

# Antonio Gramsci: From War to Revolution

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Antonio Gramsci

Eighty years after his death, Antonio Gramsci is among the most influential Marxist intellectuals across the board. By the end of World War II, liberal intellectuals had already found in him “a Marxist you can take home to Mother.” The tone was set by Benedetto Croce, who allegedly gushed in 1947, upon reading Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks*, “He’s one of us!”<sup>1</sup> It reached the point that the Sardinian activist can be presented today as no less than the guarantor of “Italian Democracy.”<sup>2</sup>

Having been inducted into the public domain with all the implied imprecisions and distortions, Gramsci’s heritage enjoys “the backhanded compliment accorded to every classic: more often referenced than actually read,”<sup>3</sup> all the more so for the abundance and range of the public and political appropriations of his thought—from Berlusconi to Sarkozy and up to Alain de Benoist, founder of the French New Right and Steve Bannon’s intellectual of reference, who claims “a right-wing Gramscianism.”<sup>4</sup>

Despite this hijacking by his enemies, Gramsci’s thought continues to be among the richest and most stimulating Marxist intellectual contributions bequeathed to us from the early twentieth century and undoubtedly the most relevant today. One measure of that is the Historical Materialism conference held in London every November. In 2015, the theme of the conference was Gramsci’s dictum, “the old is dying and the new cannot be born.”<sup>5</sup> This year, it will be the title of Gramsci’s December 1917 article, “Revolution Against ‘Capital,’” in which Gramsci attempted to make sense of the resumption of the revolutionary process in Russia. Setting off from the idea that the exceptional situation created by the war had radically invalidated the Marxists’ “dogmatic utterances, never to be questioned,” Gramsci proceeded to reflect on the ways the revolution might be extended to Italy. In particular Gramsci considered Turin, the so-called Italian Petrograd and the presumed epicenter of the revolution to come, as the experiences of the labor struggle during the *biennio rosso* (red two years), and especially the factory councils in Turin, had suggested.<sup>6</sup> It was a vexing question that would preoccupy not only the Italian activist until his death, but also the Bolsheviks, and Lenin in particular. At the second Congress of the Communist International, July 19 – August 7, 1920, Lenin would qualify the experience of the factory councils as the experience most in line with the goals of the international.

## Impending War

Antonio Gramsci arrived in Turin in 1911, barely twenty years old, to pursue studies in the humanities, studies he would have to abandon in 1915 for lack of funds compounded by an already deteriorating health. He joined the Socialist Party in 1913 and soon after began writing for the local party newspaper, *Il Grido del Popolo*, as well as for the Turin pages of the national party paper, *Avanti!*—among other roles including theater critic. Gramsci was a member of a political and cultural generation nourished by the idealism of Benedetto Croce and Giovanni Gentile, the activism

of George Sorel, and the “concretism” that Gaetano Salvemini developed in *L’Unità*, the journal he founded in 1911. As such, Gramsci argued for a break with the excessive bureaucracy of old Italian socialism, to which he counterpoised the ideas of the “ethical meaning of politics,” voluntarism, and action.<sup>7</sup> He was thus of a generation that sought to reread Marx, liberating his thought from “naturalist and positivist dross,” and scrubbing historical materialism of all determinism.<sup>8</sup>



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Italy was at that time in the grip of multiple quasi-insurrectional contestations of the social order, of which the most acute was the series of strikes and worker unrest that came to be known as the Red Week (*Settimana Rossa*). In Gramsci’s words, the “Red Week in June 1914 ... was the first, magnificent intervention of the mass of the people in politics, to directly oppose the arbitrary actions of the authorities and to give effective expression to the sovereign will of the people, which no longer found any voice in the Chamber of Representatives.”<sup>9</sup> But it was, above all, the eruption of the war in August 1914 and the subsequent debates among Italian socialists that constituted Gramsci’s first political testing ground. From its very inception, the first global conflict embodied for a small but not insignificant part of the European youth of the time the possibility of a dramatic dawn of a new revolutionary era. The possible link between revolution and war had already been invoked by the leaders of the Second International. Jean Jaurès suggested already in 1905 that “revolution [could] spring from a European war.”<sup>10</sup> Yet by 1914 Gramsci was a member of the only European socialist party in the belligerent states to have rejected—in what seemed like agreement with the stance adopted by the Socialist International—the call of war. A year later Lenin, doubting the Italian Socialist Party’s ability to maintain its position in case Italy joined the fray, noted “the indisputable fact that the workers in most European countries have been *deceived* by the fictitious unity of the opportunists and the revolutionaries, Italy being the happy exception, a country where no such deception exists at present.”<sup>11</sup> But in 1914, Gramsci was questioning the modalities of that “happy exception.”

Indeed, during the ten months between the eruption of the war and Italy joining, the Italian

Socialists were faced with the concrete task, not of stopping the war, but of preventing Italy's participation. They reacted by trying to attach a series of qualifying adjectives to the terms of neutrality: Theirs was a "vigilant and armed" neutrality, an "active and forceful" one, or an "active and operative" one. The idea of neutrality they put forward came to mean different things according to the different ways they conceived of their relation to the state and the nation, as well as the effect of the growing sense that the war would be a long one. This was also the case with the "unique" position Gramsci defended, all too often mistaken for support for revolutionary interventionism. In one of his most "enigmatic and controversial" articles, "Active and Operative Neutrality" (*Neutralità attiva ed operante*), written in late October 1914, Gramsci concerned himself with the means of neutrality, neither of the Italian state, nor of the working class of which he was certain, but of the Socialist Party. His point of departure was the observation that

even in the midst of the extraordinary confusion which the present European crisis has triggered in individuals and in parties, there is one point on which all are agreed: The present historical juncture is a desperately serious one and its consequences could be extremely grave. Because so much blood has been spilt and so many efforts have come to nothing, let us arrange things so that the maximum number of questions left unsolved from the past may be resolved, and humanity may once more proceed without its way being blocked ever again by such a grim expanse of sorrow and of injustice, without its future being marred in a short time by another catastrophe demanding just as formidable an expenditure of life and activity as this present one.<sup>12</sup>

"What role" then "should the Italian Socialist Party ... play at the present juncture of Italian history?" To answer this question, Gramsci qualified as "passive" the neutrality defended by the reformist wing of Filippo Turati and Claudio Treves. According to Gramsci, advocating that kind of neutrality in the concrete Italian situation at that moment inevitably meant more or less directly supporting the politics of the government, all the "while the proletariat's opponents are themselves creating their own hour and busy preparing their platform for the class struggle." Young Gramsci called therefore to move away from absolute neutrality and toward an active and operative one, so that the workers movement would not be relegated to the role of an "impartial observer in these events," while others are left to shape them:

Revolutionaries should not rest content with the provisional formula of "absolute neutrality," but should transform it into the alternative formula of "active and operative neutrality," which means putting class struggle back at the center of the nation's life. ... Only in this way will class dualism be re-established, and the Socialist Party be able to free itself from all the bourgeois encrustations with which fear of war has encumbered it. ... Then, having demonstrated to the country ... how [the country's] self-styled representatives have shown themselves incapable of any action whatsoever, the party will be able to prepare the proletariat to replace them: prepare it for the last supreme wrench which will signal the transition of civilization from an imperfect to an alternative, more perfect one.<sup>13</sup>

Against the "wait and see" formula of the reformists, "enthusiastically accepted, moreover, by the ruling class," Gramsci sought thus to reconstitute the antagonistic role of the workers movement by actively affirming the incompatibility between working-class interests and taking part in the war. For the revolutionaries, he continued, "history is the product of their own actions, made up of an interrupted series of wrenches executed upon the other active and passive forces in society." The war should be therefore understood as a transition between a before and an after, one that lets revolutionaries "prepare the most favorable conditions for the final wrench (the revolution)."

As we know, Italy only entered the war in May 1915. The ten months of nonintervention marked the unique and sought-after moment of searching for the means to subvert the order of the world. After May 1915, Constantino Lazzari's watchword, "neither support nor sabotage," imposed itself as a way

of acknowledging the internal contradictions of the Socialists' position without trying to resolve them.

### **"The Revolution Against 'Capital'"**

As it went on, the war, "this all-powerful 'stage manager,' this mighty accelerator" and potential trigger of social change, became the site for experiencing the "utopian" spaces opened by the intense period of political elaboration that spanned the years 1914-1915.<sup>14</sup> Conscious of that, Gramsci's efforts to grasp the war's impact on the class struggle intensified after 1917, notably through editorial projects such as the single issue of *La città futura* (*The Future City*), which sought to be "the hearth of the new moral energy, new spirit, and idealism of our youth."<sup>15</sup> In it he described the effect of the war on a large segment of Italian youth: "The war has mowed down the young; but above all, it took away all their efforts, their struggles, their splendid dreams of utopia, which the war, by merely stimulating action and achievements, could not deliver." Yet for Gramsci, the socialist youth were largely spared, not from death on the battlefields, but from disillusionment, saved by the strength of their "concrete idea" and "moral principle," and a political program that Gramsci defined as a "concrete universal." Furthermore, "the socialist youth organization did not suffer too much in itself and for itself. The thousands of young men torn from their struggles were quickly replaced." On the eve of the February Revolution, Gramsci was in fact certain that Italy was where the future would play itself out first, a future he thought of as "the projection of today's will into the future as if it has already changed the social environment."

In April 1917, when the news of the February Revolution reached Italy, necessarily in a very sketchy form, Gramsci insisted on the dissimilarity between the revolutionary events taking place in Russia and the French Revolution, emphasizing the former's "extraordinary novelty," formidable creative force, and socialist character. *Notes on the Russian Revolution* opens likewise with the question, "Why is the Russian Revolution a proletarian revolution?" According to Gramsci,

We ... are convinced that the Russian revolution is more than simply a proletarian event, it is a proletarian act, which must naturally lead to a socialist regime. ... What the revolution has created in Russia is a new way of life. It has not only replaced one power by another, it has replaced one way of life by another.<sup>16</sup>

In the following weeks, Turin, which saw no abatement in working-class combativity, became the epicenter of the insurrection. A Russian delegation arrived in the city in August and was greeted by a jubilant crowd with shouts of "Long live the Russian Revolution! Long live Lenin!" The news from the revolution in Russia brought new hope to a population already made furious by severe hardship, stirring up uprisings nearly everywhere in the north of Italy during the summer of 1917. The mobilizations—in Piedmont, Venice, Tuscany, Emilia-Romana—combined opposition to the war and demands for improving living conditions. But it was in Turin that revolution seemed closest, as the city experienced what the Italian historian Leonardo Rapone called "the most remarkable episode of popular insurrection during the war outside of Russia."<sup>17</sup> On August 21, 1917, bread shortages led workers in the city, primarily women, to launch a general strike that turned immediately into an insurrection. The uprising held until August 25, and a few of the army units sent to quell it joined the insurgents. The eventual repression of the revolt left forty dead and two hundred wounded.<sup>18</sup>

Barely a couple of weeks later Gramsci wrote an article—which was censured in toto—for *Il Grido del Popolo*, of which he was then the editor, reflecting on that insurrectional experience and arguing,

The proletariat has a collective life that cannot be accounted for by any abstract scheme. It is a continually changing organism with its own will. ... Its existence, the demonstration of its existence,

is at this time the Italian proletariat's greatest problem. And this proletariat is not the same as it was three years ago. It grew numerically. It went through more intense spiritual experiences.<sup>19</sup>

The war, for Gramsci, had nourished "the emergence of a new class-consciousness," both because of the high concentration of workers and peasants in the trenches and because of the increased social control exercised by the state. It was that "concrete experience of the masses in movement" that led to a turning point in Gramsci's political and intellectual development.<sup>20</sup>

On December 1, 1917, Gramsci published an essay that is undoubtedly among the most "canonical" of his early writings, "The Revolution Against 'Capital.'"<sup>21</sup> With the scant information at his disposal, he laid out one of the most original analyses of the Russian October Revolution. First, and in line with his *Notes on the Russian Revolution*, what happened in October was "the continuation of the general revolution of the Russian people"—a revolution against Marx's *Capital*, or better even, against the Marxists and the "cannons of historical materialism":

These people [the Bolsheviks] are not Marxists, that's all. ... Marx foresaw the foreseeable. But he could not foresee the European war, or rather he could not foresee that the war would last as long as it has or have the effects it has had. He could not foresee that in the space of three years of unspeakable suffering and miseries, this war would have aroused in Russia the collective popular will that it has aroused.<sup>22</sup>

Gramsci would return to the attempt to clarify his own idea of Marx in another article written on the occasion of the centenary of Marx's birth:

Marx did not write a nice little doctrine, he is not a Messiah who left a string of parables laden with categorical imperatives, with absolute, unquestionable norms beyond the categories of time and space. ... Marx ... is a man of action. ... In glorifying Karl Marx on the centenary of his birth, the international proletariat is glorifying itself, its conscious strength, the dynamism of its aggressiveness of conquest which undermines the rule of privilege and prepares for the final struggle which will crown all its efforts and all its sacrifices.<sup>23</sup>

During the "four red years" of 1917-1920, "the spirit's myriad sparkling lights" that Gramsci saw shining in the collective will projected into the future seemed almost palpable. After the war, Turin was again at the center of new political experiments. On May 1, 1919, Gramsci, together with Palmiro Togliatti, Umberto Terracini, and Angelo Tasca, the core group of the future Communist Party of Italy, founded a new journal, *L'Ordine Nuovo* (*The New Order*). Gramsci's liberal revolutionary friend Piero Gobetti would later describe it as "a journal of thought, unique in Italy, aware of the importance of national problems, concerned with founding a new political consciousness and being attuned to the cultural needs of the modern world."<sup>24</sup>

From the end of 1919, Gramsci and his journal stood at the center of an attempt to experiment—through the emerging factory councils—with the creation of "a new order." Gramsci immediately seized upon the factory councils as tools for autonomy and the "self-governance of the masses," and saw in them the embryonic, Italian form of the soviets and a point of departure for new revolutionary processes.<sup>25</sup> Gramsci was enthusiastic about this experience of workers democracy from below, not the least because Turin, which occupied a special place in his mind at the time, appeared to him, perhaps too optimistically, destined to "conquer the country once again."<sup>26</sup> The council movement quickly advanced to organizing tens of thousands of workers, and Gramsci theorized the subversive and revolutionary role of the councils against the organizational forms of the workers and trade-union movement in Italy, seeing in them a first step toward the socialist revolution. In particular during the strikes of April 1920 and the factory occupations that followed in September of the same year, the movement supported by Gramsci and the team of *L'Ordine*

*Nuovo*—despite some internal conflicts and disunity—appeared indeed to constitute the prelude to a “revolution in action.”<sup>27</sup> When an explicitly political strike was launched in April by the workers of Fiat “for the workers’ control of production,” it grew to encompass all of the city’s workers:

For the first time a proletariat was seen to take up the fight for the control of production without being forced into this struggle by unemployment and hunger. And we are not dealing just with a minority vanguard of the local working class; the entire mass of the working people in Turin went united into the struggle, which they upheld forcefully, without defections, subjecting themselves to the harshest deprivations and greatest sacrifices. The strike lasted a month for the engineering workers, and ten days for the entire mass of the working people.<sup>28</sup>

The factory occupations represented the “last revolutionary upswing” before fascism assumed power. With more than 180 factories in Turin occupied, and thousands of workers radicalized by a class war ever more tangible, revolution seemed at hand. Gramsci, however, was concerned, noting the ease with which workers took over the factories:

We must tell the truth to the masses of workers. They should not believe for a moment that the communist revolution will be as easy as occupying an undefended factory. ... The occupation of the factories by the masses of workers is a historical event of the first order. It is a necessary step in the revolutionary development and the class war. But it is necessary to ascertain its significance and reach rigorously and draw from it all the elements that can serve the education of the masses and the strengthening of the revolutionary spirit.<sup>29</sup>

Already in May, soon after the April strikes, Gramsci was acutely aware of the stakes:

The class war in Italy is currently in a phase that can lead, either to the conquest of political power by the revolutionary proletariat and the movement to new modes of production and distribution that can revive productivity, or to the terrible reaction from the owning and governing classes. No violence designed to reduce the industrial and agricultural proletariat to a state of servile labor will make us retreat.<sup>30</sup>

The Second Congress of the Fascist Movement was held in May. Benito Mussolini began then preparing his “preventive counter-revolution” that would usher him into power two years later—past the debris of the Italian workers’ movement.

Translated by Gabriel Ash

## Footnotes

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6. A.G. [Antonio Gramsci], "La Rivoluzione Contro il Capitale," *L'Avanti!*, December 24, 1917 (reprinted *Il Grido del Popolo*, January 5, 1918), translated as "The Revolution Against 'Capital,'" in David Forgacs (ed.), *The Gramsci Reader: Selected Writings 1916-1935* (New York University Press, 2000), 33; also by Nathalie Campbell (accessed 5/27/17). Also Paolo Spriano, *The Occupation of the Factories: Italy 1920* (London: Pluto Press, 1975).

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8. Gramsci, "The Revolution Against 'Capital.'"

9. [Antonio Gramsci], "Il popolo delle scimmie," *L'Ordine Nuovo*, January 2, 1921 (translated as "The Monkey People," in Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from Political Writings (1910-1920)*, selected and edited by Quentin Hoare (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1988), 372).

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11. Vladimir I. Lenin, "What next? On the Tasks Confronting the Workers' Parties with Regard to Opportunism and Social Chauvinism," *Sotsial-Demokrat* (no. 36, January 9, 1915), (accessed 5/27/17).

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13. Gramsci, "Active and Operative," 8.

14. V.I. Lenin, "Letters from Afar. First Letter," March 7, 1917 (published in *Pravda* (no. 14-15, March 21-22, 1917).

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