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Author(s): MARGARET LEAH KING
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THE SOCIAL ROLE OF INTELLECTUALS: Antonio Gramsci and the Italian Renaissance

MARGARET L. KING

THE INTELLECTUAL AND ARTISTIC GLORIES of the Italian Renaissance attract tourists to museums, lure scholars to libraries, inspire novels. Yet Renaissance culture remains strangely opaque. Why did a few Italian towns on the edge of the modern world produce generations of geniuses during two troubled centuries? Was their heroic vision a response to the concrete events and structures of the age, or did it spring from a separate and wholly mental world? An array of possible explanations has emerged. Some investigators see ideas as independent of society. Some view ideas as passive reflections of economic and political events, or as expressions of social and economic interests. Most agree that the situation is more complicated: that ideas are generated within social frameworks, and that intellectual activity is active and helps to move history. In exploring the complex relations between ideas and society, scholars tend dutifully to read more, work harder—and flee generalization. Perhaps new generalization is in order.

Antonio Gramsci—philosopher, journalist, linguist, co-founder of the Italian Communist Party, recently “discovered” and now much in vogue—assigns a unique and crucial role to intellectuals in the process of social change. And he finds in his own national tradition a resource and standard against which to test his theories of cultural process. Thus he speaks not only of

Ms. King is an Associate Professor at the New School of Liberal Arts, Brooklyn College. Her specialization is the Italian Renaissance. A previous contributor to Soundings, she is currently preparing a book for publication entitled Humanism and Society in Early Renaissance Venice.
intellectuals, but of Italian intellectuals, and of intellectuals of the Renaissance—critical figures of Italy's past, laden with responsibility for her present. Gramsci's theory of intellectual activity may help illumine a period distinguished by its intense forms of intellectual life. His analysis of the achievements and failures of Renaissance culture may spur neglected forms of inquiry and contribute to a deeper understanding of that brilliant age.

In this essay I will first outline Gramsci's views of the role of intellectuals in society. I will then introduce his explicit judgments, based upon his social theory, of the Italian Renaissance. Finally, I will deduce from his social and historical theories further possible methods of exploring the phenomena of Renaissance intellectual history.

I. Gramsci on the Function of Intellectuals

A brief and systematic explication of Gramsci's views is both difficult and risky. It is difficult because it will be necessary to compress into a brief and abstract statement ideas that are distributed through several volumes, where they are stated not abstractly but only as applied to immediate social, historical, and philosophical issues. It is risky because Gramsci himself warned against systematic or speculative philosophy. He saw as the unique merit of his "philosophy of praxis" that it unfolded only in relation to concrete events, that it never became remote from the flux of life. Let it be understood, therefore, that Gramsci's views will inevitably be distorted and his express wishes betrayed in this attempt to capsulize some of his central concepts. It is hoped that the distortion will not be too great, and that the pertinence to life itself of Gramsci's ideas will still be evident, even in this abstract formulation.

These cautions noted, a framework may be established for the discussion of Gramsci's understanding of the social activity of intellectuals. Four main problems will be dealt with: (1) the distinction between traditional and organic intellectuals; (2) the organization of intellectual culture within a dominant social group; (3) the organization of intellectual culture throughout society as a whole; (4) the dynamics of intellectual culture, that is, the process by which intellectual activity bridges the gap between economic change and political domination, translating economic into political hegemony. A series of four diagrams will
be employed as a basis for explication (inspired by Gramsci himself, whose language is often rich in visual images). Each diagram is intended to represent the relations of ideas and concepts pertinent to each of these four problems.

1. Traditional and organic intellectuals (Diagram 1)

The concept fundamental to Gramsci's theory of intellectual activity and social process is the distinction between traditional and organic intellectuals. Traditional intellectuals include those persons most of us would spontaneously consider to be intellectuals: philosophers, artists, writers, and perhaps teachers, religious leaders and journalists. These intellectuals share a common language, the refined language of high culture acquired through meticulous education, and a common heritage extending back to Plato and beyond. Joined by these rich cultural links, traditional intellectuals tend to see themselves and to be seen as detached from society, from the shifting currents of economic and political life. They perceive themselves and are perceived as an independent social group. But they are not; they too are possessed by history. Generation after generation, they are absorbed into new social groups through the activity of the organic intellectuals of these groups.

Organic intellectuals are the members of each social group who, whatever their profession or economic role, create the ideas which rationalize and justify the interests of their own social group and its claim to dominance. Within the ruling class, they might include engineers, managers, bureaucrats; within the proletariat, trade union leaders. As each new social group comes to the forefront in history (represented by the vertical axes in Diagram 1), its organic intellectuals intersect and penetrate the stratum of traditional intellectuals (the horizontal axis in Diagram 1). The latter (whether because of their own social origin or a more subtle form of linkage) are absorbed into one social group or another, merging with its organic intellectuals, who share the language and heritage which are the particular property of the intellectual elite. Even if the traditional intellectuals continue to believe they exist outside of the social process and identify consciously only with their heritage in time, they have been expropriated by the social process and have become absorbed into its structure through the mediation of the organic intellectuals. It is through this process of fusion that the world-
conception of a given social group becomes translated into philosophy or art, and becomes the shared world-view of that segment of the intelligentsia to which it is wedded.

Diagram 1: Traditional and Organic Intellectuals

2. The organization of intellectual culture within a dominant social group (Diagram 2)

While it is the aim of every emerging social group to harness the energies of traditional intellectuals, that group which is dominant at any time in society fulfills this aim most successfully—and it must do so if it is to survive. The intelligentsia, formed by the fusion of organic and traditional intellectuals within the dominant social group, defends that group's interest and expresses its world-view. Intellectuals organize and enforce the authority of the group they represent.

Of course, within the intelligentsia that is cohesive with a dominant social group there will emerge distinctions in quality of thought and creation. The spectrum of talent may be pictured as a pyramid (Diagram 2; the figure is Gramsci's). At the base of this pyramid reside those intellectuals most closely related to the economic activity characteristic of the social group in question, and who perform routine types of intellectual work (managerial, administrative). These are most appropriately defined as the
organic intellectuals within the intellectual elite. At the peak of
the pyramid resides the single great thinker of the social group
in question, the unique individual in whose work is expressed
most coherently the world-conception of his social group. This
figure will be one of the traditional intellectuals adhering to the
dominant social group through the mediation of its organic
intellectuals. His relation to the economic activity of that group is
remote. In between the base and peak of the pyramid extend the
various strata within the intelligentsia: towards the base, increas-
ingly organic in type and performing relatively routine intellec-
tual work; towards the peak, increasingly traditional in type and
performing relatively refined intellectual work. The pyramid in
its entirety, encompassing the range of intellectuals united to the
dominant social group, constitutes the superstructure (the intel-
lectual and artistic life) generated by that group's particular
structure (economic life).

The function of all members of the intelligentsia, to reiterate,
is to organize and enforce the authority of the group it repre-
sents. This task of enforcement is performed in two arenas: in
civil society and in political society (the State). The intellectuals
whose task is to secure the dominance (hegemony) of their group
in civil society create the literature, art, philosophy, etc., which
will inspire the free consent of members of all social groups to
the social dominance of one. This is the sphere within which most
intellectuals will operate. The intellectuals whose task is to secure
the hegemony of their group in political society create the
mechanisms that will coerce the obedience of those members of
any social groups who have not freely consented to the social
dominance of one. Thus the intellectuals persuade the public in
the civil arena to acquiesce to a certain social order; they coerce
the public to the same end in the political arena. These two main
types of intellectual activity—persuasion and coercion—
constitute the two main divisions of the superstructure pertaining
to the structure of the dominant social group (as indicated by the
trapezoid and triangle superimposed on the pyramid in
Diagram 2).

To sum up the key Gramscian concepts presented to this
point:
— An intelligentsia is not a distinct social group, but a part of
some other fundamental social group. It is created by the fusion
of the organic intellectuals of that group with traditional intellec-
tuals who falsely perceive themselves as independent of social and economic realities.

—An intelligentsia, successfully generated, will perform a spectrum of intellectual functions, ranging from the routine ones of the organic intellectuals to the refined and advanced ones of the traditional intellectuals. The former are closely related to the economic activity characteristic of their group; the latter, only indirectly, but they too are in harmony with the interests specific to the form of economic production of their group by virtue of their absorption by organic intellectuals.

—In order to become dominant, a social group requires the services of intellectuals to enforce its hegemony in two arenas: in civil society and in the state.

—The whole of the intelligentsia of a dominant social group creates the superstructure appropriate to that group, which in turn becomes the superstructure of the whole of society. The two main divisions of that superstructure correspond to the two main tasks of the intelligentsia: to enforce the authority of the dominant group, first, in civil society, and then, in political society.

Diagram 2: The Organization of Intellectual Culture within the Dominant Social Group
3. The organization of intellectual culture in the whole of society (Diagram 3)

Any society is composed of a dominant social group (represented by A in Diagram 3) and one or more subordinate (subaltern) social groups (represented by B and C in Diagram 3). One or more of the latter has the potential to displace the existing dominant group and emerge as itself hegemonic. Within each social stratum, work is performed which is consistent with the economic activity of that group. Some of this work requires more of an expenditure of muscular and nervous energy than of mental energy; some of it requires more mental than muscular and nervous effort. There is no sharp distinction between "non-intellectual" and intellectual labor. All laborers, in that they think at all, are intellectuals, and all intellectual activity, however refined, is labor. Nonetheless, a continuum of labor exists within each social stratum, ranging from that which is intensively muscular-nervous in type (at the left in Diagram 3) to that which is intensively cerebral in type (at the right in Diagram 3). Those laborers whose work is primarily intellectual constitute the organic intellectuals of their social group.

While all members of all social groups are intellectuals in that they think at all, few are philosophers. Yet even those who are not philosophers think about their society and their cosmos. The sum of their ideas is described as common sense. Common sense comprises a jumble of incoherent ideas, some derived from prejudice, some stemming from economic interest, some imposed by an alien but dominating social group, some inappropriate to the worker-thinker's real historical position but surviving somehow from a dead past. Insofar as these multiplicitous ideas are chaotic and contradictory, they are accepted on faith and are rarely subjected to critical analysis. Thus, those members of a social group whose work is primarily muscular-nervous will be unlikely to examine critically the common-sense notions they share with their fellows. Even if they attempt to do so, they will be unable to create a coherent world-conception appropriate to their social group. This task will devolve upon those relatively few members of a social group—the organic intellectuals—who can attain the skill and discipline enabling them to subject "common sense" to critical analysis, to reduce it to order, to create philosophy. Only the organic intellectuals of each social
stratum are capable of generating a philosophy consistent with its needs.

But if a social group is to become historically successful—dominant or hegemonic—it must be able to render harmonious with its critically evolved philosophy the common-sense notions of most of its members, to create, in short, an ordered world-conception shared by all members of the social group. By a process of integration, therefore, a successful social group harmonizes non-critical, common-sense thought with its critical philosophy. The shared world-conception thus formed is the ideology of that social group and is evidenced in all of its products and styles of behavior and creation.

How is this integration to be achieved? Since common-sense notions are inherently chaotic and cannot serve as the foundation for a coherent world-view, direction must come from philosophy. The responsibility for the integration of thought—the creation of ideology—within a given social stratum falls, therefore, upon its intellectuals. They must persuade the other members of their social group to accept and participate in a body of thought that they have critically elaborated. Thus, the intellectual's responsibilities are two-fold if he is to raise his social group to dominance: first, he must derive from his own critical self-consciousness a coherent philosophy appropriate to his group; and second, he must act in order to inspire (or to compel) the other members of his group to share in his conception. The first task is purely intellectual; the second is political. In Gramscian theory intellectuals do not only participate in the political process; they trigger and organize the political process. Through political action—a form of persuasion surpassing the rhetorical persuasion vainly exercised by traditional intellectuals—the organic intellectuals of any social group can extend to all its members the philosophy which has evolved to express the needs and interests of that group. Knit together by a common world-conception, it can become the dominant group. Having erected a new and vital ideology, the organic intellectuals, now the political leaders of their group, are able to subsume within their activity the traditional intellectuals, who become unwittingly their eloquent advocates.

Diagram 3 presents three stages in the process of ideological integration. In subaltern stratum C, no sub-group of organic intellectuals has succeeded in elaborating a critical philosophy
appropriate to its larger social group. All collective thought remains common-sensical. In B, a subaltern social stratum with the potential to become hegemonic, organic intellectuals have generated such a critical philosophy, but they have not yet acted politically to translate that philosophy into a common world-conception in which all members of their social group can participate. In A, the dominant social stratum, organic intellectuals have generated an appropriate philosophy, have acted politically to transform the philosophy of the elite into a collective ideology, and have secured the cooperation of traditional intellectuals who will express that world-conception in universal language.

To summarize:

- Intellectuals do not exist only in the dominant social stratum, but also in subaltern social strata. In all strata they constitute not a distinct sub-group, but merely that segment of the laboring population whose work is more intensively mental than muscular-nervous.
- The function of these organic intellectuals in each social stratum is to examine critically the common-sense notions peculiar to their group and to reduce them to a coherent philosophy.
- If their social group is to succeed historically and attain

Diagram 3: The Organization of Intellectual Culture in the whole of Society

![Diagram 3: The Organization of Intellectual Culture in the whole of Society](image)
dominance, these organic intellectuals have the further responsibility of acting politically in order to secure the participation of all members of their group in an ideology consistent with their critical philosophy.

—Having accomplished the ideological integration of their social group, organic intellectuals are able to attach the energies of traditional intellectuals upon whom is imposed that ideology and by whom it is more elegantly expressed.

Thus far, the role of intellectuals, organic and traditional, in securing the hegemony of a particular social group has been highlighted. It remains only to place this process within a broader historical and philosophical setting. For the integrative and organizational functions of the intellectuals do not cause movement in history; they only permit movement to occur. They are pivotal, not original. Intellectual activity is the medium by which economic change is translated into political change.

4. The dynamics of intellectual culture: intellectual activity and history (Diagram 4)

The historical process consists of the successive emergence and dominance of new fundamental social groups, that is, of new social groups whose economic activity is of a type distinct from and potentially more successful than that of the previously dominant group. Thus, history is moved by economic change, which causes new social groups to seek hegemony. Hegemony is sought in the two areas already introduced: first, in civil society; second (and only after hegemony in civil society has been successfully attained), in political society.7 The whole process by which economic shift causes a new social group to seek and secure hegemony in civil and political society constitutes a historical bloc—a complete stage of the historical process. If a new fundamental social group emerges in history, but fails to attain the ultimate condition of political hegemony (fails, in short, to create a State), its history is incomplete. It is not formed a historical bloc. It has utterly failed.

Intellectual activity is the means by which an emergent social group becomes hegemonic, by which economic potential becomes political actuality. The intelligentsia is thus the pivot of the historical process (represented in Diagram 4, where the central zone of intellectual activity bridges the areas of economic and political activity). Intellectuals organize historical change by
the process already described in #3, and to be reviewed in this different context. Organic intellectuals first create, at the highest level of culture, a coherent and critical philosophy compatible with the needs and interests of their social group. But if they stop at this point, history does not move. There must occur a transmutation of intellectual into voluntary force. Intellectuals must find within themselves the will to enact their philosophy, which, if not concretized in practice, will become ephemeral, non-historical, inconsequential. As actors of their own philosophy, intellectuals become the political organizers of their social group. In Gramsci’s optimistic and modern terminology, they become the political party itself: the modern Prince, the collective analogue of Machiavelli’s mythic Prince in whose supremely concentrated will was expressed the never-to-be-fulfilled urge of Renaissance Italy’s ruling group to attain political hegemony. This activated intelligentsia (whether or not institutionalized as a political party) then persuades the other members of its social group to join in the world-conception first expressed in traditional language as critical philosophy, now expressed in popular language and made the common ideology of that group. Having thus organized and achieved ideological integration within their social group, the organic intellectuals, reinforced by newly absorbed traditional intellectuals, can proceed to secure the civil and political hegemony that will signal the culmination of the historical process in the creation of a new historical bloc.

If the intellectuals fail to evolve a critical philosophy appropriate to their group, if they fail to move from intellect to action, if they fail to integrate the world-conception of their group by replacing the chaos of common sense with ideological order, if they fail to attract and direct the services of the traditional intellectuals, they will not have created a culture cohesive with the economic function of their social group, and they will be responsible for its failure to achieve hegemony. Their role is thus critical. They must produce the catharsis by which economics is transcended in culture so that it may become political, by which structure is resolved in superstructure so that it may generate structure, by which practice becomes theory to become practice, by which quantity dissolves into quality to objectify as quantity; they are the moving force in the historical dialectic.

This necessarily schematic outline of Gramsci’s theory of the
social function of intellectuals has arrived at the following point: though the ultimate historical realities remain economic and political, intellectuals perform a role of unparalleled importance as the ligature between those realities. The failure of an intelligentsia to perform its responsibilities can explain the failure of a social group to achieve social dominance, and can explain, by extension, the failures of a nation. Gramsci as philosopher has established this framework. Gramsci as historian uses this conceptual framework to analyze his national past. One of the moments of critical failure in Italian history, according to Gramsci, was the Italian Renaissance.

II. GRAMSCI ON THE RENAISSANCE

As will become evident in the following summary, Gramsci’s understanding of Italian Renaissance history depends upon the theory of the social function of intellectuals which has just been described.

Had Italy been able, as were Spain, England and France, to form a strong national state during the Renaissance, it would not have formed a weak one in the nineteenth century, nor would it have fallen prey to Fascism in the twentieth—of which Gramsci himself was a principal victim. The failure of the Renaissance in the realm of politics, which is traceable to its failure in the realm of ideas, is thus for Gramsci a phenomenon of fundamental
importance in Italian history. No group of Renaissance intellectuals was able to translate the economic ascendancy of the Italian bourgeoisie into political hegemony. The splendor of Renaissance intellectual activity is the very hallmark of that age. How may its social inadequacy be explained? The explanation for the failure of Renaissance intellectuals to organize historical progress must be sought in a still more remote past.

Italian intellectuals from their earliest history tended to think not for Italians, but for a cosmopolitan and international culture, for the intellectual elite of many nations. However great their achievement, it has been characterized by a distacco, a radical separation, from the specific needs and interests of the people. This phenomenon was already evident in the period of the Roman Empire when an imperial intelligentsia was formed whose literature and philosophy belonged not to Italian Rome but to universal Rome. This distacco of intellectuals from populace was still more sharply evident in the Middle Ages when intellectual activity became the monopoly of the Church. Its language and its ideology were equally inaccessible to the Italian nation, and became the monopoly of caste. Italian intellectuals spoke only in a universal language in which they were exceptionally skilled, and lost contact with their society. This deep-seated "cosmopolitan" tendency of Italian intellectual culture was to prove pernicious for the development of Italian society in the Renaissance.

After the year 1000, there emerged in Italy a new fundamental social group—the communal bourgeoisie—whose economic activity promised to destroy feudal forms of production and to culminate in a new form of political domination. But the latter objective was never attained because of the nature of the intellectual culture which evolved in connection with the newly dominant group. In the earlier, pre-Renaissance stages of communal society, intellectuals did emerge from the bourgeoisie whose outlook was as critical—that is, heretical—as was bourgeois society itself. But the organic intellectuals of Italy's newly dominant social group were in the end unable effectively to absorb the traditional intellectuals, resistant to new modes of thought because of their long history of cosmopolitan aloofness. Rather, the traditional intellectual caste (linked to the papacy) was able to absorb and neutralize those individual thinkers emerging organically from the
bourgeoisie. Thus, Renaissance thought did not adequately reflect the realities of Renaissance society, but remained as detached from the people as romanized medieval ecclesiastics had been from the Germanic warrior class whose world they inhabited. Renaissance thought remained aristocratic, speaking not to the Italian people but to an international élite, and the Renaissance became the culminating phase of the cosmopolitan function of the Italian intelligentsia.

In language itself can be found the traces of this process by which the Italian intelligentsia became estranged from the world-conception of the very social group whose economic leadership called for expression in the intellectual sphere. Trecento thinkers could write in the language of the people, and give expression to ideas compatible with the bourgeois outlook. But Quattrocento humanists assumed an ever-more-formalized Latin, remote alike from popular expression and popular thought. And when Cinquecento authors returned to the vernacular after Latin humanism had passed its peak, it was not the Italian of the people that they adopted, but a precious, stylized Italian, Latin in its syntax, remotely aristocratic in timbre.

Since Renaissance thought, more strongly influenced by the cosmopolitan and pro-papal outlook of the traditional intellectuals than by the bourgeois mentality of the organic intellectuals, related inadequately to the needs of the dominant social group, it was unable and unwilling to secure for that group hegemony in civil society. Discordant with bourgeois life, it could not persuade the larger society to consent to bourgeois values and acknowledge bourgeois leadership in the cultural world. Thus though the bourgeoisie could dictate to subordinate social groups, it could not gain hegemony over them. Not attaining hegemony in civil society, it could not attain hegemony in political society. The bourgeois leaders of Italian society never transcended the stage of economic dominance (the economic-corporate phase) and remained enmeshed in the lingering traces of feudal society. They could not build a State.

The powerlessness of the Italian bourgeoisie to gain civil hegemony and construct a state was exceptional in the early modern world. In other settings and other nations, both objectives were easily attained. Within Italy, the papacy—armed with the skills of the traditional intellectuals—evolved in the direction of an absolute (if not a national) state. In Germany, the Protes-
tant Reformation was carried to the people as the Renaissance never was and provided the ideological underpinning for several states. In other European countries, Renaissance thought (and emigré Italian intellectuals) was absorbed by organic intellectuals of ruling élites, and contributed to the foundation of powerful national states as it had not been able to do in Italy. But whereas the Renaissance accompanied social and political progress in other contexts, it was regressive in terms of Italian national development. In this respect it failed as a social movement and as a culture.

To recapitulate briefly, the Renaissance intelligentsia failed in these ways: its organic intellectuals failed to absorb the intensely conservative traditional intellectuals, but were instead absorbed and disarmed by them; for this reason its intellectuals failed to create a coherent philosophy appropriate to the interests of the dominant social group; they were, consequently, unable to “go to the people,” to forge an ideologically integrated culture, but created instead a culture increasingly remote from popular thought (which, in the absence of critical direction from above, continued in its turn to adhere to the medieval world-conception of the church); and having failed in all these tasks, they formed a superstructure inadequate to the bourgeois structure, and were thus unable to secure its hegemony in the civil or the political arena. The tragedy of the Renaissance was the destruction of Italy. The responsibility for the burden of foreign domination that saddled Italy from the age of Machiavelli to the age of Croce rests on the intellectuals.

The above paragraphs have presented Gramsci’s judgment upon the Italian Renaissance (again in a form more abstract than that in which he expressed himself). Renaissance specialists will detect many weak points in his argument. While his vision of the Italian Renaissance is susceptible to refutation, it is, however, not without points of interest. And more valuable still, perhaps, for Renaissance historians are the insights into Renaissance culture to be gained by applying Gramscian theory in ways that he did not envision. For Gramsci’s main goal was to explain the political failures of his generation; but students of Italian Renaissance history, utilizing his concepts with a different objective in view—with the objective of understanding a historic culture in all its complexity—may elicit other theories. An attempt to outline possible directions of inquiry follows.
III. Gramscian Theory and the Study of Italian Renaissance Intellectual Culture

How may Gramsci's analysis of intellectual culture assist the study of the intellectual history of the Renaissance? It provides a conceptual framework making possible the generation of questions that could guide the investigation of Renaissance culture. This statement does not imply that Gramsci's theories are necessarily correct, nor that the questions elicited therefrom constitute the only useful framework of inquiry, nor that these questions are wholly new avenues to studies never before undertaken. But whether Gramsci's theories are correct or incorrect, the possibilities inherent in any coherent analysis of the evolution of intellectual culture are worth pursuing. And the questions to be derived from Gramscian theory, if not uniquely useful, may still be useful. If some historians have already undertaken the investigation of some of the problems shortly to be outlined, the outlining of those problems can still make all interested historians more self-conscious of the theoretical issues surrounding these investigations.

Gramscian theory urges the historian of thought to study the structural interrelations of thinkers and ideas, rather than to study individual thinkers or groups of thinkers, or ideas or sets of ideas, as isolated entities—so often the tendency, perhaps only because of the difficulty of the pursuit of intellectual history.

Studying the history and the logic of the various philosophers' philosophies is not enough. At least as a methodological guide-line, attention should be drawn to the other parts of the history of philosophy; to the conceptions of the world held by the great masses, to those of the most restricted ruling (or intellectual) groups, and finally to the links between the various cultural complexes and the philosophy of the philosophers. The philosophy of an age is not the philosophy of this or that philosopher, of this or that group of intellectuals, of this or that broad section of the popular masses. It is a process of combination of all these elements, which culminates in an overall trend, in which the culmination becomes a norm of collective action and becomes concrete and complete (integral) "history."10

If Gramsci's injunctions are to be obeyed, ways must be defined in which these complexes of ideas and individual and collective thinkers can be studied in the setting of the Italian Renaissance. Six areas of inquiry are defined below, and are intended as a
preliminary and tentative methodology for the Gramscian investigation of the Renaissance.

1. The social relations of ideas

All ideas are conceived and articulated by thinkers who participate in an existing social world, as well as in an intellectual tradition. All ideas, therefore, can and should be studied not only in terms of their relation to ideas expressed in the past, but in relation to social realities. In Italian Renaissance thought, even the most refined and dignified ideas can and should be examined from the perspective of society. Italian Renaissance thinkers, for instance, in discussing the immortality of the soul, were in one sense only continuing in a new philosophical language a theme that had long been studied in western civilization; but what was the immediate social setting of the Renaissance discussion of the nature of the soul? When Renaissance thinkers discuss the “dignity of man,” and create philosophical justifications of individualism—an idea-complex particularly beloved of modern scholars—how do their ideas relate to social reality, to the behavior of individuals in society? How and to what extent do behavior and theory mesh? When Renaissance thinkers discuss friendship (a less-studied but still prominent theme), to what current social circumstances are they responding? Gramsci reminds us that even when intellectuals discourse in their minds with Plato, they are living a present and concrete reality. The study of Renaissance intellectual history might profit from an analysis of the social relations of ideas which is as determined as has been the analysis of ideas with respect to a philosophical tradition.

2. The social organization of intellectuals

Since not only ideas, but also the intellectuals who think them dwell in society, an attempt must be made to define the social anatomy of the intelligentsia. Just as each intellectual has distinctive qualities of mind, each intellectual or group of intellectuals has a distinctive relation to his social world. A bureaucrat is not a university professor; a Venetian is not a Florentine; a poor man is not a rich one, and a young man is not old. The study of Renaissance intellectual history should include a description of the intelligentsia from this viewpoint: the social backgrounds not
only of individuals, but of identifiable sub-groups; relations between patrons and clients; institutional attachments and professional groupings; types of intellectual circles and the nature of the nuclei around which they form; the stability or activity of these relationships.

Moreover, given the variegated nature of Italian political life in the Renaissance (which Gramsci so deplored), it is necessary not only to "anatomize" the intelligentsia, but to describe a different anatomy within each different political locus. Florence, Milan, Rome, Venice, Naples, and the many smaller city-states of the Italian scene, were characterized by a variety of political forms of rule (republican oligarchy or aristocracy, dictatorship, monarchy, ecclesiastical monarchy) each of which would attach to itself different categories of intellectuals, assign to them different tasks, permit varying degrees of autonomy, provide different stimuli to creative thought. And not only were the political cultures of the various cities distinctive: so were the societies upon which they were based; and each separate city provided a social environment peculiar to itself, inevitably impacting upon the structure of intellectual relations.

Finally, and once again because of the multiplicitous nature of the social and political environment, the "anatomy" of the Italian intelligentsia must include the phenomenon of the circulation of intellectuals from city to city, court to court. What social and ideological allegiances did these intellectuals form (and how potent were those allegiances) after they had spent a decade working for the papal curia, and then another decade in republican Florence—or if habituated to the aristocratic commercialism of Venice, they transferred to the small and absolutist court of Ferrara? What kind of interaction occurred between these migratory intellectuals and those wedded by ties of family or interest to a single city, or by vows to a single monastery? Did this complex of stable and shifting identifications tend to produce an abstract and unitary culture shared by all intellectuals, or did a common language and common methods barely disguise a radically heterogeneous culture, vital but unreliable in terms of the social integration and political formation of Italy?

The investigation of Italian Renaissance history could well involve, therefore, the attempt to define the social relations among the intellectuals, and the social relations of groups of
intellectuals with the local and national political culture (all the more powerfully since the disaggregation of the Italian peninsula and the presence within Italy of the international Church render the nature of the intelligentsia elusive). The understanding of expressed ideas could only be enriched by an understanding of social environment.

3. The organicity or traditionalism of intellectual culture

The concepts of the "organicity" or "traditionalism" of intellectual activity might aid the historian in understanding in a more complex way the motives underlying ideas. Where bodies of Renaissance (particularly humanist) ideas have been ascribed to intellectual/aesthetic motivations—the yearning for rhetorical elegance—or to political/ideological ones—the quest for republican liberty—or to economic interest, the generation of these ideas could without danger of anachronism or reductionism be interpreted in terms of the degree of "organicity" of their creators—the degree of their relatedness to the ruling groups of their society.

The organic intellectuals of the Italian Renaissance (the "managers" attached to the political élites within each city-state) and those of the traditional intellectuals most successfully assimilated by them, would understandably generate ideas useful to the rulers whose world-view they shared or adopted. Thus, it should not surprise the historian that certain Florentine humanists spoke of "liberty" (a term limited in meaning to the liberty from foreign domination) in the same decade that Venetian humanists praise aristocracy, or that Neapolitans eulogize monarchy. In each setting, intellectuals organically related to the ruling group articulate views coordinate with the interests of that group, though they do so in the universal language of the educated élite. Rather than an attempt to incorporate these discordant political stances into a homogeneous concept of "Renaissance thought," it may simply be recognized that Renaissance thought is as varied as the social worlds it inhabits, and that the intellectuals who share the outlooks of civic leaders will naturally give expression to those outlooks. It is not necessary to assume that some or all of the intelligentsia believed, as many modern intellectuals do, in abstract conceptions of democratic freedom. Nor is it necessary to assume that only those intellectu-
als who themselves formed part of a ruling class could share the outlook of that class, for traditional intellectuals of very different backgrounds could well become attached to that class and express in all sincerity its particular Weltanschauung.

On the other hand, the tendencies within Renaissance thought which seem to bear no relation to the definable economic or political interests of ruling groups should prove no obstacle to the historian, nor convince him that these phenomena constitute evidence that all Renaissance thought was divorced from civil society, pure in its pursuit of abstract aesthetic and intellectual ideals. The traditional intellectuals of Italy had a long and illustrious history prior to the Renaissance. Not all became welded to the groups socially dominant in the more vital centers of the Italian world. Some lived in remote cities, or remoter monasteries, or were related to ecclesiastical orders relatively aloof from the immediate interests of city-states. And some, even within more famous centers of culture, were encouraged to perform a decorative rather than an apologetic function. Their activities should be defined and explained. But neither the activities of these "traditional" intellectuals not thoroughly subsumed by vigorous ruling groups, nor the activities of intellectuals organically related to such groups, should be taken to characterize the whole of Renaissance intellectual culture. It is necessary to define and understand. To claim the primacy for one tendency or the other—tendencies which are not in the end incompatible but which constitute the opposite ends of a spectrum of organicity—may indicate only that the tasks of definition and understanding have not been adequately performed.

Thus, the utilization of the concepts of "organic" and "traditional" tendencies within intellectual culture may help the historian to organize the complexity of Renaissance thought without reducing its richness.

4. The utility of ideas

In assigning to intellectuals the task of translating economic power into political hegemony through the forging of ideology, Gramsci alerts scholars to the possibility of assessing ideas not only in terms of their truth but also of their utility. Ideas may be great or trivial, profound or shallow: but neither profound ideas nor shallow ones are necessarily of service to the ruling élite or
supportive of the general stability of society. Thus the criterion of utility—a criterion independent of quality—may be useful in understanding Renaissance culture. Do the ideas of Renaissance thinkers and the visions of Renaissance artists tend to affirm or to undermine the norms and goals of the society in which they are created? Do they shape a world-view (ideology, in Gramsci's sense of the word) by a critical and systematic integration of collective beliefs and objectives—or are they private, remote, and refined, responsive to only a small social group? Or in defending a shared social vision do they stifle voices that might plead for needed change? Significant or insignificant in terms of the grand tradition of western thought, ideas may foster or hinder social process, favor or threaten stability, encourage or inhibit change.

5. Common sense and high culture

The common sense of an era—the inchoate and only partly articulated thought of the popular mass—is as important in the history of intellectual culture as the careful expression of the weightiest philosopher. But how is the historian to discover and understand the content of the common sense of an age? Here intellectual historians must tread on the territory of the social historian. They must overcome a fastidious preoccupation with philosophical and literary texts, and probe chronicles, diaries, letters, laws, the whole range of public and private documents, to catch fleeting glimpses of a public mentality not expressed in traditional language. And often they must be ready to deduce from gesture or convention what has not been self-consciously expressed in words. For without an understanding of common sense—the general culture of the Renaissance populace—the higher ratiocination of the intellectuals cannot be properly understood, because it shall not have been understood in the light of its cultural integument.

The intellectual historian, moreover, need not only attempt to understand common sense but, in addition, the relation of common sense to the higher culture of the intellectuals. Which figures most clearly expressed popular concerns in the language of traditional culture? Which figures were most aloof from the concerns of the populace, and how was that aloofness maintained? Through what channels were the generally shared prejudices and anxieties of the population filtered into the
discourse of the professional intellectuals? How were the ideas generated by the intellectuals socialized, made general, palatable and receivable by the population at large—how and to what extent, that is, was the high intellectual culture of the Renaissance integrated as the ideological consciousness of its people?

Thus, intellectuals and their ideas must be studied not only in their relation to social and political structures, but to the shared mental culture of the people at large as well, if they and their historical significance are to be comprehended.

6. Dynamics of intellectual culture

How often are these questions heard from the intellectual historians of the Renaissance: when did the Middle Ages end and the Renaissance begin? Is the thought of this or that thinker distinctively medieval or Renaissance—or is it transitional? At what point in time did the essential direction of Renaissance thought change from the transcendent to the immanent? from the mystic to the secular? What is the Renaissance concept of man? What is the central and distinctive core of humanist thought?

Gramscian theory may—mercifully—permit the circumvention of these difficult and perhaps unanswerable questions. For with Gramsci's complex model of the development of intellectual culture in mind, the notions may be dispensed with that any age is characterized by a unitary system of thought, that any thought system ceases to exist when another emerges, that any single point in time can be decisive in the moment of culture. Instead, we may expect in history to see the process of shifting hegemonies: the temporary dominance of one or another social group and the superstructure that accompanies it, but not to the exclusion of other social groups and their cognate ideas. History is polyphonic, and though one social group, one social movement, one intellectual tendency may take the lead, it must intertwine with and adjust to the presence of other collective actors in the historical motet.

Intellectual historians might profitably adopt this alternative paradigm of the dynamics of cultural history. In many areas, the old questions have proved futile. We may never know when the Middle Ages ended, or what the essential characteristics of the Renaissance mind may be. The time may have arrived to focus on the interrelations, the successive emergence and recession of cultural tendencies, and to abandon the search for "moments,"

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"transitions," "crises," "stabilities," "firsts" and "lasts." The flux of historical movement must be ordered, but not if order violates life.

The six suggested areas of inquiry into Renaissance intellectual culture do not claim to be wholly new or comprehensive. They illustrate, merely, the kinds of questions that might emerge from Gramsci's theory of the social function of intellectuals. But even they, though consistent with Gramscian theory, may constitute a betrayal of the author's will. Gramsci lingered in prison for eleven years, dying a slow death like the brave sparrow he tamed and nurtured in the bleakest days of his captivity, writing about intellectuals at length and "für ewig" only because he, an intellectual, had been deprived of the opportunity to act. It is Gramsci's overriding message that intellectuals must not only think, but also act. Upon them rests the burden of historical progress, and upon them the burden of historical defeat.

NOTES


2. The following analysis of Gramsci's ideas has been based primarily on selections from three of the six volumes of Gramsci's Quaderni (Notebooks) edited by the house of Einaudi in Turin between 1948 and 1951 under the general editorship of Felice Platone: Gli intellettuali e l'organizzazione della cultura (1949); Letteratura e vita nazionale (1950); and Il materialismo storico e la filosofia di Benedetto Croce (1948). The English anthologies by Marks and by Hoare and Smith, which include selections from these and other volumes, have also been relied upon, particularly for Gramsci's discussions of the Risorgimento and the "modern Prince". The Letters (ed. Lawner) also deal with philosophical issues, sometimes more lucidly than do the Notebooks.

3. The Einaudi edition of the Notebooks was published in six volumes, each made of many fragmentary studies, but the notebooks themselves numbered thirty-two. They were not intended for publication in their original form, and it is not surprising that they are laden with inconsistencies, even contradictions, and redundancies. In his own notes on method, Gramsci cautions against confusing unfinished or unpublished works with works
approved by an author during his lifetime; they might have been “re-
pudiated or deemed unsatisfactory in whole or in part by the author” (Hoare and Smith, Selections, p. 384). The reference is to Marx, but also presumably relates to himself as well.

4. In his “Critical Notes on an Attempt at Popular Sociology” (Hoare and Smith, Selections, pp. 419-72), a polemic against Bukharin’s Theory of Historical Materialism: A Popular Manual of Marxist Sociology (Moscow, 1921; a French version of 1927 was known to Gramsci), Gramsci repeatedly cautions against separating a “speculative” component of the philosophy of praxis from its economic and political science. He also warns against making systematic ideas that have not matured to a classical stage: “If the doctrine in question has not yet reached this ‘classical’ phase of its development, any attempt to ‘manualize’ it is bound to fail, its logical ordering will be purely apparent and illusory, and one will get . . . just a mechanical juxtaposition of disparate elements which remain inexorably disconnected and disjointed in spite of the unitary varnish provided by the literary presentation. . . . But the vulgar contention is that science must absolutely mean ‘system,’ and consequently systems of all sorts are built up which have only the mechanical exteriority of a system and not its necessary inherent coherence” (p. 434).

5. For Gramsci, this unique individual thinker in his own age was Benedetto Croce, with whose views he holds a continual and critical dialogue. Croce, he wrote, “is a kind of lay Pope and an extremely efficient instrument of hegemony . . . ” (Letters, ed. Lawner, p. 204).

6. Gramsci contrasts the method by which the Church achieves hegemony to that by which a dominant social group does so. The Church’s intellectual élite severely disciplines itself and the population at large, compelling ideological harmony. A ruling social class must through political action inspire ideological coherence in the civil sphere.

7. Gramsci’s view that hegemony in civil society must be attained before political hegemony is attempted is one of the ideological roots of the present behavior of the Italian Communist Party—which has professedly abandoned the Marxist notions of the “dictatorship of the Proletariat” and the inevitability of violent revolution.

8. Gramsci points out that two towering intellectual figures of the Renaissance did recognize the political failure of their culture and dedicated their energies to exhortation to national unity—Dante and Machiavelli, Machiavelli, indeed, he identifies as the only member of the later Renaissance intelligentsia to understand fully—and to embody his understanding in the Prince—the cultural crisis underway. The theme is recurrent in Gramsci’s works, but see especially his “Brief Notes on Machiavelli’s Politics,” Hoare and Smith, Selections, pp. 125-33.

9. Few historians today will ascribe so sinister a role to the papacy as does Gramsci, or accept wholeheartedly his linguistic theories or his understanding of humanism as “immanentist” or “Guelph” in character. More seriously, few historians would condone Gramsci’s tendency to mythologize the Renaissance (and the Reformation) as a type of historical situation recurrent in history. On the other hand, Gramsci’s discussion of the long history of the Italian intelligentsia’s “cosmopolitan” character is stimulating, and his position that Renaissance intellectual culture was in many ways conservative or reactionary may be defensible on other grounds.