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From Vision to Agency:

Lessons from Gramsci on political mobilisation

by Alan O'Shea

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*“Alongside this, we need an evaluation of the strengths and weakness of the forces that will fight against any alternative – the Tories, the City, the IMF, shareholders and other vested interests – and of how they can be combated. **Until these are addressed, any alternative economic strategy will be challenged by these forces, including the old guard in the Labour Party, as head-in-the-clouds utopianism”***



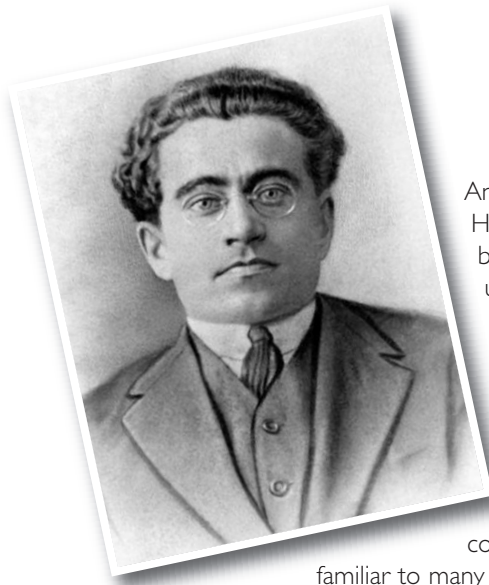
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FROM VISION TO AGENCY

Lessons from Gramsci on political mobilisation

by Alan O'Shea



Antonio Gramsci. His writing has been drawn upon frequently by the left since the English translation became available in the 1970s, and his concepts will be familiar to many reading this. But

since the present conjuncture can be understood as precisely what he called a 'crisis of hegemony' and spent so many years analysing, it is worth going back again to the original texts to renew these insights.

In 1919 Gramsci was the leading figure in the factory occupations in Turin and the setting up of factory councils, which he saw as the basis for strikes on a national scale, leading to a revolution. But the leaderships of the Italian Socialist Party and of the General Confederation of Labour refused to support this strategy and the strike was defeated. As a founder and leading figure of the Italian Communist Party, he was imprisoned when the Fascists came to power, and spent his time there examining Italian history and political philosophy in an attempt to understand his earlier failures and how a transformative movement might be more successfully built. He recorded his thinking in notebooks and letters. These writings are fragmentary and arguments often tail off, but they are nevertheless full of insight and suggestiveness, and provoke the reader into making connections with their own political understanding.

No surprise then that he has been claimed as exclusively 'theirs' by diverse political factions – Eurocommunists, Leninists and even Trotskyites. But much of his work transcends any single orthodoxy – it offers a complex understanding of how power is won, sustained and lost. The question becomes not whether we can

'claim' him, but whether his writing can help us to develop our own political struggles. What follows is a mapping of the insights I find most useful for the present task. There is no attempt to produce a comprehensive account of his thought.¹ Hopefully readers will be enticed into reading for themselves Selections from the Prison Notebooks² (from which most of my quotations are taken) and also his prison letters. After this summary, I open up a discussion of how we might apply his insights to the present political conjuncture in Britain.

Gramsci's insights...

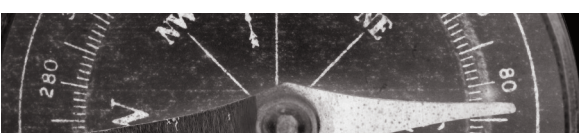
Gramsci argues that different social groups will have different sectional interests that they wish to defend or establish politically, but that any political project that aspires to hegemony – the leadership of a whole society, 'bringing about not only a unison of economic and political aims, but also intellectual and moral unity'³ – has to claim convincingly that it represents the interests of the whole society (or at least the vast majority of it). Gramsci calls this the achievement of a 'national-popular collective will'. Otherwise the project will be unstable and quickly fail. A large-scale mobilisation like this bears no resemblance to our current practice of persuading voters to turn out every five years – it is a re-politicisation of society.

'Hegemony' has sometimes been understood simply as a synonym for 'ideology'; this is not Gramsci's meaning – he sees it as the combination of 'intellectual and moral reform' with economic reform – 'indeed the programme of economic reform is precisely the concrete form in which every intellectual and moral reform presents itself'.⁴ The unity of the social classes and other forces within the hegemonic 'bloc' will only be maintained by a 'compromise equilibrium' in which 'the leading group should make concessions of an economic-corporate kind'.⁵ Hegemony is not just an ideological trick – real interests have to be addressed.

For the past few years Compass has been filling out a vision of the kind of society that greater equality, democracy and sustainability would entail (encapsulated in 'the Good Society'). In some cases, as in the work on wellbeing, this has been developed in some detail. Simultaneously, via forums, conferences, publications and so on, Compass has built good institutional links with (parts of) Labour, the Greens, the social end of the Liberal Democrats, trades unions and other mobilisers (such as London Citizens) and intellectual groupings (such as nef), and played a significant role in building a consensual set of goals and agendas. What is emerging is a case for a fundamental shift in social goals – away from 'market fundamentalism' and towards subordinating the market to the goal of establishing a 'decent life' for all citizens – clearly a long-term project.

But so far this debate has been confined to political activists. Compass's goal is a broad left-of-centre alliance, but many of the elements of this consensus have not been discussed yet with the wider population, or even with the professions that we hope will be part of the alliance. So how do we contribute to the considerable task of building a movement, and beginning to shift the political culture?

It is important to avoid the trap of rushing into reinventing the wheel, and instead to begin by reviewing what intellectual resources are already available to us. For me the richest source of all remains



One of the greatest qualities of Gramsci's thought is his insistence on the importance of historical context. There is no blueprint or general formula for successful political intervention; in order to know how to act we have to conduct a concrete and contingent analysis of our specific historical conjuncture. Any hegemony, he says, is 'a continuous process of formation and superceding of unstable equilibria' to accommodate shifting demands from within the 'bloc'. Those who wish to intervene in this must make 'a concrete analysis of the relations of force'. This will 'reveal the points of least resistance, at which the force of will can be most fruitfully applied' and 'indicate how a campaign of political agitation can best be launched, what language will be best understood by the masses, etc.'⁶

This is where the 'intellectual and moral unity' comes in – as a key element which binds the hegemonic bloc. Again this cannot be imposed from above, but is forged out of a long process of developing a convergence between popular 'common sense' beliefs, 'ways of seeing and acting', grievances, aspirations and so on, and the more elaborated and coherent philosophies of politicised intellectuals. Gramsci talks of 'the healthy nucleus that exists in "common sense", the part of it which can be called "good sense" and which deserves to be made more unitary and coherent'⁷. This may sound like leadership 'from above', but he elsewhere makes it clear that the leaders must learn from the led too, especially in grasping the 'feeling-passion' which underpins popular conceptions:

If the relationship between intellectuals and people-nation, between the leaders and the led... is provided by an organic cohesion in which feeling-passion becomes understanding (not mechanically but in a way which is alive), then and only then is the relationship one of representation. Only then... can the shared life be realised which alone is a social force – with the creation of the 'historic bloc'.⁸

The process of establishing a new 'historic bloc' is thus a long, careful process, which Gramsci argues needs to begin in civil society, gradually clarifying and uniting the broad aspirations of the mass of people – a 'war of position' rather than a 'war of manoeuvre' (a direct attack on vested power).

He also states that the form political change takes is not the stark replacement of one ideology by another but a restructuring of the ideological elements that are in play in a society. He talks of..

a process of differentiation and change in the relative weight that the elements of the old ideologies used to possess. What was previously secondary and subordinate, or even incidental, is now taken to be primary – becomes the nucleus of a new ideological and theoretical complex.⁹

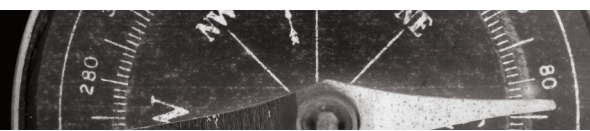
For example, Margaret Thatcher's discourse placed 'you don't spend money you haven't got' as the nucleus, imbuing a harsh, monetarist cuts agenda with an austere moralism, subordinating all else within this governing nucleus. The current Coalition likewise places debt reduction above all else, but without the moralism. A new broad left discourse may accept the need for balancing the books but only as a secondary aim, subordinated to the central goal of developing a good life for all citizens.

Ernesto Laclau develops Gramsci's formulations by arguing that 'ideological elements taken in isolation have no necessary class connotation', no fixed political belonging, until they are articulated into a 'concrete ideological discourse'.¹⁰ For example, the problem of housing queues can be articulated to 'too many immigrants' or to 'the government's neglect of the needs of the poor'. What Gramsci calls the 'nucleus', Laclau renames the 'articulating principle', the particular political hue that colours and holds together the whole hegemonic movement. Thus political struggle can be

understood in part as the work of disarticulation and rearticulation.

Gramsci's understanding of individual mentalities is equally subtle. He argues that 'the personality is strangely composite'¹¹ and formed from the 'ensemble of social relations which each of us enters to take part in':¹² we have a jumble of beliefs, practices and identifications which are incoherent and possibly contradictory. This is not because we are 'irrational' but because the different identities we are proffered and demands made upon us across the different social institutions we pass through are themselves contradictory. The way to make one's personality more coherent is to 'modify the ensemble of these relations', that is, to become politically active and tackle the contradictions.

This fact of multiple identifications is crucial for political struggle. For example, Margaret Thatcher, addressing Conservative trade unionists in 1977, noted that as workers we have sectional interests, 'but we are all consumers and as consumers we want a choice. We want the best value for money'. Hence 'the same trade unionists, as consumers, want an open market' – and thus no protection of their working conditions! Conversely, on the day I write this, Peter Wilby in the Guardian attacks the justification of the expansion of supermarkets on the grounds that they provide what the consumer wants: 'What people want as consumers may not be what they want as householders, community members, producers, employees or entrepreneurs. The loss of small shops drains a locality's economic and social capital.'¹³ Here again, political argument can be understood not as persuasive and manipulative attempts to change ideas, but as demands for certain of our social identities to be prioritised, on the grounds that they best serve our overall interests.



Putting Gramsci to work...

How can Gramsci's insights be usefully deployed in the project of building a broad left movement? What follows are some initial thoughts to contribute to the debate on political action, which has already started within political parties, trade unions and many other groupings. First, we need both to be daunted by the scale of the task, and heartened by Gramsci's insistence on the instability and transformability of hegemonic blocs. The goal of an egalitarian, participative and just 'good society' in which all citizens are guaranteed a decent life is clearly a long-term goal, and can easily be dismissed in the present climate as a mere utopian fantasy. But utopian images are crucial for any radical politics. It is too easy to lose sight of the possibility that life could be different. So this goal gives us an ethical-political yardstick for constant checking that we are moving in the right direction. It must not be a precise blueprint – the eventual forms must be the outcome of dialogue, struggle and concession – but a set of values. And these values should be embedded in our means – our procedures, our openness to listening and so on – as well as our ends. But we are talking about a 'long haul', as Stuart Hall has put it, a 'war of position' in Gramsci's terms.

An analysis of the 'relations of force' should be the starting point. This must include examining where economic power resides, and how vigorously it will be defended, and also the power embedded in state and civic institutions. But, as Gramsci argued, building a movement has also to start from socio-cultural analysis – an examination of dominant discourses and practices (including those of the popular media), and also popular cultures and sentiments – mapping differences between different social constituencies, but also identifying the crucial common elements. A key resource of 'good sense' is of course existing grass-roots activity. If we are to take seriously Gramsci's insistence on working with popular aspirations, any broader, national movement with our

goals must reverse New Labour's centralism, forge links with these struggles, and develop common cause without any detriment to the vigour that their autonomy and collectivism has given them.

This analysis should include a mapping of the social identifications in play in the present political-cultural conjuncture and an evaluation of which identifications are promising as unifying forces for a counter-hegemonic movement, and which may be counterproductive. As Gramsci suggests, these identifications are not simply 'points of view' but are embedded emotionally in the self – maybe as an angry sense of being exploited or perhaps as a deep concern for injustice being done to others. The strength of these feelings is an important component in trying to build unity across different constituencies.

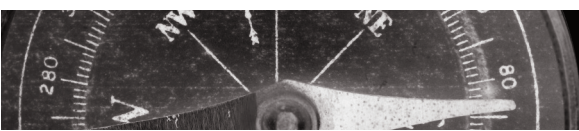
Turning more concretely to the present, there are some obvious starting points for beginning to build a 'national-popular collective will'. First, there is a widespread social malaise in Britain, as spelt out in the first part of *The Good Society*,¹⁴ and more fully in *The Spirit Level*¹⁵ and many other publications, which is part of the lived experience of large sections of society – housing shortage, job insecurity, stress at work, over-long working hours, poverty and low pay, anxiety, depression, eating problems and so on. The sentiments and identifications embedded in these experiences are ready and waiting to be articulated into a movement for change. A campaign focused on the long-term goal of, and more immediate steps towards, realising the wellbeing of all citizens should win wide support.

Second, the current economic policy of the Coalition Government is not only failing to tackle these problems but making them worse. There already exist several excellent analyses of the political economy – narratives of how we came to be where we are and how best to move on (not least Compass's *The £100 Billion Gamble*¹⁶). It is important not just to be against the Coalition's cuts and the further increases in inequality that are happening, and to

defend 'trusted institutions'. To be plausible and to win broad support we have simultaneously to propose a convincing alternative. We can campaign for different priorities in accord with our alternative values, but we cannot yet produce a financially viable, practicable programme of change. In short, we need to develop a Plan B, an economic strategy that puts the wellbeing of citizens rather than the demands of the market as its ultimate 'articulating principle', but which is worked though concretely enough to pass muster with economists. Compass, with others, has already begun on this, but we must go beyond proposing just a set of economic proposals framed within the ethics of social justice. Alongside this, we need an evaluation of the strengths and weakness of the forces that will fight against any alternative – the Tories, the City, the IMF, shareholders and other vested interests – and of how they can be combated. Until these are addressed, any alternative economic strategy will be challenged by these forces, including the old guard in the Labour Party, as head-in-the-clouds utopianism.

It is possible to envisage how this economic and social agenda could be got off the ground by a coalition of forces with whom Compass already has links. It will be a massive project, the biggest shift in social priorities for 40 years, but now is a favourable moment to begin the attempt.

Other themes central to the debates within Compass and its allies are less ripe for articulating the popular mood. The question of sustainability and, particularly, the related problem of consumerism are only central concerns for a small minority. This is not surprising – our identities as consumers with an endless urge to go on and on enhancing our material possessions have, at least in Britain, been promoted increasingly vigorously since the late 1950s. Shopping has been installed as one of the greatest forms of satisfaction for many people, becoming a deep-rooted element of their very identity. Direct criticisms of consumer culture are received as patronising and mean-spirited.



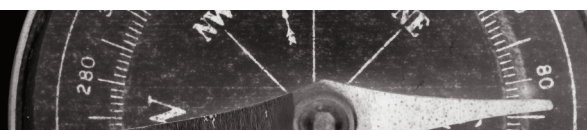
Displacing this is a long-term and very complicated project – and of course linked to the issue of sustainability. This issue is arguably better tackled by promoting other aspects of our identities (those Wilby mentions), rather by a direct attack on popular consumerism. We have a similar problem with the project of deepening democracy and promoting active citizenship. For generations we have been discouraged from taking over social responsibility for ourselves by a managerialist state insisting on providing for us; this is cemented by a general public satisfaction with what the welfare state actually provides. Thus the theme of a deeper, participatory democracy has a less immediate purchase on popular concerns than the focus on a more equal and caring society devoted to improving the quality of our lives. Rather than arguing head on for the general devolution of power at this point, this could be left as a side issue to the question of how to achieve the alternative social goals we have identified and how the public sector might be reformed to this end. In this process, the widening of democracy can emerge as a means to these ends.

These initial suggestions may all seem like common sense to readers of the Compass website, but my main concern in returning to Gramsci's formulations is to point to the hard, complex analysis that is now needed to turn our visions into a powerful force for change. It is a long-term project, and the forces ranged against it are formidable. Compass is ideally placed to be a forum for this analysis and debate. Political parties are forced into short-termism by the electoral system – we must try to keep our allies' eyes on the horizon.

Alan O'Shea,

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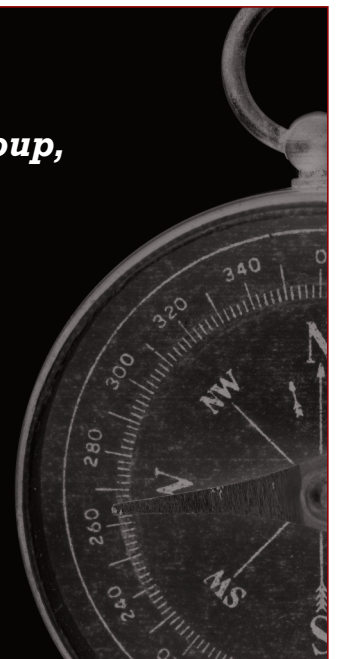
- ¹ For example, I don't cover his excellent analyses of the relation of state and civil society, of different levels of consciousness, or the key notions of 'transformism' and 'passive revolution' (though I am implicitly working with them).
- ² A. Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, Lawrence and Wishart, 1971. All quotations in the piece are from this volume. See the Lawrence and Wishart website for his other writings: www.lwbooks.co.uk/books.html.
- ³ *Ibid.*, p.181.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, p.133.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, p.161.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, p.185.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, p.327.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, p.418.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p.195.
- ¹⁰ E. Laclau, *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory*, New Left Books, 1977, p.99.
- ¹¹ Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, p.324.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, p.352.
- ¹³ P.Wilby, 'Supermarkets kill free markets as well as our communities', *Guardian*, 3 May 2011.
- ¹⁴ J. Rutherford and H. Shah (eds), *The Good Society*, Compass, 2006.
- ¹⁵ R. Wilkinson and K. Pickett, *The Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better*, Penguin, 2010.
- ¹⁶ G. Irvin, H. Reed and Z. Gannon, *The £100 Billion Gamble: On Growth Without the State*, Compass, 2010.



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***Compass is the democratic left pressure group,
whose goal is to debate
and develop the ideas for a more equal
and democratic world, then
campaign and organise to help ensure
they become reality.***

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