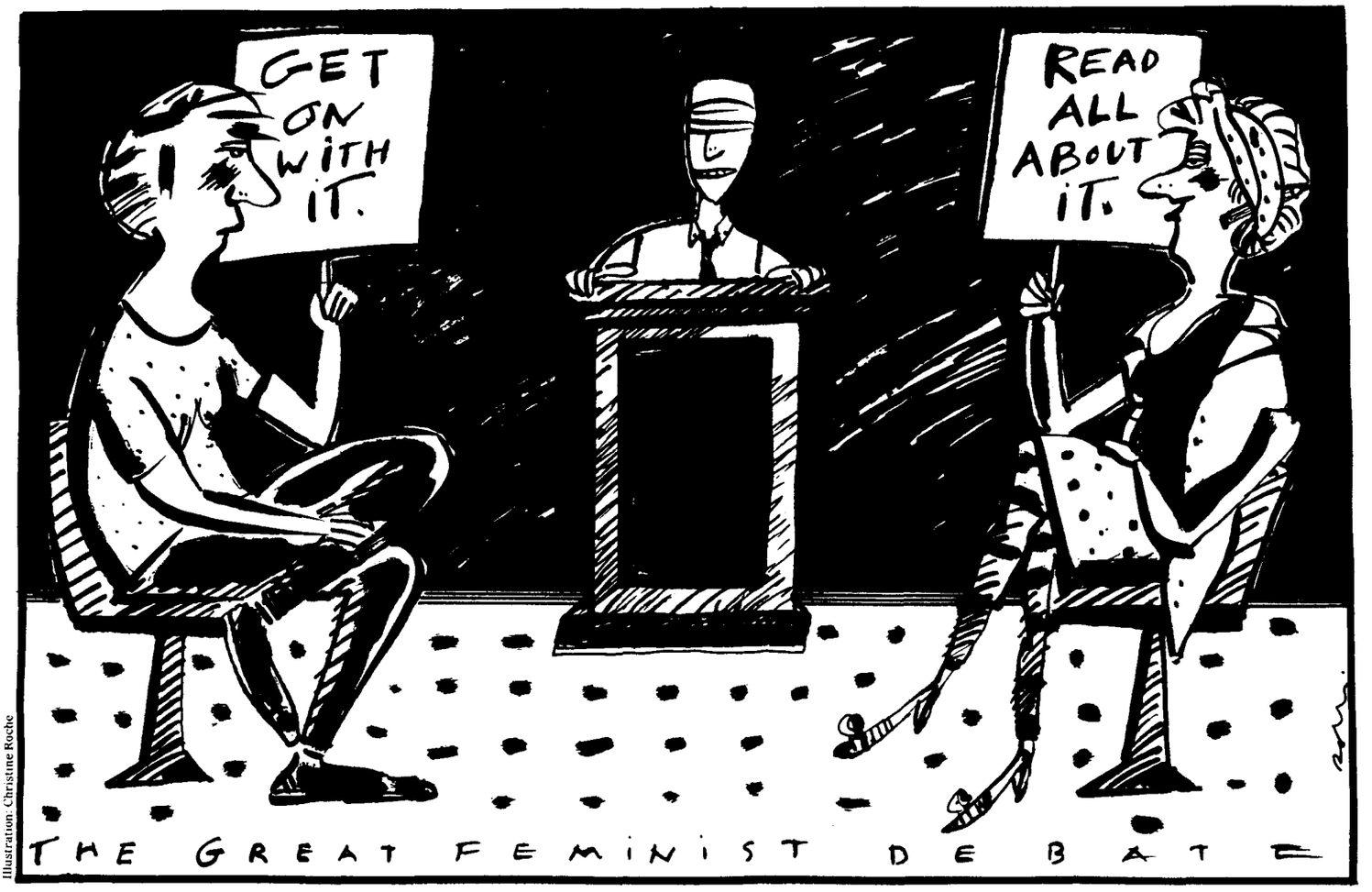

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Sisters And Slogans

Whatever happened to socialist feminism? **Melissa Benn** argues that it hasn't yet clocked the fact that feminism in the 80s is rather different from feminism in the 70s

Two books have recently been published by well-known socialist feminists: Lynne Segal's *Is the Future Female?: Troubled Thoughts on Contemporary Feminism*, and Anne Phillips' *Divided Loyalties: Dilemmas of Sex and Class*. Although the books, and particularly Lynne Segal's, have rightly attracted a lot of interest – extracts have appeared in *Spare Rib*, the *New Statesman* and *New Socialist* – there has been little sense of a *debate* around the issues raised in the books, and particularly the troubled question: what has happened to socialist feminism in the 1980s? Reviews have mostly been calm and descriptive, written in the same sad but wise tone of the books themselves.

What or where *is* socialist feminism in 1987? The difficulty of answering that question reflects the fragmentation of 1980s feminist politics as a whole. Definitions of a 'socialist feminist' – any woman who is active in, or sympathetic to, socialist or left/radical politics who also holds to a distinct feminist position – are elusive in their non-specificity. A socialist feminist could be in any one of a hundred political places. She might be active in the local ward or women's section of the Labour Party, or branch of the Communist Party; she might be active in an anti-deportation campaign; she might be a shop steward in a trade union; she might be in a Greenham group or camping outside the gates of the base; she might be no more than a woman who reads and thinks a lot . . .

This dispersal of socialist feminism marks the 1980s out as a very different time from the 1970s. Then, of course, women's liberation as a whole was different. It was more buoyant in the sense of being on an ideological offensive *vis-à-vis* society as a whole and it was more unified in the sense that the movement held national conferences which continued up to 1978, and socialist feminism had a coherent identity within that movement. Socialist feminists themselves met nationally up until 1980.

Two key changes have happened since then. The first is that socialist feminism is now more present within the 'socialist' part of its own politics than it was in the 1970s. Women in trade unions, political parties, single issue campaigns and academia are burrowing away to produce feminist change in whatever way they can in these areas. And are doing good things, undoubtedly. But the second – almost not necessarily logical – aspect of the change in the 1980s is that the 'feminist' aspect of socialist feminism has loitered. Most socialist feminists no longer have an active involvement in the women's movement. Worse, there is even a sense among some of them that the women's movement itself has to be left behind, that it belongs to the politics of another decade.

As a result of all this, much socialist feminism has become privatised, over-academic and pessimistic. And as a

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current of thinking, it is often out of touch, not much interested in, or even impatient with feminist, politics of the 1980s.

Let me try and say what I mean in more detail, in reference to three areas: discussions on sexuality within feminism; the relationship between different tendencies within feminism; and women's new involvement in mass politics – particularly the Labour Party – in the 1980s.

The first thing to say about sexuality is that most heterosexual socialist feminists simply don't talk about it any more. If the debate about sexuality has taken place anywhere in the 1980s it has taken place within lesbian feminism. It is almost as if the subject of sexuality has returned to a pre-1970 situation for women on the Left: the unspeakable clothed as the irrelevant, the disruptive dismissed as the merely embarrassing. Yet it is not as simple as that, of course, because socialist feminists have been influenced by feminist debates on sexuality and, as I said above, many have imported them into particular political, campaign or theoretical areas. Two random examples are the important work being done to combat sexual harassment at work, and the development of ideas on the psychology of women in the 1980s.

Yet there is no sense of an ongoing debate about sexuality among heterosexual socialist feminists now. To her credit Lynne Segal tackles the subject at length in her book – although there are ways in which I think she, too, refers more to the past than the present.

For instance: in the 'Sex and Violence' chapter, she talks a lot about a debate that took place at the end of the 1970s – the famous 'political lesbian' argument when a group of revolutionary feminists (women who argue that male sexual power is central to male power in general) argued that to be politically 'correct' women should not only refuse to sleep with men: they should also make a political choice *for* women. This position provoked huge opposition from many feminists but was still, as Lynne Segal points out, responsible for much heterosexual defensiveness at the time.

But that was 1980. Where I would disagree with Lynne Segal is when she implies that this anti-heterosexual morality still heavily influences feminism now. What she neglects is that the revolutionary feminist position of 1979/80 was defeated within the women's liberation movement, and that new factors are shaping a feminist approach to sexuality that mark the 1980s out as a very different period from the clashes of the 'political lesbian' days.

There is now, I think, a greater acceptance of diverse sexual practice among feminists – and among women in general. On the one hand, precisely because of the defeat of a revolutionary feminist 'morality' on heterosexuality in the late 1970s, few women are defensive about being heterosexual any more. I remember going to a Communist University of London workshop on 'sexual politics' in the early 1980s and there being a huge argument about women who slept with men. There were tears and shouting: a group of us decided to hold a separate meeting out in the corridor because it was so unbearable. Compare this to last year's 'Women Alive' event, where a friend of mine who went to the sexuality workshop told me that, 'It was all a bit bland really. An "Anything Goes" attitude'.

This may seem like a change confined to a few hundred London feminists but it goes much wider than that. Women in general don't feel they have to explain and justify their sexual choice to anybody so much any more. They are far less in awe of men's sexual power then they were (while being more aware of the potentially coercive and violent nature of male sexuality). And I sense that to young women in particular, men simply don't matter as much as they once might have done. They are there: they are not there. So what?

On the other hand, the growth of a women's culture in the last 17 years or so has had another effect. Numerous women-only spaces – from bars, to dance spaces, to bookshops, to peace camps, to reading and study groups – have been created and continue to be created. In these, women have come to appreciate and enjoy the sexual possibilities of one another. Lesbianism is simply not the 'other' to young feminists that it was to women coming to feminist politics in the early 1970s. Young feminists now have a sexual ease about other women, even if they are not in lesbian relationships themselves.

There has, too, been a growth in the refusal of feminism to accept any idea of a 'correct' or 'incorrect' kind of sexual practice, and a new advocacy of women's sexual power. This question was most recently and publicly fought out in a debate over sado-masochism at the London Lesbian and Gay Centre in 1985. It was a debate perhaps incomprehensible to outsiders because the pro-SM position seemed to be about defending the right of women to inflict pain, or have pain inflicted, on each other. Some of the women who advocated SM, particularly younger women, wore threatening clothes and symbols that offended many people. However, despite its complexities, what the argument was really about was a rejection by some lesbian feminists of a prescriptive public morality about sex.

To suggest that there is a new plurality of sexual practice among women is not to say that this amounts to a bland bisexuality among women. These changes take place within a particular context: the growing recognition by feminists over the last decade of what it means to be a lesbian out there in the world. There is now far more recognition than there was in the 1970s that to choose to be a lesbian is not to make a purely private choice. It is a choice that carries with it all kinds of difficulties and dangers in the world (as well as pleasures!). Thus, feminists now see that lesbianism has to be publicly defended if it is to be privately enjoyed. And, of course, lesbianism does have a more public identity than it did 10 or 15 years ago, particularly in those metropolitan areas where local authorities, like the now abolished GLC, have funded and supported the creation of gay and lesbian projects, like the London Lesbian and Gay Centre itself.

The second area where I would be critical of socialist feminists is in their approach to the development of women's politics in the 1980s.

In the 1970s feminist politics was characterised by a polarity between two politics: a 'radical' and a 'socialist' feminism. Broadly, radical feminism took the antagonism betweem the sexes to be the prime antagonism in society, while socialist feminists attempted to analyse the relationship between two systems of domination: capitalism and patriarchy. If there was not always hostility between the two camps – and there was a lot of that – there was a clear sense of division. These were irreconcilable politics.

Lynne Segal perpetuates this polarity in her book where she is, throughout, pursuing and then demolishing the image and the arguments of the Bad Radical Feminist (as exemplified in the works of Mary Daly and Dale Spender). She may well be right in her criticism of the work of these women – and particularly the idea that women have some sort of essentially 'superior' nature to men. But in concentrating on such ideas, she is both simplifying and ignoring the much more complex development there has been in feminist politics, and the relationship between the different strands.

How have feminist politics developed in the 1980s? Clearly, there has been a bleeding of the boundaries between radical and socialist feminism to the point where they often erode into non-significance. Many socialist feminists have been profoundly influenced by radical feminism: for example, the recognition that masculinity *per se* is a problem. Plus, many socialist feminists have been influenced by and involved in projects initiated by radical feminists. I am thinking here of work done to combat male violence – rape crisis centres, women's aid refuges and so on – many of which were initiated by radical and revolutionary feminists in the 1970s. It was radical feminism – whatever the dubious nature of much of its analysis of the causes of male violence – which actually did something.

On the other hand, radical feminists have themselves been challenged by changes within the women's movement. Following debates at the end of the decade (debates both Anne Phillips and

'Most socialist feminists no longer have an active involvement in the women's movement'

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Lynne Segal discuss) women of all politics have taken on a new sensitivity to, and therefore language of, class. Just as crucially, white women of all politics have been knocked back and changed by the criticisms of black women who have labelled so much of 1970s feminism as white and euro-centric.

'The first thing to say about sexuality is that most heterosexual socialist feminists don't talk about it any more'

All this has contributed to the key development in the 1980s of the idea of *difference* among women. This has been a contradictory development: both important and dangerous. What was, and still is, important about it is that it gives credence to every woman's personal biography; makes legitimate individual women's experience – particularly those without the power to articulate and express that experience. This was something the women's movement in the 1970s patently failed to do. In a series of challenges to the supposed unity of the political category 'woman', working class women, lesbian women and black women have all argued that they have different histories – economic, social and political – and therefore different political priorities which feminism must take account of, if it is to shape a proper politics.

But this process of defining difference within feminism has stopped at a mid-way point between the naming of experience and the creation of a politics. Instead of there being a network of alliances built up on a real recognition of women's different histories, there has instead been the development of a quite hidden politics of 'identity' within the women's movement. 'Who' you are has become a question of more moral and political significance than what your politics might be. Thus, some women have claimed a particular priority within a hierarchy within feminism on the basis of their *being* something rather than doing the more difficult thing, which is to acknowledge both the weight of your own experience while also recognising the diversity of other women's. That is, to connect up to others, through alliance.

Many socialist feminists have been rightly critical of this: but don't we also have a responsibility to challenge those who perpetuate this bad politics within the women's movement rather than to sneer at them from the outside? Those socialist feminists who have been involved in women's politics – I am thinking here of the SM debate at the LLGC – have been crucial in public arguments against this primacy of 'identity' politics over ideas of solidarity and alliance. But the vast majority of socialist feminists have been completely absent from such discussion.

One of the reasons socialist feminists have not been involved in feminist politics is because of their concentration in the Left. This is the third area I want to talk about: women's 'new' involvement in left politics, and particularly the Labour Party.

Much 1970s socialist feminism was about being outside the state or any institutions of power: it was, too, about living the identity of an outsider: radical and romantic. By the end of the 1970s, that was changing. Feminists began moving into the Labour Party where the democratic Bennite Left looked in the ascendant. Women thought they could have more power and influence in the party and it seemed also the only way to effectively challenge Thatcherism.

But women's entrance into the Labour Party has thrown up new problems and new possibilities which need some new thinking. If the Labour Party is anything it is the world of reform: a world of resolutions and plottings, topplings and totting ups. Women who had never been involved in any kind of organised left politics before found – and still find – themselves having to deal with ward meetings, general management committees, local government committees, all the structures and acronyms that saturate Labour politics.

Have some feminists in the Labour Party come to understand and use these structures too well? It is easy to understand why, if they have. There is nothing more exciting than learning the rules of a previously mystifying game and then to play it better than the people who taught you how. But in playing that game – in getting 'your' person elected chair of the GMC – it is easy to forget what feminists are doing in the party in the first place. That is, that they are there to get a feminist argument across, particularly to other women: inside the party and out.

Yet that argument is not being made effectively at the moment. Groups like the Women's Action Committee are exhausted by internal divisions and the inherent difficulty of firing women's enthusiasm for purely constitutional reforms, however crucial those reforms are. Local women's sections are as often as not divided by across-the-left divisions as they are united by a sense of a women's politics. The exception to this is when women are involved in local authority women's committees where party in-fighting often gives way to open and public discussion between Labour women and women in the community and a sense of a common women's agenda.

There are so many reasons for trying to get that feminist argument across at this moment. This is a time of possibility for women in the party. Feminism is recognised as an important strand of thinking by all sections of the Left. Women are moving into positions of power and influence unthinkable in the 1970s. We now have many women leaders, councillors and officers in Labour local authorities. More women are standing for national office. And we are seeing plans for a Ministry of Women develop which, if ever implemented, would bring enormous changes both to the public influence of feminism, and its own politics.

But if a real sense of a women's agenda within the Labour Party *is* to be constructed then women in the party need to be in touch with, and accountable to, some kind of feminist politics. Lynne Segal argues there should be a return to the principle of autonomy for women on the Left – the gathering of socialist women for separate discussion. I agree with her: 'autonomy' remains the single most important concept to come out of 1970s feminism. It is one we should retain – although it is hard to suggest the exact form any such autonomous gathering should take, and how it could realistically reflect the relations of women on the Left in what are depressingly sectarian times.

Socialist feminists within the Left, and within Labour in particular, need to keep talking about the difficult issues that face us. For instance, there are genuine problems about women having and deploying power at a local or a national level. We need it too to keep a sense of personal politics within a Labour Party feminism – the dangers of not doing so were most recently shown in the lack of a concerted Labour Party feminist response to Patricia Hewitt's comments on the gay and lesbian dimension to the Greenwich by-election, in which she publicly declared the issue to be a vote loser, a politics-by-opinion-poll approach that most feminists in the party would find untenable.

In their books, both Anne Phillips and Lynne Segal seem very pessimistic about the future of feminism and the Left. But what strikes me is their failure to see the very successes that 'their' feminism has produced: the ways in which the politics of the 1970s and beyond has changed women's way of perceiving themselves for ever. The language of feminism has become deeply embedded in our culture – albeit in often individualistic ways. Feminist ways of talking about women have changed too. There has been some transformation of the notion of woman as 'object' (of oppression/discrimination) to something more complex, to ideas of woman as subject – an active agent of change and holder of power.

This is all a bit paradoxical considering the background against which a lot of younger women have come to life and politics in the 1980s. These women have come well-grounded in a feeling of perpetual and unbreakable outsiderness: joblessness, Thatcherism, the threat of nuclear war – not to mention the decline of a national women's liberation movement and the bitternesses and break up of the Left in recent years. It is a background of utter pessimism, yet somehow younger women are more confident than those of an older generation. Well, they are bolshier. They want a lot from life: to have some kind of satisfying work, to have good relationships and to have children, if they want them. And they expect to get it. ●

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Marxism Today

presents

GRAMSCI 87

Saturday April 11th 10-6pm
in London Union, Malet Street, London WC1

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Fifty years ago this month Antonio Gramsci died after spending many years incarcerated in Mussolini's jails. But like a composer whose major symphonies are only discovered many years after his death, so it took many decades before most of the world, especially outside Italy, discovered Gramsci's writings.

It was not until the early 70s that Gramsci's impact became anything like widespread on the British Left when a substantial English version of the *Prison Notebooks* became available for the first time. The effect then was profound. Suddenly a whole new world was opened up. Gramsci made sense of Western societies in a quite new way. Over-dependence on coercive notions of the state and such ideas as 'false consciousness' gave way to a new subtlety and complexity. British marxism had always been over-dependent on the Russian experience – historically and theoretically. Gramsci's concepts of hegemony, civil society and much else now enabled completely new insights. He rapidly became seen as *the* theorist of revolution in Western Europe.

In the 70s a generation of marxists was influenced by Gramsci. He was the key figure. By the late 70s the debates of that period were drawing to a close, not least as new political realities began to assert themselves; the swing to the right was there for all to see. Yet those debates – and, above all, Gramsci's influence – were to have an enormous impact on the political analyses of the 80s. To put it bluntly, without Gramsci, our understanding of Thatcherism would be impoverished. And without doubt, Gramsci has been the most important single theoretical influence on *Marxism Today* over the last decade.

On April 11, *Marxism Today* is organising a one-day conference to mark the 50th anniversary of Gramsci's death. A powerful array of speakers will help us assess the significance of Gramsci's ideas, introduce those ideas to a new generation, and discuss their relevance for Britain today. ● ***Martin Jacques***

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GRAMSCI 87

PROGRAMME

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Gramsci and the Marxist Tradition (Manning Hall)

ERIC HOBSBAWM outlines Gramsci's contribution to Marxism.

11.45-1.15pm

Lenin vs Gramsci (Room 3A)

QUINTIN HOARE, ROGER SIMON and GAVIN KITCHEN debate the question 'did Gramsci simply develop Lenin's ideas or break with them?'

Gramsci and the National (Room 3B)

Reviewing the concept of the 'national-popular'; speakers will include JUDE BLOOMFIELD, PAUL GILROY and ANTHONY BARNETT.

Is a 'Gramscian Feminism' possible? (Room 3C)

Finding the answers will be ANNE SHOWSTACK SASSOON and MICHELE BARRETT.

Bertolucci's 1900 – Part One (Manning Hall)

2.30-4pm

Why did Eurocommunism fail? (Room 3A)

An international exchange between JON BLOOMFIELD and DONALD SASSOON with guest speakers from the French and Italian Communist parties.

Gramsci, the Left and the Popular (Room 3B)

Revealing the links between Gramsci's cultural writings and today's 'designer-socialism' debate will be KATHY MYERS, STUART COSGROVE and ROS BRUNT.

Bertolucci's 1900 – Part Two (Manning Hall)

2.30-4pm

Labour, the State, Civil Society (Room 3D)

A discussion between BEATRIX CAMPBELL and PETER HAIN on the relationships between the Labour Party, autonomous movements and local councils.

Gramsci and the British Marxist Tradition (Room 3C)

Discussing the nature of Gramsci's impact on the British left will be GREGOR McLENNAN, ROSALIND DELMAR, DAVID FORGACS and BILL SCHWARZ.

4.15-5.30pm

'Occupations' (Room 3D)

A drama workshop based on Trevor Griffiths' dramatisation of the early life of Gramsci.

Bertolucci's Cinema (Room 3A)

A chance to discuss '1900' in the context of both Bertolucci's work and Italian political history.

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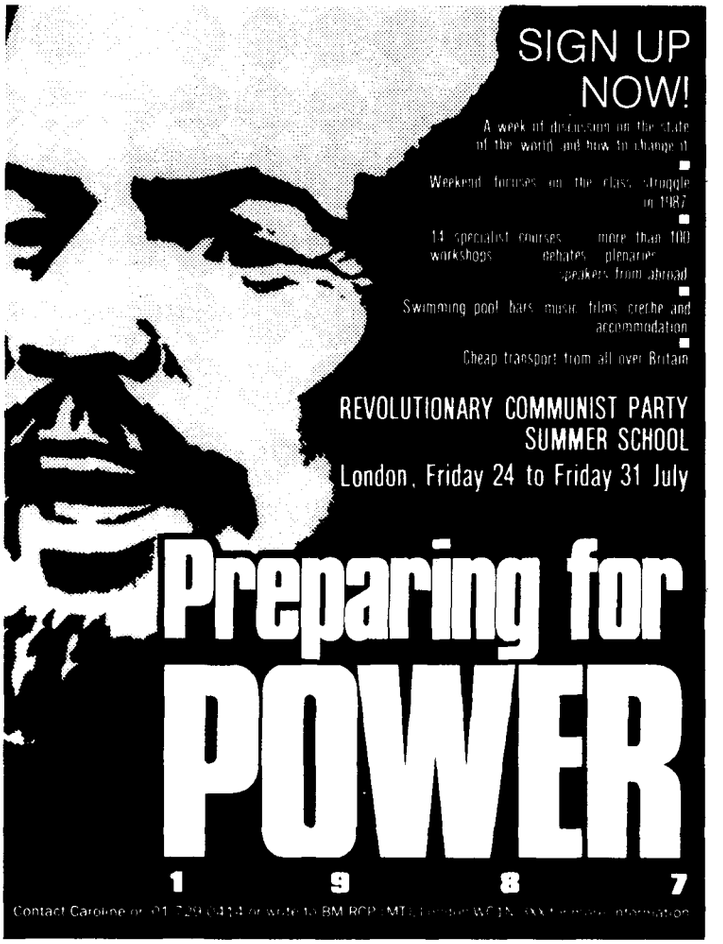

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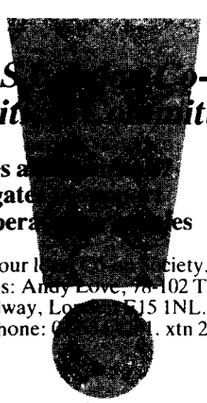

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Abel Lagos

Gramsci by Renzo Galeotti. Paintings on view at Gramsci 87

Gramsci: a glossary of revolution

GRAMSCI HAS become widely known for his concept of hegemony and this is undoubtedly the cornerstone in his political thought and his major contribution to marxist theory. But it cannot be fully grasped without taking into account his other concepts, and it may be helpful to begin with one of these, **civil society,** which I believe has not yet received the attention on the Left that it deserves.

Gramsci distinguished between the public institutions comprising the state, and all the private, voluntary relations that people enter into that are outside the sphere of the state. These voluntary relations are embodied in a wide variety of organisations and activities such as trade unions, political parties, churches, and community, cultural and charitable organisations. All these diverse voluntary activities make up civil society; they belong to the domain of society rather than to the state. Thus civil society consists of a network of social relations distinct from the economic structure as well as from the state. It is particularly important to note that it encompasses all cultural and leisure activities.

Gramsci argued that a ruling class dominates other classes by a combination of force and consent. Force is exercised mainly by the coercive apparatuses of the state – the armed forces, police, law courts and prisons – while consent is secured through the exercise of political, moral and intellectual leadership. He used the term **hegemony** to describe this exercise of national leadership. The building of alliances is central to the concept of hegemony. A hegemonic class is one that maintains a position of national leadership by gaining the consent of other classes and social groups through creating a system of alliances, and continually adapting it to changing conditions.

Gramsci suggested that it was within civil society that hegemony was mainly exercised. In one of the best-known passages of his *Prison Notebooks* he compared civil society to a system of 'fortresses and earthworks' standing behind the state: civil society had become far more complex in advanced capitalist countries than it was in Tsarist Russia before 1917, where society was dominated by the state and where the ruling class relied much more on force, and much less on hegemony, than was the case in the West. Thus in Russia a frontal attack, which Gramsci called a **war of movement,** could succeed. But in the West a different revolutionary strategy was required – a **war of position.** The advance to socialism consisted in the transformation of civil society, as a basis for the transformation of the state.

Thus in countries where civil society is highly developed, as in Britain, the labour movement has to undermine the hegemony of the capitalist class by building its own system of alliances and its own alternative hegemony in civil society.

This requires great attention to ideological struggle, to changing the way people think and act, to what Gramsci called **moral and intellectual reform.** He made a novel approach to the question of ideology by applying the term to the ways in which people make sense of the world they live in. He used the term **common sense** to mean the ordinary assumptions which people make, their way of seeing the world in which certain values seem natural and unquestionable.

Thus ideology, in this meaning of common sense, is not just an instrument of domination or a set of false beliefs. Rather, it is a terrain of struggle. It is the site on which the dominant ideology is constructed but it is also the site of resistance to that ideology.

Gramsci suggested that ideology is effective in so far as it succeeds in binding together a bloc of diverse social forces. Thus the idea of the 'welfare state' was central in forming the consensus around the postwar political settlement, and the theme of individual self-interest has been central to Thatcherism. The labour movement has to build up a new bloc of social forces, cemented by an ideology – a new common sense – expressing socialist values in ways that are related to the needs and experiences of the working class.

For building a network of alliances, Gramsci adds a very important dimension with his concept of **national-popular:** a class cannot be hegemonic if it confines itself to its own immediate material interests as a class. It must take into account the range of popular and democratic issues which do not have a purely class character, and which have given rise in many cases to significant social movements, such as those concerning women, peace, ethnic minorities, civil liberties, national liberation and the environment. These democratic issues constitute arenas where the two fundamental classes contend for supremacy. The hegemonic class is the one that succeeds in combining the interests stemming from these issues with its own interests so as to achieve national leadership.

I should like to make two concluding points.

First, Gramsci's concepts of civil society and war of position have far-reaching effects: they extend the scope of politics and deepen its meaning. Electoral activity of political parties is shown to be only part of socialist politics, which concerns the transformation of civil society. The achievements of feminism – 'the personal is political' – and of the GLC are excellent illustrations of this, pointing the way forward.

Second, Gramsci only succeeded in developing his concepts because they arose out of his concrete analysis of Italian and European history. That is why the work of *Marxism Today* is so important in laying the basis for the left to rethink its political and economic strategy, and to adapt and develop Gramscian Marxism to British conditions. ●

Roger Simon

Sardinian beginnings

BORN IN Sardinia in 1891, Gramsci won a scholarship in 1911 to study at the University of Turin, the capital of the rapidly expanding industrial north of Italy. Here, the political formation of the young Sardinian nationalist began in earnest when he joined the Socialist Party in 1913.

As news of the October Revolution broke in 1917, the socialists of Turin, Italy's 'Petrograd', chose Gramsci as their leader. In 1919, with Togliatti, he founded the journal *L'Ordine Nuovo,* which gave inspiration to the factory council movement.

The congress of the Socialists in January 1921 resulted in a split, and Gramsci, Togliatti and others, within days, founded the Italian Communist Party. From 1922-3 Gramsci was the party's representative on the executive of the Communist International in Moscow. On his return to Italy he soon emerged as the intellectual and political leader of an opposition to the sectarian postures of the party under Bordiga.

Gramsci replaced Bordiga as leader in 1924, marking a decisive turning point for Italian communism. He brought to the party a new sense of mass politics. The period 1924-6 found him analysing the social roots and development of fascism in Italy, and the types of political alliances required to defeat it. Shortly after the PCI's 1926 congress in Lyons which approved his ideas, Gramsci was arrested, held until 1928, then condemned to 20 years in prison.

Even in prison, Gramsci had more to give. His *Prison Notebooks* deepened the new analyses begun during his leadership. The new situation required new instruments of analysis. 'Historic bloc', 'war of position', 'hegemony' were ideas born out of Gramsci's passionate commitment to creating effective strategic concepts to meet this need.

The leadership of the party had passed to Togliatti, his closest political collaborator. Togliatti, in exile, read the *Notebooks* smuggled out of prison after Gramsci's death in 1937. Gramsci's thought and political instincts became almost a mental habit with Togliatti, and when he returned to Italy in 1944 his former comrade's ideas became part of the political texture of the direction he gave to the 'new party'. ●

Gino Bedani

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Hegemony in print

THERE ARE TWO ways into reading Gramsci: through writings by him or through writings about him. It is always preferable to start with the former, since the latter are a minefield strewn with conflicting views of what he is supposed to have said.

In English Gramsci's works are in five main volumes: a selection of his *Letters from Prison* (Jonathan Cape, 1975), two volumes of *Selections from Political Writings* from the period 1910-1926, *Selections from Prison Notebooks* and *Selections from Cultural Writings* (all published by Lawrence and Wishart).

Where you begin and how you read these texts depends on which aspect of Gramsci you are looking for. If you want to find out why Gramsci has mattered to the Left in Britain over the past 15 years, a good starting point is the note on state and civil society on p238 of *Selections from Prison Notebooks*. Another key passage is on pp181-2, where Gramsci explains that in order to attain hegemony, the working class must make its interests 'the interests of other groups too', it must become a 'universal' class.

Abel Lagos

Gramsci by Renzo Galeotti

These notes have been read as suggesting a left strategy appropriate mainly to the advanced capitalist West. As such, they illuminate just one facet of Gramsci. He also deals with the culture of the rural peripheries, with the peasant question, with national movements in the context of development and modernisation. Some of these issues may seem 'past' for Eurocentric marxists, but they are very 'present' for the developing world, for the European peripheries and for national minorities everywhere.

A third facet of Gramsci emerges in the two volumes of *Political Writings*, namely the political activist engaged in day-to-day problems of tactics and strategy in the fraught period between the first world war and the rise to power of fascism. The Gramsci of the factory councils, workers control and socialist democracy is represented in Volume 1 (1910-1920). His writings on the early communist movement and his analyses of fascism can be found in Volume 2 (1921-1926).

These earlier writings have been used by some commentators to support a view of a more 'orthodox' Gramsci than the allegedly 'revisionist' figure who surfaces in the prison writings. The later pieces in Volume 2, notably the 'Lyons Theses' and 'Some Aspects of the Southern Question', are important reading for anyone trying to make up their mind on this question.

Turning to writings about Gramsci, there is a wide array to choose from in English, though the quality is uneven. Of the accounts of Gramsci's life, Giuseppe Fiori's *Antonio Gramsci: Life of a Revolutionary* (NLB/Verso) is essential reading, beautifully evocative on his Sardinian origins, though not the best source on his ideas. Paolo Spriano's *Antonio Gramsci: the Prison Years* (Lawrence and Wishart) contains a well-documented account of Gramsci's disagreement with Togliatti and the PCI leadership over their acceptance of the 'class against class' policy in the early 30s.

Of the short introductions, James Joll's *Gramsci* (Fonatana Modern Masters) is probably the best. There is also an excellent introductory essay on 'Gramsci and Marxist Political Theory' by Eric Hobsbawm in *Approaches to Gramsci*, edited by Anne Showstack Sassoon (Writers and Readers) (the essay originally appeared in the July 1977 issue of *Marxism Today*). Roger Simon's *Gramsci's Political Thought* (Lawrence and Wishart) is a model of lucidity, as well as an eloquent application of Gramscian ideas to practical politics in contemporary Britain, though because of this it is not always the most reliable guide to Gramsci's ideas in themselves.

Among the criticisms of the various liberal, social-democratic and Eurocommunist betrayals of Gramisci's revolutionary thought, Chris Harman's pamphlet *Gramsci Versus Reformism* (SWP) still repays reading, as does John Hoffman's more densely theoretical but intelligent book *The Gramscian Challenge* (Blackwell). The criticisms are often well-aimed, even though the authors have a tendency to throw out a few vital organs of the Gramscian baby with the reformist bathwater and to end up suggesting either that Gramsci was wrong or else that Marx, Lenin or Trotsky said it all before. ●

David Forgacs

Home-ground comeback

IN THE LAST 10 years or so, Gramsci has almost been relegated to a street name in Italy. As the historic compromise broke down, terrorism created an atmosphere of near civil war in the late 70s, and neo-liberalism in the unlikely guise of Craxi's socialists improved the standard of living of a large part of the population (leaving a large minority well behind), Italian intellectuals have considered Gramsci out of fashion.

A constructive criticism of the limits of marxism and left politics has arrived at a wholesale rejection of the theoretical 'fathers' of the 1968 generation. Writing about him and sales of his work have been reduced to a trickle.

This is the context in which the Italian Communist Party (PCI) has launched a year of debates and discussions to celebrate the 50th anniversary of Gramsci's death. Symbolically the 1987 PCI membership card bears his portrait, but more significantly in January *L'Unita*, the PCI daily, published a long interview with PCI general secretary Alessandro Natta about Gramsci.

The thrust of his argument was that just as Gramsci was writing during a watershed for European society when capitalism was being reorganised along an 'American' model in the 1930s and the Soviet Union was encountering enormous problems in the first concrete attempt to build socialism, today Europe, East and West, is at another crossroads.

While suggesting that the PCI has gone beyond certain Gramscian categories, for example a totalising concept of the party, Natta maintained that others, such as passive revolution, and Gramsci's whole approach to analysing the changes confronting European society, are useful in the immense task confronting the European left: developing an analysis of the contemporary situation which provides the basis for a European-wide strategy.

Gramsci's status as a world-wide cultural figure whose categories are useful for re-thinking the present world crisis will be the theme of this Gramsci 'year' in Italy.

Gramsci, therefore, is being offered as part of the PCI's attempt to present itself as an integral part of a European Left which has to reconstitute itself if it is to have any affect on the developing social, economic, political and cultural processes now evident in the Western world. ●

Anne Showstack Sassoon

In praise of the peculiar

GRAMSCI'S INFLUENCE on people like me, who first read him, in translation, in the early 1960s, has been profound. Our interest in Gramsci was not scholastic. We appropriated Gramsci for ourselves in our own way. Reading Gramsci has fertilised our political imagination, transformed our way of thinking, our style of thought, our whole political project.

Certainly, 'appropriating Gramsci' has never licensed us to read him any way that suits us, uncontrolled by a respect for the distinctive grain and formation of his thought. Our 'reading' is neither wilful nor arbitrary – precisely because that would be contrary to the very lessons we learned from him. It is, after all, Gramsci himself who first taught us how to 'read Gramsci'. He re-tuned our intellectual ear to the historically-specific and distinct register in which his concepts operate. It is from Gramsci that we learned to understand – and practise – the discipline imposed by an unswerving attention to the 'peculiarities' and unevenness of national-cultural development. It is Gramsci's example which cautions us against the too-easy transfer of historical generalisations from one society or epoch to another, in the name of 'Theory'.

If I were to try to summarise, in a sentence, what Gramsci did for people of my generation, I would have to say something like this: simply, he made it possible for us to read Marx again, in a new way: that is, to go on 'thinking' the second half of the 20th century, face-to-face with the realities of the modern world, from a position somewhere within the legacy of Marx's thought. The legacy of Marx's thought, that is, not as a quasi-religious body of dogma but as a living, developing, constantly renewable stream of ideas.

If I had to make that general claim more specific, I would probably choose to emphasise – out of an array of possible arguments – the following points.

First, his boldness and independence of mind. Gramsci came to 'inhabit' Marx's ideas, not as a strait-jacket, which confined and hobbled his imagination, but as a framework of ideas which liberated his mind, which set it free, which *put it to work*. Most of us had been fed on a diet of so-called marxist writing in which the explicator, mindful of the quasi-religious character of his (definitely *his*) task,

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allowed himself only the occasional free-range moment of textual emendation. Consequently, we experienced the freedom and freshness of Gramsci's writing as a liberation, revolutionary in its impact. Here, what was undoubtedly a limitation from a textual point of view – namely, the fragmentary nature of his writings – was, for us, a positive advantage. Gramsci's work resisted even the most concerted effort to knit up its loose ends into a seamless garment of Orthodoxy.

Then, there is the way in which Gramsci, without neglecting the other spheres of articulation, made himself *par excellence* the 'theorist of the political'. He gave us, as few comparable theorists ever have, an *expanded* conception of 'politics' – the rhythms, forms, antagonisms, transformations specific and peculiar to it as a region. I am thinking of the way he advances such concepts as 'the relation of forces', 'passive revolution', 'transformism', 'strategic conjuncture', 'historical bloc', the new meanings given to the concept of 'party'. These concepts are required if we are to think the political in modern terms, as the strategic level into which other determinations are explosively condensed.

Next, I would want to fasten on the manner in which his notion of 'hegemony' forces us to reconceptualise the nature of class and social forces: indeed, he makes us rethink the very notion of power itself – its project and its complex 'conditions of existence' in modern societies. The work on the 'national-popular', on ideology, on the moral, cultural and intellectual dimensions of power, on its double articulation in state and in civil society, on the inter-play between authority, leadership, domination and the 'education of consent' equipped us with an enlarged conception of power, and of its molecular operations, its investment on many different sites. His pluri-centered conception of power made obsolete the narrow, one-dimensional conceptions with which most of us had operated.

The same could be said for the astonishing range of his writing on cultural questions, on language and popular literature and, of course, his work on ideology. The notion of the production and transformation of 'common sense', of the 'the popular' as the cultural terrain which all ideologies must encounter and negotiate with, and to the logic of which they must conform if they are to become historically organic changed the thinking of a whole generation on these questions. His work on the necessarily contradictory nature of the subjects of ideology, their fragmentary, pluri-centered character have been extraordinarily generative. They helped us to cut through the arid wastes of a progressively abstract definitional debate about ideology, to look at the cultural logics and forms of practical reasoning where the languages of the popular masses take shape and where the historic struggle to create the forms of a new culture is engaged. Nothing is so calculated to destroy the simple minded notion of ideology as 'correct thoughts' parachuted into the empty heads of waiting proto-revolutionary subjects as Gramsci's stubborn attendance to the real, living textures of popular life, thought, and culture which circumscribe the historical effectivity of even the most coherent and persuasive of 'philosophies'.

Gramsci held aloft, with fortitude and courage, the torch of critical thought and political commitment amidst the darkening storm-clouds of fascism. We have drawn inspiration, in our own 'Iron Times', from his courage and commitment. It is therefore a bizarre turn in the wheel of fortune that he should have made his most profound mark, on my own political thinking, in two related directions apparently quite foreign to his own practice and circumstances.

It is by trying to understand Gramsci that I have come to have some glimmer of an understanding of the profound transformation which is now under way in Western liberal-bourgeois societies under the aegis of the 'new Right' – the moment of revolution-and-reaction, of 'reconstruction in the very moment of destruction' which, under the name of Thatcherism, Reaganism and the other forms of crisis-resolution in capitalist societies, have come to dominate our epoch.

It is by studying this 'counter-hegemony' at work that one begins to understand what a 'hegemonic political project' might be like. Hence it is also Gramsci who has helped me to begin to understand the enormity of the task of *renewal* which socialism and the Left now has before it if it is ever to become a truly hegemonic project.

I mean by that, capable not simply of winning and holding office, or of putting into effect an outdated programme, but of laying the basis for a whole new conception of life, a whole new type of democratic socialist civilisation. Still, when I look at Gramsci's embattled face, that wild shock of hair, the unexpected orthodoxy of those wire-framed glasses, or into those luminous eyes, I like, fondly, to imagine that this is a reversal of fortune which, perversely, the Sardinian would have relished. ●

Stuart Hall

A version of this article has been published in *Rinascita*

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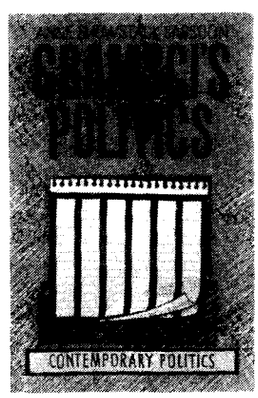

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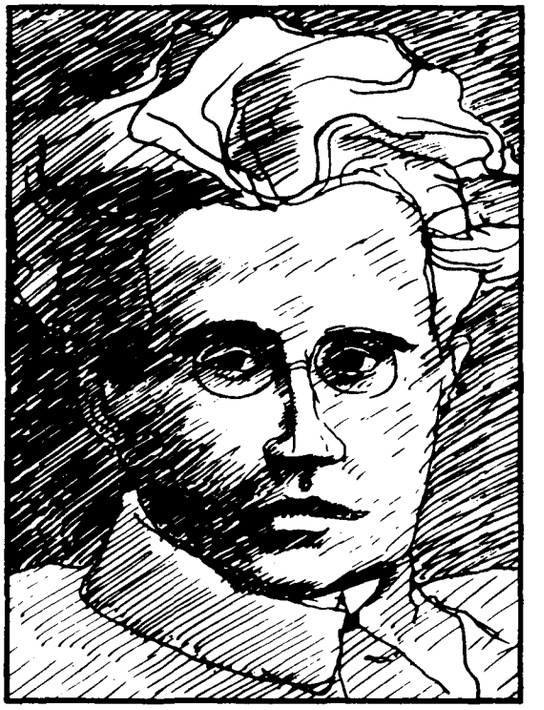

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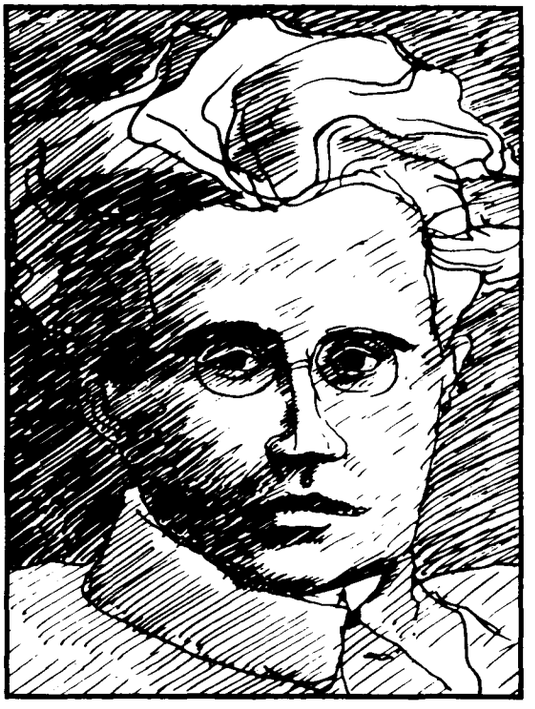

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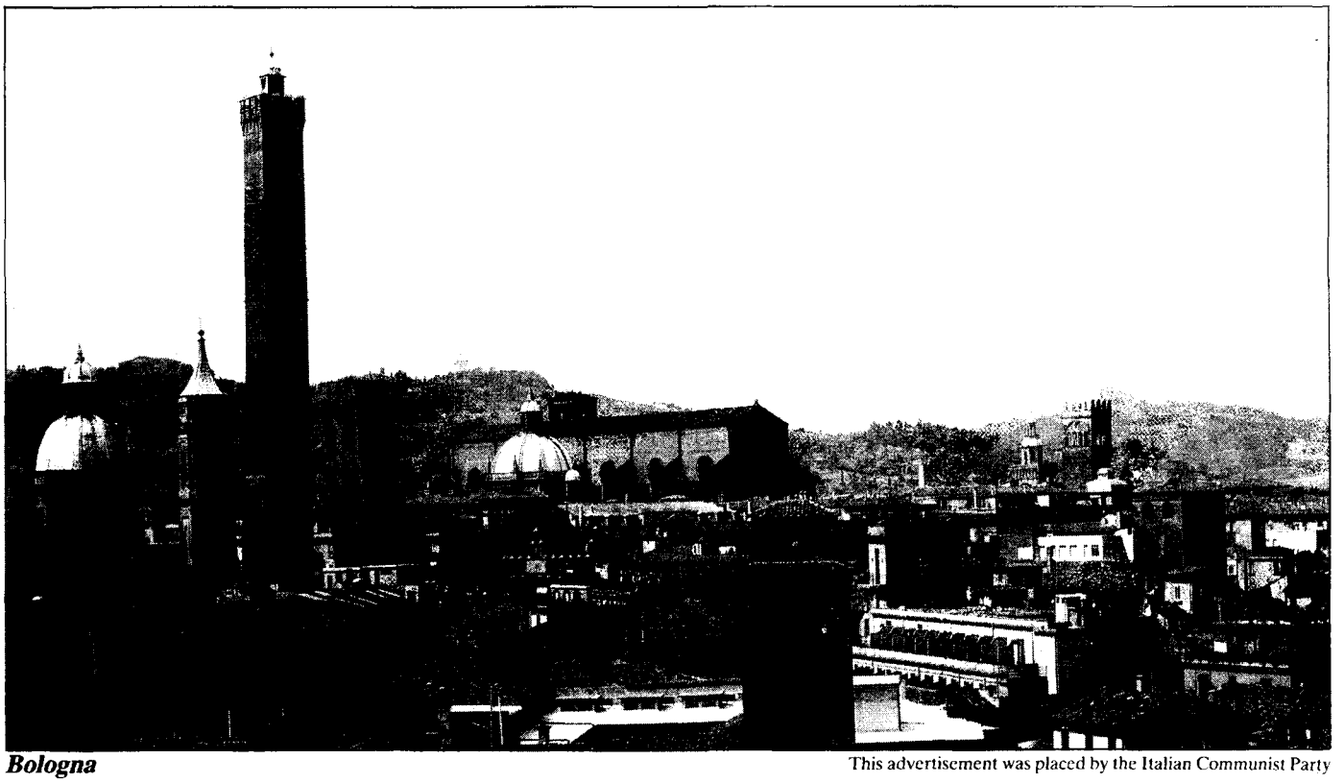

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Class War And After

The Left is in crisis. Few would now dissent from this view. But why? Here **Ernesto Laclau** argues that the cause could not be more fundamental: the idea of the working class as '*the* historical agent of change' is no longer valid.

Since the turn of the century, four key concepts have shaped the way the west European Left has understood the world. During the early 1900s, social and political events were conceived as part of the inexorable decline of the capitalist system and the inevitable movement towards socialism. During the 1930s, this vision was incorporated within a perspective that saw the opposition between democracy and fascism as the fundamental political division. At roughly the same time, the conflict between imperialist and oppressed nations began to play a similar role in the colonial and semi-colonial world. Finally, in the immediate postwar period, European social democratic parties came to view the advance towards socialism through expansion of the nationalised sector of the economy.

Each of these four visions – the necessary transition to socialism via the progressive expansion of the productive forces; democratic fronts in opposition to fascism; national anti-imperialist revolutions; increasing expansion of the public sector of the mixed economies – were for the Left something far more important than mere 'circumstantial' strategies. They were the key ideas with which it was possible to make sense of the multiplicity of historical events, the bases of all forms of political calculation. It was around these ideas that the political experience of the masses acquired a certain unity which made possible the constitution of traditions of struggle and political thought.

There is much talk today about the generalised crisis of the Left. I want to argue that this crisis is not so much one of particular aspects or policies within a stable framework of political references, but rather the result of the slow erosion and decline of those basic ideas. Thus the various leftwing political practices, lacking any unifying long-term vision, are increasingly reduced to a short-term pragmatic game incapable of generating any kind of collective enthusiasm. The political horizon looks darkened and the historical process without direction. This is, in my view, the kernel of the present crisis of the Left. What follows are some reflections on its roots and on the possible ways of dealing with it.

Let's review some of the most frequent interpretations of the present crisis. For the 'theoreticians' of the hard Left, everything is, of course, clear: there is no crisis, and the central role of the working class is an unshaken and unshakeable dogma. They are, of course, usually unable to specify what they mean by such a central role. Centrality in relation to what? If it is intended as an assertion concerning the political world, it has to be discussed in precise historical contexts and in relation to particular issues.

Let us limit our argument to the industrialised West. Two convergent processes undermine the argument of our 'class warriors': on the one hand, the numerical decline and economic fragmentation of the working class, and on the other, the marginalisation of increasingly wide sections of the population, which is at the basis of the proliferation of a wide range of new antagonisms.

So, as a sociological description, the assertion of the central role of the working class in the social structure is increasingly less acceptable. And as a political proposition it is also far from evident. Central role of the working class in the feminist struggle, in the ecological struggles, in the mobilisations of the marginalised sectors of the population in the decaying inner cities?

And claims that without the working class these other struggles have no future are circular – they *presuppose* a central role for the working class, which is precisely what has to be proved. This does not lead, of course, to denying the importance of mobilising workers, and their effectiveness in particular contexts, but to the rather different assertion that the working class is – as are all other sectors – a social agent limited in its objectives and possibilities, and not the 'universal class' of the marxist tradition, the *necessary* agent of global human emancipation.

All these arguments have been frequently presented and there is no point in reiterating them any further here. Let us deal with those approaches which in some way or the other recognise the limitations of the working class as an historical agent, but which handle these limitations in ways we consider inadequate. We can distinguish, in this respect, three basic approaches. The first suggests that the working class has to supersede its structural limits through the formation of a broad democratic alliance with other progressive sectors, following a venerable tradition going back to the popular fronts of the 1930s. The second searches for a new social agent which would not present the historical limitations of the working class. The third no longer postulates this need and accepts as inevitable and even positive the dispersion and fragmentation of the various forms of social protest.

As for the popular front strategy, its prestige among those coming from a Communist tradition is explicable for two reasons. The first is that when it was adopted by the Comintern in 1935, it was perceived as a return to common sense after years of the absurd 'class against class' line of the Third Period, which presented social democracy as the main enemy in the period leading to the seizure of power by Nazism. In this sense, the popular front themes have remained since as the epitomy of reason compared with such vanguardist adventurism. The second reason is that under the umbrella of the popular fronts, the Communist parties were able, in the period leading to the war and later during the various resistance movements and wars of liberation, immensely to widen the struggles and democratic experiences of the masses. There is no doubt that the era of the popular fronts was the heyday of the communist movements in Western Europe.

But precisely because of these successes, many analysts tend to return nostalgically to that period and to overlook the essential respects in which the experience of the popular fronts belongs to the past. The popular front mobilisations and systems of alliances presupposed the presence of the fascist danger. The broad character of the fronts was a direct consequence of the threat to the liberal democratic regimes that fascism posed. Since the end of the war, the Communist postulation of broad democratic alliances has often been accompanied by warnings of the re-emergence of fascism, but these claims have been received with general and justified scepticism.

This is even more the case when we consider present political phenomena such as Thatcherism. It would simply be

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