

PREFACE

For intellectuals who like to think of themselves as progressive, the relation between the knowledge they produce as scholars and the world beyond the academy is an ever-present question. This is a book about a thinker for whom this question was central, the Italian Marxist and cofounder of the Italian communist party, Antonio Gramsci. Paradoxically, it was his arrest in 1926 by the fascist government of Benito Mussolini that led to his greatest legacy: the prison notebooks he wrote while incarcerated. Condemned to twenty years in prison, his life as a political activist cut short, Gramsci was determined to continue his political engagement in the only way left open to him: a rigorous program of study. Prior to his imprisonment, he had written a vast quantity of journalism, but this he considered ephemeral, “written for the day,” as he put it in one of the letters he wrote from prison (*PLII*, 66). Tellingly, he rejected any attempts to publish his journalism in book form. Prison, he hoped, would provide him with the time necessary for more in-depth, scholarly analysis. As a scholar, he had exacting standards, but he also believed that the truly important knowledge is knowledge that travels beyond the academic ghetto. This is a very different attitude from that espoused by another celebrated theorist of power, Michel Foucault. By the end of his life, according to his biographer Didier Eribon, Foucault worried that his books were being circulated too widely: “[T]oo wide a circulation for scholarly books was disastrous for their reception, because it brought with it a multitude of misunderstandings. The moment a book went beyond the circle of those to whom it was really addressed, that is, those scholars who knew the problems with which it dealt and the theoretical traditions to which it referred, it no longer produced ‘effects of knowledge’ but ‘effects of opinion,’ as Foucault called them.” (Eribon 1991, 292)

Gramsci has none of Foucault’s disdain for the effects of opinion. Indeed, the shared “opinions” that inform so much of how people live their day-to-day lives, and the processes by which they come to be shared, are one of the major

concerns of the prison notebooks. He saw such “opinions” as playing a crucial role in the shaping of the social order—a social order he sought to change. A key term here is *senso comune* (common sense), the term Gramsci uses for all those heterogeneous beliefs people arrive at not through critical reflection, but encounter as already existing, self-evident truths. It is important to note, however, that the Italian *senso comune* is a far more neutral term than the English *common sense*. The English term, with its overwhelmingly positive connotations, puts the emphasis, so to speak, on the “sense,” *senso comune* on the held-in-common (*comune*) nature of the beliefs. In the notebooks, Gramsci reflects on the complicated roots of such collective knowledge, its shifting and often contradictory components, the ways it becomes accepted as beyond question—and by whom—and when, and how it changes. The collective here is important: “What matters is not the opinion of Tom, Dick, and Harry but the ensemble of opinions that have become collective and a powerful factor in society” (*PNIII*, 347). Ultimately, what interests this political activist is the knowledge that mobilizes political movements capable of bringing about radical transformation. Indeed, he questions whether “a philosophical movement” is “properly so called when it is devoted to creating a specialized culture among restricted intellectual groups” (*SPN*, 330). For him, unlike Foucault, the most important knowledge would seem to be precisely knowledge that has spread beyond “those scholars who knew the problems with which it dealt and the theoretical traditions to which it referred,” knowledge that, when embodied in self-aware collectivities, has the potential to act in the world. And for him, the primary such collectivities are classes.

Gramsci is often thought of as one of the Marxist tradition’s foremost theorists of culture. What is often overlooked, as I argued in an earlier book, *Gramsci, Culture, and Anthropology*, is that culture is central to the notebooks because culture, understood in its anthropological sense of ways of life, is for their author one of the major ways the inequalities of class are lived on a day-to-day basis. That argument is also at the heart of this book, but here, rather than focus on Gramsci’s understanding of culture, I tease out his understanding of class. I suggest that it is because he saw the fundamental inequalities of class as woven through every aspect of life that he paid so much attention to the mapping of *senso comune*, or popular opinion, and why he approached this mapping as he did. Given that the concept of class nowadays is so often taken as referring only to relations of economic inequality, it is important to stress that for Gramsci class includes far more than this.

The notebooks, as I read them, are underpinned by a concept of class, but one that is broad and inclusive, and certainly not confined to the realm of the

economic. This is a notion of class that names structural inequalities reproduced over time. But while this inequality may in the famous last analysis have its roots in fundamental economic relations, it is never a simple epiphenomenon of these: class can take many different forms. The relationship between the fundamental inequalities that shape the realities human beings confront and the ever-shifting flux of lived experience is always complex and nuanced, never crudely deterministic. In the notebooks, we see their author reflecting on the myriad ways inequality manifests itself, on the varied landscapes of power it produces, and the complex ways those landscapes are experienced by those inhabiting them. It is easy to miss the centrality of class to the notebooks, in part because nowhere in them is the concept of class defined in any precise way. This, however, is because the nature of class is, as it were, their ultimate topic. We might think here of Marx's *Capital*, which, as many have complained, also never provides a clear definition of class. The point, it seems to me, is that both *Capital* and the prison notebooks set out to explore the complex ways structural inequality manifests itself in the context of human history. There is no succinct definition of class because the protean forms it assumes in actual times and places cannot be reduced to some simple essence.

One of the forms class assumes is particular worldviews. As human beings, we make sense of our lives through the narratives our particular time and place have made available to us—accounts of “how things are” with deep but never simple roots in the fundamental social relations of the worlds we inhabit. We may challenge or even reject those narratives, but the webs of intelligibility in which our socialization wraps us from the day of our birth are a reality from which we all begin; we are all, to some degree, creatures of popular opinion. And yet, at certain historical moments, there is radical social transformation. When and why does this happen? Running through the notebooks is the question: What is the relation between popular opinion and social transformation?

To map Gramsci's multifaceted understanding of class, I focus on three of his central concepts: subalternity, intellectuals, and common sense. I explore how, taken together, these constitute an approach to the terrain of class inequality as lived reality, one that opens up the diverse and shifting forms it can assume. Approaching inequality in this way allows us to trace out the complex relationship between the actuality of the circumstances in which people live and their explanations of those circumstances, the narratives they use to make sense of the world they encounter.

One reason why the passage from knowledge to opinion is such a complex question for Gramsci is that, on the one hand, he has enormous respect

for those termed in the language of the day “the masses.” Indeed, as we shall see, he believes that political narratives capable of mounting an effective challenge to the dominant hegemony have their roots in the experience of those masses. On the other hand, he is not a populist; intellectuals, for him, have a crucial role to play in elaborating and rendering coherent the incoherent knowledge possessed by those who are subordinated, those he terms subalterns. It is equally crucial, however, that the coherent philosophy developed by intellectuals find expression as a new common sense that resonates with those subalterns, and that the masses recognize as *their* knowledge. Only then does the sophisticated philosophy of intellectuals have the potential to become “a powerful factor in society” (*PNIII*: 347). In sum, the relationship between subalterns and intellectuals is, for Gramsci, profoundly dialogical; tracing out the complicated dialogue between the knowledge of the intellectuals and popular opinion is one of the notebooks’ central concerns.

Complicating the relationship between knowledge and opinion still further, Gramsci sees the intellectuals who build on subaltern common sense to create a new philosophy as themselves produced by that subaltern group. One way this happens is through the political party: “The political party for some social groups is nothing other than their specific way of elaborating their own category of organic intellectuals directly in the political and philosophical field” (*SPN*: 15). The intellectuals produced organically by a group or class as it rises to power need to be distinguished from traditional intellectuals. This distinction, and the web of relationships linking intellectuals, subalterns, and common sense is at the heart of Gramsci’s approach to inequality as lived reality, an approach that sees class as a complex knotting together of economic, social, and political realities with narratives of those realities.

This book is organized in two parts. The first four chapters map out the broad contours of subalternity, intellectuals, and common sense as laid out in the notebooks: chapter 1 focuses on subalternity; chapter 2 on intellectuals; and chapter 3 on common sense. Chapter 4 argues that, taken together, these three concepts constitute a theorization of the complex, dialogical relationship between the experience of inequality, exploitation, and oppression, and the political narratives that articulate that experience.

The three chapters of part 2 address the question of the notebooks’ relevance for contemporary analysts. Given that they were written some eighty years ago, can the reflections of this twentieth-century, Italian Marxist, nonetheless provide a useful starting point for those interested in understanding twenty-first-century inequality and its historical roots? To suggest the potential usefulness of Gramsci’s linked concepts of subalternity, intellectuals, and

common sense I have taken them to three different case studies, one historical and two contemporary. To help elucidate the often misunderstood concept of organic intellectuals, chapter 5 takes us back to eighteenth-century Scotland and a moment when a new bourgeois order, based on industrial capitalism, was beginning to emerge. The chapter focuses on Adam Smith, a thinker who would come to be seen as one of the first theorists of capitalism. What does this luminary of the Scottish Enlightenment look like if we go beyond his popular image and locate him in his historical context? Can we see him as a bourgeois, organic intellectual? I have chosen a historical rather than a contemporary figure as an example of an organic intellectual because it is only with the benefit of hindsight that we can definitively identify an emerging class's organic intellectuals. Within the flux of the contemporary moment, it is never certain which of the many existing currents of thought genuinely represent a new hegemony in gestation.

The case studies in chapters 6 and 7 take us from the eighteenth century to the present day, and from the concept of organic intellectuals to that of common sense. Each chapter looks at a political movement that could be seen as having attempted to popularize, or create, a particular common sense: chapter 6 focuses on the Tea Party, a movement from the political right, chapter 7 on Occupy Wall Street, an upswelling of discontent that brought together a range of activists from the left. The chapters explore the two movements' different forms of common sense. In the case of the Tea Party, this is a common sense with roots in a far-from-new capitalist narrative, one often seen as originating with Adam Smith. Occupy Wall Street, by contrast, was perhaps struggling toward a new configuration of common sense—one capable of capturing in a visceral way the feeling of many in twenty-first-century America that they are living in an economic system that benefits only the wealthy. The concluding chapter reflects on what the approach to class we find in Gramsci's notebooks has to offer readers in the twenty-first century, particularly those interested in addressing the gross inequalities of our contemporary, globalized world.

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that of B. R. Ambedkar's of Dalits, and the 2013 workshop, "Antonio Gramsci: In the World," organized by Roberto Dainotto and Fredric Jameson at Duke University. The two anonymous reviewers for Duke University Press provided extremely insightful and helpful comments.

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