

# Gramsci

## Space, Nature, Politics



Antonio Gramsci  
nasce ad  
Ales nel  
1891

si iscrive all'Università

Edited by Michael Ekers, Gillian Hart,  
Stefan Kipfer and Alex Loftus



Praise for *Gramsci: Space, Nature, Politics*

‘From the backwoods to the frontlines, Gramsci’s geographical imagination receives here the thorough going exploration it has always deserved. With deep and nuanced attention to Gramsci’s spatial historicism, this collection foregrounds the profoundly geographical nature of Gramsci’s critical consciousness and what it offers for thinking space, nature and politics relationally. As beautifully considered as its cover, this book is alive to the ‘earthliness of thought’ and its political possibilities.’

*Cindi Katz, Earth and Environmental Sciences & Environmental Psychology Programs, The City University of New York*

‘This well-crafted volume pushes the boundaries of current debates on Gramsci. Highlighting spatial and geographical relations, the diverse contributions pay detailed attention to Gramsci’s writings while opening an array of contemporary issues including struggles in Brazil, Nepal, India and South Africa; discussions of gender, class, race and ecology; and engagements with the theoretical work of Laclau & Mouffe, Lefebvre, Harvey, Hardt & Negri and Subaltern Studies. The contributors have set a hallmark in scholarship that will be very influential across many fields from critical geography and international relations to political theory, development studies and postcolonialism.’

*Peter Ives, Department of Politics, University of Winnipeg, Canada*

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# Gramsci

## *Space, Nature, Politics*

EDITED BY

Michael Ekers, Gillian Hart,  
Stefan Kipfer and Alex Loftus

 **WILEY-BLACKWELL**

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# Contents

Notes on Contributors	vii
Abbreviations of Works by Antonio Gramsci	ix
Preface	xi
Acknowledgments	xiii
<b>Framings</b>	<b>1</b>
“A Barbed Gift of the Backwoods”: Gramsci’s Sardinian Beginnings <i>Michael Ekers, Gillian Hart, Stefan Kipfer, and Alex Loftus</i>	3
How to Live with Stones <i>John Berger</i>	6
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>13</b>
1 Gramsci: Space, Nature, Politics <i>Michael Ekers and Alex Loftus</i>	15
<b>Part I Space</b>	<b>45</b>
2 Traveling with Gramsci: The Spatiality of Passive Revolution <i>Adam David Morton</i>	47
3 “Gramsci in Action”: Space, Politics, and the Making of Solidarities <i>David Featherstone</i>	65
4 City, Country, Hegemony: Antonio Gramsci’s Spatial Historicism <i>Stefan Kipfer</i>	83

5	State of Confusion: Money and the Space of Civil Society in Hegel and Gramsci <i>Geoff Mann</i>	104
<b>Part II Nature</b>		<b>121</b>
6	The Concept of Nature in Gramsci <i>Benedetto Fontana</i>	123
7	Space, Ecology, and Politics in the Praxis of the Brazilian Landless Movement <i>Abdurazack Karriem</i>	142
8	On the Nature of Gramsci's "Conceptions of the World" <i>Joel Wainwright</i>	161
9	Gramsci, Nature, and the Philosophy of Praxis <i>Alex Loftus</i>	178
10	Difference and Inequality in World Affairs: A Gramscian Analysis <i>Nicola Short</i>	197
11	Gramsci and the Erotics of Labor: More Notes on "The Sexual Question" <i>Michael Ekers</i>	217
<b>Part III Politics</b>		<b>239</b>
12	Cracking Hegemony: Gramsci and the Dialectics of Rebellion <i>Jim Glassman</i>	241
13	Gramsci at the Margins: A Prehistory of the Maoist Movement in Nepal <i>Vinay Gidwani and Dinesh Paudel</i>	258
14	Accumulation through Dispossession and Accumulation through Growth: Intimations of Massacres Foretold? <i>Judith Whitehead</i>	279
15	Gramsci, Geography, and the Languages of Populism <i>Gillian Hart</i>	301
<b>Conclusion</b>		<b>321</b>
16	Translating Gramsci in the Current Conjuncture <i>Stefan Kipfer and Gillian Hart</i>	323
	Index	345

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# Abbreviations of Works by Antonio Gramsci

- FSPN *Further Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. D. Boothman, Lawrence & Wishart, London, 1995
- HPC *History, Philosophy and Culture in the Young Gramsci*, ed. P. Cavalcanti & P. Piccone, Telos Press, St. Louis, MO, 1975
- LN *L'Ordine nuovo 1919–1920*, Einaudi, Turin, 1955
- LPI *Letters from Prison*, vol. 1, ed. and trans. F. Rosengarten, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1994
- LPII *Letters from Prison*, vol. 2, ed. and trans. F. Rosengarten, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1994
- MPW *The Modern Prince and Other Writings*, ed. and trans. L. Marks, International Publishers, New York, 1957
- PNI *The Prison Notebooks*, vol. 1, ed. and intro. J. A. Buttigieg, trans. J. A. Buttigieg & A. Callari, Columbia University Press, New York, 1992
- PNI I *The Prison Notebooks*, vol. 2, ed. and trans. J. A. Buttigieg, Columbia University Press, New York, 1996
- PNI II *The Prison Notebooks*, vol. 3, ed. and trans. J. A. Buttigieg, Columbia University Press, New York, 2007
- PPW *Pre-Prison Writings*, ed. R. Bellamy, trans. V. Cox, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1994
- QC *Quaderni del carcere: edizione critica dell'Istituto Gramsci*, 4 vols., ed. V. Gerratana, Einaudi, Turin, 1975
- SCW *Selections from Cultural Writings*, ed. D. Forgacs & G. Nowell-Smith, trans. W. Boelhower, Lawrence & Wishart, London, 1985
- SPN *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Q. Hoare & G. Nowell-Smith, Lawrence & Wishart, London, 1971

- SPWI *Selections from Political Writings, 1910–1920*, ed. Q. Hoare, trans. J. Matthews, Lawrence & Wishart, London, 1977
- SPWII *Selections from Political Writings, 1921–1926*, ed. and trans. Q. Hoare, Lawrence & Wishart, London, 1978
- VWAG *A Volume of Works of Antonio Gramsci*, ed. S. Giovanili, Einaudi, Turin, 1975

# Preface

The collective project from which this volume emerged began to take shape in a workshop on “Gramscian Geographies” held in January 2009 at Royal Holloway’s Bloomsbury premises and supported by the British Academy. Alex Loftus and Mike Ekers developed the initial proposal for the workshop; Joel Wainwright and Bob Jessop were great sources of support, enthusiasm, and ideas; and Geoff Mann’s work in earlier collaborations was also a tremendous boost. Although, disappointingly, several participants were unable to attend for a variety of reasons (the UK Border Agency deserves a special mention in this regard for erecting ridiculous obstacles to the free movement of people), the two days of discussion were rich, comradely, and generative, and we forged lasting friendships.

Something vital is contained in Gramsci’s philosophy of praxis. Our shared conviction that this approach can serve as a basis for breathing new life into concrete engagements with space, nature, and politics enabled the four of us to take the rich discussions in London forward. Although mainly working remotely (often on three different continents), we have been fortunate to be able to meet as editors in Toronto (2010) and Seattle (2011) along what has been a long but immensely rewarding and enriching journey toward final publication. Along the way, Rachel Pain responded positively and warmly to our requests for support from the Antipode Book Series, and it has been a pleasure working with Jacqueline Scott. Andy Merrifield was a generous friend who liaised with John Berger over the inclusion of the latter’s open letter to Subcommandante Marcos.

We would like to give special thanks to those who contributed so generously to the cover image and design. Tracey Heatherington put us in touch with Pietrina Rubanu in the town of Orgosolo in Sardinia, which is covered in marvelous murals. Many of them – including the

image on the cover – were painted by art teacher Francesco Del Casino and his students. Pietrina, the author, together with Gianfranco Fistrale, of *Murales politici della Sardegna: guida, storia, percorsi* (published by Massari in 1998), took the cover photograph one morning in April 2012, after having requested a driver to move a car parked in front of the mural. We are also immensely grateful to Darin Jensen, cartographer and graphic designer in the Department of Geography at the University of California, Berkeley for his extraordinary care and creativity in producing the cover design.

Last but not least, we would like to record our gratitude to our families, and to the many friends and colleagues who have supported us.

# Acknowledgments

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John Berger's chapter "How to Live with Stones" is a reprinted version of an open letter published in *Le Monde diplomatique* and several other news outlets. This material is reproduced with permission of the author.



# Framings



# “A Barbed Gift of the Backwoods”

## *Gramsci's Sardinian Beginnings*

Michael Ekers, Gillian Hart, Stefan Kipfer,  
and Alex Loftus

Tom Nairn has said of Gramsci that “he was a product of the west’s most remote periphery, and of conditions which, half a century later, it became fashionable to call ‘Third World’” (1982: 161). No comparable western intellectual came from such a background, Nairn goes on to say, observing as well that “He was a barbed gift of the backwoods to the metropolis, and some aspects of his originality always reflected this difference” (161).

As we note in the Preface, the image on the cover of this book comes from a street mural in the town of Orgosolo in Sardinia. It depicts Gramsci’s departure from the port of Olbia for Turin in 1911, when he won a scholarship to study at the University of Turin. Together with John Berger’s letter to Subcomandante Marcos about Gramsci’s Sardinian birthplace (originally written as an open letter and reproduced below), the mural of the young Gramsci’s journey to a new political and intellectual life in the industrial heart of Italy frames this book. Berger’s wonderfully vivid meditation on Gramsci and Sardinia captures the key themes that tie the essays in this volume together – the resources Gramsci gives us for thinking about space, nature, and politics in relation to one another.

Woven throughout Berger’s essay is an awareness of how both space and nature subtend and inform political practice. Traces of different histories of habitation and resistance are inscribed in the Sardinian

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landscape – the pastures, piles of stones, the *nuraghi*, and the small rooms (*domus de janas*) carved out of the rocky terrain of the island.

For Berger, Gramsci's political patience, not to be read as complacency, stems from his experiences of this landscape. The "stones" are companions to Gramsci, affording him an awareness of the accumulated histories and spaces of Sardinia that must be negotiated in any political movement. There is also a deep appreciation of Gramsci's relational style of historical materialism expressed in Berger's writing that extends to nonhuman life and objects, as captured in a letter the former wrote to his sons recounting a fable of a mouse that drinks a little boy's milk. This relational Marxism informs the introduction to the collection that follows Berger's piece and many of the contributions comprising *Gramsci: Space, Nature, Politics*.

At the University of Turin Gramsci studied geography, linguistics, and philosophy, all of which inform his pre-prison and prison writings. Increasingly drawn into political life in Turin, he transitioned from student to journalist and a prolific commentator. In 1915 he became editor of *Avanti!* (Forward!), the official newspaper of the Italian Socialist Party (PSI), and later was one of the co-founders of *L'Ordine nuovo* (The New Order). Gramsci's journalistic contributions were closely tied to his relationship to Turin's working-class movements, including the occupation of the Fiat factories in 1920.

His political engagements were shaped by both the particularities of the Italian situation and his involvement in the Third International.



**Fig. 1** Nuraghi outside Ghilarza, Sardinia  
Photo © Gillian Hart, 2004

Alongside Amadeo Bordiga and others, Gramsci was a key figure in the founding of the Communist Party of Italy (PCdI), which grew out of opposition to the reformism of the PSI. Gramsci, a key antifascist activist, came to lead the PCdI and made several trips to Moscow to participate in the political debates and the planning of the International. Mussolini's fascist regime arrested Gramsci in 1926, disregarding the immunity afforded to members of parliament, imprisoning him from 1926 until 1934, thereby fatally eroding his physical and emotional health. While incarcerated, Gramsci penned his famous *Notebooks*, a collection of writings comprising 33 notebooks, which addressed the wide-ranging themes that animated his writings and commentary. Written alongside the *Notebooks* were Gramsci's letters to his friends and family. The *Letters from Prison* shed important light on his state of mind and health, his personal and political relationships, and his motives for writing the *Notebooks*. Responding to his deteriorating health, Italian authorities granted Gramsci conditional freedom in the fall of 1934; then, in 1937, he died in a clinic in Rome. Gramsci's sister-in-law, Tatiana Schucht, smuggled the notebooks from Gramsci's room, later sending them to Moscow. The chapters that follow are part of an ongoing intellectual and political project of grappling with the legacy of his *Notebooks* and other writings.

## Reference

Nairn, T. (1982) “Antonù Su Gobbu.” In A. Showstack Sassoon (ed.), *Approaches to Gramsci*. Writers and Readers, London, pp. 159–179.

# How to Live with Stones

John Berger

Marcos, I want to say something about a pocket of resistance. One particular one. My observations may seem remote, but as you say, "A world can contain many worlds, can contain all worlds."

The least dogmatic of our century's thinkers about revolution was Gramsci, no? His lack of dogmatism came from a kind of patience. This patience had absolutely nothing to do with indolence or complacency. (The fact that his major work was written in the prison in which the Italian fascists kept him for eight years, until he was dying at the age of 46, testifies to its urgency.)

His special patience came from a sense of practice which will never end. He saw close-up, and sometimes directed, the political struggles of his time, but he never forgot the background of an unfolding drama whose span covers incalculable ages. It was perhaps this which prevented Gramsci becoming, like many other revolutionaries, a millennialist. He believed in hope rather than promises and hope is a long affair. We can hear it in his words:

If we think about it, we see that in asking the question: What is Man? We want to ask: What can man become? Which means: Can he master his own destiny, can he make himself, can he give form to his own life? Let us say then that man is a process, and precisely, the process of his own acts. (Q10, §54; SPN 351)

Gramsci went to school, from the age of 6 until 12, in the small town of Ghilarza in central Sardinia. He was born in Ales, a small village nearby. When he was four, he fell to the floor as he was being carried, and this accident led to a spinal malformation which permanently

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undermined his health. He did not leave Sardinia until he was 20. I believe this island gave him or inspired in him his special sense of time.

In the hinterland around Ghilarza, as in many parts of the island, the thing you feel most strongly is the presence of stones. First and foremost it is a place of stones, and – in the sky above – of grey hooded crows. Every *tanca* – pasture – and every cork-oak plantation has at least one, often several piles of stones and each pile is the size of a large freight truck. These stones have been gathered and stacked together recently so that the soil, dry and poor as it is, can nevertheless be worked. The stones are large, the smallest would weigh half a ton. There are granites (red and black), schist, limestone, sandstone, and several darkish volcanic rocks like basalt. In certain *tancas* the gathered boulders are long rather than round, so they have been piled together like poles and the pile has a triangular shape like that of an immense stone wigwam.

Endless and ageless dry-stone walls separate the *tancas*, border the gravel roads, enclose pens for the sheep, or, having fallen apart after centuries of use, suggest ruined labyrinths. There are also little pyramid piles of smaller stones no larger than fists. Towards the west rise very ancient limestone mountains.

Everywhere a stone is touching a stone. And here, over this pitiless ground, one approaches something delicate: there is a way of placing one stone on another which irrefutably announces a human act, as distinct from a natural hazard.

And this may make one remember that to mark a place with a cairn constituted a kind of naming and was probably among the first signs used by man.

Knowledge is power [wrote Gramsci], but the question is complicated by something else: namely that it is not enough to know a set of relations existing at a given moment as if they were a given system, one also needs to know them genetically – that's to say the story of their formation, because every individual is not only a synthesis of existing relations, but also the history of those relations, which means the résumé of all of the past. (Q10, §54; SPN 353)

On account of its strategic position in the western Mediterranean and on account of its mineral deposits – lead, zinc, tin, silver – Sardinia has been invaded and its coastline occupied during four millennia. The first invaders were the Phoenicians, followed by the Carthaginians, the Greeks, the Romans, the Arabs, the Pisans, the Spanish, the House of Savoy, and finally modern mainland Italy.

As a result Sardinians mistrust and dislike the sea. “Whoever comes across the sea,” they say, “is a thief.” They are not a nation of sailors or

fishermen, but of shepherds. They have always sought shelter in the stony inaccessible interior of their land to become what the invaders called (and call) “brigands.” The island is not large (250 km × 100 km) yet the iridescent mountains, the southern light, the lizard-dryness, the ravines, the corrugated stone terrain, lend it, when surveyed from a vantage point, the aspect of a continent! And on this continent today, with their 3.5 million sheep and their goats, live 35,000 shepherds: 100,000 if one includes the families who work with them.

It is a megalithic country – not in the sense of being prehistoric – like every poor land in the world, it has its own history ignored or dismissed as “savage” by the metropolises – but in the sense that its soul is rock and its mother stone. Sebastiano Satta (1867–1914), the national poet, wrote:

When the rising sun, Sardinia, warms your granite  
You must give birth to new sons.

This has gone on, with many changes but a certain continuity, for six millennia. The shepherd’s pipe of classical mythology is still being played. Scattered over the island there remain 7,000 *nuraghi* – dry-stone towers, dating from the late Neolithic period before the Phoenician invasion. Many are more or less ruins; others are intact and may be 12 meters in height, 8 meters in diameter, with walls 3 meters thick.

It takes time for your eyes to get used to the dark inside one. The single entrance, with a hewn architrave, is narrow and low; you have to crouch to get in. When you can see in the cool dark inside, you observe how, to achieve a vaulted interior without mortar, the layers of massive stones had to be laid one on top of the other with an overlap inwards, so that the space is conical like that of a straw beehive. The cone, however, cannot be too pointed, for the walls need to bear the weight of the enormous flat stones which close the roof. Some *nuraghi* consist of two floors with a staircase. Unlike the pyramids, a thousand years earlier, these buildings were for the living. There are various theories about their exact function. What is clear is that they offered shelter, probably many layers of shelter, for men are many-layered.

The *nuraghi* are invariably placed at a nodal point in the rocky landscape, at a point where the land itself might, as it were, have an eye: a point from which everything can be silently observed in every direction – until, faraway, the surveillance is handed on to the next *nuraghi*. This suggests that they had, amongst other things, a military defensive function. They have also been called “sun temples,” “towers of silence,” and, by the Greeks, “*daidaleia*” after Daedalus, the builder of the labyrinth.

Inside, you slowly become aware of the silence. Outside there are blackberries, very small and sweet ones, cacti whose fruit with stony pips the shepherds take the thorns out of and eat, hedges of bramble, barbed-wire, asphodels like swords whose hilts have been planted in the thin soil ... perhaps a flock of chattering linnets. Inside the hive of stones (constructed before the Trojan Wars) silence. A concentrated silence – like tomato purée concentrated in a tin.

By contrast, all extensive diffused silence has to be continually monitored in case there is a sound that warns of danger. In this concentrated silence the senses have the impression that the silence is a protection. Thus you become aware of the companionship of stone.

The epithets “inorganic,” “inert,” “lifeless,” “blind” – as applied to stone – may be short-term. Above the town of Galtelli towers the pale limestone mountain which is called Monte Tuttavista – the mountain which sees all.

Perhaps the proverbial nature of stone changed when prehistory became history. Building became rectangular. Mortar permitted the construction of pure arches. A seemingly permanent order was established, and with this order came talk of happiness. The art of architecture quotes this talk in many different ways, yet for most people the promised happiness did not arrive, and the proverbial reproaches began: stone was contrasted with bread because it was not edible; stone was called heartless because it was deaf.

Before, when any order was always shifting and the *only* promise was that contained in a place of shelter, in the time of the *nuraghis*, stones were considered companions.

Stones propose another sense of time, whereby the past, the deep past of the planet, proffers a meager yet massive support to human acts of resistance, as if the veins of metal in the rock led to our veins of blood.

To place a stone upright so that it stands vertical is a symbolic recognition; the stone becomes a presence; a dialogue begins. Near the town of Macomer there are six such standing stones summarily carved into ogival forms; three of them, at shoulder-level, have carved breasts. The sculpting is minimal. Not necessarily through lack of means; perhaps through choice. An upright stone then did not depict a companion: it was one. The six bethels are of trachytic rock which is porous. As a result, even under a strong sun, they reach body heat and no more.

When the rising sun, Sardinia, warms your granite  
You must give birth to new sons.

Earlier than the *nuraghi* are the *domus de janas*, which are rooms hollowed out of rock-pediments, and made, it is said, to house the dead.

This one is made of granite. You have to crawl in, and inside you can sit but not stand. The chamber measures 3 meters by 2. Stuck to its stone are two deserted wasp nests. The silence is less concentrated than in the *nuraghi* and there is more light, for you are less deeply inside; the pocket is nearer to the outside of the coat.

Here the age of man-made place is palpable. Not because you calculate ... mid-Neolithic ... Calcolithic, but because of the relation between the rock you are in and human touch.

The granite surface has been made deliberately smooth. Nothing rough or jagged has been left. The tools were probably of obsidian. The space is corporeal – in that it seems to pulse like an organ in a body. (A little like a kangaroo's pocket!) And this effect is increased by the remaining soft smears of yellow and reddish ochre where originally the surfaces were painted. The irregularities of the chamber's shape must have been determined by variations in the rock formation. But more interesting than where they came from is where they are heading.

You lie in this hiding place, Marcos – there is a sweetish almost vanilla smell coming from some herb outside – and you can see in the irregularities the first probings toward the form of a column, the outline of a pilaster or the curves of a cupola – toward the idea of happiness.

By the foot of the chamber – and there's no question which way the bodies, either alive or dead, were intended to lie – the rock is curved and concave and on this surface a human hand has chipped distinct radiating ribs as on a scallop shell.

By the entrance, which is no higher than a small dog, there was a protrusion like a fold in the rock's natural curtain, and here a human hand tapered and rounded it so that it approached – but did not yet reach – the column.

All *domus de janas* face east. Through the entrances from the inside you can see the sun rise.

In a letter from prison in 1931 Gramsci told a story for his children, the younger of whom, because of his imprisonment, he had never seen. A small boy is asleep with a glass of milk beside his bed on the floor. A mouse drinks the milk, the boy wakes up and finding the glass empty cries. So the mouse goes to the goat to ask for some milk. The goat has no milk, he needs grass. The mouse goes to the field, and the field has no grass because it's too parched. The mouse goes to the well and the well has no water because it needs repairing. So the mouse goes to the mason who hasn't exactly the right stones. Then the mouse goes to the mountain and the mountain wants to hear nothing and looks like a skeleton because it has lost its trees. (During the last century Sardinia was drastically deforested to supply railway sleepers for the Italian mainland.) In exchange for your stones, the mouse says to the mountain, the boy, when

he grows up, will plant chestnuts and pines on your slopes. Whereupon the mountain agrees to give the stones. Later the boy has so much milk, he washes in it! Later still, when he becomes a man, he plants the trees, the erosion stops, and the land becomes fertile.

P.S. In the town of Ghilarza, there is a small Gramsci museum, near the school he attended. Photos. Copies of books. A few letters. And, in a glass case, two stones carved into round weights about the size of grapefruits. Every day Antonio as a boy did lifting exercises with these stones to strength his shoulders and correct the malformation of his back.



**Fig. 2** Display from the Gramsci museum in Ghilarza  
Photo © Gillian Hart, 2004



# Introduction

