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# Joseph A. Buttigieg

## *On Gramsci*

Antonio Gramsci was born in Sardinia in 1891 and died in Rome in 1937. Frail from birth – he was less than five feet tall – he suffered from poor health throughout much of his life. Awarded a scholarship to attend the University of Turin, he joined the Socialist Party in 1914, on the eve of the Great War. Seven years later, already well-known as a journalist and as a leader of Turin’s insurgent factory council movement, Gramsci joined a walkout at a Socialist congress in Livorno and helped to found the Italian Communist Party, subsequently representing the party as a member of Parliament. In 1926, four years after the rise to power of Mussolini’s fascists, Gramsci was arrested and imprisoned, despite his immunity as a legislator. While in prison, he kept a series of notebooks that

were posthumously published starting in 1948 – thus securing Gramsci’s reputation as perhaps the most original Marxist thinker of his generation.

There is no significant phase of Antonio Gramsci’s life, political activity, and writings in which some aspect or another of educational theory and practice does not figure prominently. The very fact that he was able to acquire an education at all, let alone go on to become one of the leading intellectuals of his generation, is remarkable in itself. His physical debility and his family’s straitened circumstances, to say nothing of the logistical difficulties of having to attend schools that were far from his small town of Ghilarza, he seems to have overcome through sheer determination. How he managed to compensate for the woe-filled inadequacies of the Sardinian schools (themselves on the periphery of the notoriously weak Italian educational system) he attended, with their primitive facilities, retrograde pedagogical practices, and many poorly qualified teachers, is not so easy to explain.

The letters he wrote to his family during his years in prison contain many retrospective vignettes of his childhood from which one gathers that while he greatly enjoyed playing outdoors in the countryside, he was also an avid reader

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with a good memory, and had the necessary self-discipline to study hard. When, thanks to a scholarship, he moved to Turin, then Italy's most industrially advanced city, to attend university, he was further hampered by poor health and abject poverty, even while adjusting to a radically different environment. Again, his hunger for learning enabled him to surmount the obstacles and extract all he could from the academic and cultural opportunities available to him.

Whether Gramsci ever actually graduated from the University of Turin remains unclear, and ultimately does not much matter – except, of course, to a biographer. What does matter is that Gramsci's enormous sacrifices to acquire an education were not motivated by a desire for material success. He did not look at education as an avenue to professional qualification, much less to a lucrative career; nor did he seem to pine for an academic post. Instead, he regarded education as the "harmonious development" of one's personality and as a liberation from the constraints and limitations of one's immediate environment and social situation.

It is impossible to exaggerate the extent to which Gramsci's views on education are intertwined with his lived experiences. He returned frequently to the topic in his letters from prison, not out of nostalgia but for very immediate practical reasons. In addition to a profound interest in and concern about the development and education of his two sons, Delio and Giuliano, who were living with their mother in Moscow, he evinced an almost paternal preoccupation with the upbringing and schooling of his niece, Edmea, who was being brought up by his mother and sisters in Ghilarza.

The numerous letters in which Gramsci discusses the formation and the vari-

ous stages of development of the youngest members of his family need to be read alongside his reflections on education in the prison notebooks. Not only do the letters amplify and even help clarify the views and ideas set forth in the notebooks, they also enable one to appreciate how Gramsci's theorizing remains anchored in, and stems directly from, his analyses of concrete, material reality. This is not an aspect of Gramsci's thought that one may choose to ignore, especially since in many of his notes (including the selection that follows) Gramsci complained about the gap between what Francesco De Sanctis called "*scienza e vita*" – that is, between learning and life, between the intellectuals and the people, between theory and practice.

Gramsci's interest in education extended well beyond questions concerning the upbringing of children and their formal education from kindergarten through university. In his political activities among the Turin factory workers, in his prolific output as a journalist, and in his organizational work as a party leader, education occupies so central a place that it almost amounts to an obsession.

Gramsci is, perhaps, best known for his theories of culture and its intersections with politics. One must bear in mind, however, that his concepts of culture and education are inseparable. It is impossible not to notice how in his writing on culture he often uses the same vocabulary he employs when dealing with education. Thus, for example, one of his earliest articles, "Socialism and Culture" (1916), contains several phrases that recur in the notes on education reproduced below. Attacking a popular misconception of culture he writes: "We must rid ourselves of the habit of conceiving culture as encyclopedic knowledge; a concept in which man is regarded as a mere receptacle to be stuffed full

with empirical data and disconnected brute facts. . . .” Instead, he goes on to explain, “culture is something quite different. It is organization, discipline of one’s inner self, a coming to terms with one’s personality; it is the attainment of a higher consciousness by means of which one succeeds in understanding one’s own historical value, one’s own function in life, one’s own rights and duties. But none of this can come about through spontaneous evolution. . . .”

Convinced that the primary task of the workers’ movement was to remedy the failures of an educational system that condemned the less privileged strata of society to ignorance, cultural impoverishment, and hence political impotence, Gramsci dedicated much of his energy to the task of what today we would call “adult education” or “continuing education.” Without carefully studying this period of Gramsci’s life – including not only his writings but also his various initiatives to set up cultural associations, revitalize the socialist newspapers, launch correspondence courses, etc. – it would be difficult to arrive at an adequate understanding of the real significance of his concept of education and the thrust of his theories about it.

The prison notebooks are themselves a product of Gramsci’s views on education. The primary reason why he so desperately sought to obtain permission to write in his cell was that he believed it to be the duty of the political prisoner to use his time in jail to study; and, in order to study seriously and in a “disciplined” manner, Gramsci felt he needed to take notes, and to organize his ideas more or less systematically in writing.

Gramsci’s prison notebooks are thus a monument to the kind of rigorous self-discipline that, in his view, a good education should impart.

This is not, however, what makes it necessary for anyone seriously interest-

ed in Gramsci’s views on education to read the notebooks in their entirety. The need arises, rather, from the singular nature of the program of study and research that Gramsci undertook and of which the notebooks are the direct record. They constitute a massive, labyrinthine, fragmentary work in progress in which Gramsci pursued various threads of inquiry, which crisscrossed repeatedly to form an intricately woven ensemble of analyses, critiques, and theories. As a result, it is virtually impossible to pursue one motif, no matter how major, independently of several others. The small selection of notes on education reproduced here represent only a fraction of the numerous pages Gramsci wrote that, in some way or another, pertain to the topic of education.

Their immediate context is a “special” notebook in which Gramsci transcribed, with substantial modifications, some notes he had written in an earlier notebook (Notebook 4) on the question of the intellectuals. Yet, it is not sufficient to just bear in mind that Gramsci approached educational issues and problems within the larger context of an inquiry into the function of intellectuals in society and the (in his view, none too glorious) role they played in Italian history. The full resonance of these selected passages would be missed – and, indeed, some of the observations they contain may be misunderstood – if one were to ignore Gramsci’s two-pronged refutation of positivism and idealism, or his copious reflections on folklore, religion, language, journalism, popular literature, Americanism and Fordism, the role of the political party as an educator in civil society, the state of Italian culture, the history of subaltern social groups, and the “Southern question.” Above all, the role of education in Gramsci’s thought cannot be properly appreciated unless one recognizes that it resides at the very

core of his concept of hegemony. "Every relationship of 'hegemony' is necessarily an educational relationship," he wrote (Notebook 10, II, §44). It would be fruitless, however, to try to locate the concept of hegemony in a specific note or notebook; it is the leitmotif of his entire prison opus.

One need hardly add that any serious interpretation of Gramsci's notes on education would have to take into account the specific policies that were enacted by Mussolini's government, the views of the minister of education and philosopher Giovanni Gentile who designed the fascist school reform, and the fact that Gramsci's ability to criticize the regime's policies openly and directly was severely limited by the prison censor's watchful eye. Still, it is not difficult to decipher Gramsci's main objections to Gentile's policy.

In his notes, Gramsci criticizes both the deleterious effects of the Gentile reform and also the philosophical rationale behind the reforms. This rationale appears in a series of lectures that Gentile had delivered in Trieste some years prior to becoming minister of education. The lectures were deemed important enough at the time to be published even in English (with a laudatory preface by Benedetto Croce) in a volume entitled, precisely, *The Reform of Education* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1922). Gentile's starting point was philosophical idealism; his educational reform was a translation of his abstract theories into practice – a practice imposed upon an entire nation.

One of the salient features of the "*ri-forma* Gentile," enacted on May 6, 1923, was its separation of technical and vocational training from "classical" education. Through a system of exams, Gentile's reform made sure that "classical" education was reserved for the prepara-

tion of select students who were meant to move on to the universities. (Not incidentally, it also made religious instruction mandatory only at the elementary school level.)

Gramsci thought that the new system was discriminatory; it perpetuated the exclusion of the majority of peasant and working-class children from the influential upper rungs of the social hierarchy by channeling them at a very early age into vocational tracks. He also disapproved of the additional barriers the fascist policy presented to women in pursuit of a full education. In a letter of May 4, 1931 to his sister Teresina, in which he alludes indirectly to the fascist government's insistence that the primary responsibility of women was to bear and rear children, Gramsci wrote: "today in our country feminine activity confronts very unfavorable conditions, even from the early years in school, such as, for example, the exclusion of young girls from scholarships, etc., so that in the competition women must have qualities superior to those demanded of males, and be endowed with a greater measure of tenacity and perseverance."

Gramsci's unapologetically progressive views on the education of women must be borne in mind, lest the circumlocutory remarks in the notebooks about the "old" school be taken to suggest that Gramsci was advocating the preservation of, or a return to, Italy's educational system before the 1920s. Nothing could be further from the truth. In his thinking about education, as in his theories of culture more generally, Gramsci's starting point was invariably his lived experience, out of which he sought to distill the basic elements of a rigorous educational philosophy – and the lineaments of a democratic and equitable national school policy.