Antonio Gramsci: Biography and Leadership

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With the collapse of communism across eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, it may appear to some that Marxists have finally relinquished any legitimate claim to effective political leadership. The role and ultimate purpose of leadership within the Marxist project has always been a topic of some contention, because the project itself has always been conceptualized in collective terms—mass revolutionary action, proletarian dictatorship, class interests. At the same time, however, Marxists have never been reluctant to commemorate their leaders, martyrs, revolutionary heroes and intellectual gurus as individuals.

As with most political parties, those of the Marxist variety have naturally had to deal with the often uneasy relationships between leaders and led. Yet this has been doubly compounded by the dilemmas of class allegiance and the possibility of political power within the “bourgeois democratic” system. For such an ambitious political project questions of leadership have remained surprisingly undertheorized. In the light of recent experience it is clear that the notion of leadership within Marxism has emerged as particularly problematic.

It may seem inappropriate to turn our attention to the figure of Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937), whose practical legacy appears to consist of little more than his work as co-founder of an initially feeble Communist Party (it was unable to unify working-class and peasant support during the pre-war Fascist regime in Italy) and his collection of prison notebooks (they are disparate, inconsistent and readily understood only by the discerning scholar). What, then, can possibly be Gramsci’s contribution to the conceptualization of leadership?

First, Gramsci’s thought is intimately concerned with clarifying what leadership was supposed to mean and how it should relate to a radical transformation of society through collective action. Gramsci was acutely aware of the organizing capacities of single individuals, in his terms, “intellectuals.” It was this particular type of agent, for Gramsci, that reconciled state and society and determined the culture within which class power operated.
Second, any discussion of Gramsci can hardly fail to focus on the curious academic success his thought has had throughout the world. It is this success that somehow makes Gramsci a major post-war phenomenon, though he died in 1937 after more than ten years in a Fascist jail. Gramsci’s life as an active socialist militant and as a serious political theorist has been strangely divided—his own practice on the “outside” (before prison and prior to our present context) and his theory on the “inside” (of his prison and in the form of texts within our present context)—leaving an ambiguous testament.

In this article I outline Gramsci’s contribution to the notions of “leadership” and “intellectuals.” I discuss the practice of interpreting the past, a perspective that Gramsci incorporated into his strategy, as itself a political activity. I then turn briefly to the matter of interpreting Gramsci himself—an activity with a history of over half a century. I point out that biographers have a role to play in constructing leaders, but that when they do this, their limitations, especially with respect to political theory, become evident. Gramsci’s writings, I suggest, articulate important insights that political biographers should consider.

INTELLECTUALS AND IDEOLOGY

From his earliest contributions to political journalism, right through to his final reflections (1929-1935) in jail, Gramsci theorized the legitimate terms of reference required to understand the organization and active participation of political agents. His early writings saw the problem of agency in terms that were idealistic, but nevertheless realistic and perceptive. In 1916, as a socialist revolutionary desperately trying to combat the empty rhetoric and parliamentary inertia of the Italian Socialist Party, he wrote:

Culture... is organization, discipline of one’s inner self, a coming to terms with one’s own personality; it is the attainment of a higher awareness, with the aid of which one succeeds in understanding one’s own historical value, one’s own function in life, one’s own rights and obligations.¹

In this undeveloped narrative Gramsci locates self-awareness, self-discipline and organization as the qualities culture endows in various degrees. It was this conception of culture that was for Gramsci and others utterly absent in post-Risorgimento Italy, where a liberal-democratic state veiled vast economic and
cultural disparities, frequent state repression and political opportu­nism. Thus for Gramsci a mass revolutionary project would have to be a mass educational one, and his journalism between 1916 and 1918, heavily influenced by neo-Hegelian idealism, testifies to his belief that only “intelligent reflection” can “convert the facts of vassalage into the signals of rebellion and social reconstruction.” It is this undetermined will that reflects on lived experience, that discovers through the “intense labour of criticism” the resources that engender social transformation.

Motivation to revolutionary action, then, is secured by mental effort. For Gramsci this meant moral responsibility and intellectual independence. As he put it himself:

To know oneself means to be oneself, to be master of oneself, to distinguish oneself, to free oneself from a state of chaos, to exist as an element of order—but of one’s own order and one’s own discipline in striving for an ideal.

The order and discipline that he sought to encourage amongst the workers of Turin was based on the formation of the collective will—a liberated, homogeneous community transcending economic and cultural fragmentation. It was this collective will that he later attempted to develop on the basis of industrial production during the brief explosion of the factory council movement (1919-20). The failure of that movement and the subsequent rise of Fascism brought home to Gramsci the need to re-theorize not only the tasks of the revolutionary party but also the notion of leadership itself.

Gramsci’s reflections in prison are the work of a political activist recalling the experiences of struggle and defeat in order to reconstruct the political terrain and to reconceptualize political agency. While his earliest writings expressed the self, within the collective act, as prime motivator in attaining goals of “historical value,” Gramsci’s prison writings present the self in a broader setting of political, economic and cultural social relations. It is here that he locates both the structural and ideological features of leadership. “Every social group,” he remarks, “coming into existence on the original terrain of an essential function in the world of economic production, creates together with itself, organically, one or more strata of intellectuals which give it homogeneity and an awareness of its own function.” Though Gramsci is grounding his analysis in terms of economic structure, he is not suggesting a simplified correspondence between the economic and the political. The homogeneity and awareness of a social
group do not arise spontaneously through class position, but must, instead, be negotiated in the disorderly and fragmented environment of political struggle. It is the intellectuals, both as organizers of the productive sphere and as “detached” scholars in the traditional sense, that a political party must attract. For it is the function of those agents to provide an economic class with that broadly cultural yet efficacious permeation of civil society that Gramsci labelled “hegemony” (egemonía). With the conquest of the state in mind, a new collective will must be constructed not only on the basis of a new intellectual and moral order, as his early writings indicated, but also through an appreciation of the manner in which social order is objectively organized and ideologically maintained.

From his own experience of reformism Gramsci was well aware of the important role of political parties in defending the social order. In a note, written in prison, on how to write the history of a political party, he set out these terms:

Will it be a simple narrative of the internal life of a political organization? How it comes into existence, the first groups which constitute it, the ideological controversies through which its program and its conception of the world and of life are formed? In such a case one would merely have a history of certain intellectual groups, or even sometimes the political biography of a single personality. The study would therefore have to have a vaster and more comprehensive framework.  

For Gramsci, the party takes on a role of collective leadership similar to the role of the individual leader outlined in Niccolò Machiavelli’s Prince. So the party must be aware of the complex conditions—”the totality of society and state”—within which it functions. For Gramsci, leadership is exercised over and through the totality of social relationships.

In Gramsci’s time the Italian social structure consisted of both a small but advanced industrial sector and a vast agricultural economy, together with a concentrated working class and a feudal social system. An elitist representative democracy competed for authority with (among other agencies) the Catholic church. So it comes as no surprise that the hegemony Gramsci defined had to be exercised across a range of cultural traditions and social loyalties—in short, a terrain of complex temporal dimensions, spanning the social formations of both the modern and pre-
industrial ages. Thus the function of the intellectual was to mediate the coexisting structures and ideologies of the past and present in order to transcend them and establish a future. It was not the capacity to predict future events that should count in Marxist theory, but rather the very fact that a social group could be convinced that the present could be overcome at all. Ideologically "cemented" consensus over a range of social phenomena became the key to overcoming collective action problems.

In this respect Gramsci identified the present, and the way that it is constructed, as a center of political contestation. In a note "The Study of Philosophy" he remarked:

For a mass of people to be led to think coherently and in the same coherent fashion about the real present world, is a "philosophical" event far more important and "original" than the discovery by some philosophical "genius" of a truth which remains the property of small groups of intellectuals.

Relinquishing crude economic determinism would permit a revolutionary party to infiltrate Italian society more effectively. Gramsci redefined the nature of revolution by arguing that it takes place through systematic self-examination, assessment and criticism, and not through the fulfillment of a predefined goal:

The starting-point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is, and is "knowing thyself" as a product of the historical process to date which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory. The first thing to do is to make such an inventory.

By the time of his imprisonment Gramsci had realized that the uneven course of modern social development provided too many conflicting agendas in society for any one social group to be guaranteed instant political success. As Adam Przeworski puts it: "Social relations are given to a historical subject, individual or collective, as realms of possibilities, as structures of choice." The point is how to influence the choices that individuals and collectives make. That is the task of Gramsci's intellectuals.
What, then, does Gramsci’s discussion of intellectuals have to say for scholars interested in biography? Gramsci stresses the positive political function of popular discourse in forming and displacing mass consciousness. Cultural disunity and political compromise, for example, are the necessary consequences of the fact that “a national-popular literature, narrative and other kinds, has always been lacking in Italy and still is,” as he put it in the Prison Notebooks. A detached and fragmented popular culture can only produce a detached and fragmented politics. Leadership is a cultural and hence political phenomenon, and so a whole range of social practices have implications for it.

Moreover, if public discourse is presumed to be a resource for a social group’s self-awareness and self-organization, then the focus of attention necessarily falls on the disseminators of knowledge, for example, the intellectuals. This suggests that biographers should have a wider field of vision than their usual one of conventional leadership. From factory managers, teachers, lawyers, through to professional philosophers, artists and writers, Gramsci stresses their role as intellectuals, which is not simply to present the “facts” to society—for Gramsci is at pains to underline that this category is non-existent, serving only as a technique for preserving the status quo. Rather, he urges the recognition of the intellectual’s role in the re-presentation of a complex, disorganized world in a simple and organized way—that is, the dissemination of “common-sense.” “Creating a new culture,” he writes, “does not only mean one’s own ‘original’ discoveries.” It also means the diffusion in a critical form of truths already discovered, their ‘socialization’ as it were, and even making them the basis of vital action, an element of co-ordination and intellectual and moral order.” The interventionist role of the party is based on an ideal-type:

... a perfect preparation of the “spontaneous” consent of the masses who must “live” those [party] directives, modifying their own habits, their own will, their own convictions to conform with those directives and with the objectives which they propose to achieve.12

Thus the most effective leadership arises from working in close proximity to social experience.

Following Benedetto Croce’s view of philosophy as a “civil religion,” Gramsci defined it as a blanket term, covering the
musings of “high” intellectuals as well as everyday outlooks and explanations of social phenomena. It could never be based on something outside the boundaries of human experience. Thus he pointed out in his *Prison Notebooks*: “One’s conception of the world is a response to certain specific problems posed by reality, which are quite specific and ‘original’ in their immediate relevance.”¹³ Importantly, biography is also an activity that seeks to unify, within a text, the various components of an individual’s life experience. These components are re-presented, according to the author’s intentions, in a manner that identifies and interprets the distinguishing features of an individual life.

The biographical text can also be seen as one way of intervening in the social milieu in order to frame experience in some coherent fashion. The intellectual, as the text creator *par excellence*, does not work on some subject in a vacuum. Rather, the text intervenes in a pre-existent complexity of “knowledges.” For Gramsci the most successful philosophy would be one which could consistently articulate real practical concerns and thus contribute to the activities of a particular group. This made Gramsci sensitive to the ideological encoding of narratives, world-views and philosophies.¹⁴ It is here that biography—which does not present facts as such, but reconstructs a life in publicly accessible form—becomes relevant.

Gramsci, of course, does not talk about biography directly. He does not construct a substantial agenda for theorizing political biography, but instead provides conceptual space in which a narrator may find useful interconnections and broader boundaries. Within those boundaries a biographer ought to reflect upon the activity of narrative construction. Thus it is the politics of biography into which Gramsci offers some insight. Whatever a biographer—or any intellectual in the Gramscian sense—may consciously believe he or she is doing, how and for whom, the fact that knowledge is being formed, communicated and organized obliges the biographer to participate in the creation or affirmation of “common-sense”¹⁵—and even hegemony. This includes the elaboration of conceptions of the world which serve to maximize or minimize an audience’s critical capacity. The intellectual is situated to provide or refuse access to particular ways of interpreting and participating in the social world. Leadership, of course, is not just about leaders; it also concerns “the led.” By making politics the site for hegemonic struggle Gramsci enlarges our conception of leadership to cover a whole range of social functions. Leadership is fragmented and multifaceted, the single intellectual being a mechanism through which social phenomena are transformed into meaningful events.¹⁶
One of these events may well be the publication and popular reception of a biography. It is interesting to note that in two recent biographies of Mikhail Gorbachev, published in the mid 1980's, the introductory remarks present the subject as a shining light in the darkness of Communist Party history. Gorbachev makes his appearance as a beacon for the new political generation in a party structure dominated by the old and slow. Whatever the achievements of Gorbachev, his biographers had constructed an agenda through which to assess Soviet development. According to this agenda he alone had the capacity to construct a more innovative leadership given the politics of party, government and nation that revolved around him.

Further afield from politics, it is interesting to recall Albert Goldman's biography The Lives of John Lennon. Goldman's purpose was to reconstruct (in fact destruct) the leadership role that Lennon has played in popular culture by unmasking the private person and revealing his involvement in sexual promiscuity and violence. Goldman's book exemplifies the interventionist role of the biographer as intellectual in working at the level of common sense, as Gramsci defined it (although Goldman's was arguably more common than sense!).

RECOVERING GRAMSCI

Having explored Gramsci's discussion of leadership in relation to political biography, I would now like to open up some aspects of the biographical recovery of Gramsci himself as a political theorist and leader. As with other Marxists, his recovery has become intimately connected with his political thought, and is part and parcel of establishing his intellectual legacy.

Gramsci's prison writings became publicly available only after the Second World War, and then they appeared in a thematic format, a grouping together of related paragraphs and essays collected from the thirty-three notebooks smuggled out of Italy after his death. What was presented to the Italian public in the post-war years, therefore, was a politically abstract and theoretically ambiguous collection. In a sense Gramsci's was a divided praxis. He entered prison a defiant political activist, but "emerged" as a posthumous Marxist theoretician. Even today it is still unclear whether Gramsci should be regarded as essentially a political leader—implying an emphasis on his practical activity outside of jail—or as a philosopher—implying that his contribution was largely that of conceptualizing practice.

This difficulty arises because Gramsci had no political practice after his incarceration against which to test and so affirm
or revise his prison writings. The *Prison Notebooks* by no means constitute a classic text in any conventional use of the term.\textsuperscript{22} We are in fact given little indication as to how exactly Gramsci would have preferred his work to have been read (if at all), how much he felt it reflected or reworked his past experience, or what immediate political purpose it could have been expected to serve outside of jail. Aside from one equivocal remark, that he regarded his work as something “for eternity” (für ewig—a phrase he ascribed to Goethe), we are left very much to decide for ourselves. And that, indeed, is precisely what his first interpreters did.

It was Palmiro Togliatti, Gramsci’s pre-prison comrade, who pieced together his colleague’s theory. This he did in a number of essays, interviews and memoirs, begun immediately after Gramsci’s death.\textsuperscript{23} These served as the foundation for a leading interpretive tradition.\textsuperscript{24} Having known Gramsci in his days as a political activist, Togliatti portrayed his prison existence as largely a re-affirmation of his party political activities. Moreover, Togliatti was intent on reconciling Gramsci’s theory not only with his own earlier practice, but also with that of the then-dominant Stalinist orthodoxy (despite considerable chronological and textual evidence suggesting otherwise). Gramsci’s writings thus became subordinate to the political needs of the Italian Communist Party in the post-war period, especially with regard to the strategy of constructing broad alliances.\textsuperscript{25} His life and work were portrayed as essentially an extension of Leninist theory and practice; his life was a homogeneous “whole”; his death was a martyrdom to international class struggle. Togliatti stressed Gramsci’s loyalty to the Communist Party and resisted investigating the possibility that Gramsci had theorized a novel approach to Italian socialist theory beyond the framework provided by Lenin and Stalin.\textsuperscript{26} Gramsci was a great leader, not because he said anything new as such, but because he did his duty for Communism.

Togliatti’s position was clearly designed to satisfy political pressures from the then-ruling Soviet leadership. It is not surprising that when the bastions of Soviet orthodoxy were finally removed, Togliatti revised his view. This revision, which represented Gramsci as a peculiarly Italian theorist, and not just a politician, opened up a new stage in Gramsci studies. If Gramsci’s intellectual formation could be assessed, then his precise contribution as a Marxist leader could also be redefined.

Gramsci’s theoretical work was presented in the early 1950s as a scholarly, personal and highly individual approach to specific political problems. This laid the groundwork for research into the theoretical positions that Gramsci actually held with
respect to Marx and Lenin, as well as with his idealist mentor Croce. But as more information became available concerning Gramsci’s early political organizing and later prison activities, it emerged that he was never entirely disengaged from politics.

At the same time, though, it did not become easier to establish any clear lines of continuity in Gramsci’s thought. There was still the problem of his Prison Notebooks, which were written in a markedly different style than his earlier polemical essays and could therefore promote a number of different political positions. Hence Gramsci has been identified with both revisionism and totalitarianism. Moreover, the political implications of Gramsci’s intra-party activity were not clear. He seems to have adhered to a strict Leninist scheme of party organization while still battling to retain political independence. Research into Gramsci’s pre-prison activities, his educational work during the war, and his later disagreements with Amadeo Bordiga’s leadership of the Italian Communist Party shows that he occupied critical, autonomous and minority positions with regard to prevailing orthodoxies. Biographical investigation, in this case, works against the leadership role that Togliatti’s interpretation posthumously conferred.

As Western European Marxists set about translating Gramsci and incorporating him into the contemporary political context, his early activities in the Italian Socialist and Communist Parties appeared increasingly irrelevant to the formation of a sustainable and popular Marxist critique of contemporary capitalism—the agenda had moved on. It has been noted that the type of Marxist project that Gramsci adhered to in the 1920s is no longer of much interest or use to socialists. Instead, there has been widespread concern to elaborate a Marxist critique based on the methods of the Prison Notebooks while looking to contemporary politics to provide substance and direction for action. From Eurocommunism to post-Marxism, Gramsci’s thought has transcended both its narrow, orthodox Marxist interpretation and its initial biographical recovery. Yet while the theoretical debate continues, Gramsci’s biographical relevance now appears uncertain.

As the perception of Gramsci’s theoretical relevance changes, so too does the relevance of the circumstances of his life. For example, Alistair Davidson’s Antonio Gramsci: Towards an Intellectual Biography distances Gramsci from the Togliattian interpretation by, for example, updating and clarifying (according to recent evidence) the positions that he took on the role of the party and on Bordiga’s leadership in the 1921-6 period. Thus Davidson aims to clothe “with substance the abstract categories of Gramsci’s ‘Croceanism’, Gramsci’s ‘Leninism’ and Gramsci’s
‘National-popularism,’ so that the reader can see how each developed from earlier positions into a particular view when he wrote his [prison] notes. In addition we are offered a substantial analysis of Gramsci’s Sardinian origins, through which Davidson intends to trace “the growth of an outlook.” The combination of a humanist perspective with the careful piecing together of Gramsci’s various views provides us with a useful account of his political maneuvers.

However, while Davidson’s biography succeeds in reconstructing the immediate context of Gramsci’s political and intellectual life—and in doing so he brings Gramsci into the limelight as an independent thinker—this is done at the expense of other biographical goals. Davidson appears to judge Gramsci’s changing political activities in a somewhat restricted light. Gramsci’s development through educational and cultural interests to an engagement with the factory council movement is seen by Davidson as representing a significant break in his subject’s intellectual formation. The early educational and cultural interests are described as “not a creative activity which was sufficiently real in the Marxist sense.” The neo-Hegelian framework that Gramsci absorbed in his early years is termed “intellectual paraphernalia,” “futile” without any real “practical” goal. Such dismissive remarks reveal Davidson’s own desire to present Gramsci as a Marxist revolutionary by means of a limply defined distinction between theory and practice. Such a judgement may help to clarify Gramsci’s distinctive revolutionary project (based within the factory councils), but Davidson fails to look into a broader theoretical context and thus does not suggest a continuity between Gramsci’s idealist outlook and his factory council activity. A further consequence is that the Prison Notebooks are narrowly identified with a political program concerning the revolutionary party and its strategy. Thus the agenda of one biographer cannot exhaust the range of biographical perspectives nor disguise the interpretive character of this exercise. Davidson succeeds in freeing Gramsci from one interpretive tradition by placing him within another.

It is interesting to note that while Davidson’s biography is vigorous in its identification of Gramsci with his political activities, the biography by Giuseppe Fiori, Antonio Gramsci: Life of a Revolutionary, remains the most accessible. In an affectionate, personal biography, Fiori manages, by avoiding close analysis of Gramsci’s thought, to keep open any final assessment of his achievements. This suggests the tentative way that conventional biography conveys political theory. Textual interpretation is in fact a continuing exercise that supersedes the presumed perma-
nence of the biographical record. Conventional biography is one way of embodying such interpretations by locating the "meaning" of texts in the available data of the subject's life experiences. In that way leadership qualities may be enhanced, subverted, manipulated or destroyed, but always according to the current agenda of the biographer.

CONCLUSION

For political biography to succeed, we need a coherent understanding of the biographer's own assumptions and presuppositions. This should make distinct the biographer's view of the present political environment and therefore the criteria by which the reader is advised to judge the subject's life. The biographer's role is that of an intellectual leader, as Gramsci termed it, and he or she is thus a type of leader in politics.

If biography is intended to address as broad a readership as possible, then it should be accepted that the readership may not share all the presuppositions of the author. Setting an agenda would make clear the intended scope of the biographical narrative. This would illuminate the intentions of the author, which the reader may not have known, but would be capable of judging. If, as in the case of Gramsci, the commentary is often within the terminology of Marxist theory, then the audience is immediately narrowed down to those with prior knowledge of this area, and the readership is, effectively, a closed shop.

A Gramscian approach to political biography might well lead to an assessment of the notion of leadership. The biographical subject does not simply intervene in a conventional political context but is also active in a social world beyond what is traditionally regarded as politics. For Gramsci this includes culture, the arts, and language. While it is useful to document the precise political positions of the biographical subject, it tends substantially to de-politicize other events. Davidson takes Gramsci's leadership qualities to be inherent in his role as party activist, while his experience before he became active in socialist politics is taken to be a mere prelude to his more conventional activity as a party organizer, and his time in prison is largely undiscussed. The conventional concept of leadership is not challenged. Gramsci, as I have explained, suggested otherwise, and the lesson applies as much to biographers as to politicians. Biography and leadership are intimately related; indeed, in the case of many "world leaders," almost one and the same. These
leaders readily find biographers who suit their own interests. Gramscian biographers would be far less circumscribed and much more challenging to the political powers that be.

NOTES
6 Hence Gramsci’s frequent reference to Marx’s remark in his *Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* that “No social order is ever destroyed before all the productive forces for which it is sufficient have been developed.” Karl Marx, *Early Writings*, trans. Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), p. 5.
7 Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, p. 325.
12 Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, p. 266.
15 Gramsci explicitly rules out the precise technical function of intellectuals in defining their leadership role: “The most widespread error of method seems to me that of having looked for this criterion of distinction [of intellectuals] in the intrinsic nature of intellectual activities, rather than in the ensemble of the system of relations in which these activities (and therefore the intellectual groups that personify them) have their place within the general complex of social relations.” *Prison Notebooks*, p. 8.
Recent developments in the Balkans and in the (former) Soviet Union reveal how tentative such narratives can be.


See Valentino Gerratana’s introduction to Gramsci’s *Quaderni del carcere*, vol. 1 (Turin: Einaudi, 1975), pp. xi-xlili.

These came out as 6 volumes of the collection of 12 in the *Opere di Antonio Gramsci* (Turin: Einaudi, 1947-72). It is on this reordering of the original texts that the English Selections are based.


For the discussion on which this section of my article is based, see Alistair Davidson, “The Varying Seasons of Gramscian Studies,” *Political Studies*, vol. 20 (1972), pp. 448-61.


With regard to Gramsci’s changing reception in Britain, see David Forgacs, “Gramsci and Marxism in Britain,” *New Left Review*, no. 176 (1989), pp. 70-88.

See the articles collected in “Il Contemporaneo,” *Rinascita*, 28 February 1987, pp. 15-34.


See Davidson’s remark: “I hope that this account of Gramsci’s life not only does justice to a great man, but by throwing attention on the inherent nobility of his desire to ‘struggle and overcome’ in various ways, some more successful than others, will direct attention to the centrality in Marxism of the III Thesis on Feuerbach.” *Antonio Gramsci*, pp. xv-xvi. As I point out, this Marxist-humanist principle seems to preclude other ways of discussing Gramsci’s life.


