

1-1-2013

# Antonio Gramsci: Life and Impact on Critical Pedagogy

Arturo Rodriguez  
*Boise State University*

Matthew David Smith

## 18. ANTONIO GRAMSCI

### *Life and Impact on Critical Pedagogy*

#### EARLY LIFE AND EDUCATION

Antonio Gramsci was born in the province of Cagliari, Sardinia on 22 January 1891. One of seven children, his formative years was spent roaming the hills of Sardinia. Antonio's political understanding was heavily influenced by the Socialism of his brother Gennaro and the imprisonment of his father, Francesco, from 1898–1904. Francesco's imprisonment caused Antonio to curtail his formal education and take up employment. This continued for several years until Francesco was released, allowing young Antonio to return to formal studies.

In the ensuing years Gennaro, with his introduction to socialist literature, was largely responsible for Antonio's political education and for igniting his hunger for knowledge (Rosengarten, 2012). Throughout the period preceding his university studies, Antonio bore witness to social unrest and military repression across Sardinia, swaying him to the cause of Sardinian nationalism efforts (Gramsci, 1971a). Antonio, however, quickly ended his nationalistic tendencies and refocused his attention to the international working-class movement.

In 1911 Gramsci earned a scholarship to the University of Turin where he showed great promise in linguistics and philosophy, delving into the writings of Hegel, Marx, and Engels. However, due to recurring health challenges and difficult learning environments, Gramsci was forced to leave the university before the conclusion of his studies only to find himself sustaining his intellectual curiosities through journalism by writing articles and position papers for leftist newspapers. At the time, the social climate of Turin was one of transition and industrialization; with a population boom and the growth of companies such as Fiat, it was then Gramsci began to take part in organizing trade unions and advocate for the enactment of workers' councils.

Gramsci eventually joined the *Partito Comunista d'Italia* (PCI), and while visiting Russia in 1922, it enabled him to gain much insight of the fascism that was unfolding in Italy. In 1923 Mussolini arrested the general leadership of the PCI, leaving Gramsci in charge. In 1926, with the enactment of fascist laws and Mussolini's purge of political dissidents, Gramsci was placed under arrest and sentenced to prison. His health declined throughout his imprisonment, and following several prison transfers, solitary confinement, and malnutrition he was discharged from prison for hospital stays. While in a hospital in Rome, Gramsci passed away in

1937 at the age of 46. Yet it was during his time in prison, Gramsci composed over 3,000 pages on history, philosophy, and political economy. His work has inspired a number of past and contemporary critical theorists, critical pedagogues, political economists, and Marxists, among others.

A BRIEF REVIEW OF CENTRAL THOUGHTS IN GRAMSCI'S *SELECTIONS FROM THE PRISON NOTEBOOKS*

Across the 30 notebooks, Gramsci wrote throughout his incarceration, he covered a range of topics and themes revealing that his early termination of university studies did not hinder his learning. To that end, as outlined in Gramsci's *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (1971b), the following explores a few of the central tenets of Gramsci's thought.

*The Two Types of Intellectuals* – Gramsci distinguishes between two categories of intellectual: the traditional and the organic. The traditional intellectual is trained/taught within a specific academic field and his/her operations are conducted from a position of concealment/disregard for social class. That is, traditional intellectuals, by and large, lack a concrete or critically conscious connection to a subject of inquiry that might relate the subject ecologically. The organic intellectual concretizes their understandings as he/she enacts their membership in a group. Gramsci (1971b) writes that, “organic intellectuals are distinguished less by their profession...than by their function in directing the ideas and aspirations of the class to which they organically belong” (p. 3). An organic intellectual is thus ecologically related to the social and material experience of human beings. The above binary separation of intellectuals permeates a multitude of topics in the *Prison Notebooks*.

*Cultural Hegemony* – Perhaps the most well-known of Gramsci's philosophy is his notion of cultural hegemony. Gramsci explains that the method in which a capitalist state maintains control, power over its citizens, is through the dominance of cultural aspects, processes, and norms. As a result, the ideology of the dominant class comes to be subtly and overtly accepted by the subordinate classes who in turn normalize an ideology through their daily engagement and practice. As a process of intellectual and practical dominance, the subordinated groups internalize the dominant class's ideology and though it be counter to their own best interests the dominated classes may succumb to its logic.

*War of Position and War of Maneuver* – For Gramsci, two distinct options were at the disposal of subordinated classes in the midst of class struggle: war of position and war of maneuver. The war of position is conducted whereby the oppressed classes and organic intellectuals plan, organize, and enact a reality that actively opposes the imposed norms and counteracts the cultural hegemony of the ruling class. The war of maneuver is thus the physical overcoming and deposing of the ruling class. Consequently, it is necessary that the war of position precede the war of manoeuvre.

*Education* – Gramsci's writing on education can be seen as a direct precursor to those scholars that investigate concepts related to the sociology of education,

education and social class, the debate of instruction versus education, and ideology and education. For Gramsci (1971b), relationships must be drawn between the school and the lived experiences of the students, asserting “the individual consciousness of the overwhelming majority of children reflects social and cultural relations which are different from and antagonistic to those which are represented in the school curricula...” (p. 35). Thus, one can particularly see the influence of Gramsci on the thinking that frames critical pedagogy, particular with respect to examining the incongruence of the lived experiences of children and the official school curriculum. His critique of the disconnection between schooling and society compels us to consider the motives of those responsible for producing and sanctioning “official” curricula.

#### CONNECTION TO CRITICAL PEDAGOGY

To say Gramsci’s legacy influences education is stating the matter lightly. Indeed, his thinking continues to be relevant across the critical tradition; the following are just a few notable examples:

*Paulo Freire-Organic/Academic Intellectual* – Gramsci and Freire clearly share common intellectual interests which include, among others, Hegel, Marx, and Engels. Freire’s discussion of the revolutionary educator (Freire, 2003) as an agent in overcoming both the banking method of education (which only serves to reproduce a dominant ideology) and the teacher-student binary (central to banking education and frequently upheld by the Academic Intellectual) is congruent with Gramsci’s notion of the Organic Intellectual, an anchor in critical pedagogy.

*Henry A. Giroux-Education* – In his analysis of the role and purpose of public education today, Giroux draws from Gramsci to illustrate the reinforcement of dominant ideology embedded both in public education and beyond the classroom (public pedagogy). To fully grasp how the dominant group shapes public education and social media, it is necessary to first understand what is directly at stake (Giroux, 2001). Much of Gramsci’s descriptions of ideology then resonate with critical pedagogy by providing analytical tools for educators, students, and social activists to interrogate and challenge those dominant modes.

*Peter McLaren-War of Position and War of Maneuver* – For Peter McLaren, Gramsci’s war of position and war of maneuver are central to the political and economic world in which we are currently situated. McLaren (2007) asserts that “we are currently living in... a ‘war of position’” (p. 313) in that we are presently engaged in unifying a diverse network of socially and politically active networks; this will allow an opportunity for a war of maneuver. For critical pedagogues, the classroom is a site for a war of position.

*Donaldo Macedo-Cultural Hegemony* – For years, Donaldo Macedo has challenged oppressive linguistic policies and practices. Recognizing that questions of language are veneers directly related to power and control, Macedo’s resistance and challenge to linguistic oppression articulates a similar position to Gramsci’s theory

of cultural hegemony. Policies that restrict or officialize one language (particularly in educational settings) are tools for dis-abling language minority populations. This oppression extends far beyond the classroom; over time, languages other than English are killed, with them the inherent logic and systems of thought that exist among their speakers (Macedo, 2006).

#### CONCLUSION

Revolutions do not occur spontaneously. They are the work of individuals who engage the human and not so human experiences they encounter and then dream ways to transform them. Antonio Gramsci's work clearly influences the struggle over the commodification of human beings, building a more humanized reality. He understood as Freire, Giroux, McLaren and Macedo reflect, if we consider their life's work, the human experience is one we are more fully born into as we engage experience and consider our relationships with the world and each other.

#### REFERENCES

- Boggs, C. (1976). *Gramsci's Marxism*. Camelot Press Limited: Southampton, UK.
- Boggs, C. (1984). *The two revolutions: Antonio Gramsci and the dilemmas of western Marxism*. Boston, MA: South End Press.
- Freire, P. (2003). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Continuum: New York.
- Giroux, H. A. (2001). *Theory and resistance in education: Towards a pedagogy for the opposition*. Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey.
- Gramsci, A. (1971a). *Men of flesh and blood*. L'Ordine Nuovo. Retrieved from: [www.marxists.org/archive/gramsci/](http://www.marxists.org/archive/gramsci/)
- Gramsci, A. (1971b). *Selections from the prison notebooks*. Q. Hoare & G. Nowell Smith, (Eds.). New York, NY: International Publishers.
- Joll, J. (1977). *Gramsci*. Glasgow, Scotland: William Collins Sons and Co.
- Macedo, D. (2006). *Literacies of power: What Americans are not allowed to know*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- McLaren, P. (2007). *Life in schools: An introduction to critical pedagogy in the foundations of education*. (5th ed.). Allyn & Bacon: Boston.
- Rosengarten, F. (2012). *An introduction to Gramsci's life and thought*. Retrieved from: [www.marxists.org/archive/gramsci/](http://www.marxists.org/archive/gramsci/)