# Gramsci Outside of Marx?: Defining Culture in Gramscian Terms 1

# Vanessa Raney



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Abstract: This paper suggests that Antonio Gramsci, while Marxian in approach, had a different grasp of culture when compared to Marx. In focusing on The Prison Notebooks I hope to show how Gramsci approaches culture from many applicable but different contexts. I deliberately veer away from issues of hegemony in an attempt to offer a more general definition of culture that is more in line with Gramsci and Marx. Finally, I look to specific Gramscian scholars to understand how Gramsci has been approached in the scholarship.

**Key words:** *Gramsci, Marx, Culture, Althusser,* Prison Notebooks, *Ideological state apparatus, Mass consumption, Labor, Education, Bourgeoisie, Proletariat, Organic intellectual, Traditional intellectual* 

### Introduction

Antonio Gramsci is considered to be an important figure in the field of cultural studies. He takes the ideology of Marx and applies its practice to his native Italy. However, as Stuart Hall explains, "Gramsci was never a 'Marxist' in either a doctrinal, orthodox or 'religious' sense" (412). While Gramsci, as Hall points out, uses Marxian concepts of base/superstructure, these are really in the background of Gramsci's concerns, although certainly relevant. 2 Yet Gramsci is often positioned in terms of Marx.

What I want to show, however, is that Gramsci had his own way of defining culture, its attributes and disjunctions. More specifically, he employed a definition of culture that is independent, though not disassociated from, concepts of hegemony, class, and "sociology of knowledge." However, although I plan to structure my paper primarily around a textual reading of Notebooks I through 5 of Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* (hereinafter referred to as PN1 or PN2), I will also give some consideration to the works of Gramscian scholars.

I want to point out, however, that my scholarship on Gramsci is limited to English-language texts. So while scholars writing in other languages may have discussed Gramsci's definition of culture, I have not discovered the same in the English-language texts that I have read thus far. 6 Instead, the focus tends toward the relational structures, including the "socio-political" nature, 7 of culture rather than on culture itself.

To situate my paper, therefore, I plan to begin by defining culture generally, then in terms of how Gramsci defines it. Once the definition of culture has been established, I will explore the various manifestations of culture in PN1 and PN2. Finally, I will consider PN1 and PN2 in light of Gramscian scholars Kate Crehan (2002), Joseph A. Buttigieg (1992), Anne Showstack Sassoon (1982), and Gershon Shafir (1980).

# **Defining Culture**

My general understanding of culture is the expression of people's attitudes and beliefs that come together to form a society of mutual reciprocity. What I mean to suggest is that the ideological state apparatus, as Althusser explains, depends on what the people want. 8 One example is the case of the dividing line between rich and poor in the U.S. On one side is the argument that the people with the top percent of the wealth should promote better labor practices that do not exploit the poor. On the other side of the argument is the belief that mass production, which depends on the exploitation of labor, benefits the greater good (the majority), and therefore is justified.

However, Althusser would argue that it is because the U.S. promotes the rhetoric of mass consumption in its various forms (*e.g.*, through media, education) that the question of whether it is fair or not to exploit the laborer is irrelevant. The will of the majority (the mass consumers) defines the rules of labor; labor becomes exploitative only when the ideology of mass consumption is replaced with something else. From a Marxian, and even Gramscian perspective, although the line between rich and poor is egregious, it is

because the poor choose not to directly challenge the system -- because they buy into the ideology of mass consumption -- that a more equitable economic superstructure is not to be found.

On the other hand, when the exploited laborers do finally become conscious of the ideological state apparatus, they will also become aware of the conditions of their exploitation. However, this is where the situation begins to get complicated, because underlying the ideology of mass consumption is capitalism -- a system that makes money *the* value of exchange, in which people can be bought and traded very easily. I believe, as Gramsci alludes, that Marx's idea was for a real revolution of change that would inspire the proletariat to be bourgeoisie, that is, that the proletariat could be more than a dung heap that get stepped on without the benefit of recognition. 9

However, to Marx (and of course, Gramsci), this axis of revolution would, in turn, necessarily impact the economic superstructure. Why? Because the equal distribution of wealth in society represents a system of exchange that is non-exploitative (in which people have value). What this suggests, then, is that Marx had a much broader goal in mind when he wrote *The Communist Manifesto*. Although often seen purely in economic terms, *The Communist Manifesto* represents Marx's (and Engel's) attempt to raise awareness about the existing culture.

One complication, though, as I alluded to earlier (and where Gramsci begins to differentiate from Marx), concerns the response of the bourgeoisie to the proletariats. If, for example, the bourgeoisie offer the proletariats a ten-cent increase in hourly wages and the proletariats accept, the system of exchange has not changed. In order for the axis of revolution to take place, therefore, the proletariat must demand not only better wages, but also positions in higher management, etc. However, where Marx sees this in terms of a group of laborers, Gramsci suggests that it will be an organic intellectual 10 (or intellectuals) who represents the interests of the proletariat to the traditional intellectuals who have power to change the rules.

Yet it should be clear that Gramsci is not simply substituting Marx's term of bourgeoisie and proletariat for traditional intellectual and organic intellectual; rather, he very clearly defines the potential for actual modes of change in terms of education. To Gramsci, education (formal or informal) implies a conscious understanding of how one's status is impacted by the relational modalities then in place (*e.g.*, in our time, race, class, gender). Moreover, an understanding of the processes required for actual change (*e.g.*, through legislative actions, publication).

In either case, however -- Marx or Gramsci -- the substance of *The Communist Manifesto*, PN1 and PN2 remain largely abstract. What I find more problematic is the lack of a clear definition of culture, especially when the objects of culture (class, social relations) are used to suggest greater metamorphological changes in society. That is not to say, however, that Marx and Gramsci fail to provide any definition of culture. In fact, they both suggest a view of culture that does not quite fit Althusser's notion of the term:

as the expression of the masses. To Marx and Gramsci, the masses are those currently in the dung heap.

According to the *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, Tenth Edition, culture is defined as:

CULTIVATION; TILLAGE 2: the act of developing the intellectual and moral faculties esp. by education 3: expert care and training . . . 4 a: enlightenment and excellence of taste acquired by intellectual and aesthetic training b: acquaintance with and taste in fine arts, humanities, and broad aspects of science as distinguished from vocational and technical skills 5 a: the integrated pattern of human knowledge, belief, and behavior that depends upon man's capacity for learning and transmitting knowledge to succeeding generations b: the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group c: the set of shared attitudes, values, goals and practices that characterizes a company or organization 6: cultivation of living material in prepared nutrient media; also, a product of such cultivation. (282, underlining added)

We can see, in the underlined passages, something of Gramsci's understanding of culture. The first -- "the act of developing the intellectual and moral faculties esp. by education" -- underlies every aspect of culture for Gramsci. Education is the way that we become conscious, thinking human beings able to make choices about the things we do in order that we may contribute to the world around us. The second -- "the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group" -- reflects the stratums of culture that Gramsci places into different contexts throughout PN1 and PN2. For example, he says "that the clergy used to perform: charity, popular culture, relief services, etc." (PN2 76).11

# Textual Readings of PN1 (Notebooks 1 & 2) and PN2 (Notebooks 3-5)

It is clear, from reading PN1 and PN2, that Gramsci never fully defines what culture means. In fact, what he offers is an abstract notion of cultures, always on the periphery, never wholly tangible. Yet he presents an eye to culture in a way that concretizes it, especially in his explication of the intellectuals and in his references to the subaltern classes. What is interesting about PN1 and PN2, however, is the many variations in which culture/cultural appears:

<u>First Notebook</u>: "homogenous cultural center" (129); "cultural unity" (139); "economic-cultural structure" (179); "culture-degraded" (184);

Second Notebook: none;12

<u>Third Notebook</u>: "cultural associations" (25); "courtly culture" (47); "historical culture" (80); "cultural aristocracy" (113);

<u>Fourth Notebook</u>: "cultural manifestation" (141); "higher culture" (142); "cultural organization" (207); "cultural activity" (208); "cultural institutes" (213); "cultural snipers" (221); "secular-religious culture" and "secular culture" (222); "autonomous culture" (224);

<u>Fifth Notebook</u>: "cultural world" and "cultural dissemination" (285); "cultural currents' (294); "rhetorical cultural tradition" (296); "cultural movements" (305); "cultural climate" (312); "religious cultural groups" (327); "cultural innovation" (332); "cultural document" and "cultural exasperation" (346); "living culture" (351); "cultural fact" and "cultural self-consciousness" (355); "cultural order" (368); "cultural circulation" (387); "cultural collectivity" (400).

What this suggests is that Gramsci located culture generally and specifically (such as in reference to people). Thus, culture becomes more than the description of the particular ways that people in a given society conform to each other. Culture, as manifested throughout PN1 and PN2, instead refers to the different ways culture is appropriated and understood. That is, for Gramsci, culture describes how people function (organize), imprint (document) and interact (socialize). Hence, culture is not static, but varies according to how it is used; that is, culture is non-referential (it cannot be held to one thing) and therefore changeable.

## Herald the Gramscian Scholars

Gramscian scholar Kate Crehan (2002) is important because she defines what culture does not mean to Gramsci, albeit comparatively in relation to anthropological studies. 13 Buttigieg provides an insightful introduction to his translation of the PN that includes a broad overview of the contexts in which Gramsci wrote and the conditions of Gramsci's prison writing. 14 Anne Showstack Sassoon (1982), although less significant in terms of my argument, includes "A Gramsci Dictionary" that will help to ground some of Gramsci's terms as I describe them in my paper. 15 Gershon Shafir (1980) is also on the periphery, but in chapter 4 ("A New Intellectualism") includes discussion of the traditional and organic intellectuals that provide a basis for Gramsci's understanding of culture. 16

Gramsci, of course, was writing during a time of enforced political incarceration resulting from his involvement with the Italian Socialist Party. If, as scholars like Buttigieg contend, Gramsci coded specific terms when referencing Marx or Marxian concepts, why did Gramsci include explicit references to Marx (and Machiavelli, so forth) at all? Buttigieg, as others, also argues that Gramsci's "philosophy of praxis" refers to a Marxian concept. Yet, according to Gramsci in PN2, "He [Machiavelli] articulated a conception of the world that could also be called 'philosophy of praxis' or 'neohumanism,' in that it does not recognize transcendental or immanent (in the metaphysical sense) elements but is based entirely on the concrete action of man, who out of historical necessity works and transforms reality" (Notebook 5, 378).

Crehan's approach in *Gramsci, Culture and Anthropology*, however, is different. She focuses on how anthropologists and Gramsci approach culture. So while the prison context may be important, her aim is more in highlighting Gramsci's writings on culture in order to suggest a new approach to anthropological studies. In order to situate Gramsci, she first introduces the different waves of interest in Gramsci.

For example, "The first wave of interest in Gramsci was triggered by the publication, in Italy, of his prison writings, starting with letters which appeared in 1947, and continuing with the six volumes of the thematic edition of the notebooks, the last of which was brought out in 1951" (vii). Then, Crehan explains, "Gramsci's influence became even more pronounced in the 1980s with the spread of cultural studies, the growing fascination with the question of 'power,' and the greater attention that scholars from different disciplines were devoting to the relations among culture, society, and politics" (viii).

Even here, however, Crehan devotes greater attention to the politics of Gramsci's culture -- "between the dominant and the dominated" (66) -- than to the specific attributes of culture that Gramsci discusses in PN1 and PN2. Although, certainly, Gramsci is about politics, his interest is not as much about turnovers in power, but in a sustained (though changeable) shift in power than gives voice to all members of a society rather than the elite among them. A society, moreover, in which all members are educated -- through book-learning or vocation training (depending on interest) -- and afforded equal opportunity to move up in the world. 17

Thus, Gramsci is less about how "a major new culture, the world-view of an emerging class, comes into being" (129) than in the relationship between those in power (or those in a position to change the laws) and those at the bottom (that is, those currently in the dung heap). It is important to make the distinction because Crehan falls into the same error as other scholars who identify Gramsci's view of culture too closely with politics.

As previously mentioned, Gramsci had many different views of culture that depended on context. Therefore, while political culture or a culture of politics is certainly one aspect of culture, culture to Gramsci is not defined by power alone. What I find interesting, from my reading of PN1 and PN2, is that I located no mention of political culture or a culture of politics as such. However, I also do not want to mislead the reader into thinking that Gramsci was not interested in politics when he clearly was interested. Rather, I am saying that for Gramsci, politics was not the end-all of culture, but dependent on other factors such as economics and education. Crehan, on the other hand, argues that "for Gramsci the primary object of study is never specific 'cultures', it is always power, more specifically particular constellations of power relations in particular times and places" (66).

Yet Gramsci moves across so many topics, including nationalism, literature, economics, education, the cultures of the subaltern, Italy, France, America, China and Japan, history, philosophy and references to Lombardo, even women, that suggesting his primary aim in writing, especially *The Prison Notebooks*, was politics is to read him

within a particular framework. This is evident in Crehan's reading of Gramsci, in which she argues that "Gramsci's concern is always with the *process* by which power is produced and reproduced or transformed, and how intellectuals fit within this rather than with individual intellectuals themselves" (143).

Except to Gramsci, the organic intellectuals rise up from the bottom to influence the political "process" that the traditional intellectuals oversee. However, Gramsci also suggests that changes in political structure, politics, etc. come about through the common interests of the traditional and organic intellectuals (PN1). In other words, the traditional and organic intellectuals are more alike than different -- a point that Crehan and other Gramscian scholars overlook. One important difference, though, between these members of society, in Gramsci's eyes, is education.

In discussing how changes are brought about in society, it might do at this point to consider how Sassoon's "A Gramsci Dictionary" defines the following Gramscian terms:

**Passive Revolution:** This is a notion derived from conservative tradition going back to Edmund Burke who argued that society had to change in order to stay the same, *i.e.* to preserve its most essential features. It indicates historical changes which take place without widespread popular initiative, from 'on high'. 18 Gramsci uses it to describe both specific historic developments, for example the establishment of an Italian nation-state, and a style of politics which preserves control by a relatively small group of leaders while at the same time instructing economic, social, political, and ideological changes. (15)

**Revolution as Process:** Rather than viewing revolution as a dramatic break after which the new society begins to develop form scratch, Gramsci maintains that revolution must be understood as a process which begins within the old society and continues after moments of dramatic change. An old society will be destroyed in all its aspects only insofar as a new one is built and consolidated. Put differently, a revolutionary movement will be able to destroy the old by building qualitatively new social relationships. 19 In addition to this notion of construction-destruction, revolution as a process is related to Gramsci's view that a socialist revolution must be made by the mass of the population, not by a small élite. 20 (15-16)

What these terms suggests is 1) the contexts of Gramsci's PN are really not boxed into the political, but include other interrelated positionalities that ultimately impact the social constructions of the ideological state apparatus; 2) "the mass of the population" are those with the power to change the larger societal structures but whose self-conceptions restrict them to the dung heap. To put it more clearly, the dung heap is an ideological space that is maintained as a response to the social structures embedded in the "economic, social, political, and ideological." Thus, the congruence between these various modes of social

being are, as Gramsci predicates, dependent and, unlike Marx, represent more of a democratic ideal than communism.

As Shafir explains, "Gramsci was answering the basic problem of political sociology: how are social groups formed? Organization takes place only when there is a consciousness of commonality, when the commonality is culturally mediated . . . Intellectuals' cultural activity is the mechanism through which economic conditions are translated into group consciousness and organization and therefore into political activity" (233).

In relation to broader inquiries of "Who? What? Why?"21 of culture, Gramsci also opened a gateway toward greater inclusionism while also carrying forward the possibility of revolutionary change that Marx advocated but never applied in actual practice. At the same time, Gramsci contributed more of a foundation than a practical application, which has proven incidental to scholars like Stuart Hall who try to fit Gramsci's ideas into concrete form such as in understanding how questions of race impact institutions and policy. For that, Gramsci remains an important figure in the continually expanding field of cultural studies.

## **Notes**

- <u>1</u> This paper was originally submitted to fulfill the requirements for CLST 300 Introduction to Cultural Studies I at Claremont Graduate University, Fall 2003. It was also presented with some minor revision at The Melbern G. Glassock Center for Humanities Research Conference, held at Texas A&M University, 1-3 Apr. 2004.
- <u>2</u> Hall, Stuart. "Gramsci's relevance for the study of race and ethnicity." In *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, eds. David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chin, 411-441. London and New York: Routledge, 1996.
- 3 According to Anne Showstack Sassoon, in "A Gramsci Dictionary" (*Approaches to Gramsci*, London, England: Writers and Reading Publishing Cooperative Society Ltd., 1982), "hegemony is used in the sense of influence, leadership, consent rather than the alternative and opposite meaning of domination. It has to do with the way one group influences other groups, making certain compromises with them in order to gain their consent for its leadership in society as a whole. Thus particular, section interests are transformed and some concept of the general interest is promoted. Hegemony has cultural, political and economic aspects and is the foundation of Gramsci's argument that the modern state is not simply and instrument of a class which it uses for its own narrow interests" (13-14). For other specific takes on Gramsci and hegemony see Adamson, Walter L. *Hegemony and Revolution: A Study of Antonio Gramsci's Political and Cultural Theory*. Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: U of California Press, 1980; see

- also Bocock, Robert. *Hegemony*. Chichester, England, and London and New York: Ellis Horwood Limited, Tavistock Publications, 1986.
- 4 Keen, Mike Forrest. "Investigations Towards the Foundation for a Sociology of Knowledge in Gramsci's Prison Notebooks." Ph.D. diss., U of Notre Dame, 1985.
- 5 Gramsci, Antonio. *Prison Notebooks*, edited with an introduction by Joseph A. Buttigieg. Translated by Joseph A. Buttigieg and Antonio Callari. 2 Vols. New York and Oxford: Columbia UP, 1992. Reprint, 2d ed., Torino: Giulio Einaudi Editore, S.p.a., 1975. Although the notes here follow the order Gramsci wrote them, for other arrangements see *History, Philosophy and Culture in the Young Gramsci*, ed. by Pedro Cavalcanti and Paul Piccone. Saint Louis: Telos Press, 1975; see also Gramsci, Antonio. *Selections from Cultural Writings*, ed. by David Forgacs and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith. Translated by William Boelhower: Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1985.
- 6 Kate Crehan comes closest to discussing culture in terms of Gramsci. However, she speaks more to how Gramsci approaches the study of culture than on culture per se. see *Gramsci*, *Culture and Anthropology*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California P, 2002.
- 7 For a detailed exploration of Gramsci's politics see Golding, Sue. *Gramsci's Democratic Theory: Contributions to a Post-Liberal Democracy*. Toronto, Buffalo and London: U of Toronto P, 1992.
- <u>8</u> Althusser, Louis. "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes toward an Investigation) (*January-April 1969*)." In *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, by Louis Althusser (Trans. by Ben Brewster), 127-186. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971. Reprint, *La Pensée*, 1970.
- <u>9</u> Like dung, which helps to clear the body of unwanted toxins, laborers help to clear out products that contribute to their owners' wealth.
- 10 According to Sassoon, Gramsci defines intellectuals in a broad sense, to indicate all those people who have an organizational, or ideological-cultural role in society, *e.g.* school teachers, factory technicians and managers, civil servants, social workers, university professors, journalists *etc.* He then differentiates between organic intellectuals who perform tasks essential to the reproduction of a particular society, *e.g.* a capitalist one; and traditional intellectuals whose function derives from an earlier historical period, *e.g.* priests, but who continue to exist. Moreover, Gramsci relates the functions of all intellectuals to a capacity inherent in every human being, the ability to think and reason, which becomes a technical skill in certain people through study and practice" (14). However, she misses a point: the traditional intellectuals are those currently in power and in a position to make the laws/rules (not just the priests who function in a more limited capacity), while the organic intellectuals are those who rise up from the masses to effect changes in or, as Sassoon asserts, to reproduce the system then in place (PN1).

- 11 Gramsci, Antonio. "Notebook 3." In *Prison Notebooks: Volume II*, ed. and with an introduction by Joseph A. Buttigieg. Translated by Joseph A. Buttigieg and Antonio Callari. New York and Oxford: Columbia UP, 1996. Reprint, 2d ed., Torino: Giulio Einaudi Editore, S.p.a., 1975.
- 12 Although the Second Notebook includes interesting information on economics, Americanism, and emigration, it does not make references to culture, at least not directly. Sassoon, however, defines "Americanism and Fordism: This refers to the development of assembly line production in the United States most notably by Henry Ford. Gramsci was concerned with the significance for the working class movement of the introduction of the techniques of "scientific management" as elaborated by the American Frederick W. Taylor (thus "Taylorism") in a period of which this kind of rationalization of production was much admired in the Soviet Union" (12); however, she does not make reference to Gramsci's discussions of the differences between America and England, and what those differences suggest (PN2).
- 13 Crehan's position on Gramsci is one of the most original and insightful that I have come across. She begins with an overview of specific anthropological definitions of culture, then in the next section shows where Gramsci differs in his approach to culture, and in the last part considers how Gramsci's understanding of culture might be applied to anthropology.
- 14 See also Spriano, Paolo. *Antonio Gramsci and the Party: The Prison Years*. Translated by John Fraser. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1979. Reprint, Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1977 (Italian language). Spriano's focus, however, is related more to Gramsci's involvement with the Socialist Party. See also Buttigieg, Joseph A. *Antonio Gramsci's Triad: Culture: Politics and Intellectuals*. CHS (Center for Humanistic Studies) Occasional Papers, no. 10. University of Minnesota, 1987; here he provides a more discursive break for a broader understanding of Gramsci.
- 15 Sassoon, Anne Showstack. "A Gramsci Dictionary." In *Approaches to Gramsci*, ed. by Anne Showstack Sassoon. London, England: Writers and Readers Publishing Comparative Society Ltd., 1982: 12-17. See also Harris, David. *From Class Struggles to the Politics of Pleasure: The Effects of Gramscianism on Cultural Studies*. London and New York: Routledge, 1992. Harris' approach, in contrast to Sassoon's, involves placing into context the English appreciation/approbation of Gramsci from a scholarship perspective.
- 16 Shafir, Gershon. "Intellectuals and the Popular Masses: An Historical and Sociological Study of Antonio Gramsci's 'Prison Notebooks'." (Ph.D. diss., U of California, Berkeley, 1980.) Facsimile. Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms International, 1986. cf. Keen. Keen's positioning of Gramsci in relation to the "sociology of knowledge" echoes some of the sentiment in Shafir. However, Keen relies more on a theoretical approach to Gramsci: "In the sociology of knowledge the fundamental theme that has been pursued is the distinction between reality and illusion in the sphere of human thought, belief, idea

- systems, etc." (6). Keen also provides one of the more extensive accounts of Gramsci's personal and work background in chapter II ("Antonio Gramsci).
- 17 Recall the theme song of *The Jeffersons*, a show that originally aired on television during the 1970s or 1980s: "Moving on Up... to the East side."
- 18 This is similar to Buttigieg, who presents the following argument in his book, *Antonio Gramsci's Triad*: "Idealism, for Gramsci, represented the most advanced philosophical tradition ever achieve; it proved itself as the overwhelming cultural force that enabled the bourgeoisie to achieve a higher level of consciousness, to become more aware of its worth and its rights, and therefore be in a position to organize itself, attain freedom and make its own history" (14). This concept of "Idealism," however, is left out of Sassoon's "A Gramsci Dictionary," yet this view of why the bourgeoisie are able to effect change is exactly what Gramsci proposes for the masses: education.
- 19 Ibid. cf. "Knowledge is produced historically and must be assimilated critically not received passively; then it becomes a powerful source for change, for the making of history" (12).
- <u>20</u> Actually, Gramsci says that change can only really take place when traditional and organic intellectuals find commonality to aspire to a common goal (PN1). (see my previous explanation in reference to Crehan).
- 21 Theme for The Melbern G. Glassock Center for Humanities Conference.

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