

Introduction

Language and hegemony in Gramsci

This book provides an interdisciplinary introduction to the ideas and writings of Antonio Gramsci, an Italian Marxist born in Sardinia in 1891 who died shortly after being released from Fascist prison in 1937. It is aimed at readers with diverse interests including Marxism, critical theory, cultural studies, postmodernism, multiculturalism, nationalism, colonialism, postcolonialism, new social movements, deliberative democracy and globalization.

There are two reasons why I use language as an entrance point into Gramsci's political and cultural theory, which was developed primarily in the notes that he wrote while in prison. The first and most important reason is that since his death, language has become increasingly a central topic within political, social and cultural theory. Many of the trends that have dominated the humanities and social sciences in the twentieth century have been called 'linguistic turns' or have in some way focused on language, discourse or deliberation. The second reason is based on my own more particular interpretation of Gramsci's writings, which is that his interest in the politics of language was a defining influence on his entire thought. Not all scholars agree with this second point.¹ So, like any introduction, this one includes the author's own perspective. While my goal is in part to convince readers of this second argument about how to read Gramsci, my primary purpose is to introduce him to a wide interdisciplinary audience in a form that makes his ideas pertinent to current social, cultural and political theory.

Some of the most influential social and political theorists of the twentieth century have been concerned with language: Ludwig Wittgenstein, Ferdinand de Saussure, Martin Heidegger, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Jürgen Habermas and Noam Chomsky. In addition to academic movements from psychoanalysis to

poststructuralism and deliberative democracy, many of the last century's social and artistic movements paid considerable attention to language. These include dadaism, feminism, antiracism, postcolonialism, multiculturalism and identity politics. An important body of scholarship also connects the phenomena of language with the revival of ethno-nationalism.² It is in this context that Gramsci's own development of 'hegemony' – a concept with which he first became familiar while studying linguistics – has become so influential. Indeed, even those who have most explicitly argued for a move 'beyond' Marxism and its categories have retained the concept of hegemony, as we shall see in Chapter 5. Gramsci's notion of hegemony has been accepted across many academic disciplines and in non-academic, mainstream discussions.

I am certainly not suggesting that Gramsci's interest in language is his only contribution of importance, nor that those who turned to Gramsci's writings did so expressly because of his approach to language. Quite the contrary, most of the non-Italian literature on Gramsci neglects his writings on language and de-emphasizes his early studies in linguistics. What I am proposing is that by focusing on language, Gramsci's ideas can be introduced in a manner underscoring their continued relevance and importance. This approach provides the theoretical framework to understand Gramsci's many insights into the politics of culture, the institutions and operations of power in democratic regimes and the interaction of the requirements of capitalism with the maintenance of consent and legitimization of elected governments.

The pervasiveness of Gramsci's hegemony

Before Gramsci, the term 'hegemony' was more or less limited to meaning the predominance of one nation over others, especially within relatively friendly alliances. Significantly due to his writings, hegemony is now used to describe the intricacies of power relations in many different fields from literature, education, film and cultural studies to political science, history and international relations. In a nutshell, Gramsci redefined hegemony to mean the formation and organization of consent. But as we shall see, this is not an adequate understanding of Gramsci's notion

of hegemony, which contains a richer and more complex theorization of consent and its relation to coercion.

How has Gramsci's influence spread so widely? Why have there been over 14,500 publications on Gramsci in 33 different languages throughout every field in the humanities and social sciences? Why have the prison notes of a relatively obscure Italian communist reached well beyond Marxist circles?

Of course, there are many answers to these questions. Gramsci was imprisoned by Mussolini and thus he is an ideal martyr, a revolutionary Marxist who was not tarred by the brush of Stalinism. He was one of the earlier Marxists to reject the economic reductionism of many of the Marxists of his time. Thus, unlike other Marxists who omitted the importance of culture and non-economic aspects of society, Gramsci provided a much broader social and cultural portrayal of modern society. He helped found the Communist Party of Italy, the successor of which became one of most successful Western communist parties. All these points go some way towards explaining Gramsci's past influence. But with the fall of the Soviet Union, the demise of the Italian Communist Party, and the new historic circumstances of the twenty-first century, will Gramsci's name fade into history?

If the number and breadth of recent publications regarding Gramsci is any barometer of the future, his legacy is far from over.³ As this book illustrates, Gramsci's lasting importance derives substantially from his insightful and wide-ranging analyses of the politics of culture and operations of power in industrialized democratic capitalist countries. This poses a major question of whether the stagnation of industrialization in the so-called 'Western World' and post-industrial developments make Gramsci's writings obsolete. Or, as this work hopes to show, does the advent of computerization, all the various trends that are called 'globalization', and the 'new information-based economies' compel us to take an even closer look at Gramsci's insistence on the importance of culture in the maintenance of democratic capitalism even if viable alternatives seem remote?

Gramsci is best known for his analyses of the political importance of cultural and social institutions. Politics, for him, cannot be conceived exclusively in narrow terms of the state and government but must encompass the wide range of human

activity often seen as non-political, such as our everyday beliefs and behaviour, from the books we read and the films we enjoy to our religious feelings and perceptions of the world. It is Gramsci the theorist of cultural politics who garners attention not only from progressive activists and academics on the Left but even from the unlikely quarters of the Right. For example, Rush Limbaugh, the extreme right-wing American talk show host, discusses Gramsci in relation to what has been dubbed the 'culture wars' in the United States in the 1990s. He even argues that the Right must learn Gramsci's lessons.⁴

Gramsci's insistence on the political importance of cultural matters led him to write about such things as why Italian peasants more often read French novellas than Italian ones. He wrote newspaper articles about how the demise of theatre in Turin was connected to more widespread economic and cultural factors, not simply the technological advantages of cinema. For Gramsci, to understand the complex social issues that lie at the heart of the general population's political beliefs and activities, one must take account of the ways in which our everyday world and daily experiences are organized. The schools we attend, the organizations we belong to and the way we spend our free time are of central political importance. Gramsci's ideas have been seen as useful in sorting out some of these complexities.

But this does not fully answer the question of why we should be interested in what Gramsci had to say about the reading habits of Italian peasants or obscure politicians and intellectuals in Italy near the beginning of the last century. Why read Gramsci's writings, especially since most of them are notoriously fragmentary, unfinished notes written under harsh prison conditions making them difficult for most readers to understand? Cannot we forego the arduous process of trying to interpret his sketchy notes, which he never had the chance to prepare for publication? Why not just take heed of his simple point that culture is important for political and social analysis? Why have his writings resonated in so many different academic disciplines throughout the twentieth century and what insights do they contain for the twenty-first century?

This book is based on one of several answers to these questions: his approach to language.⁵ Other introductions offer different answers highlighting the historical context of Gramsci's

thought, the philosophical traditions in which he was writing or the academic and political debates that have arisen about interpreting his work. Focusing on language – a topic that has preoccupied social and political thought since his death – illustrates Gramsci's relevance to contemporary theories and analyses across an array of intellectual disciplines. Just as Gramsci's own writings are not restricted to one field and his influence has a particularly broad scope, the topic of language has also been approached from an interdisciplinary perspective. This book highlights such interdisciplinarity by summarizing key ideas within structuralist linguistics, philosophy, political science and cultural studies for readers less familiar with these specific disciplines. It will help to overcome the disciplinary obstacles that face many readers trying to understand Gramsci and his legacy.

Approaching language and hegemony

Gramsci was able to combine two approaches to language in a unique way that spoke to broad trends in Western society and various more specific concerns and uses of language. He pays great attention to language as a political issue, for example, to government policy around language, educational language curricula and everyday language practices. He combines this with the rich metaphorical power of linguistic concepts as tools to help analyse political circumstances, specifically the role of culture in shaping people's beliefs, behaviour and even their voting patterns. Chapters 1 and 5 summarize some of the ways in which other prominent thinkers in the twentieth century use similar linguistic metaphors and concepts. These two chapters also note the differences between Gramsci's approach to language and that of others. Chapters 2, 3 and 4 highlight Gramsci's more unique concern with the actual process of the standardization of the Italian language and its political implications. From such a perspective, his use of linguistic metaphors does not become as abstract and esoteric as that of many other social theorists who, also realizing the metaphorical power of linguistic concepts, make what has been called 'the linguistic turn'. Because he is ultimately concerned with political questions, such as how Fascism took hold and why his own counter-hegemonic

movement failed, he expands narrow linguistic concepts to be of great use for social and political analysis.

Chapter 3 outlines the complexities of the concept of hegemony, including some of the debates over its interpretation. It also illustrates how Gramsci's method is at least a partial explanation for why he never gave a clear definition of the term 'hegemony'. Among all the different possible meanings for the term, one common element is that it helps explain why large groups of people continually acquiesce to, accept and sometimes actively support governments – and entire social and political systems – that continually work against their interests.⁶ In other words, can we say a society is free of domination if the government or state is not using overt coercion and physical force to dominate its subjects? Gramsci would answer, no. And hegemony is a central concept in analysing such domination.

We will discuss the Marxist concept of 'class' and Gramsci's role in debates about class reductionism in detail in Chapters 4 and 5. Suffice it to say that he was primarily concerned with class relations. He accepted Marx's argument that class position is defined by one's role in the economy. Do you work in a factory owned by others and receive a wage? Do you farm land belonging to someone else? Or do you own land or a factory? In other words, in the 1920s and 1930s in Italy, Gramsci was most concerned with the question, how did the bourgeoisie or capitalist classes, who were after all a small minority, rule over the large peasantry and working class? For various reasons, including changing economic circumstances, failures of Marxist political movements, and criticisms of Marxist and class analyses by feminists, environmentalists, postmodernists and others, the question of class, its definition and its relation to consciousness or identity, is of central importance to Gramsci's legacy and continued relevance. Chapter 5 engages with the work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, two 'post-Marxists' who criticize the notion of 'class' and find Gramsci lacking because of his adherence to it. Laclau and Mouffe are of central importance because they epitomize a broader trend of moving away from economic analysis and moving towards linguistic, or discourse analysis. As they describe their progress beyond Gramsci, they draw on ideas about language inaugurated by Ludwig Wittgenstein and Ferdinand de Saussure. By looking at Gramsci's own writings on language, the reader will

be better able to assess Laclau and Mouffe's position and that of other theorists of 'new social movements'.

The Italian linguist Franco Lo Piparo has pointed out that the role of language and its diffusion throughout different populations served as an important metaphor for Gramsci in explaining similar political dynamics. Language is spread predominantly not by government or state coercion, military or police action, but by speakers accepting the prestige and utility of new languages, phrases or terms.⁷ Yet the idea that we have totally free choice over the language we use, the words we speak, is clearly misleading. People select vocabulary by gauging their audience and use the style and conventions that they hope will most effectively communicate their message or achieve their desired results. Sometimes this means indicating deference, understanding or camaraderie with listeners. This may involve a degree of ignoring – or showing a lack of respect for – people we are speaking about. This is especially common, even if inadvertent, when we are talking with some people about others. To use a contemporary term, it may involve 'othering' people – that is making generalizations that serve to emphasize differences between 'us' and 'them'. For example, by complaining about 'immigrants', a speaker can create a commonality between themselves and whoever they are talking with (assuming they do not take themselves to be 'immigrants' even if they have actually immigrated) and cast a diverse array of people who happen to have immigrated as 'other', that is different. We may adopt phrases, terms, attitudes or even languages even if they are awkward for us, because we know they will be met positively. As we shall see, such dynamics are central to Gramsci's notion of hegemony and he provides an array of concepts to help investigate them, such as his notions of 'common sense', 'organic intellectuals', 'subalternity' and 'normative versus spontaneous grammars'.

The decisions about how we speak are clearly affected by institutional resources including the existence of grammar books and dictionaries (often government subsidized), government-sponsored training of teachers and many other policies that affect language use. Such questions were being examined by linguists with whom Gramsci studied. In describing the geographic and social centres from which language change originated and radiated they used 'hegemony' (or *egemonia* in Italian) along

with 'attraction' (*fascino*) and 'prestige' (*prestigio*). These theories had a profound influence on Gramsci's thought.⁸

His use of language as a metaphor enables him to develop the rich concept of hegemony that addresses the crucial and complex tension to paraphrase Marx, between, our being constrained by our historical conditions, and yet being human agents capable of mobilizing and organizing to change our world. Expressing this tension in the terms of contemporary social theory, Gramsci's focus on language helps address how our subjectivity is constituted by forces external to us, and yet, at the same time, we as subjects make choices that collectively determine our lives.

Overview

Chapter 1 provides an overview of the role of language within contemporary social theory including summaries of Ferdinand de Saussure, structuralism, Ludwig Wittgenstein and Marxist accounts of language. Chapter 2 gives some essential background for Gramsci's life, with special attention to language issues. This chapter highlights two specific contexts. The first is what in Italy is called *la questione della lingua*, the Language Question or Language Problem. While Italy was politically unified in 1861, it was far from being a culturally or socially cohesive nation. One of its major obstacles was that there was hardly a coherent Italian language common to the new Italian citizens. While commentators have expressed amazement at the fact that in France in the 1840s only about 40 per cent of the population spoke French, in Italy the situation was far more drastic. Historical linguists have estimated that only a small fraction (some estimate about two and a half per cent, others about twelve per cent) of Italians spoke the 'standard' language, making the entire question of what 'standard Italian' was a question with significant political and social ramifications. Indeed, there were rampant debates throughout the end of the nineteenth century about how best to 'standardize' the language and spread it throughout the nation. The language issue was integrally related to other questions of national unity and how to rectify, decrease or mediate all the various divisions that separated Italy into its regions and social classes. This is a part of the historical background that Gramsci finds is at the heart of

the Fascist success in exploiting regional and class interests to come to power.

The second specific context dealt with in Chapter 2 is connected to *la questione della lingua*. It is the general situation of Italian and European linguistics in the 1910s when Gramsci was a student at the University of Turin. I will outline how linguists used the concept of hegemony and its synonyms which, as the later chapters demonstrate, became central for Gramsci's development of the term in the direction of political and cultural analysis. There are two additional reasons to consider the state of linguistics in Italy during this period. The first is that the Italian linguists, especially G.I. Ascoli, who had a significant influence on Gramsci, were involved in *la questione della lingua*. The second is that Gramsci's professor of linguistics, Matteo Bartoli, was engaged in a heated polemic against the Neogrammarians, with whom Saussure's early career was intermeshed. Thus the issues raised by Saussure's creation of structuralist linguistics, discussed in Chapter 1, are quite close to those that Gramsci was grappling with both as a student and later as a political thinker. If we are to ask how Gramsci's work is relevant in disciplines that have been very much influenced by structuralism, it makes sense to have a careful investigation of the milieu and debates from which both emerged. This will set the stage for the issues of structural determination and human agency to be addressed throughout the rest of the book, especially in Chapter 5.

Chapters 3 and 4 explain Gramsci's major political concepts such as hegemony, organic intellectuals, war of manoeuvre, passive revolution and subalternity. These chapters lay out Gramsci's theory of politics and culture with the added enrichment of the contexts of language provided in Chapters 1 and 2. Chapter 3 addresses the most central concept of hegemony by using Gramsci's discussion of grammar and language as a model for different types of hegemonic formations. This illustrates how he derives central ideas from linguistics and explains his important notion of 'common sense' and his Marxist or historical materialist conception of knowledge and history. Chapter 4 builds on Chapter 3, encompassing the concepts of 'passive' revolution, war of manoeuvre/position, civil society, state, national-popular collective will and historical bloc. The central issue here is how

Gramsci understands the relationship between coercion and consent.

Gramsci employs language to think through how human agency is related to structure. We will see how the structures of language are used to understand that as individuals we do have creative freedom and, as Marx says, we create our own history, but not under the conditions of our own choosing.⁹ In other words, we are not able to do this in a total vacuum or with no constraints. Just as a speaker can form new sentences which are understandable even though they have never been heard, individuals and collectivities create new realities. But speakers are not totally free to speak in whatever way they wish. If we do not substantially conform to how other people speak, to the language structure that already exists, we simply will not be understood. Or our basic point might be conveyed, but it will be accompanied by a whole host of other meanings and ideas that we did not necessarily intend to be communicated. For example, if I use racist language and refer to a black man as a 'boy', you may well understand who I am referring to. But you will also learn that I have a bigoted world-view. Or if I do not speak grammatically, my meaning might come through fine, but my lack of education and social class may also be communicated.

Gramsci's discussions of grammar provide a nuanced appreciation for such dynamics and how they can be used metaphorically to understand how coercion and consent operate, which is central to his theory of hegemony. Chapter 5, the final chapter of *Language and Hegemony in Gramsci*, engages with contemporary social theory and cultural criticism. By highlighting the importance of how language is characterized in current debates about postmodernism, new social movements and globalization, this chapter illustrates Gramsci's continued relevance. Ironically, those who argue that Gramsci is outdated give opposing reasons. Some see Gramsci as inescapably tied to Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy; others, such as Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, see him as a crucial passage along the way to post-Marxism. In this way, Laclau and Mouffe make Gramsci a precursor to their theory of radical democracy, which is heavily influenced by the poststructuralism of Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida.

Laclau and Mouffe's work has become central and far-reaching within political and social theory. But their narrow reading and what I will suggest are one-sided criticisms of Gramsci prohibit Gramsci's possible contribution to such debates. From their perspective, post-Marxism has surpassed Gramsci's insights and overcomes what Laclau and Mouffe see as his inability to transcend the very economism that he attacks. By using poststructural theories of language and discourse as comparisons, this chapter suggests that Gramsci provides an insightful way to rethink the dichotomy between matter and language, between materialism and idealism, that Marxism – and Gramsci in particular – strove to overcome.

In addition to an extensive discussion of Laclau and Mouffe's post-Marxism, this chapter addresses more general themes within semiotic, poststructural and deconstructive theory to show how Gramsci's perspective remains insightful especially in our postmodern, so-called 'information age' where work increasingly involves linguistic activity and language is increasingly commodified. It will address neo- and postcolonial concerns over the politics of language, consciousness and culture within new global hegemonic formations and possible sites of resistance.

The book is organized to provide flexibility for different audiences. I have tried to write each chapter so that it can be read out of order, or on its own. The exception to this is Chapter 4, which should be read after Chapter 3. The chapters are ordered for the reader with little background in either Gramsci or contemporary social theory. This order is also appropriate for those with a degree of knowledge about Gramsci, but less familiarity with postmodernism or poststructuralism. Those more eager to get to Gramsci's ideas can skip Chapter 1 and return to it as necessary. Readers familiar with the major ideas of Saussure and Wittgenstein or who are primarily interested in the relationship between Gramsci and poststructuralism could begin with Chapter 5 and then proceed to Chapters 2, 3 and 4. Those with knowledge of contemporary social theory but little knowledge of Gramsci may start with Chapters 3 and 4 and then read Chapters 2 and 5.