a universal (timeless) category in art, in which to claim the corresponding timelessness of the intellectual in whom he identifies himself.<sup>35</sup>

It is important to note that intellectuals are not defined in the conventional sense of erudition, originality or indeed by the flashes of brilliance of artists and literati. Gramsci's views on art are consistent with his general claim that intellectuals need only occupy strategically important positions in society in order to churn out cultural logic to complement the political conditions necessary for a given productive rationale.

Yet, it remains for Gramsci to demonstrate why precisely the organic intellectual of the capitalist class assumes a certain class identity and function. Croce, of course, makes the very case that by definition the intellectual is a "free-thinker." Hence, in what way is the intellectual grounded? As Cuneo sees it, since capitalist production is organised on the principle of surplus value, this is the objective reality underlying the subjective political battles of the class struggles of capitalist cultures.<sup>36</sup> If this is true, how does Gramsci relate this economic struggle to the organic intellectual struggle?

As has been said, Gramsci marks off intellectuals in terms of their function, which is, he says, "directive and organisational."<sup>37</sup> He does not, therefore, conceive of intellectuals as a strict economic category, as is the case with other workers. That is to say, they are not defined by direct involvement in surplus-value extraction *per se* – although shop-floor supervisors and so forth might be subject to it. For the most part intellectuals are the capitalists' hired legitimising agents.<sup>38</sup> Gramsci argues that intellectuals are "functionaries" in a "complex of superstructures" which are not directly correlated to production in the same way as the fundamental social groups themselves, but represent activity that is "mediated" by the entire social fabric.<sup>39</sup> For example, Gramsci identifies "governing personnel,"<sup>40</sup> *funzionari* or state

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<sup>35</sup> See: comments Croce 1922, pp. 71-2. For a more detailed discussion, see: Bové 1992, pp. 200-14. This is Chapter 10, entitled "Dante, Gramsci, And Cultural Criticism."

<sup>36</sup> Cuneo 1982, p. 378.

<sup>37</sup> Gramsci 1971, p. 16.

<sup>38</sup> Gramsci 1971, p. 12.

<sup>39</sup> Gramsci 1971, p. 12.

<sup>40</sup> (Gramsci 1971, p. 117.

bureaucrats,<sup>41</sup> schoolteachers,<sup>42</sup> all of whom must be regarded as funded *by* the capitalist *from* surplus value, with the express purpose of legitimising surplus value extraction.

Does this explain, then, the loyalty of the intellectual to a given productive form? Gramsci appears to suggest that, on the one hand, the loyalty of the intellectuals to production is rather more loosely determined in the subjective rationality of the intellectuals themselves; that their fortune is linked to the overall fortune of production.<sup>43</sup> In this sense, the relationship of the intellectual to production is one of (mutual) dependency. Evidently the status of the intellectuals rises and falls along with the mode of production they articulate; for it is production that provides the intellectuals with definition, appoints them to prestigious positions, rewards them, and so on. Therefore, an attack on the values of production, by organic intellectuals appointed by production, is equivalent to undermining their own social status, and thus the credibility of their message. This, it seems, is unlikely to occur - that is, at least until a credible alternative view of production is put forward. Indeed, for on the other hand, Gramsci suggests that intellectuals are never able as individuals to go significantly against the entire moral tide of society unless they attach themselves to dissenting organic social forces.

Gramsci thus plots the role of the intellectual according to the historical map they (perhaps, inadvertently) provide for the analysis of superstructures.<sup>44</sup> He sees the economy as the nucleus of an integrated culture, and so it is more correct to place the function of the intellectual not just in terms of production but in terms of the socio-economic formation as a whole.<sup>45</sup> For the greater part then, in bourgeois societies, the capitalist entrusts the organisation and articulation of the general relations of production to means of control that are external to his or her business.<sup>46</sup> One could, in this sense, pose the question in terms of what it is the intellectuals do for the entire structure of *capitalist culture*, that is, rather than merely the *capitalist* with whom he/she may have little direct contact.

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<sup>41</sup> (Gramsci 1971, p. 13.

<sup>42</sup> Gramsci 1971, p. 26.

<sup>43</sup> Gramsci 1971, p. 14.

<sup>44</sup> Gramsci 1971, p. 15.

<sup>45</sup> Vacca 1982, p. 63.

<sup>46</sup> Gramsci 1971, p. 6.

However, it is important to consider that the separation of the capitalist from the intellectual deputy creates vital space for self-legitimation in exploitative societies. The limited autonomy of intellectuals from production affords the very flexibility necessary to affect the view that they are actually people of good standing. That is, insofar as they are not thought to be in the pocket of industry or, indeed, part of it, their view is regarded as reasonably impartial and thus economically transcendent. This is important because, as Gramsci says, everyone

must respect [the] . . . order through spontaneous assent, and not merely as an external imposition – it must be a necessity recognised and proposed to themselves as freedom, and not simply the result of coercion.<sup>47</sup>

We ought to be reminded, however, that Gramsci in no way dispenses with the concept of force as an aspect of domination. The moment of force is preceded by hegemonic failure and here the intellectual becomes an enforcer. Gramsci states that intellectuals also comprise

[t]he apparatus of state coercive power which “legally” enforces discipline on those groups who do not “consent” either actively or passively. This apparatus is, however, constituted for the whole of society in anticipation of moments of crisis of command and direction when spontaneous consent has failed.<sup>48</sup>

This function involves the enforcement agencies of police, courts, etc, whose human component is again associated with the ranks of bourgeois intellectuals but, on such occasions, act as the component of “force” in Gramsci’s famous equation, paraphrased here as: state = force + consent.<sup>49</sup> In Gramsci’s usage, consent involves the hegemonic regulation of the human psyche so that the victim assumes they are acting under their own impulses and motives. By contrast, force involves physically disabling those for whom hegemonic consenting mechanisms are no longer effective in promoting “self-regulation.”

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<sup>47</sup> Gramsci 1971, p. 34.

<sup>48</sup> Gramsci 1971, p. 12.

<sup>49</sup> Gramsci 1971, p. 263.

Gramsci translates and contrasts the twin agents of political organisation – i.e., consent and force – in intellectual terms into the functions of “leadership” and “domination,” hegemony and dictatorship, respectively.<sup>50</sup> One might take issue with Gramsci’s taxonomy in that there only appears to be a semantic distinction between being led and being dominated, although his point seems clear enough. The oppressed worker is either persuaded or by sanction forced into line. Hence, intellectuals are both persuaders and enforcers. But surely this undermines his argument somewhat.<sup>51</sup> Gramsci marks out the “civil” (hegemony) from the “political” (statutory) in order to illustrate a neglected form of domination but then seemingly blurs the twin aspects of state. Indeed, it is interesting that on another occasion Gramsci separates domination from intellectual activity: “the supremacy of a social group manifests itself in two ways, as “domination” and as “intellectual and moral leadership.”<sup>52</sup> The only credible explanation for this apparent contradiction is that when intellectuals are called upon to dominate they are no longer acting in their principal political medium – hegemony – and that such periods are exceptional. However, it is also worth considering that statutory norms were once hegemonic propositions in themselves. Hegemony had already conditioned civil society to a certain level of acceptance prior to those values becoming statutory duties. The next section explains this phenomenon.

### **The Politics of Intellectual Life**

Having established the link between intellectuals and production, Gramsci proceeds to make an important distinction between “organic” and “traditional” types. Intellectuals are organic when they are linked to the specific historical organism, existing productive practices, and functional to its productive culture. The traditional intellectual, such as that represented by the clergy as an expression of the feudal mode of production, is tied to a bygone productive era but clings to the present

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<sup>50</sup> Gramsci 1971, p. 106.

<sup>51</sup> Certainly, Perry Anderson finds Gramsci’s argument not altogether convincing; Gramsci’s distinctions – force bolstered by consent, leadership with domination, violence with hegemony – are, he argues, far too slippery (Anderson 1976-7, p. 26) and Gramsci consequently underestimates the role of state coercion (Anderson 1976-7, pp. 49-50).

<sup>52</sup> Gramsci 1971, p. 57.

superstructure as a remnant of an organic view once successfully turned into a cosmopolitan outlook.<sup>53</sup>

Some commentators find Gramsci's distinction between organic and traditional intellectuals problematic because these terms have no fixed objectivity.<sup>54</sup> This, however, seems to overlook the source of Gramsci's objectivity which is history, and history is about movement. It would be risky, for example, to claim with certainty that an army on a battlefield has a fixed objectivity as "in the ascendancy" or "in retreat" before the battle is concluded. For Gramsci, intellectuals are the chiefs of staff of the "war of position" for ideological dominance but the positions they occupy are in flux. Moreover, a point overlooked by most commentators is that during periods of greater class equilibrium – i.e., less one-sided hegemonic domination – more or less equal organic forces compete for the privilege of capturing and "traditionalising" their opponents. In other words, it is possible for the superstructure to not only lag the economy seriously but to even go into reverse. What does this mean?

In effect, intellectuals orchestrate an ideological battle for the mass acceptance of an explanation of reality derived from ways of actively living. Intellectuals must battle it out, says Gramsci, "to assimilate and to conquer 'ideologically.'"<sup>55</sup> It is a slugging match but, Gramsci insists, for dialectical reasons the conflict must be kept fluid and mobile and not be allowed to crystallise. Subject to hegemonic struggle, the task for the organic intellectuals of the emergent class is to sideline their opponents and reveal their anachronistic character. Once the displaced intellectual stratum has seen its monopolisation of common sense broken, it becomes traditional. In other words, the task for the emergent intellectual is to displace the previous organic intellectuals and their hegemony in accordance with a similar displacement in the productive and legal fields. This concrete process is revealed in the history of philosophy. Gramsci states:

[t]he history of philosophy as it is generally understood, that is as the history of philosophers' philosophies, is the history of attempts made and ideological initiatives undertaken by a specific class of people to change,

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<sup>53</sup> Gramsci 1971, p. 18-9; Ransom, 1992, p. 198.

<sup>54</sup> For example: Simon 1991, pp. 93-4; Karabel 1976, p. 154.

<sup>55</sup> Gramsci 1971, p. 10.

correct or perfect the conceptions of the world that exist in any particular age and thus to change the norms of conduct that go with them; in other words, to change practical activity as a whole.<sup>56</sup>

Gramsci's distinction between organic and traditional intellectuals is thus tied to his dialecticism. Once formed, or at an advanced stage of development, the dominant groups' intellectuals utilise the relative autonomy of civil society in order to further integrate and consolidate the historical bloc.<sup>57</sup> Once radical and critical, these organic intellectuals tend to switch to become conservative when the transformative task is complete in order to suppress the further expression of social contradictions.<sup>58</sup> For example, Croce was a revolutionary at the time when liberal forces in Italy were advancing on the hegemony of feudal Catholicism. Having reached a certain level of political and economic development, liberal forces then dug-in and constructed a "powerful system of fortresses and earthworks" to oppose socialist forces of the working class.<sup>59</sup> The line then crystallised and solidified, the idea of revolution in history evaporated from Croce's schema, and the idea of patient progress was promulgated to check the rise of the proletariat.

Having reached a level of development necessary to crystallise hegemony in legality, all of history is incorporated in that moment. The conquered intellectual stratum is absorbed and transfers to the leading group all of its accumulated social weight or "cultural capital." This capital is proportional to its lasting impact on mass common sense. Drawing on his experience of Italy, Gramsci understood that a measure of the success of bourgeois revolutions is the extent to which its organic intellectuals succeed in absorbing into its *visione mentale* (world view) the organic intellectuals of the declining feudal class. The point Gramsci is making is that the rising organic intellectuals have to incorporate into their justification for society the entire intellectual history of those justifications. In that way they can become, or more correctly appear to become, the advanced guard of a tradition or continuity. It was Gramsci's view, therefore, that, in order to throw off cultural domination, the working class must produce organic intellectuals of its own.

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<sup>56</sup> Gramsci 1971, p. 344.

<sup>57</sup> Gramsci 1971, p. 137.

<sup>58</sup> Gramsci 1971, p. 61.

<sup>59</sup> Gramsci 1971, p. 238.

## Working Class Organic Intellectuals and Good Sense

In an article published as early as June 1919, Gramsci sketched his factory council plan and offered this up as a mirror to the pitiful condition of organised labour as it was at the time in Italy. Properly constituted, factory councils would become a “magnificent school of political and administrative experience” that should “effect a radical transformation of the worker’s mentality” and better equip the worker “to exercise power.”<sup>60</sup> The councils fulfilled a necessity to educate the masses and to connect the workers’ living sensations with intellectual (Marxist) theorisation supplied by communist intellectuals. In other words, the councils were to be central practical components of praxis.

Communist intellectuals were not to repeat Croce’s error and remain in a primary-secondary relationship with the workers. Capitalism, in moving increasingly toward a specific type of workplace regimentation, which Gramsci later dubbed “Fordism,” provided a tremendous opportunity to cultivate, firstly, proletarian intellectuals, and, secondly, to eradicate the socio-political distinction between neuromuscular and intellectual labour. In short, Fordism provided a historically unique opportunity to build a political consensus among already ranked and regimented workers for revolutionary socialism from the “bottom-up.”

The factory councils were designed, moreover, to overcome an existing tendency towards a double conspiracy that was evident during the Turin factory occupations of 1919.<sup>61</sup> On the one hand, trade unions were effectively complicit in surplus-value extraction by colluding with employers to fix pay rates; on the other, they acted as a policing agency on behalf of the employers.<sup>62</sup> In looking at the matter historically, it was simply the case that bourgeois production had generated the need for trade unions and thus both sides of production had become structurally dependent on the other. As such, the level of vision of the trade union movement was restricted historically to economism, something Gramsci described as the “current phase of

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<sup>60</sup> Gramsci 1977, p. 67-8.

<sup>61</sup> This marked what became part of the *Biennio Rosso* (“Red Two Years” – 1919-1920) in Italian working class folklore, a period marked by serious industrial unrest, violence and poverty.

<sup>62</sup> Gramsci 1977, pp. 116-17.



struggle over hours and wages.”<sup>63</sup> Trade unions, Gramsci concluded, were historically specific to capitalist culture and were incapable of seeing beyond it.

Gramsci’s factory-council plan, therefore, differed profoundly from all forms of Italian trade-union syndicalism as it was constructed during the doomed *Biennio Rosso*. In the worker democracy envisioned by Gramsci, the factory council was more than an industrial political unit; it was to form the basis of legislative and executive government. The council was not a proletarian version of bourgeois freemasonry where a member joins voluntarily. There was to be no “contract” that the member could later back away from and revoke.<sup>64</sup> Workers were already active “members” because they were already active producers. All workers, and this included supervisors and managers, qualified to vote for recallable delegates that were to carry their respective interests forward to the council decision-making process.

There was also, as touched on above, an important educational quality to the factory councils that trade union syndicates lacked. Gramsci noted that factories dispersed technically into different production units. These boundaries tended to fragment the entire proletarian movement and block a conception of the relationship between productive parts and the whole. It was necessary for the workers to become conscious of their social identity and, indeed, value within the totality of the system. Worker self-government demanded it. The following is a highly lucid example of Gramsci’s step-by-step educational programme and is worth citing at length.

The worker can see himself as a producer only if he sees himself as an inseparable part of the whole labour system which is concentrated in the object being manufactured, and only if he experiences the unity of the industrial process which *in toto* demands collaboration between manual workers, skilled workers, administrative employees, engineers and technical directors. The worker will see himself as a producer if – after he has become psychologically part of a particular productive process in a particular factory (e.g. in a car plant in Turin) and has come to think of himself as a necessary and indispensable factor in the activity of the social complex producing the car – he can now go one stage further and comprehend the whole of the Turin car-manufacturing process. If he can

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<sup>63</sup> Gramsci 1977, p. 160. This was an argument originally advanced by Lenin in *What is to be Done?* [1901].

<sup>64</sup> Gramsci 1971, p. 295.

comprehend Turin as one production unit characterized by the car; see a large part of the general productive activity of Turin as existing and developing simply as a result of the existence and development of the car industry; and so see the workers in these general productive activities as themselves belonging to the car industry, for the simple reason that they create the necessary and sufficient conditions for that industry's existence. Starting off from this original cell, the factory, seen as a unit, as an act that creates a particular product, the worker proceeds to the comprehension of ever vaster units, right up to the level of the nation itself – which is in its entirety a gigantic apparatus of production.<sup>65</sup>

Gramsci's proposed transformation was based on the human association of the workplace, but the worker was not seen as merely extending his or her industrial practices into self-government. It was not a matter of eliminating the capitalist and carrying on as before. Rather, Gramsci saw the factory as an arena where the workers could be educated beyond the limitations of their productive logic into a new cultural bloc. The workers were not merely to take control over production and the decision-making processes involved in it. Gramsci saw the factory and its council as a kind of nursery that would provide the educational means to create nothing less than a new, non-exploitative civilisation in which humans might at last become "themselves."

## **Conclusion**

Gramsci depicts hegemony as a sort of military command structure with "chiefs of staff" and "subalterns." When one encounters today soldiers accused of abuses offering such mantras as "I was only following orders" there is understandable incredulity at the lack of personal responsibility taken. Yet, there might be some truth in it. The defensive case might be better expressed as, "I was led to believe I was acting acceptably and that my actions were therefore not entirely my own." This might not get the accused off lightly but it would indicate the degree to which people are not in full possession of themselves.

By advancing his theory of hegemony, Gramsci sought to illustrate a political dimension to power through which the capitalists garnered and maintained their

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<sup>65</sup> Gramsci 1977, pp. 110-11.

interests and carried these forward to become statutory duties among other classes. In other words, somehow prevalent ideology was activated, through various civil media, in the untrained faculties of the workers' minds and adopted as a universal account of reality. To some extent this represents a psycho-political mechanism of self-oppression. Workers are not merely under ideological intoxication *per se* but persuaded of the efficacy of a world view opposing the one they would have if their faculty of good sense was better developed.

The capitalist intellectuals, those whom their working class counterparts are pre-destined to fight, are “deputies” of the capitalist and not, strictly speaking, capitalists themselves. It makes little effective difference if the instruments of hegemonic oppression are aware of their function or not. Their function is to construct theories of truth that make some appeal to the logic of everyday reality. The problem is that through the human contradictions of capitalist society, there can be no universal truth. There is only historical truth. That is to say, there is only truth to the extent that one group has succeeded in foisting its version of reality on everyone else to become at best the partial truth of a time and space. Hence in the denial of means to truth is the act of suppression of identity but this is forever struggling for liberation through organic attachment to the movement of historical forces.

What is clear is that various opposition groups cannot mobilise their search for historical identity within a framework of common-sense assumptions borrowed from the superstructure to be opposed, and in this case awareness is everything. To Gramsci, proletarian political movements have to act upon and cultivate good sense derived of activity that would arise spontaneously if the opposing superstructure were not present. Hence, the critical role of the Factory Council supplemented by the Communist Party involves an interruption of the hegemonic relationship between capitalist and worker and the creation of the right conditions for praxis – the self-educational combination of practice and theory.

As Gramsci understood it, the question of human identity is both social and historical. The social force with which one becomes combined in any age depends on the symbiotic association of actual living practices and the best available theoretical explanation of them. This creates momentary fusion of “being” and “thinking” necessary to instigate historical movement. There is no “generic human identity”

which we might apprehend as “ourselves” operating outside of this dialectical process.

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