**Notes on “The Formation of the Intellectuals” by Antonio Gramsci**

Dear All,

I hope you are coping well with the lockdown and taking good care of your health. Here are the notes on Gramsci that I had promised. I’m extremely sorry for the delay.

The following pages will include my explanation and analysis of the sections of the essay we have not yet read in the class. Don’t treat these comments as the last word on Gramsci, but as prompts to help you analyze his ideas. I will also answer some of the questions you have asked me in our previous classes and conversations.

Don’t worry if you have not included these points in your assignments, I will mark you based on what I had taught you before the holidays. You may include these points if you wish to.

Feel free to write to me on email or Whatsapp me personally if you have a doubt or want to discuss something.

So, let me begin with my explanations and comments on the text.

**“School is the instrument through which intellectuals of various levels are elaborated….”**

**(p. 25)**

By elaboration, Gramsci means development, expansion, widening of scope.

School is the place where intellectuals are formed, their minds are developed, they are trained in intellectual-cerebral activities. This is also the place where the relationship between the intellectual-cerebral and the muscular-nervous effort is modified and brought to an equilibrium suited to the material conditions in the world of production.

Gramsci says, **“the more extensive the “area” covered by education and the more numerous the “vertical” “levels” of schooling, the more complex is the cultural world, the civilization, of a particular place.”** By “area,” Gramsci could mean the area of intellectual activity covered by the educational institutions (how many subjects, streams, specializations) or the number of students covered by the education system. Basically, the quantity of students, quantity and variety of intellectual activity. By “levels”, he means how many years, primary, middle, high, higher-secondary, undergraduate, post-graduate, doctorate, post-doctorate, and so on. The widest base in terms of number of students educated is required for the selection and elaboration of people for the top intellectual qualification. Students drop out at different stages to occupy various levels of the hierarchy of intellectuals. Quantity cannot be separated from quality, because quantity is required to ensure the quality of intellectual activity.

Gramsci points out that this wide base, this democratization of education, often causes widespread unemployment. One observation that had come up in our class discussions was that Gramsci does not provide any solution to this problem. I would say, Gramsci hints at a way out, but does not elaborate on it in this essay. The Prison Notebooks were not finished works. Through these notebooks, we get a glimpse of Gramsci in the process of figuring things out. So there are a lot of open questions. In this case, Gramsci points out a contradiction in the education system, which the dominant ideology tries to obfuscate. I think one of the contributions of Marxism is the recognition of unemployment as a problem created by the structure of capitalist economy, and not some intrinsic defect in a person’s character. Here, Gramsci shows how unemployment is the result of the education industry itself. Interestingly, this wide base of education came into existence along with the rise of industrialism and capitalism. For a fun illustration of this, I suggest this RSA animation of Ken Robinson’s talk on public education <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zDZFcDGpL4U>).

You have also read about this education system in Dickens’ *Hard Times*. You have read how Dickens refers to people who are poor, unemployed or in debt in his novels. His representations are sympathetic, but often paternalistic. The narrative of the self-made man in *Hard Times* propagates the idea that people are poor and unemployed because they could not “make” themselves, whereas the Gramsci’s reading of the problem is that this unemployment is a result of the structure of the education system.

Gramsci refers to this crisis of unemployment again at the end of the section on the formation of intellectuals, and seems to suggest that unionization is a way of addressing this crisis: “Mass formation has standardised individuals both psychologically and in terms of individual qualification and has produced the same phenomena as with other standardised masses: competition which makes necessary organisations for the defence of professions, unemployment, over-production in the schools, emigration, etc” (28). This refers to the necessity of unions, guilds and various organizations to defend the rights of workers, unemployed people, students who fall through the cracks of the education system, migrant workers and so on.

**The relationship between the intellectuals and the world of production (p. 26)**

Intellectuals have a direct relationship with the “fundamental social groups” or classes, especially organic intellectuals. However, their relationship with the world of production (or the economic base/structure) is mediated by the whole fabric of society and the complex of superstructures.

“Superstructures” would include the legal, political, religious, educational, aesthetic and many such entities. There are multiple levels of superstructures, but Gramsci mentions two major superstructural levels in this essay—civil society and political society. The text clearly explains (and I am just summarizing it here):

1. Civil society corresponds to the function of hegemony or social hegemony which creates the “spontaneous” consent of the masses to the “general direction imposed on social life” by the dominant class.[[1]](#footnote-2) When you read Louis Althusser’s essay, this will correspond to the Ideological State Apparatuses.
2. Political society corresponds to direct domination or political government, which uses coercive power and “legally” enforces discipline when “spontaneous” consent fails. This corresponds to Althusser’s Repressive State Apparatus.

Intellectuals are the functionaries of the various levels of the superstructure. Thus, there is a division of labour, which creates a hierarchy of intellectuals based on the intrinsic characteristics of the intellectual activity. At the highest level are the creators of “sciences, philosophy, art,” who perform directive and organizational functions. At the lowest level, there are the administrators and “divulgators of pre-existing, traditional, accumulated intellectual wealth.” who do not perform directive or organizational functions.”

Gramsci goes on to say that in the modern world, there has been a massive expansion of the category of intellectuals. The functions they perform are not justified by the necessities of production, but by the political necessities of the dominant fundamental group (dominant class). In other words, the mass of intellectuals exists not in order to facilitate production, but to maintain the hegemony of the dominant class. Thus, intellectuals do not have a direct connection with the world of production. It is mediated by their interaction with the larger social fabric.

**Necessary reciprocity between structure and superstructure**

Let me bring in an insight from Antonio Santucci here. Gramsci theoretical analysis is based on the “necessary reciprocity between structure and superstructure (reciprocity that is precisely the real dialectical process (Santucci 151). Although there is no direct relationship between the intellectuals (functionaries of the superstructure) and the world of production (the structure or base), this mediated relationship is worth studying. According to Antonio Santucci, Gramsci’s theoretical analysis is based on the “necessary reciprocity between structure and superstructure (reciprocity that is precisely the real dialectical process (Santucci 151). Although Gramsci believes that the structure or the economic base is the defining element in the formation of ideologies, he still laid great emphasis on the study of ideologies. This is in opposition to orthodox Marxists such as Nikolai I. Bukharin, who insisted on an “ultra-materialistic” interpretation of Marxism and saw ideologies as illusory appearances which didn’t require much critical analysis.

Intellectuals play an important role in the formation of ideologies. These ideologies are “powerful tools of political rule” (Santucci 152). Thus, for an emerging class to capture political power, it is important to study ideologies and the role of intellectuals in society.

**My responses to some questions**

**How to apply Gramsci to our study of literature**

Most of the theories we read in the Literary Theory paper introduce us to ways of understanding society from different angles—class, gender, language, psychology, etc. So, these theories, unlike the readings in the Literary Criticism paper, do not refer only to literature. Rather, they help us to understand the workings of society and culture, of which literature is a part. I think this critical understanding of the world around you will inform how you read literature.

In “The Formation of the Intellectuals,” Gramsci describes the various levels of the superstructures within which intellectuals function. He helps scholars and creators of literature to understand their position and role within the superstructure. According to him, “the creators of the various sciences, philosophy, art, etc.” are placed highest in the hierarchy of intellectuals in modern society and play an organizational and directive role. One’s class affiliation will determine whether one is an organic or traditional intellectual.

This essay reminds the literary scholar to place themselves as well as the text within the superstructure. It is very important to recognize that the scholar is not an objective observer of literary phenomena, but an individual with a specific subject position which influences their analysis of the text. Similarly, we have to place the author too within the superstructure and the text within the ideology. What is the class affiliation of the author? What kind of ideology does the text create or reinforce? When we critique Charles Dickens’ *Hard Times* as a text that reinforces bourgeois ideas of upward mobility, the narrative of the self-made man, we are applying Gramsci or Marxism in general.

There is a beautiful description of the role of the intellectual in another section of the *Prison Notebooks* which you don’t have in your syllabus, but I think you would find relevant to literary creation and scholarship. It is the section titled “Passage from Knowing to Understanding and to Feeling and vice versa from Feeling to Understanding and to Knowing.” Kate Crehan refers to this section in her book *Gramsci, Culture and Anthropology* and explains, “It is intellectuals who transform the incoherent and fragmentary ‘feelings’ of those who live a particular class position into a coherent and reasoned account of the world as it appears from that position.” According to Gramsci, an intellectual cannot create knowledge or politics-history without the “sentimental connection between intellectuals and people-nation” (Crehan 130). In my opinion, creative writers have the ability to transform the incoherent and fragmented feelings of people into a coherent and reasoned account. I borrow this view from an essay by Roland Bleiker on Neruda titled “Pablo Neruda and the Struggle for Political Memory,” where he argues that through his poetry, Neruda helps to create political memory out of the “faint voices and perspectives,” the “whispers” of the least privileged sections of society. Bleiker does not mention Gramsci in his essay, but I hear echoes of Gramsci in his argument. I tend to use this line of analysis whenever I read poetry, especially poetry that is avowedly political.

One can also use Gramsci’s analysis of the superstructure to analyze the depiction of the social structure in fiction or drama, for instance, what are the classes represented in the text? What are the class relations? What are the competing ideologies in the narrative? What are the competing ideologies in the author’s style of writing?

These are the various ways in which your knowledge of Gramsci can help you to analyze texts. I will send you a section from Raman Selden’s book *Practising Theory and Reading Literature*, which has illustrations of Marxist analyses of Daniel Defoe’s *Moll Flanders*, James Joyce’s *Ulysses* and William Shakespeare’s *King Lear* and *Twelfth Night*. You can pick and choose which sections you read based on your familiarity with the authors/texts.

**What does Gramsci mean when he uses the word “caste”?**

When the term “caste” is used in these translations of Gramsci, it refers to class groupings which do not have a fundamental role to play in the relations of production. For example, the aristocracy. Please refer to footnote no. 1 (in page 30) in the essay in your textbook *Theorisms* for more on Gramsci’s terminology. There is also a small section in Hoare and Smith’s preface to the *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, which I’ll try to send to you.

That is all for today. Take good care of yourselves.

Your teacher,

PD.

P. S. Here are the details about the books I have mentioned in these notes:

Bleiker, Roland. “Pablo Neruda and the Struggle for Political Memory.” *Third World Quarterly* 20.6 (1999): 1129-1142. Jstor. Web. 1 Mar. 2017

Crehan, Kate. *Gramsci, Culture and Anthropology.* London: Pluto Press, 2002. Print.

Santucci, Antonio A. *Antonio Gramsci.* tr. Graziella Di Mauro and Salvatore Engel-Di Mauro. New York: Monthly Review Press, 2010. Print.

Selden, Raman. *Practising Theory and Reading Literature: An Introduction*. Kindle ed., London: Routledge, 1989. Print

Hoare, Quintin and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, ed. and trans. *Antonio Gramsci: Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. 1971. Delhi: Aakar, 2015. Print.

1. Gramsci uses “dominant fundamental group” as a euphemism for “class”. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)