

The 'Whalebone' in the (Social Work) 'Corset'? Notes on Antonio Gramsci and Social Work Educators

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The writings of the Italian philosopher and political activist Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937) are neglected in social work, but his complex body of work might aid the profession's understanding in the early twenty-first century. Social work education, specifically, may have much to gain from Gramsci's theorisation. The focus of this article—perhaps, something of an introduction of Gramsci—will be on his approach to Marxism and his ideas related to 'common sense', intellectuals and intellectuality. It will be maintained that Gramsci's contributions on these questions could contribute to social workers' critical reflection during a period of neoliberal inspired transformations.

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Introduction

The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW)/European Association of Schools of Social Work (EASSW) conference, held in March 2007, set out to examine the impact of social change on the social professions. This event was located in Palma in Italy and—coincidentally—the month after the conference marked the 70th anniversary of the death of the Italian philosopher and political activist Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937). Although the writings of Gramsci are rarely referred to in any analytical depth (if at all) within the discourse of social work and although his work does not appear to have been the focus of any papers at the conference, it is the contention of this short article that his spectre may well have haunted the proceedings. Perhaps his ghostly form circulates around social work partly because some of Gramsci's concerns are frequently those around which social work, and associated forms of activity, gravitates (see also Giroux, 1999; Ledwith, 2001). Here,

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for example, we might refer to Gramsci's remarks, in his Prison Notebooks (PN), on the treatment of the disabled and mentally ill, on incest and elder abuse and so on (Forgacs, 1988, pp. 280–281; see also Germino, 1986, p. 23).¹ More fundamentally, Gramsci's life and legacy may be of importance for social work because he was a participant in the struggle over the trajectory of 'modernity' and what it means to be 'modern' (Garrett, 2008a).

Since his death, in 1937, the right to claim Gramsci's legacy has been fought over by a number of different currents on the political left (Martin, 1998). Gramsci the writer and thinker was the 'posthumous product of allies from the Communist movement who arranged his notes, thematically ordered them, reconstructed the booklists, and saved the manuscripts from destruction by spiriting them away to the Soviet Union, where they were first carefully edited' (Brennan, 2001, p. 146). So, as Timothy Brennan (2001, p. 146) points out, what are now regarded as Gramsci's main thematic preoccupations emerged from editorial decisions made by intellectuals from the *Partito Comunista Italiano* (PCI). From the mid-1970s Gramsci (or perhaps more accurately a particular version of Gramsci) was connected to the evolution of Eurocommunism and a prominent Socialist parliamentary official and professor—Noberto Bobbio—crafted a reading of Gramsci that 'helped forge a "Eurocommunist" version of the man' (Brennan, 2001, p. 147).² This, at a time when the PCI was about to seek 'respectability within a parliamentary framework and needing to remould the image of its chief intellectual icon' (Brennan, 2001, p. 147; see also Bambery, 2006). Subsequently, Gramsci (or perhaps a version of 'Gramsci lite') has been used as a point of departure for a number of writers associated with 'post-Marxism' (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; Laclau, 1996; Tormey & Townshend, 2006). However, somewhat ironically given that Gramsci himself was a 'college drop out' who never actually wrote any books, the 'post-Marxist' phenomenon is a mostly academic activity which is confined, not to a prison cell, but to the environs of the university precinct and professor's office (see also Levy, 1986).

The article will begin by suggesting that Gramsci can be perceived, in some respects, as a revolutionary *outsider* and this is a dimension which merits consideration when engaging with his work. However, on account of Gramsci's political orientation, it might be countered that the suggestion that he could be of relevance to social work (its objectives, aims, rhetoric) recklessly brings the profession into the orbit of Marxism. Even worse, for some, it could be maintained that he is tainted, by association, with the 'failed' project of 'socialism' in the Soviet Union and its satellites. Gramsci's Marxism will, therefore, be examined next along with some of his thoughts on 'common sense', intellectuals and, more broadly, intellectuality.

The Revolutionary Outsider

An aspect of Gramsci's life which can, perhaps, be interpreted as important is his complex status as an 'outsider' and this is apparent in at least four ways. First, he was from Sardinia which 'held a relationship to northern Italy comparable to that of "underdeveloped" nations today' (Germino, 1986, p. 24; see also Landy, 1986).

Moreover, those from Sardinia, such as Gramsci, were often regarded with disdain. Second, from childhood, Gramsci was disabled and—throughout his life—periodically suffered from mental health problems (see, for example, Lawner in Gramsci, 1979). He had a malformation of the spine, which doctors attempted to cure when he was a child by ‘having him suspended for long periods from a beam on the ceiling, and when he grew up he became hunch-backed and was barely five feet tall’ (Hoare & Nowell-Smith, 2005, p.xix). On account of the ‘hunchback’ which was ‘probably as a result of contracting Pott’s disease, he suffered from the local superstition toward anyone or thing that was different, and often felt rejected as a consequence’ (Bellamy, 1994, pp. x–xi). Despite this disability, Dante Germino (1986, p. 21) has noted that ‘so many learned dispositions’ on the influences on Gramsci fail to take account of his ‘physical deformity (*sic*) on his life and thought’. Similarly his disability is often omitted in the pictorial imagery of him; indeed, these representations (perhaps suggestive of a somewhat more studious Che Guevara) implicitly promote a particular picture of revolutionary masculinity and attempt, it could be argued, to *erase* Gramsci’s disability. However, Germino (1986, p. 21) has contended that

Antonio Gramsci was a *gobbo* (hunchback) helped make him enormously more attentive to the plight of individuals and groups at the “margins of history” ... For a long time, his hunchbacked condition made him feel an “intruder” in his own family, to say nothing of how he felt in relation to the “fossilized” Sardinian attitudes that condemned and ridiculed any deviation from the norm.

Clearly, it is necessary to avoid crudely interpreting his politics and theorisation from his disabled status because this would risk producing a reductive, psychosocial account of Gramsci. Nonetheless, his disability (and how it was perceived) must have contributed to his psychological and political formation. What is more, in his writings Gramsci reveals a continuing preoccupation with the body.

A third component of Gramsci’s outsider or peripheral positioning relates to the fact that he was, for almost a quarter of his life, a prisoner of the Italian Fascist state and, as a result, he suffered from social isolation and periodic depression (Gramsci, 1979, pp. 153–154, 256–257). Finally, there is some evidence that during his period of confinement Gramsci became somewhat marginalised within the *Partito Comunista d’Italia* (PCd’I) and even his ‘Italian Communist comrades apparently lost contact with him as the years wore on although he still remained, at least, nominally, their leader’ (Buttigieg, 1986, p. 2; see also Sillanpoa, 1981, p. 128). However, what prison, a life *inside*, did provide Gramsci with was space to think *outside* the confines of the formal structures of the international communist movement during a period of turmoil and Stalinisation (Anderson, 1976). This thinking led him to reconsider how Marxism could be viewed and interpreted in the light of evolving economic, political and social circumstances.

For Marx, Not ‘Messiah’: Gramsci’s ‘Unapologetic’ Marxism

In proposing that Gramsci is of potential usefulness for those involved in social work, either in education or practice, this discussion is founded on a rejection of the notion

that social work is a non-political activity. Related to this point, this brief exploration is underpinned by a willingness to engage with the form of open, pluralistic Marxism which Gramsci's thinking opens up. As Kate Crehan (2002, p. 176) has argued, Gramsci was an 'unapologetic' Marxist and for 'many nowadays ... for whom the fall of the Berlin Wall demolished Marxism together with communism' this 'seems embarrassingly naïve and passé, if not downright offensive'. Nonetheless, Gramsci's intellectual project was 'framed within an unambiguously Marxist problematic' and it is 'impossible to separate his insights from his Marxism without reducing him to "Gramsci lite"'. Engaging seriously with his work necessarily means engaging with Marxism' (Crehan, 2002, p. 176). Elaborating on this theme, she maintains correctly that how 'class is lived, is central to the prison notebooks ... what it means to be a worker, or a peasant, in a particular time and place' (Crehan, 2002, p. 195). Related to this approach, for Gramsci, 'as for Marx, class acts in history, but it does so through the political and social identities that previous histories have brought into being' (Crehan, 2002, p. 195).

Gramsci was, of course, guided by the writings of Marx, but he rejected the notion that his work provided a blueprint for change which had to be adhered to rigidly and this orientation was apparent even in his, perhaps now neglected, pre-prison journalism. In an article commenting on the revolution in Russia in 1917, Gramsci asserted that the Bolsheviks were *not* 'Marxists' in the sense that they had

not used the Master's works to compile a rigid doctrine ... They are *living out* Marxist thought ... And this true Marxist thought has always identified as the most important factor in history not crude, economic facts, but rather men [*sic* throughout] themselves, and the societies they create, as they learn to live with one another and understand one another. (In Bellamy, 1994, pp. 39–40)

The following year he returned to the theme when he maintained, against those who attempted to produce an arid and prescriptive reading of Marx, that

Marx did not write a nice little doctrine, he is not a Messiah who left a string of parables laden with categorical imperatives, with absolute, unquestionable norms beyond the categories of time and space. The only categorical imperative, the only norm: "Workers of the world unite!" (In Forgacs, 1988, p. 36)

One key area which for many, remains innovative in Gramsci's work is the fact that although he retained the classical Marxist base–superstructure model he attempted to *rethink* it and destabilise it (Cox, 1983, p. 363). Thus, while he retained 'even in his final writings the language of base and superstructure, in practice he transcends this over-simple metaphor of stacked layers' (Crehan, 2002, p. 72).³ During a period when Marxist theory was dominated by economic determinism and mechanistic approaches, Gramsci's work (particularly his focus on hegemony) with its recognition of the importance of 'superstructural' factors (such as politics, culture and ideology) can, therefore, be interpreted as shifting the emphasis away from an overly narrow focus in the economic basis of society (Joseph, 2006). Integral to this Gramscian approach is an understanding that the base–superstructure relation is far

less static: more *churning*, more dynamic than the dominant, authorised accounts of Marxism maintained. As Marcia Landy (1986, p. 53) has suggested, Gramsci's

dialectical analysis proceeds from the assumption that everything in life is in constant motion, that everything is inter-related rather than rigidly schematic and systematic. In Gramsci's analysis of institutions, the church, schools, corporations, trade unions, and forms of "entertainment", social structures are conceived of as a source of lived social relations and as sources of constant conflict.

In an English context, John Clarke (2004, pp. 4–5) has implicitly used a Gramscian perspective to try and map some of the changes taking place in relation to 'welfare' regimes which house social work and related forms of endeavour. Analytically, this orientation encourages us to have regard to 'multiple and potentially divergent or opposed projects or designs for the future ... even if there are dominant forces and voices' (Clarke, 2004, p. 5). More fundamentally, this analytical tact is rooted in an 'approach to institutions, arrangements and relationships as contradictory—containing antagonistic pressures, forces, interests and potentials (that may be contained, but also overflow their containment)' (Clarke, 2004, p. 5). Thus, Clarke opposes 'linear and inevitabilist narratives' of 'welfare reform' and lays an emphasis on the 'uneven and unfinished' nature of change. In this sense, New Labour's project to, for example, re-design welfare provision for the unemployed ('job-seekers') and to create a matrix of agencies and practices which prompt individuals to become self-activated and self-supporting, still remains incomplete and contested.

'Everyone is a Philosopher': Gramsci and 'Common Sense'

Gramsci was 'opposed to both everyday "common sense", the philosophy of the masses, and to the manipulative and passivity-inducing effects of elite-dominated politics. He was, therefore, an advocate of a *revolution in everyday life*' and, more broadly, a wholesale intellectual and moral reformation (Robinson, 2006, p. 75, emphasis added). This project needed, moreover, to be 'analogous in function and scale to the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century' (Forgacs, 1988, p. 323). Everyone:

has a number of "conceptions of the world", which often tend to be in contradiction with one another and therefore form an incoherent whole. Many of these conceptions are imposed and absorbed passively from outside, or from the past, and are accepted and lived uncritically. In this case they constitute what Gramsci calls "common sense" (or, in another context, "folklore"). Many elements in popular common sense contribute to people's subordination by making situations of inequality and oppression appear to them as natural and unchangeable ... It is contradictory—it contains elements of truth as well as elements of misrepresentation—and it is upon these contradictions that leverage must be obtained in a "struggle of political hegemonies". (Forgacs, 1988, p. 421)

This understanding was important to Gramsci because it clearly implied that Marxism (referred to in the PN, in order to evade censors, as the 'philosophy of praxis') should not simply present itself as an abstract philosophy but 'should enter

people's common sense, giving them a more critical understanding of their own situation' (Forgacs, 1988, p. 421). Thus, Marxism was not to be imposed mechanically from outside, but should draw out and elaborate 'elements of critical awareness and "good sense" which are already present within people's "common sense"' (Forgacs, 1988, p. 323). This, along with material changes, might then present the possibility of going *beyond* 'common sense' and onto a new plain of understanding. For Gramsci:

A philosophy of praxis cannot but present itself at the outset in a polemical and critical guise, as superseding the existing mode of thinking and existing concrete thought (the existing cultural world). First of all, therefore, it must be a criticism of "common sense", basing itself initially, however, on common sense in order to demonstrate that "everyone" is a philosopher and that it is not only a question of introducing from scratch a scientific form of thought into everyone's individual life, but of renovating and making "critical" an already existing activity. (In Forgacs, 1988, p. 332, emphasis added)

Thus, as Forgacs (1988, p. 323) maintains,

the philosophy of praxis can exert leverage on people's consciousness because part of that consciousness is already aware of the truth. It thus draws out and elaborates that which people already "feel" but do not "know", in other words that which is present in nascent or inchoate form in their consciousness but which is contradicted and immobilized by other conceptions.

This is related to Gramsci's perception that the

personality is strangely composite: it contains Stone Age elements and principles of a more advanced science, prejudices from all past phases of history at the local level and intuitions of a future philosophy which will be that of a human race united the world over. (In Forgacs, 1988, p. 326)

So, for him, people's understanding of the world 'was never simply wrong or ignorant; it might also contain a rational "kernel" of "good sense"' (Brunt, 1989, p. 155; see also Clarke *et al.*, 2007).

Opposing 'Feeble and Colourless Intellectualism'

The work Gramsci undertook in prison on intellectuality and intellectuals was preceded by initial contributions provided for the socialist press. As early as 1916, for example, in a piece titled 'Socialism and Culture' he was beginning to sketch out his thoughts:

It is essential to get out of the habit of conceiving culture as encyclopaedic knowledge, and, correspondingly, of man as a receptacle to be crammed with empirical data, with crude, unconnected facts which he must file away in his brain, as though in the columns of a dictionary, in order to be able to respond, on any given occasion, to the different stimuli of the world around him. This form of culture really is harmful especially to the proletariat. It can only serve to create misfits, people who believe themselves superior to the rest of humanity because they have amassed in their memory a certain quantity of facts and dates, which they

trot out at any opportunity, setting up a kind of barrier between themselves and others. (In Bellamy, 1994, p. 9)

According to Gramsci, this ‘false conception of culture’ served to create ‘feeble and colourless intellectualism’. This, for him, ‘is not culture, it is pedantry; it is not intelligence, but intellectualism’ (in Bellamy, 1994, p. 9). Those associated with this ‘intellectualism’ thought ‘themselves superior to the most skilled of skilled workers, who performs a precise and essential task in his life and who is hundred times better at his work than they are at theirs’ (in Bellamy, 1994, p. 9). Gramsci shunned, therefore, the superiority complex which the dominant contemporary understanding of intellectuals generated: his emphasis was on the social location, *role and function* of ‘intellectuals’, not on their personal attributes: in short, it was for him a question of ‘being there’ over ‘being something’ (Fischman & McLaren, 2005, p. 435).

Furthermore, underpinning his perspective was a democratising mission since he was intent on extending ‘the concept of the intellectual beyond the received notion of an elite intelligentsia’ (Martin, 1998, p. 44; see also Williams, 1983, p. 169). In this context, he argued that although ‘one can speak of intellectuals, one cannot speak of non-intellectuals, because non-intellectuals do not exist ... There is no human activity from which every form of intellectual participation can be excluded’ (in Forgacs, 1988, p. 321). Thus:

in any physical work, even the most degraded and mechanical, there exists a minimum of creative intellectual activity ... All men are intellectuals, one could therefore say; but not all men have in society the function of intellectuals (thus, because it can happen that everyone at some time fries a couple of eggs or sews up a tear in a jacket, we do not necessarily say that everyone is a cook or a tailor). Thus, there are historically formed specialized categories for the exercise of the intellectual function. They are formed in connection with all social groups, but especially in connection with the most important social groups, and they undergo most extensive and complex elaboration in connection with the dominant social group. (In Forgacs, 1988, p. 304)

As he comes to redefine ‘intellectual’, it designates:

anyone whose function in society is primarily that of organizing, administering, directing, educating or leading others. Gramsci is concerned both with the analysis of those intellectuals who function directly or indirectly on behalf of a dominant social group to organize coercion and consent and with the problem of how to form intellectuals of the subaltern social groups who will be capable of opposing and transforming the existing social order. (Forgacs, 1988, p. 300)

Furthermore, the ‘mode of being a new intellectual can no longer consist in eloquence ... but in active participation in practical life, as a constructor, organizer, “permanent persuader”’ (in Forgacs, 1988, p. 321).

‘Traditional’ and ‘Organic’ Intellectuals

For Gramsci ‘every “essential” social group which emerges into history out of the preceding economic structure ... has found categories of intellectuals already in

existence' (in Forgacs, 1988, p.302). The 'most typical' of these categories of intellectuals was, he argued, that of ecclesiastics:

who for a long time ... held a monopoly of a number of important services: religious ideology, that is the philosophy and science of the age, together with schools, education, morality, justice, charity, good works, etc. The category of ecclesiastics can be considered the category of intellectuals bound to the landed aristocracy. It had equal status juridically with the aristocracy, with which it shared the exercise of feudal ownership of land, and the use of state privileges with property. (In Forgacs, 1988, p. 302)

However, over time, we also find 'the formation ... of a stratum of administrators, etc., scholars and scientists, theorists, non-ecclesiastical philosophers, etc' (in Forgacs, 1988, p. 303). These 'various categories of traditional intellectuals ... put themselves forward as autonomous and independent of the dominant social group'. They think of themselves 'as "independent", autonomous, endowed with a character of their own, etc.' (in Forgacs, 1988, p.303). One of the most important characteristics, therefore, of any group that is 'developing towards dominance' is:

its struggle to assimilate and conquer "ideologically" the traditional intellectuals, but this assimilation and conquest is made quicker and more efficacious the more the group in question succeeds in simultaneously elaborating its own organic intellectuals. (In Forgacs, 1988, p. 304–305, emphasis added)⁴

Within this Gramscian framework, therefore, intellectuals (as we have seen very broadly conceived) play a crucial role in helping to maintain or challenge a given economic and social order. That is to say, they (including social work educators and social workers), are key actors operating within civil society, enmeshed in the exercise of hegemony.

In order for an oppressed group to challenge and ultimately usurp the existing order it must, therefore, sever the ties that bind and cease being dependent on intellectuals from outside its own class and create 'organic' intellectuals of its own. These 'organic intellectuals' of the new, emergent order would become, in his well-known phrase, the 'whalebone in the corset' (in Robinson, 2006, p. 79).

Within Gramsci's scheme, it is, however, also possible 'to be a politically abhorrent' organic intellectual (Brennan, 2001, p. 175); that is to say, they need not fulfil a progressive role politically. He was also clear that the creation of organic intellectuals of the working class was no easy task:

If our aim is to produce a new stratum of intellectuals, including those capable of the highest degree of specialization, from a social group which has not traditionally developed the appropriate attitudes, then we have unprecedented difficulties to overcome. (In Forgacs, 1988, p.320)

Nonetheless, Gramsci believed that obstacles could be

surmounted in two complementary ways: through the mass political party, which functions as a "collective intellectual" ... and through the school, which must be reformed so as to overcome the streaming of manual and mental skills and to enable a "new equilibrium" between them to emerge. These two developments

would also be part of a wider movement towards liberation and self-government. (Forgacs, 1988, pp. 300–301)

We can see from this, therefore, that Gramsci retained the idea that the Marxist political party—or ‘modern prince’—was a vital and indispensable element in the struggle for socialism (Showstack Sassoon, 1986; see also Gill, 2000). However, instead of ‘a Bolshevik vanguardism which would deliver to the ... working class an historical vision formulated from an Archimedean point populated by professional revolutionaries, at the core of Gramsci’s project was a *critical pedagogy*’ (Rupert, 2006, p. 94, emphasis added). For him, therefore, the

modern prince, the myth-prince, cannot be a real person, a concrete individual. It can only be an organism, a complex element of society in which a collective will, which has already been recognised and has to some extent asserted itself in action, begins to take concrete form. (In Hoare & Nowell Smith, 2005, p. 129)

Gill (2000), however, has attempted to reformulate this notion for a present-day when popular protest is, perhaps, apt to be more dispersed and in the West less likely to be led by a mass political party of the Marxist Left.

Critical Reflection: ‘Know Thyself’

The argument at the core of this discussion is that all of Gramsci’s themes and concepts potentially gel with the constant invocations for social workers to become more critically reflective (White *et al.*, 2006). For him, critical reflection involved a scrutiny of the self within a particular time and place. As early as 1916, for example, he stressed the significance of the famous saying of Solon (later appropriated by Socrates) to ‘Know Thyself’. Solon, according to Gramsci, was not intent on encouraging a merely narcissistic or intensively singular and insular inquiry: the saying was prompted by a much more political and democratising aspiration:

Solon intended to provoke the plebeians, who believed themselves *bestial in origin*, while the nobles were *of divine origin*, to reflect on themselves and recognize themselves as being *the same human nature as the nobles*, and therefore to claim to be made *equal with them in civil rights*. And he identifies this consciousness of the shared humanity of plebeians and nobles, as the basis and the historical reason for the rise of democracies in antiquity. (In Bellamy, 1994, pp. 8–9, emphases added)

Gramsci used this interpretation as a foundation for his own understanding which connected the individual with the wider community:

To know oneself means to be oneself, to be master of oneself, to assert one’s own identity, to emerge from chaos and become an agent of order, but of one’s own order, one’s own disciplined dedication to an ideal. And one cannot achieve this without knowing others, knowing their history, the succession of efforts they have made to be what they are, to create the civilization they have created. (In Bellamy, 1994, p. 11)

Thus, the ‘ultimate’ dialectical aim was ‘to know oneself better through learning about others, and to know others by learning about oneself’ (in Bellamy, 1994, p. 12).

He returned to the same theme during the period of his confinement, insisting that there was a need to engage in

criticism of all previous philosophy, in so far as this has left stratified deposits in popular philosophy. The starting point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what really 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. Such an inventory must therefore be made at the outset. (In Forgas, 1988, p. 326, emphasis added)

In short, Gramsci’s point was that if those seeking fundamental social change

were to develop a clear and coherent conception of the world they ... should make a start by asking how people experienced the world as it was, how they got by and coped with it on a daily basis. And, “people” and “they” included “me”, “us”, the would-be world changers. (Brunt, 1989, pp. 153–154)

Discussion

This short article merely aspires to serve as something of an introduction to Gramsci’s work and it has not tried to make schematic links between his writing and social work. In short, the aim has not been to dwell, in a mechanistic way, on *applications*. Rather, it has been to propose that there are suggestive *connections* or *routes* which merit further exploration and investigation (see also Garrett, 2008, forthcoming). Perhaps, in this context, the concept of hegemony is also particularly significant in that Gramsci expands the definition of politics and the ‘political’. That is to say, this notion of hegemony shows how ‘seemingly private and personal aspects of daily life are politically important aspects of operations of power’ (Ives, 2004, p. 71). As a consequence, he was deeply interested in the ‘daily and molecular operations of power’ (Ives, 2001, p. 71).

This attentiveness to the unquestioned, the everyday and ‘molecular’ could potentially help steer social work in a more reflexive direction and move it (or sections of the profession) into the orbit of anti-capitalism and those movements and social forces seeking alternative ways to live (Mooney & Law, 2007). At present, this might, for example, lead to a questioning of focal ‘common sense’ assumptions—assumptions which are, moreover, often embedded in social workers’ own *professional* ‘common sense’. This suggests that educators and practitioners could seek to become more analytical and intent of *defamiliarising* elements of an ‘official’ social work discourse which is frequently riddled with take-it-for-granted assumptions which are reflective of a particular and historically and economically determined social totality: often this is most apparent, not only in the categories that social workers are apt to use, promote and reify (for example, the ‘case’), but also in the documentation deployed and in recording practices (see, for example, Garrett, 2003).

Moreover, the suggestion here is that a whole range of policies impacting on social work can be interpreted through the Gramscian lens. For example, the faltering Labour administration in England is, under the *Care Matters* programme, intent on

introducing what has been termed 'social work practices' (SWP) (Secretary of State for Education and Skills, 2006; DfES, 2007; Garrett, 2008b). One interpretation of this development is that the government appears committed to the privatisation of local authority services for 'looked after children' and their families and there has, as a consequence, been inchoate opposition to SWP (Hughes, 2002; Stein, 2006; Toynbee, 2006; ADSS *et al.*, 2007; Mathiason, 2007). Social work educators seeking to analyse these developments and prompt detailed interrogation of the plan might, therefore, encourage students and practitioners to focus on a range of related questions: what is the context for the introduction of *Care Matters* and SWP? Why are SWP being introduced now rather than at some other time? What are some of the main characteristics of the political and social landscape into which these proposals are being introduced? What are the central, core ideas underpinning the introduction of SWP? How is language being deployed and manipulated (Fairclough, 2000)? How is the official discourse on SWP being constructed and 'put together' in terms of the 'text' and the 'talk'? Are there 'common sense' assumptions which are going unchallenged? How are attempts being constructed in order to gain consent and 'win over' dissenting interests and voices to achieve hegemony for the project to introduce SWP? What is the role being fulfilled by 'intellectuals' and 'experts' prominent in promoting the SWP plan (Le Grand & Pettigrew, 2006; Le Grand, 2007)? In contrast, whose views and perceptions are being rendered marginal and worthless? Are there any specific perspectives (perhaps parents or children) which are being silenced, muted or 're-framed'? What role, in a society where capital accumulation is central, is the private sector playing in promoting the privatisation and plundering of public services (Confederation of British Industry, 2006)? How is the role of social work and social workers being delineated? What is the implicit trajectory being put in place for social work in the context of SWP? Importantly also, of course, how can counter hegemony be forged (Law & Mooney, 2007)? Where are the social forces seeking to install SWP most vulnerable to critique? How can social workers, social work educators and students help to construct alliances (often with what might initially seem unlikely partners) in order to resist the privatisation of public services for 'looked after' children?

Engaging in such oppositional activity is, of course, a far from easy task because those in positions of structural power (and invested with the power of naming and defining) seek to maintain hegemony and identify what is permissible and what should be 'closed down'.⁵ More broadly, within academic institutions, educators are often constrained because programmes have curricula (mostly grounded in a neoliberal world view or incessantly inflected in that direction) which is predetermined and mapped out by central 'authorities'. However, as indicated earlier, this is not to argue that there are no 'spaces' for a more critical engagement within social work education. Moreover, hegemony is 'not a state of grace which is installed forever ... [it is] not a formation which incorporates everybody' (Hall in Fischman & McLaren, 2005, p. 430).

Nonetheless, any attempts to promote a more critical form of intellectual engagement in social work education and practice is, of course, complex because

social work is constructed differently in different local and national settings. Indeed, although not specifically drawing on Gramsci's thinking, this is one of the themes at the core of Gudrid Aga Askeland & Malcolm Payne's (2006, p.734) remarks on a current, within social work education, which appears mistakenly intent on promoting a restrictive 'cultural hegemony'. For them, social work education has

become part of the global market in that those who have the resources to produce and market social work literature are able to disseminate their theoretical views and skills in social work throughout the world as the way of handling social issues in a professional way, ignoring the different local context in which it is produced and in which it should be read.

This dynamic can be detected in, for example, talk on the need for greater 'standardisation', 'global standards' and in moves to ensure that there is one universal definition of 'social work'.

Conclusion

All of Gramsci's ideas and formulations are inter-connected and present themselves to his readers as a complex mosaic. His thoughts on particular topics should not, therefore, be perceived as discrete and enclosed. However, as hinted throughout this discussion, his writings on these questions could contribute to social workers' critical reflection, understanding, and attempts to construct a more oppositional form of social work education and practice during a period of contested neoliberal inspired transformations.

Notes

- [1] The Prison Notebooks (PN) comprising 33 exercise books were written between 8 February 1929 and June 1935. Readers new to Gramsci can find English translations of his writings in Bellamy (1994), Forgacs (1988), Hoare (1988), and Hoare & Nowell Smith (2005). Jones (2006) provides a short, accessible introduction to Gramsci laying particular emphasis on his conceptualisations for cultural studies. The playwright Trevor Griffiths (2007) featured a dramatised Antonio Gramsci in his *Occupations* which was first performed in 1970.
- [2] Gramsci had been dead for 20 years before the first small selection of his writings was published in English. However, his work was, for a period, very influential across sections of the Left in Britain (Nairn, 1964; Williams, 1973; Hall *et al.*, 1978). It was, though, the administrations of Margaret Thatcher (May 1979–November 1990) which triggered particular interest in Gramscian approaches. Indeed, the concept 'Thatcherism' and the attempt to comprehend the 'great moving right show' was underpinned by an application of Gramsci's theorising to the British social formation during a period of radical transformation (Hall, 1993). A key figure in this regard was Stuart Hall who was influential in bringing a Gramscian perspective to cultural studies (Hall & Jacques, 1989). He also made a number of important interventions in the British Communist Party publication, *Marxism Today*: calling, for example, for those on the Left to think 'problems in a Gramscian way' (Hall, 1987, p.227). More recently Hall (1996, 1998, 2003) has utilised some of Gramsci's formulations to better understand New Labour (see also Finlayson, 2003). John Clarke, an associate of Hall's from the late-1970s, has also brought a distinctly Gramscian inflected perspective to the politics of social policy (Clarke, 2004; Clarke *et al.*, 2007).

- [3] Zygmunt Bauman, whose sociology has been imported into social work following his break with Marxism, has maintained 'Gramsci immunized me once and for all against brain-paralyzing bacchilli of systems, structures, functions, billiard-ball models of the agent and mirror models of the subject's minds, determined past and preordained future' (in Beilharz, 2001, p. 334; see also Ferguson, 2008).
- [4] Gramsci made specific comments on intellectuals of the rural type and some of his comments may continue to have contemporary resonance, outside Italy, in small towns and rural settings. Richard Pugh (2007), for example, has produced an interesting article on social work in rural settings which could, perhaps, be reinterpreted and enriched using a Gramscian perspective.
- [5] For example, in her review into the status of social care services, published in April 2007, Dame Denise Platt drew attention to a criticism of the *British Journal of Social Work* with its 'small readership' and articles that are 'tortuously theoretical and get nowhere' (Platt, 2007, p. 17; see also Department of Health, 2007). This could, of course, be interpreted as a question of subjective preference or taste. However, it might also be argued that this criticism, from a primary definer of the purpose and intent of social work and social care, was actually targeted at the journal's willingness to engage with quite abstract theoretical and political questions.

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