

The Transformation of Antonio Gramsci:

A Study in Retrieval

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The Problem:

When contemplating Gramsci's views "On Education" an intriguing puzzle confronts the educator. In the literature on the topic Gramsci emerges as the hero with two faces, two heads facing in precisely opposite directions.

The views of Antonio Gramsci on education present a problem to the scholar, the educator, the teacher, and the enlightened citizen concerned about the fate of education as a casualty in the war on culture. His views have been subject to extensive analysis by partisans on both sides for over a generation. They involve writers of prominence, men who would all appear to know what they are talking about. Yet, the essential Gramsci seems to slip through their fingers. To the Left, he emerges as the incarnation of the educator as radical and visionary. While to the Right, he takes shape as the beau ideal of traditional and conservative education. Each case is forcefully argued and, at its best, displays wide familiarity with his writing and the literature surrounding it.

Disputes of this kind are not unknown in political science. In a celebrated article Sir Isaiah Berlin summarizes the centuries old "question of Machiavelli."¹ And in the introduction to what is the most precise and imaginative translation of the Social Contract Willmoore Kendall tells us that the interpretation of Rousseau's masterpiece has, despite "its engaging sentence-by-sentence simplicity," become a tangle of conflicting opinions. But, The Prince has long signaled its problematic character by the sudden change in the last chapter. And Rousseau's great work is pitched on a hair-raising level of abstraction and complexity. By contrast, Gramsci's essay, his most explicit theoretical statement, is a mere seventeen pages in length. It is as plain to see as the nose on your face and as easy to read as the Sunday paper. Why then the mystery and why the controversy? What is the problem?

The War of Ideas

Of the partisans commanding the two thought worlds four can be singled out for mention here. On the radical side the first in the field is Quentin Hoare, the English translator of Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci with its generous and well-informed introduction. This was followed some years later by Henry Giroux, a prominent disciple of Paulo Friere.

Equally notable are the captains of culture on the other side. Pride of place here belongs to Harold Entwistle, a British educator now domiciled in Canada, whose book Antonio Gramsci, Conservative Schooling for Radical Politics (1979) broke new ground. He was then followed by E.D. Hirsch, formerly a Professor of Literature whose Cultural Literacy had already made him a household word, to be followed by The Schools We

¹ Isaiah Berlin, "The Question of Machiavelli" The New York Review of Books, Special Supplement. Vol. 17, No. 7, Nov 4, 1971.

Need and Why We Don't Have Them. Hirsch, who is also fluent in Italian, built on the work of Entwistle to make the case for Gramsci as a traditional educator. Both Entwistle and Hirsch were then duly savaged by Giroux in the pages of the Harvard Educational Review, Telos, and the British Journal of the Sociology of Education. The fires in the culture war were blazing brightly.

The core of Quentin Hoare's argument is the contention that everything Gramsci says on education "must" be read in light of his revolutionary perspective as a Marxist. Gramsci's language and heresies in a more "conservative" direction were simply strategies to evade the censor. But why "must" Gramsci's thoughts "On Education" all be read in this light. Hoare offers no justification for his canon of interpretation. He simply presents it as a self-evident truth, as Higher Dogma, Gramsci might well have used certain circumlocutions to evade the censor's eye. The stock examples here are the use of Lenin, Trotsky, and Stalin's real names and the phrase "the philosophy of praxis" to stand for "Marxism." Yet only a few essays later he refers quite openly to Proudhon and his famous book on poverty and also to "some Marxists" and so forth². Once his methodological rule is questioned and Gramsci's thoughts are taken as he wrote them the Hoare case disintegrates before our eyes until there is nothing left.

Giroux has written more extensively, favoring us with three long articles and part of a book. He is a convert from Freire to Gramsci, blending them both into his own special cocktail, now made in America. Giroux's arguments are made in a blaze of passion. To a cool critic, however, they are singularly unconvincing.

Consider only a couple or so of his main arguments. Giroux makes much of Gramsci's theory of the intellectual. Much of this, such as his view that all men are "intellectuals" because they all perform some intellectual labor is idiosyncratic and borders on the absurd. To group the local lens grinder in a class with Spinoza (or Leibniz, or Newton, not to mention Galileo) is to make nonsense of a category whose very purpose is to distinguish. More important is the category of the "transformative" intellectual with its suggestively Leninist overtones. To the extent that we simply mean leadership of a genuinely transforming power, as in Kuhn's paradigm transforming individuals, or Jaspers' paradigmatic leaders of the axial age, the Galileos and Newtons, the Bachs and Beethovens and Mozarts, the Adam Smiths and Ricardos, the Darwins, Marxes and Keynes, the Einsteins of today and tomorrow have all so far been the products of traditional culture and education. The socialist world has produced nothing to match it nor has the praxis and "the philosophy of praxis" in Gramsci, Freire, and Giroux. In fact, socialism has everywhere and at all times meant the destruction of reason and the degradation of culture. Giroux likes to think that he is "thinking like Gramsci," but this is pure illusion. Without any real competence in political theory or philosophy, Gramsci's critique of the superstructure, and hence his unique brand of Marxism, is seen through the lens of vulgar Marxism prevalent among American pseudo-intellectuals. So it comes as no surprise when he exhibits no understanding of Gramsci's thoughts "On Education."

² Quentin Hoare. Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci. Translated by Quentin Hoare and Geoffrey Noell-Smith, International Publishers, New York, 1971, p. 109 ff.

These are, however, only his most minor blemishes. In his attack on Entwistle he strikes his most characteristic pose, compounding ersatz moral indignation with bogus scholarship. Entwistle's paradoxical thesis is open to question. But this is not the way to answer it.

Giroux opens his attack on a note of lofty dismissal. He adopts the same strategy when criticizing Allen Bloom, of whose philosophy he displays no shred of comprehension, and E.D Hirsch, whom he ranks among the "ideologues," Giroux's favorite term for "conservatives." The attack on Entwistle exceeds either or both of these in hostility and abuse. To reprint these passages is distasteful. Any interested reader can easily find them in their unlovely originals. Among a plethora of references to the secondary literature (in English) there are only three to Gramsci himself and The Prison Notebooks. In a passage on the skills training side of primary and secondary education, the core of the curriculum, Giroux assures us of "an array of skills" to be found in the program of instruction. To a reader of Gramsci, this is a remarkable claim. Remarkable it may be, but is it true? Giroux furnishes no documentation. When asked point blank for the necessary documentation, Giroux is airiness itself. "It is," he assures us again, "somewhere in the Notebooks." Perhaps so, but one wonders precisely where, since no one that I know has ever noticed it. In another passage, he castigates Entwistle for likening the status of knowledge in Gramsci to the "positivism" of Karl Popper in his theory of "objective knowledge" or "epistemology without a subject". In fairness, Giroux has something of a point here, though it might not be exactly the one he thinks.

For one thing, Entwistle is quite aware of his hero's Marxism. For another, we have it on Popper's own authority that far from being a positivist he was not admitted to the meetings of the Vienna Circle precisely because of his well-known opposition to logical positivism³. Such blunders would make a schoolboy blush! To castigate Entwistle, a traditional educator, for the broad similarity he sees between the traditionalist position he imputes to Gramsci and the right-wing views of E.D. Hirsch and Diane Ravitch, Chester Finn, and Charles Sykes, represents yet another form of confusion. Entwistle is not making a political alliance or even a political point. His political views, as far as I know them, are those of a British labourite or, at most, a lib-labber as they were called.

The point is that traditional education, as a form of education and teaching, is an abstract form, which can readily accommodate an extended family of opinions from the social democracy of Entwistle to the Olin scholar Sykes, and do it with no inconvenience. Giroux may have fumbled at every turn, but the question still remains. Has Entwistle made the case that Gramsci was, despite all appearances (and preconceptions) a traditional educator? Or has he pulled a rabbit out of his British hat? This is the decisive question to which we now turn.

³ Karl Popper, "How I see Philosophy," The Owl of Minerva. (Ed.) Charles J. Bontempo and S. Jack Odell, McGraw-Hill Books, Inc., New York, NY, 1975, pp. 45 ff.