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Gramsci on the Jews

The following extracts from Gramsci's letters from prison have been translated from the Italian by Hamish Henderson, and selected and edited by Valerie Gribbin.

Antonio Gramsci was a leading figure in the fight against the rise of Fascism in Italy. He was one of the founders of the Italian Communist Party with Togliatti in 1921; in 1924 he was elected secretary of the Party and in the following year became a deputy in the Italian Parliament. At the time of his arrest in November, 1926, he was the leader of the Communist deputies in their opposition to Mussolini.

Gramsci was born in Sardinia in 1891 of poor parents. He started work at the age of 11 and as a result, suffered all his life from ill-health. In 1910 he won a scholarship to Turin University where he specialised in linguistics and philology. He abandoned any idea of an academic career in 1915, when Italy entered the war; thenceforth he devoted himself to politics: At this time he was in the Socialist Party, and in 1919, he, Togliatti and others founded the weekly paper *Ordine Nuovo* and later *Unita'*. It was from this group of men that the leadership of the Communist Party came at the break with the Socialists in 1921.

His death in 1937 was a direct result of the harsh treatment he received in Turin Prison.

Already before his imprisonment he had earned his reputation as a great politician and intellectual. His studies of Marxism and its application to Italy still form an important part of Italian Communism. This work he carried on under great physical hardship in prison. Dr. Louis Marks has already published a selection from his political writings. However, his personal correspondence from prison is not available in this country, although it has been translated by Hamish Henderson. The letters cover a great variety of subjects and illustrate clearly the extent to which Gramsci retained his interest and originality of thought during most of the 10 years he was in prison. Here we give a selection of his comments on one specific question: the Jewish problem. These were all written to his sister-in-law in 1931, after he had been imprisoned for almost 5 years. She had seen a film *Two Worlds* in which the exclusiveness of the Jews was stressed. It is of interest that Gramsci's arguments were developed before anti-Semitism had begun to take its more violent forms in the later 1930s and when it was still possible for intellectuals to ignore the issue. He saw clearly the logical consequence of accepting the *Two Worlds* thesis and how this thesis can lead on from an artificial, to a deliberate separation of the races, culminating in either a ' pogrom ' or the extermination camps:

'...what do you actually mean by the expression "Two Worlds"? That we are faced as it were, with two planets which cannot draw any nearer to each other and cannot enter into communication? If you do not mean this, and the expression is to be understood only in a metaphorical and relative

sense it has little significance, because metaphorical 'worlds' are numberless.

To how many societies does an individual belong? Hasn't everyone of us got to make continual efforts to unify his own conception of the world, in which heterogeneous splinters of fossilised cultural worlds are bound still to be lodged? And doesn't there exist a general historic process which is persistently tending to unify the entire human race? Don't we two, when we write to each other, continually discover grounds for friction, and at the same time don't we try, at times successfully to reach agreement on certain questions? And does not every group or party, or sect, or religion tend to create a "conformism" of its own (I do not mean the word in its passive sense of "falling in with the crowd"? ...'

'... We are dealing with an ideology which belongs, even if only marginally, to the same camp as the Black Hundreds. Of course, I understand perfectly well that you wouldn't take part in a *pogrom*; nevertheless, for a pogrom to be possible, it is necessary that the ideology of 'two impenetrable worlds', of races, etc., should be widely diffused. This helps to create that imponderable atmosphere which the Black Hundreds can exploit, organising the discovery of a child's corpse drained of blood and accusing the Jews of having murdered him in ritual sacrifice. The outbreak of the World War has shown how ably the ruling classes and groups know how to exploit these apparently innocuous ideologies, in order to set in motion the waves of public opinion ...'

'... I'm sorry that this old hoodoo has entered your head, especially seeing there has been no anti-Semitism in Italy for a long while now. Jews can become ministers of the crown (not to mention prime ministers, as in the case of Luzzatti); they can also reach the rank of General in the Army. Marriages of Jews with Christians are very numerous, particularly in the large cities; and this is not only a working class phenomenon, for a number of girls of the aristocracy have married Jewish intellectuals. In what way does an Italian Jew (leaving aside a small minority of Rabbis and traditionalist greybeards) differ from an ordinary Italian of the same class? There's a much greater difference between such a Jew on the one hand and a Polish or Galician Jew of the same class on the other. It's true there was a little political anti-Semitism against Toeplitz, the director of the Commercial Bank, and in 1919 the Milan Review (*La Rivista di Milano*) was founded; this was as fiercely anti-Semitic as its circulation was restricted. I can't help being reminded of the Italian (or French) proverb; "Scratch a Russian and you'll find a Cossack"; many Cossacks used to believe as an article of faith that Jews had tails ...'

'... I don't think ... that there is an "evident" tendency to "force the Jews back into an isolated community"; this tendency seems to me to be rather the "subjective" one of the old rabbis and the young Zionists. The objective truth seems to be that, as a result of the Concordat, the Jews are in the same position as Protestants ...'

... The important thing to remember in connection with this question is that the Jews were not liberated from the Ghetto until 1848, and that they remained in the Ghetto segregated in every way from European society

for almost two millennia. This was not of their own volition - it was imposed on them by others. Since 1848 the process of assimilation in the Western countries has been so rapid and profound that one cannot help thinking that it was only the segregation imposed on them which prevented their complete assimilation in the various countries. It should be borne in mind that the Christian religion was the only "state culture" which (right up to the French Revolution) demanded that Jews should be segregated because of their religious "incurability". (This intransigence, incidentally, is a thing of the past. Nowadays they pass from Judaism to Deism pure and simple, or to atheism.) In any case it is worth noting that many characteristics which are taken for racial are actually the result of life in the Ghetto. On the other hand the system of Ghettos was imposed in different ways in different countries, with the result that an English Jew, for example, has almost nothing in common with a Jew from Galicia.

' Gandhi today appears to represent the Hindu ideology; but the Hindus have reduced the aboriginal Dravidian inhabitants of India to the status of pariahs - they were a warlike race, and they could hardly have thrown up a man like Gandhi until after the Mongol invasion and the English conquest. For two millenia the Jews have had no territorial state, and no unity of language or culture or economic life; how then could one expect to find an aggressiveness, etc., in them? The Arabs too are Semites; blood relations of the Jews; once upon a time they had their period of aggressiveness and of attempts at world conquest. And one last point; insofar as the Jews are bankers and holders of finance capital, how can you possibly assert that they do not have their share in the "aggressiveness" of imperialist states?

'... Who is the "true" Jew, or the "average" Jew? - or even the 'average man', who is not, I think, to be found in any museum of anthropology or sociology? Or alternatively; what significance is there for the Jews of the present day in their conception of God as the "Lord of Hosts", and all the language of the Bible about the "chosen people" and the mission of the Jewish people which sounds like the sort of talk Kaiser Bill used to go in for before the war. Marx has written that the Jewish question went out of existence at the time when the Christians all became Jews, assimilating the assense of Judaism which is the speculative spirit. Or rather, that the Jewish question will only be solved when the whole of Europe is liberated from the speculative spirit, or Judaism in general. This seems to me the only way of posing the general question, apart from recognising the right of Jewish communities to cultural autonomy (of language, schools, etc.), and also national autonomy in any case where a Jewish community succeeded in one way or another in inhabiting a definite territory.

Everything else seems to me false mysticism, good enough maybe for the little Jewish intellectuals of Zionism; it is all one with the question of "race" when that word is understood in any other sense than the purely anthropological; as early as the time of Christ the Jews no longer spoke their own Language, which was reduced to the status of a liturgical language - they spoke Aramaic. When a "race" has forgotten its native tongue; it means that it has already lost the major part of its inheritance; of its own

original conception of the world, and has absorbed the culture (together with the language) of a conquering people. What meaning does "race" still have in that case? It is evident that we now have to deal with a new community; a modern community which has received the passive (not to say negative) imprint of the ghetto, and which in the framework of this new social situation has grown a new "nature". As far as I am concerned, that just about settles the question, and I'm not going to let myself be lured into starting others. The question of "race", outside the realm of anthropology and prehistoric studies, does not interest me ... '