

How Antonio Gramsci's Ideas Went Global

Antonio Gramsci was twentieth-century Italy's greatest intellectual. Fifty years ago, the English translation of *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* allowed his unorthodox Marxism to spread worldwide.



A photograph of Antonio Gramsci dated 1921.

Antonio Gramsci needs no introduction. The anti-fascist political thinker is one of the most cited Italian authors — certainly the most cited Italian Marxist ever — and one of the most celebrated Marxist philosophers of the twentieth century.

Much of the fascination with Gramsci lies in the story of his life and premature death, torn between political struggle and intellectual commitment, imprisonment at the hands of Benito Mussolini and factory occupations, and in his unique status within the Marxist tradition. Gramsci left us thirty-three notebooks, handwritten in jail and filled with over two thousand reflections, annotations, allusions, and translations. The fragmentary nature of his works and the adventurous, even mysterious, fate of the notebooks' recovery and publication by the Italian Communist Party (PCI) at the beginning of the Cold War also contribute to his enduring legend.

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Gramsci was the first Marxist to write that culture is not simply the expression of underlying economic relations but, most important, one of the elements of hegemony, which he described as the constant process of power renegotiation and shifting ideology that defines modern politics and capitalist societies. His sophisticated analysis of social power as a more complex matrix than a simple matter of domination and subordination, in which institutions as well as mass popular and literary cultural

production play a subtle role, has turned out to be at ease across the world, from India to Argentina, Spain, and the African continent, and from the United States to Britain. The adaptability of his reflections on democracy and the meaning of revolution, and on civil society and subaltern groups, has proved relevant for theoretical abstractions as well as for political activism, for contemporary social theory, and, most recently, as a model for Left electoral strategies in the age of populism. It is safe to say that Gramsci's legacy has been a lasting one.

Antonio Gramsci in the Anglophone World

The globalization of Gramsci is, however, quite a recent phenomenon. For a long time, Gramsci had remained an Italian concern, closely connected to the history of the PCI and the use (or abuse) pursued by its post-World War II leader Palmiro Togliatti, who, while trying to foster a link between Marxism and the Italian intellectual tradition, anchored his strategy for the "new party" to Gramsci's writings about interclass unity and a new historical bloc. The two strands partnered successfully in the famous Italian "red belt": the success of Emilia-Romagna's communist administrations contributed to the dissemination of Gramsci's theory, especially in the United States and in Britain.

In the Italy of the 1970s and 1980s, the story of [Red Bologna](#) and its socialist (or at least progressive) policies stood opposed to the rise of neoliberalism. It is not by chance that the debates on Italian communism, on the one hand, and Thatcherism as a hegemonic project, on the other, came about in the pages of the periodical [Marxism Today](#). That magazine's leading intellectuals were the [historian Eric Hobsbawm](#) and the cultural theorist Stuart Hall, both of whom adopted a great deal from the works of Antonio Gramsci.

When Gramsci's notebooks began circulating worldwide, it was most often through the filter of the English translations. The first publication outside Italy of Gramsci's writings was an English translation of some shorter extracts in 1957, followed in 1971 by [Selections from the Prison Notebooks](#), translated by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith and published by Lawrence & Wishart. This sparked the emergence of Gramsci as a global phenomenon.

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Any political or intellectual application of Gramsci's powerful categories is necessarily mediated by the ways in which his words were at first introduced. And even today, fifty years later, for a nonexpert or for a non-Italian reader, it is that English translation that conveys Gramsci's operationalization.

As Joseph Buttigieg — Gramsci's American translator, and the father of the [American politician Pete Buttigieg](#), who died before completing the English critical edition — once said, the history of Gramsci's reception, application, adaptation, and further circulation in the English-speaking context is of central importance. Vice versa, unpacking and reflecting on the way in which Gramsci has been trapped and reshaped in different guises since his global success might also allow us to reconsider the radical politics of the past and to reclaim Gramsci's contribution in a new strategic

and democratic way.

The Prehistory and Afterlife of the Notebooks

Gramsci's thinking arrived in Britain across a broad spatial, historical, and cultural gap. It is generally argued that his ideas contributed to countering "economism" within British Marxism and helped the Left to interpret Thatcherism and the process of globalization. While the first two short selections from Gramsci in 1957 had no impact outside Left and Communist intellectual circles (*The Modern Prince and Other Writings*, translated by Louis Marks, presented Gramsci as the theoretician of the party, whereas *The Open Marxism of Antonio Gramsci*, translated by Carl Marzani for the United States, offered a "moderate" Gramsci), the turning point was the 1971 translation.

Attempts to publish Gramsci's notebooks shortly after the end of the war were made by Gramsci's close friend and Cambridge economics professor Piero Sraffa, while an earlier translation of some of Gramsci's writings had been started by the Scottish poet Hamish Henderson. The hesitations, if not deliberate obstruction, by the British Communist Party stopped any efforts until the post-1956 Hungary crisis.

The following year, José Aricó had begun a translation into Spanish meant for Latin American readers, and an unauthorized French translation was circulating, which was the main source for Louis Althusser's highly influential critique in *Lire le Capital*. Nonetheless, Gramsci's work did not receive much attention until the release of *Selections* — and it was a version of Gramsci adapted to serve a post-1968, post-Fordist world.

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The two translators, Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, had access to Gramsci's original manuscripts and the first draft of Valentino Gerratana's critical Italian edition, which was to be published in 1975. The introduction, largely written by Hoare, presented a strong "leftist" Gramsci, in harmony with the radical interpretation favored by the British readership and in explicit opposition to the "interclass" version endorsed by the postwar Italian political and intellectual milieu. Hoare and Nowell Smith adopted neologisms and created a completely new English political vocabulary; this refreshed British political discourse by introducing concepts such as "historical bloc," "war of position," "civil society," and, above all, hegemony — and presented a more complex and less monolithic system of absorbing Marxism in the advanced Western liberal democracies.

The book played extremely well with the scene already set out in Britain by the New Left, and Gramsci became, at the same time, both the vehicle for arguing over its very existence and the instrument to foster further divisions and confrontations. On the one hand, there was Perry Anderson's assertive appropriation in the pages of the *New Left Review*; on the other, the leading culturalist application of Stuart Hall, especially for the concept of Thatcherism.

Both intellectuals had discovered Gramsci's thinking in the 1960s through the Italian lens: Anderson via Tom Nairn's experience at Pisa's Scuola Normale Superiore; Hall

through Lidia Curti's arrival at Birmingham with a copy of Gramsci's *Letters from Prison*. Yet they used it for different purposes, and their imprints transmitted a sort of double register in the context of the British left.

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For Anderson, Gramsci helps to explain the absence of a radical proletariat and, ultimately, of a British revolutionary spirit. Anderson was particularly inspired by Gramsci's efforts to explain Italian history as diverging from what should have been the normal pattern of Marxist historical development. But, to his critics, Anderson had mechanically transferred Gramsci into a different context — thereby failing to completely understand that Gramsci's urgent purpose had been to explain the rise of Italian fascism in the context of the inherent and ultimately insuperable tension between democracy and the state.

Anderson would end up distancing himself from Gramsci's approach by searching in the *Prison Notebooks* only for supposed "unresolved antinomies." However, by representing a powerful alternative to the at times stagnant corporatism of the British Labour Party in the 1960s and 1970s, this highbrow Gramscian reading won over academic circles and, undoubtedly, still attracts extensive interest, especially in the context of the post–New Labour left.

Hall used various core concepts from Gramsci's lexicon to address Margaret Thatcher's political consensus. Introduced for the first time in 1979 in a celebrated article in *Marxism Today*, Thatcherism was understood as a hegemonic project and modeled after a provocative parallel: it was a "reactionary modernization," rather like Italian fascist corporatism — analyzed by Gramsci in terms of passive revolution and hegemony — had been a modernizing and regressive force. Hall's main perspective of analysis was to posit that Thatcherism was a political phenomenon *because* it was primarily a cultural one.

His elaboration encountered both enthusiastic approval and harsh criticisms, especially among historians; nevertheless, its powerful legacy is clear from its enduring success within the political discourse and academic debate. One might attribute to Hall the spread of a one-dimensional culturalist approach to Gramsci or the unstructured "discursive hegemonic formation" of Ernesto Laclau's post-Marxism. Yet Hall's work evidences the modernity of Gramsci's socialism in its efforts to unpack and act upon the simultaneous presence in post-Fordist British society of the processes of traditional and democratic political legitimation and the new discursive expressions of national identity and class politics.

Whereas in Europe, where in the early 1980s a meteoric reformist and social democratic Gramsci was used to sustain the Eurocommunist project, his work outside the imperial core received a very different reception. In Europe's ex-colonies — in India and in Latin America especially — a revolutionary Gramsci was revived and acted on politically. Beyond the English-language world, that is another, contrasting, afterlife.

The Production of the Past Within the Present

According to [Anne Showstack Sassoon](#), one of Gramsci's major contributions is the recognition of the importance of historical reflection as a precondition for expanding democracy, and as the foundation for the construction of a theoretical and political agenda, rather than as simply a critique of the past.

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In this respect, Gramsci's changing paradigm of inquiry — from focusing on strategies of inclusion to questioning the social and cultural conditions of subordination and exclusion — represents a crucial political shift. While acknowledging the weight of history, Gramsci derived a theoretical and political agenda from the problems and possibilities of the present and future rather than from a program of the past. This is a process in which the ongoing results emerge not by accumulation but, on the contrary, by negotiation.

Gramsci's reflections were committed to paper during a period of epochal transformation, marked by the challenges of mass society, a new form of capitalism, and the threat to democracy. According to [Michele Filippini](#), Gramsci addressed this with the aim of absorbing and taking on the new reality by making use of the vocabulary from different theoretical traditions in order to refine his own analytical tools.

On more than one occasion, he had professed his interest in the “production of the past within the present” and his intention to write a “theory of history and historiography,” considering himself a “historian of historical development.”

Historical reconstruction was not, of course, the central focus of his interest. But it was a practice upon which he constructed his political activity. It was, in short, a [question of method](#):

If one wishes to study the birth of a conception of the world which has never been systematically expounded by its founder (and one furthermore whose essential coherence is to be sought not in each individual writing or series of writing but in the whole development of the multiform intellectual work in which the elements of the conception are implicit) some preliminary detailed philological work has to be done. This has to be carried out with the most scrupulous accuracy, scientific honest and intellectual loyalty.

The fiftieth anniversary of the publication of *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* offers us the opportunity to go back to the texts and, in a certain sense, to ask these questions of Gramsci himself.