

Antonio Gramsci:

How the Legacy of an Italian Communist Is Wrecking the Catholic Church Today

By JOSEPH CROSSON

Antonio Gramsci is an individual seldom spoken of in academic circles. Indeed, some encyclopedias have ceased to carry an entry for his name. He is one of the little-known, seldom-mentioned but incredibly forward-sighted fathers of modern-day communist/socialist theory. The political formula Gramsci devised has done much more than classical Leninism/Stalinism to spread Marxism throughout the capitalist West. Gramsci's ideas are also some of the more potent enemies of the Christian church. A significant part of the issues with which the church has been confronted for the past 50 years in its declining congregation and a dilution of geopolitical influence of its clergy in Western governmental affairs is due in no small part to adherents of Gramscian philosophies. Using the stratagems and ideas Gramsci conceptualized, refined and implemented during his efforts to reform political systems in pre-World War II Europe, opponents of class separation and institutionalized religion have planted the seeds of discord and disharmony which have radically altered and forever softened the practical power and awe-inspiring influence traditionally wielded by representatives and agents of the church.

In order to analyze the reasons Gramsci and his ideas have helped reshape the role of the church in the 21st century, one needs an effective understanding of Gramsci and his experiences, which crafted how he looked at the people and institutions that defined sociopolitical processes of his day.

Gramsci was born in Italy January 22, 1891, in the rural village of Ales, Sardinia. The fourth of seven children (he had three brothers and three sisters), his mother, born Giuseppina Marcias, was a schoolteacher and his father, Francesco, a rural land tax assessor. In the impoverished Sardinian peasant society of those times the Gramscis were relatively privileged "signori." At age 4 he developed a curvature of the spine, possibly due to a fall down a flight of stairs

when a servant dropped him. His hunchback caused him to be ostracized and physically attacked by his superstitious playmates, who also resented his privileged status as the son of Signore Francesco. Gramsci was a strong-willed, bright child with a vivid imagination and a naturally sunny disposition. However, when he began going to the village school, he soon became a withdrawn, solemn, oversensitive loner and stoic. Gramsci was not a happy child; largely due to his father's imprisonment on embezzlement charges when was 6, his school years and early adulthood were marked by considerable economic hardship. According to John

Cammett, one of his biographers, "as a boy, he felt unloved, alienated, humiliated." His family and friends who knew him as a child remembered him as, quiet, reserved and melancholy.

Later in his early teen years he read socialist, liberal and Sardinian nationalist newspapers, brought home by his older socialist activist brother, Gennaro.

Gennaro, seven years his senior, introduced Gramsci to socialist ideas and the world of the Sardinian working-class struggle. Gennaro was a labor militant active in Cagliari, Sardinia's capital. When Gramsci was 14, Gennaro bought him a subscription to *Avanti*, the Italian Socialist Party's newspaper. From 1908 to 1911 Gramsci attended the Dettori Liceo (high school) in Cagliari and roomed with Gennaro. Before his 20th birthday, Gramsci's socialist, anti-colonial sympathies were clear. In a school essay titled "Oppressed and Oppressors" written in October

1910, Gramsci praised the human race's "incessant struggle" against the tyranny of "one man, one class or even a whole people." This thesis, at such an early age, shows Gramsci's passion, focus and discipline.

After graduating from the Dettori Liceo in September 1911, Gramsci won a scholarship to the University of Turin on the Italian mainland. Between 1911 and 1912 Gramsci was a full-time university student, excelling in his studies of philology and seriously considering becoming a university professor of linguistics. In the summer of 1913 he applied for membership in the FGS, the Socialist



ANTONIO GRAMSCI

Subversive influences still felt today.

Party youth federation, and was accepted at the end of 1913, joining the Party itself in 1914. For most of 1914 and 1915 he remained a part-time student at the University of Turin and still considered an academic career but finally in April 1915 sat for his last exam and dropped out. He was increasingly impatient and sought to turn the radical ideas he had been exposed to at the university into practical political action. World War I had broken out in August 1914 and, after a bitter national debate, Italy entered the war on the side of Britain and France against Germany and Austria in May 1915.

Italy was then, as it is now, a country divided between north and south. The south was overwhelmingly rural with a large illiterate peasantry and the north essentially industrialized with a well-organized and politically aware working class. The contrast was immense. Turin has been described as the Red capital of Italy at the time Gramsci arrived there. It was home to the most advanced industry in the country and above all to FIAT, the motor manufacturer. By the end of World War I, 30 percent of Turin's civilian population was industrial workers (10 percent of the total population was in the army).

The organized workers of Turin had a very combative history. For the first 20 years of this century, Turin was to witness countless demonstrations and a number of general strikes until finally in 1919, there began a movement for the occupation of the factories and the setting up of factory councils to run them. It was this sort of atmosphere that welcomed reformist notions and was to affect his thinking for the rest of his life. Gramsci's earliest activity as a member of the FGS, the socialist youth federation, was teaching young workers about his intellectual heroes: Marx, Romain Rolland (the great Swiss anti-war novelist), Benedetto Croce, Italy's leading liberal philosopher, and Labriola, a Hegelian like Croce and "father of Italian Marxism." Young Gramsci was a very effective teacher, with a quiet, unemphatic, inexorable voice.

In 1914 and 1915, with the political struggle between pro-war nationalists and anti-war socialists heating up, Gramsci also began writing anti-war articles for the Turin socialist weekly, *Il grido del Popolo* ("The Shout of the People"). In 1916, Gramsci, now 25, began writing a regular column called *Sotto la Mole*, for the Turin socialist party paper *Avanti*. It included both theater reviews and political and cultural articles about working class struggle. In the spring of 1919, Gramsci, together with Angelo Tasca, Umberto Terracini and Togliatti, founded *L'Ordine Nuovo: Rassegna Settimanale di Cultura Socialista* ("The New Order: A Weekly Review of Socialist Culture"), which became an influential periodical (on a weekly and later on a bimonthly publishing schedule) for the following five years among the radical and revolutionary left in Italy. The review gave much attention to political and literary currents in Europe, the USSR, and the United States.

The August insurrection and the Bolshevik revolution in Russia in October 1917, convinced Gramsci and the left socialists (and the Italian capitalists) that revolution in Italy was all but inevitable. But knowing what practical steps to take to prepare for revolutionary seizure of power by the workers was much more difficult to figure out.

For the next three years Gramsci poured himself heart and soul (and fragile nervous system) into the task of propagandizing for a worker's seizure of power. Using first *Il grido* and later in

1919 a new revolutionary paper he helped found called *Ordine Nuovo* ("New Order"), he focused on the political and cultural education of workers who he believed would soon be confronted with the problem of seizing state power, reorganizing Italian society and building a new socialist culture. In little over a year's time he and his *Ordine Nuovo* co-editors were able to build a mass following among Turin auto factory workers for the idea of factory soviets as the key to a worker's revolution in Italy. Overcoming popular consensus, however, is not easy. Ideological hegemony meant that the majority of the population accepted what was happening in society as "common sense" or as "the only way of running society." There may have been complaints about the way things were run, and people looked for improvements or reforms, but the basic beliefs and value system underpinning society were seen as either neutral or of general applicability in relation to the class structure of society. Marxists would have seen people constantly asking for a bigger slice of the cake when the real issue was ownership of the bakery. Gramsci stated:

If the relationship between intellectuals and people—nation, between the leaders and the led, the rulers and ruled, is provided by an organic cohesion in which feeling/passion becomes the understanding and thence knowledge (not mechanically, but in a way that is alive), then, and only then, is the relationship one of representation. Only then can there take place an exchange of individual elements between the rulers and ruled, leaders and led, and can the shared life be realized which alone is a social force—with the reaction of the "historic bloc."

In the three years between the August 1917 Turin insurrection and the 1920 factory occupations, Gramsci was rapidly transformed from a radical student intellectual into a mass organizer and apprentice revolutionary. Tragically, his personal and political growth as a revolutionary was just a step behind events, as was that of the revolutionary working-class movement from which he was learning. His mass organizing work in Turin through the revolutionary working-class paper *Ordine Nuovo*, begun in May 1919, laid the groundwork for the 1920 factory occupations. But he failed to take the step of forming a national organization around that magazine to give it a national working-class base.

The years 1921 to 1926, years "of iron and fire" as he called them, were eventful and productive. They were marked in particular by the year and a half he lived in Moscow as an Italian delegate to the Communist International (May 1922-November 1923), his election to the Chamber of Deputies in April 1924, and his assumption of the position of general secretary of the PCI. His personal life was also filled with significant experiences, the chief one being his meeting with and subsequent marriage to Giulia Schucht (1896-1980), a violinist and member of the Russian Communist Party whom he met during his stay in Russia.

In May 1922, fearing for his safety and concerned about his poor health, the party decided to send Gramsci to the Soviet Union. Gramsci lived and worked politically in the Soviet Union and Vienna until May 1924. On his arrival in Russia he suffered a complete nervous breakdown and spent the next six months in a rest home on the outskirts of Moscow. It was here that he met and fell in love with his future wife Giulia, the daughter of a prominent Russian communist who was a close personal friend of Lenin him-

*The media here bombard the public with this position time and again.

self. Gramsci described his time with Giulia as the one really happy time of his life. While in the Soviet Union as an active member of the Comintern's Executive Committee, his analysis of Italian fascism as a new kind of mass counter-revolutionary middle-class movement helped orient the international communist movement to treat Fascism as a new and serious historical threat to Bolshevism.

On his return to Italy in May 1924 he was elected to the Italian parliament and began the laborious process of winning the party membership over to his ideas of a mass revolutionary workers and peasants party, as opposed to a narrowly militaristic, top-down, one-class, "workerist" conception of the party. Throughout 1924-26 he struggled to reorganize the party so that it could wage both broad mass popular legal resistance and an armed, clandestine resistance to the Fascist dictatorship.

By 1925 he had won leadership of the party and began trying to find ways to expand the party's mass base into rural southern Italy, hoping to lay the political foundation for a peasant insurrection when, on November 8, 1926, he was arrested at his rented room in Rome just as party leaders were making last-minute preparations to smuggle him out of Italy. In his room was the uncompleted draft of a long article on the "Southern Question," his analysis of why peasant insurrection in the south was the key to overthrowing the Fascist dictatorship and Italian capitalism.

On the evening of November 8, 1926, Gramsci was arrested in Rome and, in accordance with a series of "Exceptional Laws" enacted by Mussolini and the Fascist-dominated Italian legislature, committed to solitary confinement at the Regina Coeli prison. This began a 10-year odyssey, marked by almost constant physical pain as a result of a prison experience that culminated, on April 27, 1937, in his death from a cerebral hemorrhage.

Gramsci's intellectual work in prison did not emerge into the light of day until several years after World War II, when scattered sections of his notebooks began to be published, and some of the approximately 500 letters he wrote from prison. By the 1950s, and then with increasing frequency and intensity, his prison writings attracted interest and critical commentary in a host of countries, not only in the West but in the so-called Third World as well. Some of his terminology became household words on the left, the most important of which, and the most complex, is the term "hegemony" as he used it in his writings and applied to the twin task of understanding the reasons underlying both the successes and the failures of socialism on a global scale, and of elaborating a feasible program for the realization of a socialist vision within the actual existing conditions that prevailed in the world. Among these conditions were the rise and triumph of fascism and the disarray on the left that had ensued as a result of that triumph. Also extremely pertinent, both theoretically and practically, were such terms and phrases as "organic intellectual," "national popular" and "historical bloc," which, even if not coined by Gramsci, acquired such radically new and original implications in his writing as to constitute effectively

new formulations in the realm of political philosophy.

Gramsci agreed that the great mass of the world's population was made up of workers—a simple fact. Something that also appeared clear to him was that nowhere—especially not in the Christian European nations—did the workers of the world perceive themselves as separate and apart from the ruling classes by an ideological chasm. If that held true, Marx and Lenin were, therefore, wrong in the assumption there could and would be a glorious uprising of the proletariat. Gramsci became convinced that no country fulfilled the Lenin/Marx model of a large, featureless structure of masses who perceived themselves as different from the superstructure of society. Therefore, the way to achieve the peak of human happiness had to be something other than the armed uprising espoused by the Lenin/Marx doctrine.

One of the many theories conceived by Gramsci was the "long march through institutions." What Gramsci knew was that most people are so devoted to institutions with which they are familiar that they desperately will try to save them even when they are teaching and doing the complete opposite to what they were taught and did originally. Creatures generally gravitate toward the familiar, be it physical habits or intellectual ideals. The key would then become the process of changing what the culture finds familiar. By changing the very essence of what thoughts and ideals people (the worker masses) find to be familiar a movement could then effect the changes on the large scale that it could not realize through armed revolution. In an armed revolution, the natural tendency of people would be to gravitate toward the familiar, even if it meant preserving and protecting a system that subjects them to misery. They would know no other way to replace the things they despise or would be

too nervous to jump into the unknown.

A long march through an institution means the unhappy segment of society, instead of seizing control through infiltration of a small but critical segment of the state apparatus to displace current controllers, would choose to seize power from within the system. Once power is assumed, existing lines of authority and habits of obedience already inherent in legitimate government would be utilized to advance the coupster's illegitimate aims. Typically, this march through an institution would take place from the bottom up. Patience is needed to silently weave the seditious ideals and philosophies needed to allow a proper anchor to set within the masses. Those masses will soon be set to attacking and branding the non-duped conservative elements as hopelessly behind the times and harmful to the goal of attracting young people to the cause or, finally and even worse, a traitor. Opponents of this coup should be labeled as isolationists who are misguided and dangerous individuals unable to move into the future and accept the wonderful changes the future will bring.

The long march removes the risks inherent to an armed takeover of a government or institution by removing the possibility of forcing the rank and file with their natural tendency toward pro-

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* Same as in America... politics long before Gramsci!!!

* Is it keep the same meaning of "hegemony"?

tecting and gravitating to the familiar not accepting the new regime. What it does, if patience prevails, is almost guarantee success because the group targeted for the coup will not only offer little to no resistance but will also, quite likely, provide itself as the most effective asset for the coup. A law of war is stated simply: "Know thine enemy." An opponent will not fight if he either cannot see or does not realize an enemy is before his very eyes.

Gramsci noted, "Religion must be approached 'not in the confessional sense' but in the secular sense of a unity of faith between a conception of the world and a corresponding norm of conduct." Gramsci proposed setting aside concern for Catholicism as an instructor of doctrine or body of belief and concentrating on it as a potential vehicle for ideology and politics that could be used in the service of Marxist communist order. Use Lenin's geopolitical structure not to conquer the halls of the Vatican and Holy See but rather use it to conquer the mind of the Catholic population itself. Though the church seemed strong on its surface, it had been subjected to a fairly constant and sustained barrage of criticism against its teachings and structural integrity. Gramsci needed to alter the Christian mind and turn it around completely to an anti-Christian position but keep those efforts secret. The best way to do this was to get individuals, regardless of their station in society, to think of the problems and issues facing them without reference to the Christian God or laws of the Christian God. A bedrock of Marxism—the guiding ideal that this paradise is the summit of human existence—is that there is nothing beyond the matter of this world. In other words, traditional theology would now be treated with no greater or lesser emphasis when compared to the other aspects of culture.

It made better sense, in Gramsci's mind, to let Catholics remain Catholics instead of making communists of Catholics. It would be preferable to mutate the dogma of their faith into a secular ideology similar to Marxism. The question merely became which opportunity and manner would present itself to start this transformation. Fortunately, for Marxist infiltrators, the Catholic Church provided the most ideal vehicle for this insertion when Pope John XXIII announced the 21st ecumenical council in the history of the church, aka the Second Vatican Council.

The pope's idea for the council was that the Holy Spirit would inspire all who attended with renewed vigor of faith and evangelism around the planet. He felt it important to include the Soviet Union (then led by Nikita Khrushchev) in this process and convinced the Soviet Premier to allow two Russian Orthodox priests from the USSR to serve as observers. Additionally, the pope granted, as a result of secret negotiations with Khrushchev, what amounted to be a huge concession by agreeing to not issue a condemnation of Marxism and the communist state. This was significant in that up to that time such condemnations had always been included as a given standard in any Vatican or Roman Catholic commentary on the world as a whole.

Changes made by the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II) were numerous and caused profound change in the way the Vatican approached the faithful and the very manner and language in which the Mass itself could be conducted. What the casual observer did not see, however, was the more profound philosophical shift in the attitudes and conclusions in other areas of the council. One document on religious liberty declared that everyone, rich or poor,

should be free from any constraint or restriction in religious matters, including the choice of which religion one chose to follow. To some, this was taken to mean an individual did not need to be Roman Catholic in order to be spared from doom in hell itself. Still, the declaration won a plurality of votes in the council. Accordingly, by the closing sessions of Vatican II, some bishops and Vatican personnel were adopting and imposing new and different meanings on ecumenism. An example can be seen in the newly introduced policies of then-powerful Augustin Cardinal Bea, considered a spearhead in ecumenical revolution. The cardinal organized gatherings that included not only Catholics and Protestants, as would be typical, but also included Jews and Muslims, eventually Buddhists, Shintoists, animists and various other non-Christian or non-religious groups. This not-so-slight split from the norm would only widen over time.

The reigning Pope Paul VI gave the farewell address for the departing bishops on the council. In that speech, Paul discussed the new, broad umbrella that secularism within the church would be defended and protected against the wave of world protest of the adoption of the new policies. The pope told the departing clergy that their church opted for man, to serve man and to help man build his home here on Earth. According to the pontiff, man with his ideas, aims, hopes, fears, difficulties and sufferings would now be the centerpiece of the church's interest. The special attention the bishops had decided to place on the plight of the poor was now morphed into something labeled "preferential option for the poor." This was then taken in turn to mean a *carte blanche* mandate for deep alliances with socialists and communists, including terrorist groups. The Vatican Bank would soon be exposed in investment scandal after investment scandal, even being forced to disclose its significant stock interests in pharmaceutical companies that produced birth control medication. Ecumenism was no longer a belief and mandate to heal the heresy and rifts that pervaded the church. It was now a means not of healing, but of leveling differences of all kinds between all Christian believers and non-believers. Liberation no longer meant a release from sin and damnation. It now defined itself as the struggle against oppression by big capital interests and the authoritarian colonial powers of the West.

Liberation theology became a new concept within the church to such an extent that books written by converted priests, along with political and revolutionary literature, flooded the Latin American region, where almost 400 million Catholics included the lowest and poorest members of society, a population with little or no hope for economic betterment for themselves or their children. Liberation theology was a perfect exercise in Gramscian principles: launched with the corruption of a limited number in high positions, aimed at the culture and mentality of the masses, locking the individual and the culture in the race toward a single goal—class struggle for sociopolitical liberation. Nowhere in all this discussion are the traditional ecumenical and spiritual foundations on which the church was created.

The 1962 Vatican-Moscow Agreement still seems to be in force. This agreement has silenced the church and allowed the errors of communism and socialist theory to invade and pervade both it and society virtually unchallenged. According to communist Russian

Gen. Volkogonov, this understanding (*perestroika*) is what made possible the invasion and subversion of traditional Christian theory. The continuation of this agreement and the absence of any official elaboration force one to speculate that some form of cooperation/blackmail may still exist. Vatican and Holy See silence about Marxism only serves to guarantee civil and religious liberation in Catholic countries across the globe. General Secretary Gorbachev's statements in a 1987 address can estimate a measurement of this cooperation: "There must be no let-up in the war against religion because as long as religion exists, communism cannot prevail. We must intensify the obliteration of all religions."

Generally, toward the end of the 1960s, a sea change in church doctrine was rapidly under way. Another significant secular question before leaders of industrialized countries was that of population control. Contraception and abortion could only resolve the problems of overpopulation and the rising cost of living. These two questions, up to that date, were consistently rejected by dogma and considered mortal sins against God. An effort to include these solutions as a basic human right was then launched. Eventually, industrialized Western nations successfully pushed to legalize these measures on a secular level. Traditional principles of education in Catholic schools also took a tumble, from elementary to university levels. The refusal of bishops to insist on obedience to dogma about divorce, abortion, contraception and homosexuality became pervasive. At the parish and diocesan level, the bottom of church hierarchy, base communities were forming with lightning speed. Largely composed of lay Catholics, base communities decided how to pray, what priests to accept, what bishops, if chosen at all, would have authority, and what sort of liturgy would be tolerated. Any relation and reference to Rome and its central authority or traditional Catholic theology was quietly considered inconsequential or coincidental. Each step and measure taken to regionalize and personalize traditional Catholicism and Christian belief was another Gramscian step taken in the effort to remove religion as an otherworld and spiritual consideration.

Upon the arrival of Pope John Paul II the notion of this "infection" was no longer even a secret within the Vatican and Holy See. However, the new pope understood what actions and policies had initiated this historic change in church presence and influence. He was not unaware that Gramscian and Leninist processes were well under way in transforming his church, indeed Christianity itself, into a marginalized and compartmented aspect of secular consideration. Nevertheless, he did undertake his own efforts to reverse the changed policies, call on his bishops to follow his orders within their regions and reinstitute their vows of obedience. Despite his best efforts, no substantial difference was seen.

By 1987, pro-Marxist and violence-prone base communities in Latin America numbered over 600,000. To better appreciate that number, not even 1,000 Roman Catholic dioceses existed in North and South America combined at the time. At the time, almost all of those exhibited some doubt in their allegiance to Rome and the Vatican. Additionally, countries that were stalwarts in their adherence to the Vatican, such as Italy and Spain, were removing roadblocks to the legalization of divorce and the liberalization of laws written with Christian-based restraints, such as those dealing with

family, sexuality and pornography. Effectively, the church's ability to influence secular laws was under attack in a manner never seen before in its 2,000-year history.

Within what was called Catholicism, the adjective "Roman" was frequently dropped. "Modern Catholicism" became the newly applied term that was more consistent and compatible with secular globalism. A large majority of priests, bishops, laity and religious leaders had assumed the traits of the new religious culture. They had ceased be Catholics in any manner that would have seemed familiar to Pope John XXIII when he undertook Vatican II. This is the face of the enemy the church not only faces going into the 21st century, but it is also the face of the enemy that Pope John XXIII unwittingly fertilized in his honorable but misguided attempt to spiritually rejuvenate not just his congregation but the world masses. This takeover was a perfect display of Gramsci's mandate to Marxists everywhere: Exploit each opportunity that presents itself. Be rigid in material philosophy. Be clever as you do it. Ally yourself with any and every force that presents itself as an opening for Marxist insertion and secular beliefs.

This is plainly evident when observing how Marxists align themselves with Christian churches and organizations in cooperative dialogue and mutual humanitarian undertakings. The originally Christian mind in Western countries was already eroding as capitalism persuaded these countries they can and should find contentment in the idea that the meaning of life is life itself. Life is rooted in patriotism to one's nation. It is conducted with a high-degree of solidarity amongst a society of all nations. Life needed a reverence for all things that surrounded it—plants, animals, the water and the air. Milovan Djilas once wrote, "Life is patriotic without being nationalistic, socially responsible without being socialist, and respectful of human rights and those of all creatures without calling itself Christian."

As the pope leads the bruised but still powerful and distinct structure of his Roman Catholic Church into the unpredictable and volatile new century, he is likely certain the shadow of Gramsci will follow suit. Sadly, because of her silence, Gramsci's strategy of perverting the Catholic Church is in full swing. The religion of God is being replaced with the religion of man, facilitating the Marxist control of the minds of de-Christianized masses. Not since the time of Nero has the very fabric of the church itself been in such danger of destruction. ❖

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