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# Gramsci and Political Theory

E. J. Hobsbawm

*(We print below an article based on the paper read by Professor E. J. Hobsbawm at the Gramsci Conference organised jointly by Lawrence & Wishart and the Polytechnic of Central London on March 5-6, 1977. The subheads are ours.)*

Antonio Gramsci died 40 years ago. For the first 10 of these 40 years he was virtually unknown except to his old comrades from the 1920s, since very little of his writings were published or available. This does not mean that he lacked influence, for Palmiro Togliatti may be said to have led the Italian Communist Party on Gramscian lines, or at least on his interpretation of Gramscian lines. Nevertheless, for most people anywhere until the end of world war II, even for communists, Gramsci was little more than a name. For the second decade of these 40 years he became extremely well known in Italy, and was admired far beyond communist circles. His works were extensively published by the Communist Party, but above all by the house of Einaudi. Whatever

criticisms were subsequently made of these early editions, they made Gramsci widely available and allowed Italians to judge his stature as a major marxist thinker and, more generally, a major figure in 20th-century Italian culture. But only Italians.

For during this decade Gramsci remained for practical purposes quite unknown outside his own country, since he was virtually untranslated. Indeed, attempts to get even his moving *Prison Letters* published in Britain and the USA failed. Except for a handful of people with personal contacts in Italy and who could read Italian—mostly communists—he might as well not have existed this side of the Alps.

During the third decade of these 40 years, there were the first serious stirrings of interest in Gramsci abroad. They were no doubt stimulated by de-Stalinisation and even more by the independent attitude of which Togliatti made himself the spokesman after 1956. At all events in this period we find the first English selections from his work and the first discussions of his ideas outside Communist parties. As it happens outside Italy, the English-speaking countries seem to have been the first to develop a sustained interest in Gramsci. Paradoxically in Italy itself, during the same decade, criticism of Gramsci became articulate and sometimes shrill, and arguments about the interpretation of his work by the Italian Communist Party developed.