

Antonio Gramsci

Towards an ethnographic Marxism

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ABSTRACT: “Culture” was always for Gramsci an important aspect of political struggle. In the *Prison Notebooks* he insists on the need for «a cultural front alongside the merely economic and merely political ones» (Gramsci 1995: 345). We should note, however, that the concept of culture we find in the notebooks is rather different from that of mainstream anthropology (see Crehan 2002). At the same time Gramsci’s approach to culture and the relation of culture to history can be seen as informed by an ethnographic sensibility, which is always determined to seek out, and take seriously, the narratives others use to make sense of their world and navigate their way through it. To clarify the nature of the ethnographic sensibility we find in the notebooks and the letters from prison, the article compares this sensibility to that of Bronislaw Malinowski as laid down in the famous Introduction to *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (termed by George Stocking, anthropology’s mythic charter). The article argues that Gramsci’s ethnographically-informed approach can help anthropologists and others trace out the complicated passage between the material structures that shape the basic social and political landscapes within which people live, and the narratives by which they live. And that understanding this is a crucial foundation for any effective political movement that would bring about a more just and fair world.

KEYWORDS: GRAMSCI, MARXISM, CULTURAL STRUGGLE, ETHNOGRAPHY, MALINOWSKI.

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Antonio Gramsci: Towards an ethnographic Marxism

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Books and magazines only offer general ideas, sketches (more or less successful) of general currents in the world's life, but they cannot give the immediate, direct, vivid impression of the lives of Peter, Paul, and John, of single, real individuals, and unless one understands them one cannot understand what is being universalized and generalized (Gramsci, letter to Tatiana Schucht, 19 November 1928).

Antonio Gramsci, co-founder of the Italian communist party and one of the most creative and interesting Marxist theorists of the twentieth century, was a committed political activist who devoted his life to bringing about radical social transformation¹. At the heart of the famous notebooks he wrote during his long years of imprisonment by Mussolini's fascist regime is a quest to understand the defeat of the Italian left and the deep historical roots of that defeat. For Mussolini's prisoner an essential component of any radical social change was *cultural* transformation. «[Marxism] in its most recent stage of development», he wrote: «consists precisely in asserting the moment of hegemony as essential to its conception of the state and in attaching “full weight” to the cultural factor, to cultural activity, to the necessity for a cultural front alongside the merely economic and merely political ones» (Gramsci 1995: 345).

I approach Gramsci as an anthropologist. I first read the notebooks in the 1970s as a graduate student preparing for the classic anthropological rite of passage: extended fieldwork based on participant observation. Although the prison notebooks were already known in Anglophone Marxist circles, it was the publication in 1971 of Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith's *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci* that introduced them to Anglophone anthropology more widely. For many anthropologists the Italian Marxist's interest in culture seemed highly relevant to a discipline in which culture has been such a core concept. But this apparent shared concern with culture can be deceptive. The concept of culture we find in the notebooks is not the same concept of culture as that «around which», Clifford Geertz argued, «the whole discipline of anthropology arose» (Geertz 1973: 4). In *Gramsci, Culture and Anthropology*, I explored this difference. This article, which grew out of my thinking as I was working on a more recent study, *Gramsci's Common Sense: Inequality and Its Narratives*, focusses on a different question: inhabiting, as they do, cultural worlds structured by narratives that to an important degree view that world from the vantage point of the dominant, to what extent do subaltern groups have their own,

1. An earlier version of this article was presented at the International Colloquium of Gramsci Studies 2017, Campinas, Brazil, which will be published as *Antonio Gramsci: em busca de um marxismo etnográfico* (Bianchi *et al.*, forthcoming).

alternative understandings – understandings rooted in subaltern experience that genuinely challenge the prevailing hegemony? To the extent that such alternative worldviews do exist, albeit in embryonic form, is it possible for intellectuals who would bring about radical change to gain access to them? Can progressive intellectuals gain a genuine understanding of subaltern cultural worlds which are not their cultural worlds?

Accessing subaltern cultural worlds

In contrast to James Scott (a hugely influential theorist of subaltern consciousness), Gramsci does not believe that «[e]very subordinate group creates, out of its ordeal, a “hidden transcript” that represents a critique of power spoken behind the back of the dominant» (Scott 1990: xii).

Subalterns may indeed critique power but this critique is fragmentary, incoherent. It does not represent an *effective* challenge: «by definition, the people (the sum total of the instrumental and subaltern classes of every form of society that has so far existed) cannot possess conceptions which are elaborated, systematic and politically organized and centralized» (Gramsci 1985: 189); «the lower classes, historically on the defensive, can only achieve self-awareness via a series of negations, via their consciousness of the identity and class limits of their enemy; but it is precisely this process which has not yet come to the surface» (Gramsci 1971: 273).

For this «self-awareness» to emerge as a coherent and effective political narrative it is necessary that such «negations» are developed and built upon by intellectuals, but this requires that those intellectuals have access to the embryonic fragments of «self-awareness» existing beneath the surface.

Subaltern groups may have to struggle to achieve coherent understandings of the realities they face. Nonetheless, and Gramsci insists on this in many places in the notebooks, it is the fragments of «self-awareness» that emerge out of subaltern experience that are the ultimate source of coherent political narratives: «Is it possible that a “formally” new conception can present itself in a guise other than the crude, unsophisticated version of the populace?» (Gramsci 1971: 342).

One form such fragmentary subaltern knowledge takes is common sense (*senso comune*). The Italian *senso comune*, it should be noted, lacks the positive connotations of the English “common sense”. It is a more neutral term that refers simply to the beliefs and opinions held in common, or thought to be held in common, by the mass of the population². For Gramsci

2. See Crehan 2016: 43-58 for an extended discussion of Gramsci’s concept of *senso comune* and the difference between *senso comune* and the English term common sense.

this assemblage of accepted beliefs is above all «a confused agglomerate» (Gramsci 1985: 189). 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 [inconsistent]³, in conformity with the social and cultural position of those masses whose philosophy it is» (Gramsci 1971: 419).

Nonetheless, embedded within the chaotic confusion of common sense there is what Gramsci identifies as *buon senso* (good sense). For instance, taking the common expression «being philosophical about it», he notes that while this expression may contain «an implicit invitation to resignation and patience», it can also be seen as an «invitation to people to reflect and to realise fully that whatever happens is basically rational and must be confronted as such». This appeal to use reason rather than blind emotion constitutes «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» (Gramsci 1971: 328).

But how should progressive intellectuals go about discovering the “good sense” from which genuinely new worldviews emerge? Scott has a straightforward answer: it is in the spaces «outside the earshot of powerholders, where the hidden transcript is to be sought». All that is necessary is to seek out such spaces. For the Sardinian Marxist, who had spent years organising workers, things are not so simple: dominant narratives reach deep into the consciousness of subalterns. It is not so easy to cast off the manacles of hegemony. «Subaltern classes», he argues, «are subject to the initiatives of the dominant classes, even when they rebel; they are in a state of anxious defense» (Gramsci 1996: 21).

Subalterns can never find a space completely outside the earshot of the powerholders; those powerholders have, as it were, taken up residence inside their heads. This is an important part of what hegemony means. At the same time, hegemony is never complete. The contradictions between the official narratives of the dominant and the actual experience of subalterns bubble up to the surface and find expression, albeit in embryonic form. Subaltern good sense is not to be found in separate spaces but rather in the interstices and cracks of the existing hegemony.

Mining the submerged nuggets of good sense on which a progressive social movement can build on is not easy however. It requires that those who would change society listen to subalterns, take their understandings of the

3. Gramsci writes «inconseguente», translated by Hoare and Nowell Smith as *inconsequential*. In this context, inconsistent would be a more accurate translation. I am grateful to the late Frank Rosengarten for drawing my attention to this mistranslation.

world seriously, and seek out the traces, however fragmentary, subaltern knowledge has left as it travels through history. In a number of places in the notebooks Gramsci suggests how we might do this, compiling what we might call an archive of common sense. An important source is folklore. In folklore, he argues, we can find evidence «of all the conceptions of the world and of life that have succeeded one another in history. In fact, it is only in folklore that one finds surviving evidence, adulterated and mutilated, of the majority of these conceptions» (Gramsci 1985: 189). Genuinely listening to subalterns, however, making sense of that evidence to map the cultures they inhabit, and to decipher the traces they have left in the historical record – traces that go against the hegemonic grain – is challenging. Discerning good sense within the babble of common sense demands attentive listeners.

One of the challenges for an intellectual like Gramsci, a challenge he was well aware of, was that despite his years of organising workers, his cultural world remained that of a cultivated intellectual. Popular culture fascinated him but it was not his culture. One of his letters from prison, for instance, contains a remembrance of Giacomo Bernolfo, a man who had once been his bodyguard, who had recently died. Bernolfo was very fond of reciting verses belonging to what Gramsci describes as «that third rate romantic literature loved so much by simple people [populo] (along the lines of opera librettos, which are mostly written in a very peculiar baroque style with disgustingly pathetic mawkishness, which however seem to be astonishingly appealing)» (Gramsci 1994, vol 2: 159) Gramsci ends his remembrance like this:

This memory [of Bernolfo reciting verses to his comrades] is the most vivid aspect of his character that insistently comes back to my mind: this gigantic man who with sincere passion declaims verses, in bad taste but that express robust and impetuous elementary passions, and who stops short and blushes when his listener is an “intellectual” even though a friend (Gramsci 1994, vol. 2: 159).

This tension between Gramsci’s personal distaste for much popular culture and his conviction that it contained the seeds of a new, progressive, revolutionary culture runs through the notebooks. For him to enter subaltern cultural worlds, even if those subalterns were Italian workers, was often to enter cultural world that were aesthetically alien to him. And yet he saw gaining access to those worlds, as crucial to the work of political organisation. All too often progressive intellectuals assume they know what subalterns think. If those actually experiencing inequality and oppression see things differently, then they are suffering from “false consciousness” and it is the intellectuals’ task to enlighten them.

This was never Gramsci's view. For him, as I have noted, collective subaltern experience is the ultimate source of new, potentially transformative, political narratives. Genuinely «organic» intellectuals⁴ develop and give coherence to the beginnings of knowledge that emerges out of a group's experience, but it is the subaltern group itself that creates its intellectuals:

A human mass does not “distinguish” itself, does not become independent in its own right without, in the widest sense, organising itself; and there is no organisation without intellectuals, that is without organisers and leaders, in other words, without the theoretical aspect of the theory-practice nexus being distinguished concretely by the existence of a group of people “specialised” in conceptual and philosophical elaboration of ideas. But the process of creating intellectuals is long, difficult, full of contradictions, advances and retreats, dispersals and regroupings, in which the loyalty of the masses is often sorely tried (Gramsci 1971: 334).

It is important to note here that that the intellectuals a subaltern group creates as it emerges from subalternity are not necessarily members of that group by birth. Gramsci, for instance, did not come from a working-class background. His father was a petty bureaucrat. He himself studied at university and his own intellectual formation could be seen in certain respects as that of a traditional intellectual. But he can also be seen as an organic working-class intellectual, the product of early twentieth-century political struggle.

The difficult, but necessary, dialogue between a subaltern group and the intellectuals to whom it so painfully gives birth, requires that would-be progressive intellectuals understand that subaltern world, as it were, from the inside; and understand it both experientially and theoretically. This raises an epistemological question that was foundational in the development of twentieth century anthropology: how can those who are not members of a given world gain an insider's view of that world, and, crucially, theorise that view in a way that explains it to other outsiders? It is notable, however, that while many Anglophone anthropologists have drawn on Gramsci, they have rarely if ever, concerned themselves with his epistemological arguments. Rather, they have borrowed theoretical concepts, such as hegemony, or subaltern⁵. The interest has been in how this Marxist thinker so concerned with culture might enrich anthropology, not in how Marxism might be enriched by ethnography. My focus here, we might say, is not *Marxist* ethnography but *ethnographic* Marxism.

4. See Crehan 2002 for an extended discussion of Gramsci's often misunderstood concept of the organic intellectual.

5. In Crehan 2016, I discuss the ways in which various anthropologists, such as Jean and John Comaroff, have used Gramsci.

In their reading of Gramsci, anglophone anthropologists, I would argue, have tended to overlook the profound *ethnographic sensibility* of the notebooks, something that struck me from my first reading of them as an aspiring anthropologist. Let me explain what I mean by this. I define ethnographic sensibility as a determination to seek out the narratives others use to make sense of their world and navigate their way through it. It requires a commitment to treat those narratives with the utmost seriousness, always attempting to understand them in terms of their own assumptions and logics. This kind of ethnographic attentiveness has been central to anthropology as a discipline. And such ethnographic sensibility is also a leitmotiv of Gramsci's search for subaltern worldviews in the notebooks; the kind of leitmotiv for which their author tells us to search when approaching the work of a major thinker: «search for the *Leitmotiv*, for the rhythm of the thought as it develops, should be more important than that for single casual affirmations and isolated aphorisms» (Gramsci 1971: 383-384).

To explore the similarities and differences between the ethnographic sensibility we find in the notebooks and in classic anglophone anthropology I want to focus on the vision of anthropology laid out in Bronislaw Malinowski's Introduction to *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, published in 1922. There is no evidence that Gramsci knew this classic New Guinea ethnography. The two thinkers, both products of early twentieth century Europe, were close contemporaries however, Malinowski born in 1884, Gramsci in 1891.

The *Argonauts'* Introduction was hugely influential. For George Stocking, anthropology's foremost historian, it provided «a mythic charter for [anthropology's] central ritual [that is, fieldwork]» (Stocking 1992: 57). And «for almost four decades Malinowski's mythic charter functioned to sustain the ethnographic enterprise, helping several generations of aspiring ethnographers to “get on with the work”» (Stocking 1992: 59). In more recent years, the degree to which Malinowski lived up to the ideals he laid out has been called into question, but whatever the realities of this pioneer's own fieldwork, the methodological prescriptions laid down in the Introduction, and still widely taught in introductory anthropology courses, remain relevant for twenty-first century anthropologists. The *Argonauts* Introduction is, we might say, the quintessential expression of the ethnographic sensibility of anthropology as a discipline.

The ethnographic sensibility of Bronislaw Malinowski

Malinowski came to Britain to study anthropology in 1910, after obtaining a doctorate in Chemistry in his native Poland. He would go on to become one of the founding fathers of anglophone anthropology. As an “ethnographer”, Mussolini’s prisoner, writing his notebooks in his cell under the constraints of the prison regime, with no freedom of movement, and continually subject to surveillance, may seem to have little in common with the Polish anthropologist living with all the privileges of his whiteness in his Trobriand village.

Both men, however, were committed to exploring worldviews largely hidden from those in power: in Gramsci’s case, those of subalterns; in Malinowski’s, those of indigenous peoples living under colonial rule. Each theorist saw this mapping as difficult and challenging, if for different reasons, and reflected at length on how it might be achieved. Comparing their methodological approaches will, I hope, further clarify what I mean by ethnographic sensibility and suggest why it remains relevant not only for twenty-first century anthropologists, but for others interested in imagining a Marxism for our historical moment.

In the Introduction to *Argonauts* Malinowski gives anthropologists, termed by him ethnographers, a clear charge: «the final goal, of which an Ethnographer should never lose sight, is ... to grasp the native’s point of view, his relation to life, to realise *his* vision of *his* world» (Malinowski 1922: 25, emphasis in original). To achieve this goal the ethnographer must enter into a world that is not their own, and come to understand it from the inside. The methodology Malinowski lays out will, he argues, enable the ethnographer/anthropologist both to achieve this empathetic understanding, and record it in a rigorous, scientific fashion. This is the methodology that would come to be called participant observation.

The methodological prescriptions to be found in the *Argonauts*’ Introduction are based on two key principles. The first is that researchers must share the lives of those they study. For colonial researchers, like Malinowski, the primary object of study was “the native”. Anthropology, he writes, reveals «the native as he is; it opens up to its practitioners the native’s mind» (Malinowski 1922: xv).

But, if the goal is to discover «the native as he is», practitioners needed to get a lot closer to those they studied than was customary when Malinowski began his fieldwork in 1914. A standard way of collecting data at that time was for individual “native” informants to be summoned by the anthropologist and questioned, frequently through an interpreter, about

their “culture and traditions”. Often these interviews would take place on the verandas that were a standard feature of colonial buildings. This was not a method likely to provide the deep insight the *Argonauts*’ author sought. Anthropologists, needed to descend from their verandas and live among those studied, learning their language, and observing the reality of daily life. Only by committing themselves to sharing the worlds they observed could they hope to gain a full understanding of those worlds.

[...] Living in the village with no other business but to follow native life, one sees the customs, ceremonies and transactions over and over again, one has examples of their beliefs as they are actually lived through, and the full body and blood of actual native life fills out soon the skeleton of abstract constructions (Malinowski 1922: 18).

Living amongst the “natives”, however, is only the first step. Having put oneself in the midst of “native life”, one must then listen and watch attentively, registering everything that goes on, and, to the extent possible, participating in that native life. This is the second primary component of participant observation. Malinowski provides this picture of his own participation observation among the Trobriand villagers: «soon after I had established myself, ... I began to take part, in a way, in the village life, to look forward to the important or festive events, to take personal interest in the gossip and the developments of the small village occurrences; to wake up each morning to a day, presenting itself to me more or less as it does to the native» (1922: 7).

Anthropologists would thereby put themselves in a position where they will see life as it is lived, not merely how their informants say it is lived.

The importance of theory

Opening oneself up to the lived reality of the lives observed, and recording it in all its dense complexity, is only the beginning however. The data collected also need to be organised and interpreted. Inevitably there is a tension here. On the one hand, the researcher needs to keep an open mind, resisting the temptation to slot what they see and hear into pre-determined conceptual boxes. On the other, theory is necessary to make sense of the flood of “facts” generated by participant observation. In a passage that is worth quoting at length, Malinowski, the former chemist, explains the need continually to tack back and forth between data and theory:

Good training in theory, and acquaintance with its latest results, is not identical with being burdened with “preconceived ideas”. If a man sets out on an expedition, determined to prove certain hypotheses, if he is incapable of

changing his views constantly and casting them off ungrudgingly under the pressure of evidence, needless to say his work will be worthless. But the more problems he brings with him into the field, the more he is in the habit of moulding his theories according to facts, and of seeing facts in their bearing upon theory, the better he is equipped for the work. Preconceived ideas are pernicious in any scientific work, but foreshadowed problems are the main endowment of a scientific thinker, and these problems are first revealed to the observer by his theoretical studies (1922: 8-9).

Gramsci, a man who certainly had «a good training in theory», and one who held himself to the highest intellectual standards, also stresses the primacy of data. It is «the theoretician's task», he writes, «to “translate” the elements of historical life into theoretical language, but not vice versa, making reality conform to an abstract scheme. Reality will never conform to an abstract scheme» (1996: 52).

Prison, as the letters he wrote from prison reveal, exposed Gramsci to a world that initially was to him perhaps as alien as that of the Trobrianders initially seemed to Malinowski. In one of the earliest letters written to his sister-in-law, Tatiana Schucht, he writes of the non-political prisoners, «the ordinary detainees whose life I would be unable to describe to you in a few words: do you remember Kipling's short story “A Strange Ride” ... It immediately leaped to my mind so much that I thought I was living it» (Gramsci 1994, vol. 1: 40).

The Rudyard Kipling story Gramsci has in mind is one of Kipling's earliest publications, written when he was nineteen. A nightmarish tale reminiscent of Edgar Allan Poe, its full title is *The Strange Ride of Morrowbie Jukes*. The narrator, Morrowbie Jukes, is a young engineer working in colonial India. One night while suffering from a fever he mounts his horse and rides wildly off into the desert night. His horse stumbles and horse and rider are thrown down a steep cliff to land in a crater from which there is no escape. To his horror, Jukes discovers the crater houses unfortunates who have been thrown there after apparently dying, but then reviving as they are about to be cremated. In the crater they eke out an existence that is scarcely human, sheltering in rough burrows hollowed out of the sand, kept alive, but barely, by irregular deliveries of food thrown down to them.

«When a man felt his death coming on he retreated to his lair and died there. The body was sometimes dragged out of the hole and thrown on to the sand, or allowed to rot where it lay» (Kipling 2011: 22). On seeing Jukes in their midst they cluster round him and laugh: «the ragged crew actually laughed at me – such laughter as I hope I may never hear again. They cackled,

yelled, whistled, and howled as I walked into their midst, some of them literally throwing themselves down on the ground in convulsions of unholy mirth» (Kipling 2011: 18). Thanks to a faithful servant, who tracks him down, Jukes does eventually escape but remains haunted by his time in this place where human beings stripped of virtually everything that makes them human wait to die.

That this vision of a kind of living hell «immediately leaped» to Gramsci's mind on his first contact with the prison's ordinary detainees, suggests how alien the world of these prisoners was to him. At the same time Gramsci was fascinated by the new worlds he discovered in prison, and once he had overcome his initial culture shock he was a perceptive observer of his fellow prisoners. Some four months later in another letter to Tatiana, he describes an entertainment his fellow detainees staged for the celebrity in their midst:

Men from Apulia, Calabria, and Sicily present a knife-fencing clinic in accordance with the rules of the four states of the southern underworld (the Sicilian State, the Calabrian State, the Apulian State, and the Neapolitan State): Sicilians against Apulians, Apulians against Calabrians, because the hatred between these two states is powerful and the clinic even becomes serious and bloody. The Apulians are the masters of all of them: unsurpassed knife wielders with a technique full of secrets and very lethal, developed in line with all the others and in order to outdo them. An old Apulian, age sixty-five, much revered, but without "state" recognition, defeats all the champions of the other states; then, as the grand finale, he fences with another Apulian, a young man, with the most beautiful body and surprisingly agile, a high dignitary whom they all obey and for half an hour they demonstrate all the normal techniques of all the fencing schools. A truly grandiose and unforgettable spectacle in every way, because of the performers and the spectators: *a whole subterranean world was revealed to me, extremely complicated, with its own life of emotions, of points of view, of points of honor, and formidable, iron hierarchies* (Gramsci 1994, vol. 1: 96, emphasis added).

Note here, the linking of this one-off entertainment to «a whole subterranean world». The Sardinian Marxist and his Polish contemporary in the Trobriand Islands are both concerned with collective rather than individual understandings. «What matters», Gramsci insists, «is not the opinion of Tom, Dick, and Harry, but the ensemble of opinions that have become collective and a powerful factor in society» (Gramsci 2007: 347). Similarly, in the *Argonauts* Introduction, Malinowski writes «as sociologists, we are not interested in what A or B may feel *qua* individuals, in the accidental course of their own personal experience – we are interested only in what they feel and think *qua* members of a given community» (Malinowski 1922: 23).

Mapping subaltern worlds

At the same time, Gramsci's object of study in the notebooks is very different from that of Malinowski. The visions of the world Gramsci seeks to map are not those of "natives" living under colonialism, but subalterns across a wide span of history. And subalternity in the notebooks is a very broad category. Its inclusivity reflects Gramsci's refusal to force the rich specificity of «historical life» into pre-determined theoretical boxes. Subalternity in the notebooks, as Marcus Green stresses, does not define a particular form of subordination, such as that of the proletariat. Rather it embraces a whole range of oppressions and subordination suffered by different groups. Evidence for this reading is provided by the fact that, as Green notes, at different points in the notebook devoted to subaltern social groups, «slaves, peasants, religious groups, women, different races, and the proletariat» are all termed «subaltern social groups» (Green 2011, 69). For Gramsci, the concept of subalternity names a general condition of subordination. We can only know the particular shapes it assumes through the empirical analysis of particular times and places.

Gramsci's interest in subaltern culture and subaltern narratives stems from his commitment to the struggle for political and social transformation. Unlike Malinowski, his final goal was not simply to understand how subalterns view the world, but to understand how they might overcome their subalternity to become a political force capable of bringing about radical change. Subalterns who transcend their collective subalternity – Gramsci's focus was always on subaltern groups rather than individual subalterns – do so with the aid of intellectuals, intellectuals whose knowledge is rooted in specific lived experience, even if they themselves have not come from that background. Such intellectuals «[work] out and [make] coherent the principles and the problems raised by the masses in their practical activity» (Gramsci 1971: 330). This is part of the work of «creating intellectuals» described in the passage from the notebooks quoted above on p. 138. This work, however, requires that intellectuals have a genuinely empathetic understanding of how particular subalterns in particular places at particular times perceive the reality they inhabit. In other words, they need to possess an ethnographic sensibility.

It is this kind of receptivity we find in the notebooks. And it is there from the beginning. The notebooks were the result of Gramsci's determination that while the fascists might have incarcerated his body, they would not imprison his mind. To combat the psychologically destructive effects of prison, he set about devising a plan for the kind of systematic, serious study not possible in the hurly-burly of his political life prior to his arrest. In a

famous letter he wrote to Tatiana Schucht, a little later than the letters I have already quoted but still soon after his arrest, he sketched out a series of topics he planned to study, one of which was *The serial novel and popular taste in literature*. This idea had come to him, he explained, «when he read about the death of the actor-manager of a theatre company whose performances he had attended. He saw such popular theatre as «the theatrical counterpart of the serial novel». The report had brought back to him, «what fun I had all the times I went to see him, because the performance was twofold: the suspense and unleashed passions, together with the interventions of the audience of ordinary folk, which was certainly not the least interesting part of the performance» (Gramsci 1994, vol. 1: 84).

As with the «knife clinic» put on for his benefit by other prisoners, Gramsci was always fascinated by anything he saw as providing a window into the imaginative worlds inhabited by subalterns. *The serial novel and popular taste in literature* provided just such a window, and was a topic he could pursue in prison. If approached in the right spirit, he explained in one letter, even the apparently poor resource of the prison library can contain riches. We need to ask of popular novels, «why is this sort of literature almost always the most read and the most published? what needs does it satisfy? what aspirations does it answer? what emotions and points of view are represented in these trashy books for them to be so popular?» (Gramsci 1994, vol. 1: 262).

Written sources were Gramsci's raw material. Thanks to his friend and supporter Piero Sraffa, who paid for an account with a Milan bookshop, Gramsci was able to order anything not forbidden by the prison censors. This arrangement allowed him to obtain a wide range of both scholarly and popular books, journals, magazines and newspapers. The popular publications were important because they revealed how their audiences «conceived of the world and life». Whatever he read, whether scholarly, academic or popular, lowbrow or highbrow, he reads as an ethnographer: what are the links between this particular work, this particular author, and the larger context to which the work and the author belong? As an activist, he has little time for intellectuals who devoted themselves «to creating a specialized culture among restricted intellectual groups» (Gramsci 1971: 330). His concern is always the relationship between ideas, narratives, assumptions, and the wider world within which they exist, and the role they play within that wider world. In reflecting on the appeal of serial novels, for instance, he repeatedly returns to *The Count of Monte Cristo*, a runaway best seller immediately on its publication in the mid-1880s and still a staple of popular culture:

The serial novel is a substitute for (and, at the same time, it stimulates) the fantasies of the common man; it really is daydreaming [...]. In this case [*The Count of Monte Cristo*], one could say that the fantasies of the people stem from a (social) “inferiority complex” that is the source of fantasies about revenge, punishing those responsible for their adversities, etc. *The Count of Monte Cristo* contains all the ingredients to induce these flights of fancy and hence to administer a narcotic that dulls the sense of pain, etc. (Gramsci 2007: 106).

To anthropologists, Gramsci’s reflections in the notebooks may fall short of true ethnography, but they are, I would argue, suffused with an ethnographic sensibility. Rather than searching for an abstract theoretical understanding of the forms of power inherent in capitalism, he seeks to discover, as would an anthropologist, how *particular* groups in *particular* places understand their world. Always he refuses to «make reality conform to an abstract scheme», just as Malinowski, once he has laid out a general methodology in his Introduction, does not in the rest of his long ethnography give us a map of the worldview of some generalised “native”, but that of the Trobrianders in the early twentieth century.

Conclusion

Let me conclude with some thoughts on the significance of Gramsci’s ethnographic sensibility for our historical moment. At a time when so many of the certainties of an older, more rigid Marxism have been called into question, Gramsci offers us an open and flexible Marxism which insists that we need to start not from pre-determined theoretical schemes but from the complexities of empirical reality. In our globalised and increasingly automated world, one old certainty that has collapsed is the assumption that any effective challenge to capitalism would necessarily be led by organised industrial workers. In recent years the left has increasingly, if belatedly, come to recognise the importance of gender, race, ethnicity and other forms of difference in structuring inequality and oppression both in the workplace and beyond.

Feminist scholarship, for instance, has revealed the complex links between paid and unpaid work. The value of Gramsci’s inclusive category «subaltern» is that it does not pre-determine who counts as subaltern, or prescribe a “correct” subaltern worldview. Being subaltern can take many forms. But who in our twenty-first century world of multiple and entangled inequalities might constitute the collectivities, the historical subjects, with the power to challenge capitalist hegemony effectively? The notebooks do not provide an answer to this question, rather they suggest how those seeking a fairer, more just world might go about finding an answer, offering

us not a template, but an approach to the mapping of inequality and subalternity, an approach that is always attentive to the lived realities of power. Armed with the questions posed by that approach, it is our task as analysts and activists to explore the empirical landscapes of subalternity in all their complexity. Only then can we hope to identify potential collectivities that might effectively challenge twenty-first century capitalism. Transforming this challenge into reality demands what Gramsci, in the passage with which I began this essay, called a cultural front.

In the notebooks, “culture” names shared ways of understanding the world and inhabiting it. These ways of knowing and being are crucial to the production and reproduction of subalternity, and it is only through their transformation that subalterns can escape their subalternity. All cultures, even if they appear fixed and unchanging, are inherently in a state of flux. Over time all come into being, change, and pass away. Nonetheless, as individuals and groups we come to consciousness, and live our lives, as members of particular cultural worlds. And it is through these cultures, absorbed largely unconsciously, that we experience, and make sense of, the realities of inequality of our time and place.

To those socialised within them, the basic contours of their cultural worlds, including their hierarchies of power and associated tangles of common-sense notions, seem beyond question, so obviously real, that it would be absurd to ask for evidence or proof: this is just the way the world is. Disparities of wealth and power, for instance, may be thought of as manifestations of the laws of economics or of divine will; they may be celebrated or railed against, but to those who inhabit a world structured by these disparities it is hard to imagine that things could be other than as they are. A crucial part of any fundamental social change is a cultural transformation that makes it possible for subalterns to imagine another reality.

There need to be, in Gramsci’s words, «new popular beliefs, that is to say, a new common sense and with it a new culture and a new philosophy which will be rooted in the popular consciousness with the same solidity and imperative quality as traditional beliefs» (Gramsci 1971, 424). If those beliefs and that culture are to take hold, those who would bring about change need to engage in cultural struggle.

Interestingly, we find the same stress on the importance of cultural norms in the best-selling 2014 study of inequality, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* by Thomas Piketty, an explicitly non-Marxist economist. Piketty’s focus is on quantitative measures of inequality. Nonetheless he makes a

point of stressing that «[t]he history of inequality is shaped by the way economic, social, and political actors view what is just and what is not, as well as by the relative power of those actors and the collective choices that result» (Piketty 2014: 20).

The struggle over what is believed to be just, and what is not, is precisely the kind of cultural front for which Gramsci calls. Engaging effectively on this front, I suggest, requires an ethnographically informed Marxism, attentive to the empirical complexities of subalternity. This is a Marxism that does not assume it already has all the answers, a Marxism rooted in subaltern experience, whose intellectuals are continually in dialogue with the lived realities of subalternity, continually mapping its complex, and shifting, diversity, and searching out the fragmentary nuggets of good sense to be found within the confusion and contradictions of popular common sense. An ethnographic Marxism is a Marxism that builds on these embryonic beginnings, developing them into the coherent political narratives that are an essential part of building mass movements powerful enough to bring about lasting change.

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