ANTONIO GRAMSCI, POLITICAL THINKER ON EDUCATION

ANTONIO GRAMSCI, PENSADOR POLÍTICO DA EDUCAÇÃO

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ABSTRACT: As a first step, the article aims to present Antonio Gramsci's trajectory as a political man: his formative years, the beginning of his militant engagement, the impact of workers' democracy on his thinking, his time as a leader of the communist movement and, finally, his intense intellectual activity, associated with the growing infirmity of his body, in the fascist prison. It then mobilizes some fundamental concepts from his work (civil society, hegemony, organic intellectual) in relation to his educational and pedagogical ideas, particularly regarding the formation of working-class intellectuals and his views on progressive education. This is a bibliographical study of Gramsci's thought, focusing on his ideas on education. However, it acknowledges that an understanding of his views on education can only be achieved within the framework of his broader concepts and arguments.

KEYWORDS: Antonio Gramsci. Education. Civil society. Hegemony. Organic intelectual.

***RESUMO**: O artigo busca, em um primeiro momento, apresentar a trajetória de Antonio Gramsci como homem político: seus anos de formação, o início de seu engajamento militante, o impacto da democracia operária em sua reflexão, seu momento como liderança do movimento comunista e, por fim, sua intensa atividade intelectual, associada a crescente enfermidade do seu corpo, nas celas da prisão fascista. Em seguida, mobiliza alguns conceitos fundamentais de sua obra (sociedade civil, hegemonia, intelectual orgânico) ao lado de suas ideias educacionais e pedagógicas, fundamentalmente no que diz respeito à formação dos intelectuais da classe trabalhadora e às suas posições frente à Escola Nova. Trata-se de uma pesquisa de caráter bibliográfico acerca do pensamento de Gramsci, com foco em suas ideias sobre educação. Considera-se, não obstante, que o entendimento de suas posições sobre a educação só pode ocorrer no quadro de um conjunto mais amplo de seus conceitos e argumentos.*

***PALAVRAS-CHAVE**: Antonio Gramsci. Educação. Sociedade civil. Hegemonia. Intelectual orgânico.*

***RESUMEN**: El artículo presenta, en primer lugar, la trayectoria de Antonio Gramsci como hombre político: sus años de formación, el inicio de su compromiso militante, el impacto de la democracia obrera en su pensamiento, su etapa como dirigente del movimiento comunista y, por último, su intensa actividad intelectual en la prisión fascista, asociada a la creciente enfermedad de su cuerpo. A continuación, moviliza algunos de los conceptos fundamentales de su obra (sociedad civil, hegemonía, intelectual orgánico) junto con sus ideas educativas y pedagógicas, principalmente en lo referente a la formación de intelectuales obreros y a su postura sobre la escuela nueva. Se trata de un estudio bibliográfico del pensamiento de Gramsci, centrado en sus ideas sobre la educación. No obstante, se considera que la comprensión de sus posiciones sobre la educación solo puede darse en el marco de un conjunto más amplio de sus conceptos y argumentos.*

***PALABRAS CLAVE:** Antonio Gramsci. Educación. Sociedad civil. Hegemonía. Intelectual orgánico.*

Introduction

The research conducted in support of the writing of this article is bibliographical in nature. It sought secondary literature that could assist in presenting Antonio Gramsci's main educational ideas. To this end, it was first necessary to situate the author's political–intellectual trajectory and, based on this, to delimit his key concepts, given that education is a transversal theme throughout his work. In this way, it was possible to relate these concepts to some of Gramsci's more specific ideas on teaching and pedagogy.

The authors included in the supporting bibliography are classical Gramsci scholars in Brazil, such as Carlos Nelson Coutinho—whose *Introduction* and *Chronology* to *Gramsci for the Reader* (organized in 2011) were used to construct the political–intellectual biography of the author—and Marcos Del Roio; more recent Gramscian researchers, such as Daniela Mussi; and authors linked to the field of educational research.

A Life and Work Dedicated to Socialism

Antonio Gramsci was an Italian political militant and intellectual, born in 1891 and deceased in 1937, widely known for articulating political and cultural dimensions in his reflections and actions regarding the contemporary world. Within the Marxist field, from which he wrote and acted, Gramsci is considered a pioneer in providing a more systematic and in-depth treatment of cultural issues (including education). He is also recognized as an innovative political theorist for his analysis of revolutionary strategies appropriate to his historical context.

Having experienced an impoverished childhood in Sardinia, Gramsci distinguished himself academically and received a scholarship that enabled him to attend the University of Turin, a city in northern Italy that was undergoing industrialization and concentrating a large contingent of workers. There, he became involved in political conflicts while studying philosophy, philology, and the history of the Italian Peninsula, among other subjects and disciplines.

From early youth, Gramsci engaged in intense journalistic activity in various print outlets linked to the workers' movement and the Italian Socialist Party (PSI). In 1913, he began his militant activity within the party and was already critical of positivism and economism—two common deviations within the Marxism of the Second International and the PSI. In 1917, in the context of the October Revolution, Gramsci wrote that organized political action is the

primary driver of human history, rather than economic structures, an error he attributed to other intellectuals within the socialist movement (Coutinho, 2011b).

Gramsci was also politically involved with the factory councils in Turin during the revolutionary effervescence of the post–World War I period, between 1919 and 1920. Indeed, the idea of workers' self-government would remain a guiding principle of his thought. For Gramsci, factory councils functioned as the germ of workers' power, an apparatus through which power could be contested within society as a whole, rather than being restricted to economistic issues, as in the case of trade unions. Through them, workers would be transformed into autonomous producers, freely associated. At that moment, Gramsci believed that "it is in the productive process itself that the foundation of the process of self-education and self-emancipation of labor is to be found" (Del Roio, 2006, p. 315, our translation).

The leadership of the PSI did not engage in the struggle for the factory councils, and the movement was defeated. Reflecting on this experience, Gramsci came to understand that workers' self-government should not operate solely from the factory or workplace, but from the multiple social relations that organize society.

In 1921, Gramsci was one of the founders of the Communist Party of Italy (PCd'I), a split from the PSI aligned with the Russian Revolution and the Third International, and became a member of its Central Committee. At this point, he was already strongly influenced by Lenin. Between 1922 and 1923, he traveled to Russia and began to defend the united front policy against fascism, opposing the sectarian and leftist positions of the PCd'I leadership at the time. Gramsci believed that the party leadership

> should educate itself as it was being formed, overcoming a sectarian spirit and, at the same time, should be capable of assimilating the best expressions of culture and political action generated within the working class itself. In addition to self-educating, the educator should continue to be educated by the educated (Del Roio, 2006, p. 320, our translation).

Within the context of these debates, Gramsci began to outline his strategy for the transition to socialism in what he termed the "West," where the development of superstructural mediations would not lead to the seizure of power through revolutionary assault, as in Russia or other Eastern societies, but through other, more complex means (Coutinho, 2011b).

He was elected deputy in 1924, but the early 1920s already revealed the defeat of proletarian insurrection in the West and the subsequent rise of fascism, with Italy itself at the

forefront of this process (the defeat of the Turin councils and the rise of Mussolini, as well as developments in Germany following the defeat of the 1918–1919 revolution).

In 1926, Gramsci was imprisoned by the fascist regime. While incarcerated, he devoted himself primarily to study, producing notes that were later compiled as the *Prison Notebooks*. At the same time, his fragile health deteriorated over the years. In 1933, he was transferred from prison to a clinic, still under the condition of imprisonment. At the end of 1934, he was granted conditional release, remaining under surveillance by the fascist police. Gramsci died shortly after being granted full freedom, in 1937, after having spent long periods hospitalized (Coutinho, 2011a).

Gramsci never published a book during his lifetime. His pre-prison intellectual production is mainly found in articles for the workers' press, as well as in letters to comrades and reports for the party. His mature prison-period production consists of an organized set of study notes, along with further correspondence addressed to family members and friends. This fact creates difficulties for the systematic study of his thought, as well as for the precise delimitation of his concepts, which appear more in action, operating within historical analyses.

His life, though brief—he died at the age of 46—was entirely dedicated to the cause of socialism and human emancipation. His organizational work within the political formations to which he belonged, as well as his intellectual activity, revolved around the political movements necessary to achieve an egalitarian, democratic, and free society.

Gramsci's work has been attacked by far-right intellectuals for decades, but this dynamic has become more visible in recent years with the global rise of the far right (see the historical and geographical trajectory outlined by Mussi and Bianchi, 2022). In general, these critics regard Gramsci as one of the most pernicious Marxists because, by rejecting economic determinism, he allegedly conjectured the possibility of a silent revolution through gradual changes within the fissures of modern culture. Such changes could often go unnoticed, yet would be more profound because they concerned how people make sense of the world.

In their sensationalist arguments, these authors misuse Gramsci's own terminology in order to construct a straw man. This rhetoric, however, only demonstrates the strength and contemporary relevance of Gramsci's thought, particularly of the ideas attacked—and feared—by these far-right intellectuals, such as hegemony.

Intellectuals and the Struggle for Hegemony

As discussed above, Gramsci understood that the development of Western societies led to a social configuration in which the path to power to be pursued by the working class differed from that taken by the Bolsheviks in 1917:

> [He] observed that in so-called Western societies, [...] organizations referred to as private—schools, the press, the church, parties, unions, associations, etc.—form a network that sustains or contests the actions of political society [...] and that ideological and political disputes occur primarily within these spaces, which he called civil society (Jacomini, 2020, p. 5, our translation).

For Gramsci, the integral State is a dynamic whole (marked by contradictions), divided into two spheres: civil society and political society (or the restricted State). The former is the field of struggle for hegemony, while the latter is linked to the coercive domination exercised by the ruling class. The institutions of civil society therefore contribute to maintaining mass consent for the direction imposed by dominant classes on the political destiny of society, a result of the prestige derived from their own position; the apparatuses of political society function to coerce those who do not consent, or who may potentially refuse consent.

From this perspective, revolutionary theory undergoes revision, as civil society emerges as the privileged space of political struggle—specifically, the struggle for class hegemony. Civil society is understood as a space in which subaltern classes can fight to build their own hegemony, establishing themselves as the political leadership of society as a whole. It is along this path to power that Gramsci would focus his efforts.

To this end, it becomes essential to understand the agents involved in the construction of hegemony contested by classes within civil society. This is where the figure of the organic intellectual emerges. For Gramsci,

> every social group, originating on the basis of an essential function in the world of economic production, creates for itself, at the same time and organically, one or more strata of intellectuals who give it homogeneity and awareness of its own function, not only in the economic field but also in the social and political spheres (Gramsci, 2011, p. 203, our translation).

The organic intellectuals of social classes are, "in most cases, 'specializations' of partial aspects of the primitive activity of the new social type brought into being by the new class" (Gramsci, 2011, p. 203, our translation). In the case of the capitalist class, Gramsci cites the political economy scholar as an example.

The relationship between fundamental classes and production is direct, since they are defined by their structural position within the production process itself. By contrast, the relationship of intellectuals to production is more complex and mediated. Intellectuals function, as it were, as the "functionaries" of the superstructure.

In this sense, the production of an organic intellectual is neither a mechanical nor a formal process. Fundamental social classes within a given mode of production encounter historically preexisting intellectual categories. In capitalism, for example, the persistence of clerics as a group of intellectuals—originally linked to the feudal aristocracy—is notable. Here, Gramsci's analysis reveals the radical historicism that underpins his conceptual framework. It is no coincidence that he characterizes his work as research in the history of intellectuals or the history of culture, rather than sociology, which he regards as more schematic and abstract.

Following the Marxist method, Gramsci does not seek an alleged essence of intellectual activity. Instead, he analyzes the relations that this activity, in its social position, maintains with other social positions. On this basis, he argues that, strictly speaking, everyone is an intellectual, although this function is exercised only by certain individuals occupying specific positions within the social relations that structure society. These positions have their own historically constructed institutional forms, which facilitate the exercise of intellectual functions.

Within this framework, the figure of the intellectual is considerably broadened. Gramsci argues that only in this way can the form of society in his time be properly understood: the number of intellectuals is not justified by the needs of production, but by the political needs of the dominant classes in their hegemonic project. For the ruling class, the primary objective is to construct a worldview to be incorporated by the subaltern classes, that is, the production of consensus.

Consequently, the analysis of the superstructure becomes central in Gramsci's thought. It is no longer a mere epiphenomenon of the structure, nor is it subordinate to it; rather, it constitutes a primary arena of struggle over the direction of society. The interactions among these different social levels are far more dynamic and complex than those proposed by other Marxists of the period, such as the reformists of the Second International. In short, one may agree that in Gramsci "[...] civil society and the [restricted] State are identified, that is, they maintain a relationship of unity and distinction, in the sense that these two moments composing society as a whole are in alignment" (Jacomini, 2020, p. 8, our translation).

From a broader perspective, the school can be understood as one of the institutions of civil society tasked with disseminating certain forms of conduct and worldviews, while

inhibiting others. Examining the historical trajectory of this specific apparatus, Gramsci also argued that the development of school systems in Europe, for instance, promoted a specialization of intellectual functions and a consequent segmentation of the education system, going beyond the long-established division between manual and intellectual labor. It is at this level of analysis that we now turn to Gramsci's thought.

Gramsci's Educational and Pedagogical Ideas

In opposition to the segmentation of the school system, Gramsci advocates, at the level of basic education, the concept of a unitary school, so called because within it work and theory are "closely linked" (Gramsci, 1982, p. 149, our translation), rather than merely juxtaposed in a mechanical way. The unitary school "[…] embraces the ideal of integral human formation, a being developed as fully as possible in relation to both intellectual and manual capacities" (Martins, 2021, p. 12, our translation).

This position stems from the Marxist concern with overcoming the division between manual and intellectual labor. The aim is to (re)unite them, not simply to encourage intellectuals to engage superficially and presumptuously in manual activities, thereby turning such schools into institutions "of a snobbish type" (Gramsci, 1982, p. 149, our translation). Dilettantism and elitism are, moreover, sharply criticized by Gramsci. For him, culture is not a collection of erudite contents; such a conception "serves only to create misfits, individuals who believe themselves superior to the rest of humanity because they have stored a certain quantity of data and dates in their memory, which they use at every opportunity to erect a kind of barrier between themselves and others" (Gramsci, 2010, p. 52, our translation). Culture is a way of thinking that must be transmitted: "it is organization, discipline of one's inner self, the appropriation of one's own personality, the conquest of a higher consciousness through which one comes to understand one's own historical value […]" (Gramsci, 2010, p. 53, our translation).

Nevertheless, Gramsci maintains that students must have, as a foundation, contact with the contents of the cultural heritage of the past, and that this access must be universal. "To create a new culture does not mean only to make individual 'original' discoveries; it also means, and above all, to critically disseminate already discovered truths, to 'socialize' them, as it were" (Gramsci, 2010, p. 72, our translation).

Through this process, the emergence of organic intellectuals from the working class may be fostered:

> By appropriating this cultural heritage produced by humanity, an elevation of students' levels of consciousness may occur, inducing new forms of individual and collective action, as they become more aware of themselves and of the world—a fundamental condition for formulating strategies and promoting actions aimed at overcoming the social contradictions that challenge their existence (Martins, 2021, p. 12, our translation).

From this perspective, and within a more specifically pedagogical debate, Gramsci advances several critiques of the conceptions held by authors associated with the New School movement, or its precursors, such as Pestalozzi. He does, in fact, acknowledge that pedagogues inspired by Rousseau represented an advance over traditionalist education linked to the Jesuits. Nevertheless, he strongly criticizes approaches that conceive education as spontaneity, in which the teacher becomes a mere assistant to the student's discovery and learning process, limiting their role to creating favorable conditions for the student's free and natural development.

On the contrary, Gramsci argues that it is the responsibility of the preceding generation to educate the following one. Such formation entails a struggle against the most immediate instincts, aiming to produce individuals who are contemporaneous with their own time. This is not about simply guiding children through their existing knowledge; rather, it concerns a cultural project—that is, the human production of subjectivity and social materiality.

Gramsci also attributes the shortcomings of the New School movement of his time to the insufficient maturity of its project:

> We are still in the romantic phase of the active school, in which the elements of the struggle against the mechanical and Jesuit school have been morbidly exaggerated because of contrast and polemic; it is necessary to enter the classical, rational phase, finding in the ends to be achieved the natural source for elaborating methods and forms (Gramsci, 2010, p. 111, our translation).

In this sense, the Italian revolutionary criticizes schools that allow for "total freedom in study" (Gramsci, 1982, p. 150, our translation), precisely because they tend to foster a loose bond with teachers, who do not follow students systematically, but only during concentrated periods that result in work overload. Gramsci maintains that intellectual work and study require discipline, routine, and systematization.

He further notes that pedagogies inspired by New School principles—such as those in which teachers merely stimulate students' interests and guide their investigations while rejecting more dogmatic instruction—are more difficult to generalize, as they depend on the training of a large contingent of highly qualified teachers. As a result, such schools, although often producing good outcomes, tend to constitute an elitist segment of the school system.

At the same time, Gramsci does not deny the value of certain aspects of these pedagogies, which were highly influential in the early twentieth century, as they often promote collective effort and collaboration and foster a genuine passion for knowledge among students.

From this standpoint, an active school along New School lines could be more appropriately employed at the final stage of schooling, rather than in early childhood education. The final phase of basic education, within the unitary school,

> […] should be conceived and organized as the decisive phase, in which one seeks to create the fundamental values of "humanism," intellectual self-discipline, and the moral autonomy necessary for subsequent specialization, whether of a scientific nature (university studies) or of an immediately practical-productive nature (industry, bureaucracy, commerce, etc.) (Gramsci, 2011, p. 217–218, our translation).

In terms of teaching methods, this translates, in the more advanced years of the unitary school, into the proposal of holding seminars and, in everyday practice, encouraging students who have greater mastery of a given subject to support their peers, so that the school collective may advance in learning (Martins, 2021, p. 13, our translation). It is at this stage—more suitable for New School methods—that "the fundamental school activity will develop […] in libraries and experimental laboratories; it is here that organic indications for vocational orientation will be chosen" (Gramsci, 2010, p. 112, our translation).

Gramsci thus distinguishes at least two phases of basic education:

> In the first phase, the aim is to discipline, and therefore also to level, to obtain a certain kind of 'conformism' that may be called 'dynamic'; in the creative phase, on the basis already achieved of the 'collectivization' of the social type, the aim is to expand the personality, rendered autonomous and responsible, but with a solid and homogeneous moral and social consciousness. Thus, a creative school does not mean a school of 'inventors and discoverers'; it indicates a phase, a method of investigation and knowledge, and not a predetermined 'program' that forces innovation and originality at all costs (Gramsci, 2010, p. 111–112, our translation).

Given his expanded concept of the intellectual, Gramsci also cannot conceive education, in the strong sense of the term, as being strictly confined to the school space. Education also takes place in extra-school contexts. He highlights the importance, for modern popular culture, of community public libraries, as well as the provision—understood as a public service rather than a commodity—of access to theaters, museums, zoos, gardens, and similar institutions. Access to these goods and services is also formative for the working class, just as access to

formal schooling is. Accordingly, the struggle for these cultural goods and services is likewise a struggle for hegemony.

An Approximation to Pierre Bourdieu

As discussed, Gramsci understands intellectual activity as a form of labor, including in the sense that the intricacies of its practice must be taught in school. As he himself states, "[…] study is a profession, and a very tiring one, with a particular apprenticeship of its own, not only intellectual but also muscular-nervous: it is a process of adaptation, a habit acquired through effort, boredom, and suffering" (Gramsci, 2010, p. 125, our translation).

Reflecting on the arduous psychophysical process of study—and it is difficult not to recall his own fragile health—Gramsci further observes that

> Certainly, a child from a traditional family of intellectuals overcomes the psychophysical adaptation process more easily; upon entering the classroom for the first time, they already have several advantages over their classmates, possessing an orientation acquired through family habits: they concentrate attention more easily, as they are accustomed to bodily posture, and so on (Gramsci, 2010, p. 125, our translation).

The proximity of this reflection to Pierre Bourdieu's thought is readily apparent to readers familiar with the social sciences. Decades later, the French sociologist's argument regarding the familial transmission of predispositions necessary for school success—predispositions inscribed in the body and acquired prior to and external to the school institution—closely parallels Gramsci's observation cited above. Naturally, this comparison must account for differences in theoretical foundations and style between the two authors. In Bourdieu's terms,

> the education system reproduces the structure of the distribution of cultural capital between classes all the more effectively […] the closer the culture it transmits is to the dominant culture and the less distant the mode of inculcation it employs is from the familial mode of inculcation (Bourdieu, 1992, p. 306, emphasis added, our translation).

In any case, the shared rejection of economic determinism renders the dialogue between these two thinkers meaningful, particularly given their sustained attention to education.

Final Considerations

The concept of the organic intellectual, coined by Gramsci, can aptly be applied to Gramsci himself. The Italian revolutionary distinguished himself as an editor in the workers' press and became a political leader within the communist movement in Italy. Indeed, he was the principal organic intellectual of the Italian working class and remains, to this day, a major theoretical and political inspiration for those across different strands of the left who struggle for an egalitarian, democratic, and free world. In the field of Education in particular, many intellectuals draw on Gramsci's ideas to reflect on the challenges currently faced in this arena of struggle. Gramsci is, ultimately, a thinker of action and education whose relevance endures.

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