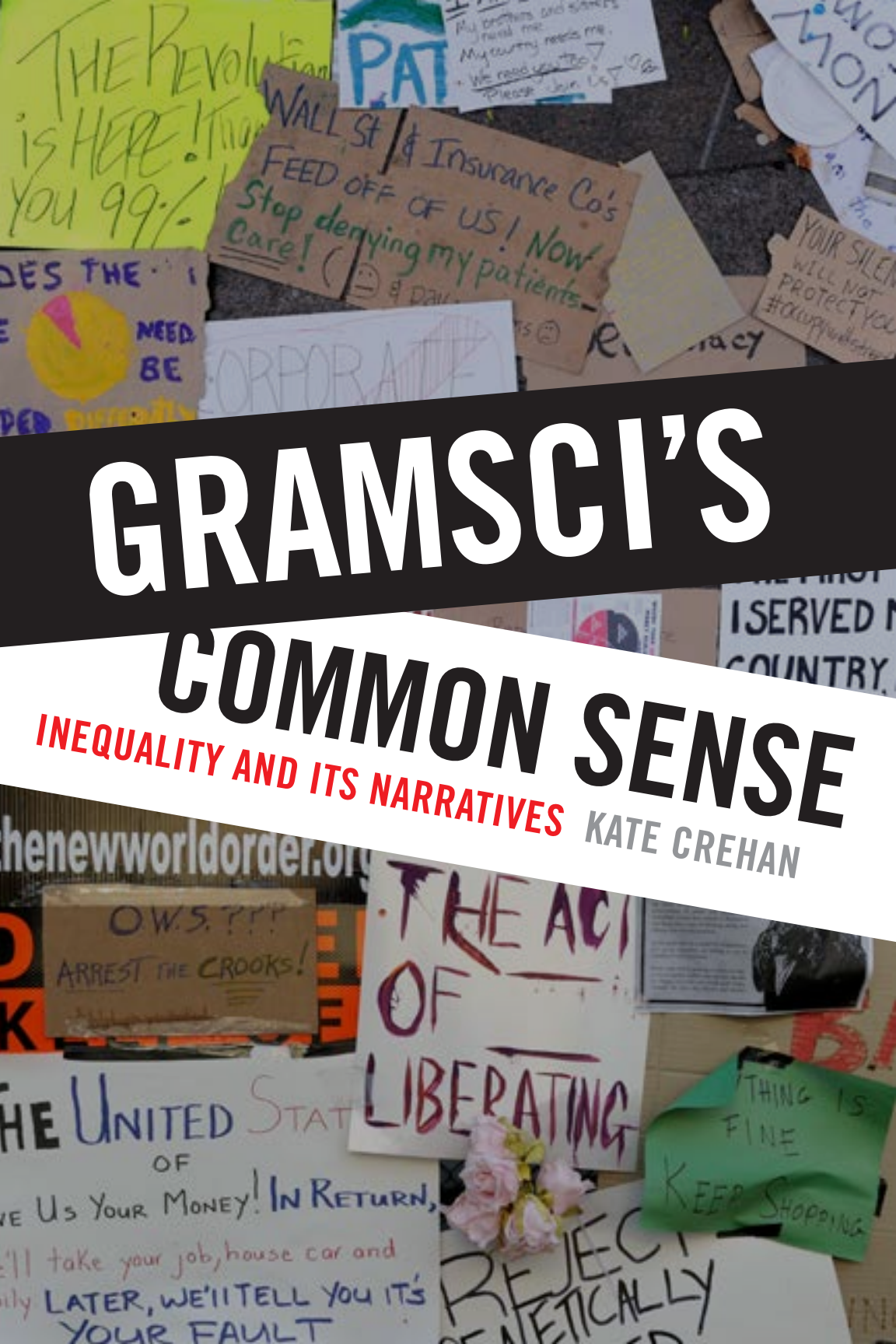
GRAMSCI'S
COMMON SENSE
INEQUALITY AND ITS NARRATIVES
KATE CREHAN

Kate Crehan

Gramsci's Common Sense

INEQUALITY AND ITS NARRATIVES

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COVER ART: (*top*) Occupy Wall Street signs, epa european pressphoto agency b.v./Alamy; (*bottom*) Occupy Vancouver signs, Mark Oun/Alamy.

Every social stratum has its own "Common Sense" and its own "Good Sense," which are basically the most widespread conception of life and of man. —ANTONIO GRAMSCI, *The Prison Notebooks*

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PREFACE

For intellectuals who like to think of themselves as progressive, the relation between the knowledge they produce as scholars and the world beyond the academy is an ever-present question. This is a book about a thinker for whom this question was central, the Italian Marxist and cofounder of the Italian communist party, Antonio Gramsci. Paradoxically, it was his arrest in 1926 by the fascist government of Benito Mussolini that led to his greatest legacy: the prison notebooks he wrote while incarcerated. Condemned to twenty years in prison, his life as a political activist cut short, Gramsci was determined to continue his political engagement in the only way left open to him: a rigorous program of study. Prior to his imprisonment, he had written a vast quantity of journalism, but this he considered ephemeral, "written for the day," as he put it in one of the letters he wrote from prison (*PLII*, 66). Tellingly, he rejected any attempts to publish his journalism in book form. Prison, he hoped, would provide him with the time necessary for more in-depth, scholarly analysis. As a scholar, he had exacting standards, but he also believed that the truly important knowledge is knowledge that travels beyond the academic ghetto. This is a very different attitude from that espoused by another celebrated theorist of power, Michel Foucault. By the end of his life, according to his biographer Didier Eribon, Foucault worried that his books were being circulated too widely: "[T]oo wide a circulation for scholarly books was disastrous for their reception, because it brought with it a multitude of misunderstandings. The moment a book went beyond the circle of those to whom it was really addressed, that is, those scholars who knew the problems with which it dealt and the theoretical traditions to which it referred, it no longer produced 'effects of knowledge' but 'effects of opinion,' as Foucault called them." (Eribon 1991, 292)

Gramsci has none of Foucault's disdain for the effects of opinion. Indeed, the shared "opinions" that inform so much of how people live their day-to-day lives, and the processes by which they come to be shared, are one of the major

concerns of the prison notebooks. He saw such "opinions" as playing a crucial role in the shaping of the social order—a social order he sought to change. A key term here is *senso comune* (common sense), the term Gramsci uses for all those heterogeneous beliefs people arrive at not through critical reflection, but encounter as already existing, self-evident truths. It is important to note, however, that the Italian *senso comune* is a far more neutral term than the English *common sense*. The English term, with its overwhelmingly positive connotations, puts the emphasis, so to speak, on the "sense," *senso comune* on the held-in-common (*comune*) nature of the beliefs. In the notebooks, Gramsci reflects on the complicated roots of such collective knowledge, its shifting and often contradictory components, the ways it becomes accepted as beyond question—and by whom—and when, and how it changes. The collective here is important: "What matters is not the opinion of Tom, Dick, and Harry but the ensemble of opinions that have become collective and a powerful factor in society" (*PNIII*, 347). Ultimately, what interests this political activist is the knowledge that mobilizes political movements capable of bringing about radical transformation. Indeed, he questions whether "a philosophical movement" is "properly so called when it is devoted to creating a specialized culture among restricted intellectual groups" (*SPN*, 330). For him, unlike Foucault, the most important knowledge would seem to be precisely knowledge that has spread beyond "those scholars who knew the problems with which it dealt and the theoretical traditions to which it referred," knowledge that, when embodied in self-aware collectivities, has the potential to act in the world. And for him, the primary such collectivities are classes.

Gramsci is often thought of as one of the Marxist tradition's foremost theorists of culture. What is often overlooked, as I argued in an earlier book, *Gramsci, Culture, and Anthropology*, is that culture is central to the notebooks because culture, understood in its anthropological sense of ways of life, is for their author one of the major ways the inequalities of class are lived on a day-to-day basis. That argument is also at the heart of this book, but here, rather than focus on Gramsci's understanding of culture, I tease out his understanding of class. I suggest that it is because he saw the fundamental inequalities of class as woven through every aspect of life that he paid so much attention to the mapping of *senso comune*, or popular opinion, and why he approached this mapping as he did. Given that the concept of class nowadays is so often taken as referring only to relations of economic inequality, it is important to stress that for Gramsci class includes far more than this.

The notebooks, as I read them, are underpinned by a concept of class, but one that is broad and inclusive, and certainly not confined to the realm of the

economic. This is a notion of class that names structural inequalities reproduced over time. But while this inequality may in the famous last analysis have its roots in fundamental economic relations, it is never a simple epiphenomenon of these: class can take many different forms. The relationship between the fundamental inequalities that shape the realities human beings confront and the ever-shifting flux of lived experience is always complex and nuanced, never crudely deterministic. In the notebooks, we see their author reflecting on the myriad ways inequality manifests itself, on the varied landscapes of power it produces, and the complex ways those landscapes are experienced by those inhabiting them. It is easy to miss the centrality of class to the notebooks, in part because nowhere in them is the concept of class defined in any precise way. This, however, is because the nature of class is, as it were, their ultimate topic. We might think here of Marx's *Capital*, which, as many have complained, also never provides a clear definition of class. The point, it seems to me, is that both *Capital* and the prison notebooks set out to explore the complex ways structural inequality manifests itself in the context of human history. There is no succinct definition of class because the protean forms it assumes in actual times and places cannot be reduced to some simple essence.

One of the forms class assumes is particular worldviews. As human beings, we make sense of our lives through the narratives our particular time and place have made available to us—accounts of "how things are" with deep but never simple roots in the fundamental social relations of the worlds we inhabit. We may challenge or even reject those narratives, but the webs of intelligibility in which our socialization wraps us from the day of our birth are a reality from which we all begin; we are all, to some degree, creatures of popular opinion. And yet, at certain historical moments, there is radical social transformation. When and why does this happen? Running through the notebooks is the question: What is the relation between popular opinion and social transformation?

To map Gramsci's multifaceted understanding of class, I focus on three of his central concepts: subalternity, intellectuals, and common sense. I explore how, taken together, these constitute an approach to the terrain of class inequality as lived reality, one that opens up the diverse and shifting forms it can assume. Approaching inequality in this way allows us to trace out the complex relationship between the actuality of the circumstances in which people live and their explanations of those circumstances, the narratives they use to make sense of the world they encounter.

One reason why the passage from knowledge to opinion is such a complex question for Gramsci is that, on the one hand, he has enormous respect

for those termed in the language of the day "the masses." Indeed, as we shall see, he believes that political narratives capable of mounting an effective challenge to the dominant hegemony have their roots in the experience of those masses. On the other hand, he is not a populist; intellectuals, for him, have a crucial role to play in elaborating and rendering coherent the incoherent knowledge possessed by those who are subordinated, those he terms subalterns. It is equally crucial, however, that the coherent philosophy developed by intellectuals find expression as a new common sense that resonates with those subalterns, and that the masses recognize as *their* knowledge. Only then does the sophisticated philosophy of intellectuals have the potential to become "a powerful factor in society" (*PNIII*: 347). In sum, the relationship between subalterns and intellectuals is, for Gramsci, profoundly dialogical; tracing out the complicated dialogue between the knowledge of the intellectuals and popular opinion is one of the notebooks' central concerns.

Complicating the relationship between knowledge and opinion still further, Gramsci sees the intellectuals who build on subaltern common sense to create a new philosophy as themselves produced by that subaltern group. One way this happens is through the political party: "The political party for some social groups is nothing other than their specific way of elaborating their own category of organic intellectuals directly in the political and philosophical field" (*SPN*: 15). The intellectuals produced organically by a group or class as it rises to power need to be distinguished from traditional intellectuals. This distinction, and the web of relationships linking intellectuals, subalterns, and common sense is at the heart of Gramsci's approach to inequality as lived reality, an approach that sees class as a complex knotting together of economic, social, and political realities with narratives of those realities.

This book is organized in two parts. The first four chapters map out the broad contours of subalternity, intellectuals, and common sense as laid out in the notebooks: chapter 1 focuses on subalternity; chapter 2 on intellectuals; and chapter 3 on common sense. Chapter 4 argues that, taken together, these three concepts constitute a theorization of the complex, dialogical relationship between the experience of inequality, exploitation, and oppression, and the political narratives that articulate that experience.

The three chapters of part 2 address the question of the notebooks' relevance for contemporary analysts. Given that they were written some eighty years ago, can the reflections of this twentieth-century, Italian Marxist, nonetheless provide a useful starting point for those interested in understanding twenty-first-century inequality and its historical roots? To suggest the potential usefulness of Gramsci's linked concepts of subalternity, intellectuals, and

common sense I have taken them to three different case studies, one historical and two contemporary. To help elucidate the often misunderstood concept of organic intellectuals, chapter 5 takes us back to eighteenth-century Scotland and a moment when a new bourgeois order, based on industrial capitalism, was beginning to emerge. The chapter focuses on Adam Smith, a thinker who would come to be seen as one of the first theorists of capitalism. What does this luminary of the Scottish Enlightenment look like if we go beyond his popular image and locate him in his historical context? Can we see him as a bourgeois, organic intellectual? I have chosen a historical rather than a contemporary figure as an example of an organic intellectual because it is only with the benefit of hindsight that we can definitively identify an emerging class's organic intellectuals. Within the flux of the contemporary moment, it is never certain which of the many existing currents of thought genuinely represent a new hegemony in gestation.

The case studies in chapters 6 and 7 take us from the eighteenth century to the present day, and from the concept of organic intellectuals to that of common sense. Each chapter looks at a political movement that could be seen as having attempted to popularize, or create, a particular common sense: chapter 6 focuses on the Tea Party, a movement from the political right, chapter 7 on Occupy Wall Street, an upswelling of discontent that brought together a range of activists from the left. The chapters explore the two movements' different forms of common sense. In the case of the Tea Party, this is a common sense with roots in a far-from-new capitalist narrative, one often seen as originating with Adam Smith. Occupy Wall Street, by contrast, was perhaps struggling toward a new configuration of common sense—one capable of capturing in a visceral way the feeling of many in twenty-first-century America that they are living in an economic system that benefits only the wealthy. The concluding chapter reflects on what the approach to class we find in Gramsci's notebooks has to offer readers in the twenty-first century, particularly those interested in addressing the gross inequalities of our contemporary, globalized world.

In the course of writing this book, I have benefited from discussions of Gramsci with many colleagues and friends. Joseph Buttigieg, Alessandro Carlucci, Marcus Green, Aisha Khan, Shirley Lindenbaum, Maureen Mackintosh, Mauro Pala, Frank Rosengarten, Steve Striffler, and Cosimo Zene all helped me think through the issues raised by the notebooks, and the value to be gained from reading them today. Two workshops at which I presented preliminary versions of some of my arguments helped me refine and sometimes rethink those arguments: the 2010 workshop organized by Cosimo Zene at SOAS, which brought together Gramsci's theorization of subalternity with

that of B. R. Ambedkar's of Dalits, and the 2013 workshop, "Antonio Gramsci: In the World," organized by Roberto Dainotto and Fredric Jameson at Duke University. The two anonymous reviewers for Duke University Press provided extremely insightful and helpful comments.

Mark Porter-Webb's help with finding and formatting the images of the "We are the 99 Percent" Tumblr posts and the Occupy slogans was invaluable. I am also enormously grateful to my editor at Duke, Gisela Fosado, for her support for my project and for her exemplary efficiency.

ABBREVIATIONS

FSPN *Further Selections from the Prison Notebooks/Antonio Gramsci.* Translated and edited by Derek Boothman. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995.

PLI *Letters from Prison: Antonio Gramsci*, vol. I. Edited by Frank Rosengarten. Translated by Ray Rosenthal. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994.

PLII *Letters from Prison: Antonio Gramsci*, vol. II. Edited by Frank Rosengarten. Translated by Ray Rosenthal. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994.

PNI *Antonio Gramsci: Prison Notebooks*, vol. I. Edited by Joseph A. Buttigieg. Translated by Joseph A. Buttigieg and Antonio Callari. New York: Columbia University Press, 1992.

PNII *Antonio Gramsci: Prison Notebooks*, vol. II. Translated and edited by Joseph A. Buttigieg. New York: Columbia University Press, 1996.

PNIII *Antonio Gramsci: Prison Notebooks*, vol. III. Translated and edited by Joseph A. Buttigieg. New York: Columbia University Press, 2007.

SCW *Antonio Gramsci: Selections from Cultural Writings.* Edited by David Forgacs and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith. Translated by William Boelhower. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1985.

SPN *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci.* Edited and translated by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971.

PART I. *Subalternity, Intellectuals, and Common Sense*

1

Subalternity

It really must be stressed that it is precisely the first elements, the most elementary things, which are the first to be forgotten. . . . The first element is that there really do exist rulers and ruled, leaders and led.
— SELECTIONS FROM THE PRISON NOTEBOOKS, 144

This is a book about narratives of inequality. In his history of modern capitalism, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, Thomas Piketty observes, "The history of inequality is shaped by the way economic, social, and political actors view what is just and what is not, as well as by the relative power of those actors and the collective choices that result" (Piketty 2014, 20). As an economist, Piketty's focus, however, is on the quantitative measurement of inequality, and the policy reforms that might lessen it, rather than on the processes by which "economic, social, and political actors" arrive at their understandings of "what is just and what is not." It is those processes that this book explores. What are the origins of the narratives that explain why specific inequalities are inevitable, necessary, indeed beneficial, or conversely unjust, harmful, and far from inevitable? And how do certain of those narratives establish themselves as self-evident truths, the kind of "truths" that the Italian Marxist, Antonio Gramsci, refers to as *senso comune* (common sense)?

Inequality was once commonly theorized using a Marxist concept of class. In recent years, however, class has fallen from favor in both academic and popular circles. But if we want to understand inequality, how it is lived, and why

people see it as just or conversely unjust, perhaps we have been too quick to write off the usefulness of a Marxist notion of class. One reason this approach to inequality has fallen into disfavor is that all too often nowadays the Marxist concept of class is understood as confined to the realm of the economic, as when Richard Wolin writes of "orthodox Marxism's stress on the universalizing framework of 'class,' which reduced social conflict unilaterally to the opposition between wage labor and capital" (2010, 358). Understood in this reductive way, class is indeed easy to dismiss as overly simplistic. The Marxist tradition, however, contains far richer and more interesting versions of class that encompass the many other ways structural inequality manifests itself, and that pay attention to the different ways people in different social locations understand "what is just and what is not." A particularly rich and nuanced approach to inequality is to be found in the now celebrated notebooks Gramsci wrote during his years of imprisonment by the fascist regime of Benito Mussolini. At the heart of this approach is a concern with the complex passage from lived experience, itself always mediated by the existing explanations of that experience, to political narratives and political movements capable of bringing about radical change.

Class, as long as it is not defined in narrowly economic terms, is fundamental to Gramsci's thought. I approach his nuanced and multifaceted understanding of class through three concepts that I see as central to his theorization of power: subalternity, intellectuals, and common sense. Tracing his use of these concepts and their interlinkages provides something like a map of his approach to the complex relationship between the particular economic and political vantage points from which people view the world, and their conceptions of that world.

This chapter introduces the concept of subalternity we find in the notebooks. First, however, it is necessary to say something about the nature of those notebooks as a text. Unfinished, never prepared for publication by Gramsci, and consisting as they do of a series of separate notes that range over very disparate topics, they present the reader with a challenge. And unless we understand the conditions under which they were written, and the basic questions they address, it is difficult to grasp the creative and open Marxism that informs the overall project, a Marxism that is always attentive to the multiple forms in which the inequality between "rulers and ruled, leaders and led" manifests itself.

Reading Gramsci

In November 1926, even though as an elected parliamentary deputy he should have had immunity from prosecution, Gramsci was arrested by the fascist authorities. He and twenty-one other leaders of the Italian communist party were then subjected to a show trial in June 1928. Conviction was never in doubt, and one of the longest sentences was handed down to the future author of the prison notebooks: twenty years, four months, and five days. Referring to this physically diminutive but intellectually imposing prisoner, the prosecutor famously declared: "We must prevent this brain from functioning for twenty years." For his part, Gramsci was determined to keep his brain functioning. He petitioned for a single cell and permission to write. The petition was granted in January 1929, and on the 8th of February he would make his first entry in the first notebook. He continued to work on the notebooks until 1935, when his deteriorating health made further work impossible. He would die in 1937, a patient in the Quisisana clinic still under surveillance, a few days after the expiration of his now reduced sentence.

After their publication in Italy in the late 1940s, the notebooks soon began to acquire an international readership. A key moment in the Anglophone world was the publication of Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith's *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci* (1971), which includes a substantial number of the notes, organized thematically. The volume was rapidly taken up by social scientists across a wide range of disciplines and has never gone out of print. Raymond Williams's *Marxism and Literature*, published in 1977, further popularized Gramsci's concepts among those unable to read Italian, as did the work of Stuart Hall and other members of University of Birmingham's Centre for Cultural Studies. As yet, however, there is no complete English translation of the notebooks, although the first three volumes of a planned five-volume edition, edited by Joseph Buttigieg, have appeared.

As a text, the thirty-three notebooks resist succinct summary. While there are certain recurrent themes, their richness lies in the ways their author explores and expands on these themes; grasping the argument requires close reading. In part this is because Gramsci gives us not polished summations of his reflections but rather tracks left by a mind continually on the move. We accompany Gramsci on his journeys through a thickly wooded intellectual terrain. Sometimes he sticks to the paths already marked out, but often he veers off, carving out his own path as he challenges conventional categories and established thinking. This is particularly true of his writings on intellec-

tuals and the production of knowledge. Keeping up with this thinker requires that we pay careful attention to the twists and turns of his ever-active mind.

The very form of the notebooks confronts us with a problem. Each one consists of series of separate notes, varying in length from a sentence or two to many pages. Together they "possess all the intricacies and perplexities of a textual labyrinth," as Buttigieg has written (*PNI*, ix). If we are to find our way through this labyrinth, it is helpful to begin by considering the conditions in which Gramsci was writing, and how he approached the task of recording his reflections.

Two people who were crucial for Gramsci's physical and intellectual survival during his incarceration were Tatiana Schucht, a sister of his wife Julia, and Piero Sraffa, a left-leaning Italian economist and long-standing friend. Tatiana was an unfailing source of practical and emotional support. Remaining in Italy until his death, largely so that she would be in a position to provide this support, Tatiana did everything she could to ease the many hardships of prison life. Keeping him supplied with writing materials was one of her tasks. The prisoner was very clear as to what he wanted. She was, he wrote to her, to provide him with "notebooks of a normal format like those used in school, and not with too many pages, at most forty to fifty, so they are not inevitably transformed into increasingly jumbled miscellaneous tomes" (*PLII*, 141). Maintaining order was not easy, however. Gramsci would work on a number of different notebooks simultaneously. His intention was to keep different ones for different topics, but this was not always possible. For one thing, his mind worked in such a way that he was continually seeing connections between apparently separate topics. Another problem was that the prison authorities insisted that the notebooks be kept in storage. At any one time he was only allowed to have a limited number of them with him in his cell. Consequently, he would sometimes use whichever was at hand. To add to the reader's difficulty, the notes themselves can be fragmentary and elliptical, leaving them open to a wide range of interpretations. The openness of his thought is in fact one of his strengths as a theorist, but it does mean that if we are to find our way through Gramsci's labyrinth, we need to read him with extreme care.

Although living in Britain by the time of Gramsci's arrest, Sraffa made regular trips to Italy, during which he would visit Gramsci in prison. He was also in contact with a number of leading Italian communists living in exile, and he spearheaded a campaign in the international media for the release of this major political figure. This helped ensure that Mussolini's prisoner was not forgotten by the wider world. Most important, as regards the notebooks, Sraffa opened an account with a Milan bookstore in Gramsci's name (paid for

by the independently wealthy Sraffa) that allowed him to obtain books and other publications. Although he was limited in his ordering by what the prison authorities would allow, the account still enabled him to obtain a wide range of books and periodicals. Without Tatiana and Sraffa, it is unlikely that we would have the notebooks: it was their support that enabled them to be written, and after their author's death it was they who ensured the notebooks' survival.

In addition to the notebooks, we also have many of his letters written from prison, available in English in Frank Rosengarten's superb edition. The largest number were written to Tatiana. Once sentenced, prisoners were only allowed to write to relatives. Although he wrote to various members of his family, Tatiana became his main correspondent. In part this was because he often found it hard to write to his wife. She was living in Moscow throughout his imprisonment but had various emotional and physical problems and wrote only intermittently.

The bookstore account was a particularly crucial resource given the dialogic character of Gramsci's thought. Most commonly a note will begin with his engaging with another author. In one of his letters to Tatiana, written in December 1930, he explains his need as an intellectual to feel himself engaged in a dialogue: "Perhaps it is because my entire intellectual formation has been of a polemical order; even thinking 'disinterestedly' is difficult for me, that is, studying for study's sake. Only occasionally, but rarely, does it happen that I lose myself in a specific order of reflections and find, so to speak, in the things themselves enough interest to devote myself to their analysis. Ordinarily, I need to set out from a dialogical or dialectical standpoint, otherwise I don't experience any intellectual stimulation. As I once told you, I don't like to cast stones into the darkness; I want to feel a concrete interlocutor or adversary" (*PLI*, 369).

The reluctance to focus simply on "the things themselves," however, is not only about wanting to "feel a concrete interlocutor." It also speaks to a concern with ideas as living realities rather than pure thought, abstracted from the messy flux of day-to-day life. The books he requested included not only serious academic scholarship but popular history, sociology, politics, and writings on cultural topics. And his orders included a range of newspapers and periodicals, from as wide a political spectrum as the prison authorities would allow. One reason he insisted on reading so much popular, ephemeral stuff is because, for him, what is important are not debates confined to a few intellectuals, but the ideas and beliefs that inform and shape the lives lived by the mass of the population.

Gramsci was especially interested in ideas and beliefs which had established

themselves as "common sense" (senso comune). As he writes in one note (part of which I quoted in the preface): "[I]s a philosophical movement properly so called when it is devoted to creating a specialised culture among restricted intellectual groups, or rather when, and only when, in the process of elaborating a form of thought superior to 'common sense' and coherent on a scientific plane, it never forgets to remain in contact with the simple[1] [common people] and indeed finds in this contact the source of the problems it sets out to study and to resolve? (*SPN*, 330). Were he alive today and writing in the United States, Gramsci would certainly be an avid follower of the whole spectrum of media, from WBAI to Fox, from *The Nation* to Rupert Murdoch's tabloids, not to mention the ever-expanding media landscape, including social media, of the internet. For the contemporary Anglophone reader, the dialogical character of the prison notebooks can present problems. Reading Gramsci's reflections on what he is reading is often like hearing a single participant in an ongoing conversation. Those other participants range from major thinkers to long-forgotten journalists, and for those unfamiliar with these interlocutors and the relevant debates, the argument can be hard to follow.

The sometimes fragmentary form of the notes is not, however, merely the result of Gramsci's need to engage in debate and his concern with ideas as they are lived. There is also the problem of what he referred to as his "methodological scruples." He had to overcome enormous obstacles to achieve his education: poor schools with inadequate teachers in his impoverished homeland of Sardinia, a lack of family resources, and his own ill health. Thanks to hard work and extraordinary persistence, he eventually won a highly competitive, although far from lucrative, scholarship to Turin University. For several years in Turin, despite the extreme poverty to which his meagerly funded scholarship condemned him, he studied language and philology with ferocious intensity, before finally dropping out to become a full-time political activist and journalist. In later life, he would continue to hold scholarship to the highest standards, writing in one letter to Tatiana: "You must also keep in mind that the habit of rigorous philological discipline that I acquired during my university studies has given me perhaps an excessive supply of methodological scru-

1. Gramsci uses the term *semplici*. Given the pejorative connotations of the literal English translation "the simple," it is important to note that, as Marcus Green explains in his entry on *semplici* in the *Dizionario Gramsciano* (Liguori and Voza 2009), Gramsci uses this term "to refer to the Catholic Church's paternalistic view of common people and peasants as 'simple and sincere souls' in contrast to the Church's superior view of cultured intellectuals."

ples" (*PLII*, 52). In the notebooks he repeatedly stresses the provisional, unfinished character of his notes, writing, for instance, "These notes often consist of assertions that have not been verified, that may be called 'rough first drafts'; after further study, some of them may be discarded, and it might even be the case that the opposite of what they assert will be shown to be true" (*PNIII*, 231).

The conditions under which the prison notebooks were composed made scholarship worthy of the name impossible in their author's eyes. For such a dialogic thinker, access to books and periodicals was crucial, and yet before ordering any publication from his bookstore account he had to apply for permission to the prison authorities, permission that might well be denied. Moreover, as the official prison stamp to be found on each page of every notebook testifies, every word he wrote was subject to the oversight of the prison censors. Over the years the degree of censorship varied, but it was a constant presence, although, as Marcus Green argues, its role in shaping the notebooks has been much exaggerated (Green 2011a). His lack of access to adequate library resources was, for Gramsci, a far greater obstacle to serious scholarship. Earlier in the same letter in which he notes his "methodological scruples," he also explains: "One might say that right now I no longer have a true program of studies and work and of course this was bound to happen. I had set myself the aim of reflecting on a particular set of problems, but it was inevitable that at a certain stage these reflections would of necessity move into a phase of documentation and then to a phase of work and elaboration that requires great libraries" (*PLII*, 51–52).

The notebooks document a thought process in which Gramsci is continually torn between the creativity of his ever-active mind, forever throwing off ideas and suggesting new avenues of research to pursue, and his methodological scruples. The emotional force of those scruples is suggested by this sentence at the end of one note: "In general, remember that all these notes are provisional and written as they flow from the pen: they must be reviewed and checked in detail because they undoubtedly contain many imprecisions, anachronisms, wrong approaches, etc., *that do not imply wrongdoing* because the notes have solely the function of quick memoranda" (*PNII*, 158; emphasis mine). The phrase "that do not imply wrongdoing" is surely very revealing. If we want to understand the notebooks' often fragmentary and allusive style we need to remember not only the very real and physical censors omnipresent in his prison life, but also the equally inescapable academic policemen permanently lodged in his head. One way it seems he is able to quiet these internal judges is by continually reassuring himself that what he writes is no more than "rough first drafts." The question of what Gramsci actually achieved in the prison notebooks is, of course, another matter.

Something that can frustrate contemporary analysts interested in using this Marxist's concepts in their own work is the notebooks' apparent lack of fixed and precise definitions of basic terms such as *subalternity*, *intellectuals*, and *common sense*. Also, the notebooks were written at a particular, and now somewhat distant, historical moment; their reflections are responses to specific events and interlocutors viewed in the context of that historical moment. Nonetheless, underlying the notes as a whole it is possible to trace out the contours of an analytical approach that we can take to times and places quite remote from Italy in the mid-twentieth century. As an anthropologist, I have attempted to take this approach and combine it with the detailed ethnography that is a strength of my discipline.[2] The case studies in part II of this book, while based on secondary literature rather than my own fieldwork, represent concrete examples of how contemporary analysts might use Gramsci's concepts in their own studies.

The notebooks certainly challenge the reader. Their note form and their dialogic character make it hard sometimes to follow Gramsci's thought as he debates with absent adversaries and pursues ideas as they lead him down new and sometimes unexpected paths. He himself, however, gives us some useful guidance. How should one proceed, he asks, and he clearly has Marx in mind here, if one's goal is "to understand the birth of a conception of the world which has never been systematically expounded by its founder"? (*SPN*, 382). We should, he tells us, look for the spirit or leitmotif in the body of thought as a whole: "Search for the *Leitmotiv*, for the rhythm of the thought as it develops, should be more important than that for single casual affirmations and isolated aphorisms" (*SPN*, 383–84). It is this rhythm and this leitmotif (or leitmotifs) that I have sought to hear in my reading of the notebooks.

Subaltern Voices

In the last thirty years, Gramsci's concept of subalternity has been taken up by many analysts, particularly scholars of the Global South. A much debated question is the degree to which subalterns are able to understand and articulate their own subalternity. This is a central question in the notebooks, and, indeed, this book. Two contemporary theorists with diametrically opposed positions on this issue are Gayatri Spivak, feminist literary critic and coeditor of the first *Subaltern Studies Reader*; and James Scott, author of the much cited

2. See, for instance, Crehan 1997, 2011a, and 2014.

Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance; Domination and the Arts of Resistance; and other works celebrating the agency of the subordinated. Teasing out something of Spivak's and Scott's opposed positions can help clarify the epistemological claims at stake here and, before turning to Gramsci himself, I want to look briefly at their respective arguments.

In a celebrated article, Spivak took as her title the question: "Can the Subaltern Speak?"[3] She has acknowledged Gramsci as a significant influence, this influence coming primarily via the early work of the historian Ranajit Guha and the Subaltern Studies Group (Spivak 2010b, 232–33). She was, she tells us, "so overwhelmed" by Guha's "On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India" (1988), essentially the manifesto of the Subaltern Studies Group, that she withdrew an earlier version of "Can the Subaltern Speak?," then called "Power and Desire," in order to rethink and rewrite it radically. Later, however, she would come to reject what she saw as Guha's transformation of the Gramscian notion of subalternity, explaining: "I did not then understand that Guha's understanding of the subaltern world would subsequently take on board a much broader transformation of the Gramscian idea insofar as the subaltern, according to Guha, would call out in a collective voice. I never went that way at all" (Spivak 2010b, 233). But how much of a transformation is this? As I read the notebooks, Gramsci's primary interest is very much the collective voice. Remember his insistence in one of the passages I quoted in the preface that what is important is "the ensemble of opinions that have become collective and a powerful factor in society" (*PNIII*, 347). I shall come back to the question of individual and collective subaltern voices, and to the role the Subaltern Studies Group played in popularizing the term subaltern. For the moment, I want to concentrate on the central argument of Spivak's essay: her rejection of the claims of theorists of the Global North to "know" and speak for subalterns of the Global South.

Two theorists with whom she engages at length are Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze, focusing particularly on the published exchange between them, "Intellectuals and Power: A Conversation between Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze" (Foucault 1977). She notes that the two French theorists assume, indeed assert, that "the oppressed, if given the chance . . . *can speak*

3. The most widely known version of "Can the Subaltern Speak?" is probably the one first published in Nelson and Grossberg (1988, 271–313). An earlier version, "Can the Subaltern Speak? Speculations on Widow Sacrifice," had appeared in *Wedge* (Spivak 1985, 120–30). Spivak (1999, 244–311) is an expanded version of the essay. Morris (2010) includes both the 1988 and the 1999 versions.

and know their conditions" (Spivak 2010a, 252). She quotes Foucault's insistence that "the masses *know* perfectly well, clearly . . . they know far better than [the intellectual] and they certainly say it very well" (quoted in Spivak 2010a, 241, Foucault's emphasis). Spivak points out that the "masses" Foucault and Deleuze have in mind here are those of the Global North.[4] In other words, subalterns who have long been subject to advanced capitalist regimes and their sophisticated mechanisms of social reproduction. Spivak's focus is, as she puts it, "on the other side of the international division of labour," that is, subalterns in the Global South. It is with reference to those subalterns that she poses her famous question: Can the subaltern speak? (Spivak 2010a, 252). Her primary concern, however, is not subalterns in the Global South in general, but the particular predicament of female subalterns, doubly silenced, first because of the subalternity they share with male subalterns, then because of the subalternity they experience as women.

Spivak goes on to explore the nature of this silencing through an examination of the debates around the British colonial authorities' abolition of *sati* (widow sacrifice) in India. What we see in these debates, according to Spivak, is the meanings of women's actions being argued over by men, with the individual women themselves rendered mute. As Spivak puts it, ending the practice whereby some Hindu widows would immolate themselves on their husband's funeral pyre, "has been generally understood as 'White men saving brown women from brown men.' White women . . . have not produced an alternative understanding. Against this is the Indian nativist argument, a parody of the nostalgia for lost origins: 'The women actually wanted to die'" (Spivak 2010a, 269). Spivak's point here is that we never hear the testimony of the women themselves, although she is quick to add, "Such a testimony would not be ideology-transcendent or 'fully' subjective, of course, but it would have constituted the ingredients for producing a countersentence" (Spivak 2010a, 269).

It would take us too far afield to follow Spivak's complex and nuanced arguments in any detail, but her basic argument that the condition of subalternity involves a particular kind of muting, is certainly central to Gramsci's under-

4. In fairness to Foucault, it should be noted that in the sentence quoted by Spivak, Foucault is specifically referring to the French masses of May 1968. Spivak omits the beginning of the sentence, which makes this clear. The full sentence in the original (a conversation recorded in 1973) reads: "In the most recent upheaval [May 1968, popularly known as the 'events of May'], the intellectual discovered that the masses no longer need him to gain knowledge: they *know* perfectly well, without illusion; they know far better than he and they are certainly capable of expressing themselves" (Foucault 1977, 207).

standing of subalternity. The position of Spivak (and Gramsci) here is very different from that of James Scott. For Scott, subalterns can and do speak. This is, indeed, at the heart of his argument in *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*. Scott accepts that subaltern speech may be muted in the presence of the powerful but insists that, nonetheless, "[e]very subordinate group creates, out of its ordeal, a 'hidden transcript' that represents a critique of power spoken behind the back of the dominant" (1990, xii). And as long as theorists are prepared to seek out the secluded spots where the exploited and oppressed feel free to speak, they can find these "hidden transcripts." It is, as he puts it, "outside the earshot of powerholders, where the hidden transcript is to be sought. The disparity between what we find here and what is said in the presence of power is a rough measure of what has been suppressed from power-laden political communication. The hidden transcript is, for this reason, the privileged site for nonhegemonic, contrapuntal, dissident, subversive discourse" (1990, 25).

Scott's insistence that all subordinate groups have their own "critique of power," and his general respect for such groups' ability to understand and articulate such critiques are shared by many anthropologists. One of the strengths of the anthropological tradition is precisely a stress on genuinely listening to those studied. As Malinowski so famously claimed in his introduction to *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, the final goal of the anthropologist is "to grasp the native's point of view" (Malinowski 1984, 25). Gramsci's frequent disparagement of subaltern common sense, and his insistence that coherent and effective critiques of power require the intervention of intellectuals, albeit the organic intellectuals who have emerged out of subaltern experience, can strike anthropologists as patronizing. It is important to remember, however, that the Italian Marxist's goal was never simply to grasp the subaltern view, to see the world through subaltern eyes: his goal was social transformation. And this required not only the mapping of common sense and the identification of the good sense he saw as embedded within it, but its translation (within the context of the political party) into effective political narratives capable of mobilizing large masses.

Spivak does not specifically engage with Scott in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" It seems likely, however, that she would see his approach as falling under what she dismisses as "[t]he banality of leftist intellectuals' lists of self-knowing, politically canny subalterns" (Spivak 2012, 243). The key difference between Scott and Spivak here is that for Scott, subalterns understand and are fully able to articulate their subalternity; it is only their fear of the "powerholders" that keeps them silent, while for Spivak their muting is more radical. Subalterns, especially female subalterns, have neither the words nor the con-

cepts to articulate their condition in a language their oppressors are capable of comprehending.

So where does Gramsci stand on this question? There is no easy answer. Discovering whether or not the subalterns of the notebooks can "speak," and to the extent they do, what forms this speech might take, requires a careful reading of those notebooks; it cannot be summed up in a single sound bite. Having laid out something of what is at issue, therefore, I shall leave the question hanging, letting it resonate through this and the next two chapters before returning to it in chapter 4. First, we need to ask, who are subalterns in the notebooks? This is the question on which I focus for the remainder of this chapter.

Who Are Subalterns?

Thanks in large part to the Subaltern Studies Group, the term *subaltern* has now entered the academic mainstream. In the course of its journey, however, it has lost much of the multilayered richness it has in the notebooks. Beginning in the 1980s, the Subaltern Studies Group (which included Spivak) produced numerous papers, published in a series of volumes entitled *Subaltern Studies*, that challenged and rethought the standard accounts of Indian history. Although they would later move away from Gramsci, for the first five years nearly all their work would be, as an editor's note to *Selected Subaltern Studies* puts it, "an expansion and enrichment of Antonio Gramsci's notion of the subaltern" (Guha and Spivak 1988, xii). These South Asian scholars drew new attention to the place of this term in the notebooks, and all those interested in navigating the notebooks' labyrinth owe them a debt of gratitude. Their belief that the notion of the subaltern was in need of "expansion and enrichment," however, derives from a particular reading of the notebooks, one that argues that much of Gramsci's innovative terminology, such as his use of the category subalterns, and his references to "philosophy of praxis" rather than Marxism, should be seen as self-censorship, an anxiety to avoid arousing the suspicions of the prison censors.[5] According to this reading—one that has been enormously influential—*subaltern* is simply a euphemism for *proletariat*.[6] Having

5. See Haug (2000) for a detailed argument that the term *philosophy of praxis* is not a euphemism for Marxism, used by Gramsci to deflect the attention of the prison censors, but rather a way of naming Marxism that captures Gramsci's own understanding of Marxism.

6. Spivak (1992, 324), Lloyd (1993, 126), Rogall (1998, 2), and Beverley (1999, 12), for example, all claim that *subaltern* is Gramsci's code word for *proletariat* (see Green 2011a).

decided that *subaltern* was no more than a codeword for *proletariat*, it is not surprising that these scholars ended up, as David Ludden (one of the group) has put it, "reinventing subalternity" (cited in Green 2011a, 387). In effect, as Marcus Green writes in his authoritative account of the meaning of *subalternity* in the notebooks, "subaltern studies opened Gramsci to a new reading that highlighted the importance of the subaltern in his work, but then closed off its own reading by misinterpreting the meaning of the 'subaltern' in his writings" (2011a, 388). It is true that Gramsci did at times avoid using terms and names too obviously linked to Marxism or the Soviet Union, but by no means always; the term *proletariat*, for example, appears over seventy times in the notebooks (2011a, 392). As for *subaltern*, "[a]nalysis of the complete *Prison Notebooks* reveals no indication that Gramsci devised and used the term 'subaltern' as a codeword or euphemism for the word 'proletariat'" (2011a, 392). The problem with attributing the unfamiliar terminology we find in the notebooks to self-censorship is that this suppresses the open and expansive quality of Gramsci's Marxism.

In the case of subalternity, as with so many of the theoretical concepts in the notebooks, Gramsci never provides us with a precise definition. This, however, is not due to any lack of precision in his thinking. Rather, it speaks to a fundamental characteristic of his concepts. For Gramsci, as for Marx, while general abstract concepts have their place, they are often not particularly useful once the analysis moves to the specifics of a particular time and place. In the *Grundrisse*, for example, Marx writes of *production*: "[T]here is no production in general, . . . Production is always a *particular* branch of production—e.g. agriculture, cattle-raising, manufactures etc.—or it is a *totality*" (Marx 1973, 86). As a totality, the condition of subalternity is broadly inclusive, encompassing all those who are oppressed rather than oppressing, ruled rather than ruling. Green notes that at different points in Notebook 25 (the notebook devoted to subaltern social groups) Gramsci "identifies slaves, peasants, religious groups, women, different races, and the proletariat as subaltern social groups" (2011b, 69). The diffuse and general character of subalternity in general is captured in a passage in which Gramsci explains why what he terms an unfortunate "deterministic, fatalistic and mechanistic element has been a direct ideological 'aroma' emanating from the philosophy of praxis." For him, this "has been made necessary and justified historically by the 'subaltern' character of certain social strata" (*SPN*, 336) and their need to endure repeated defeat: "When you don't have the initiative in the struggle and the struggle itself comes eventually to be identified with a series of defeats, mechanical determinism becomes a tremendous force of moral resistance, of cohesion and

of patient and obstinate perseverance. 'I have been defeated for the moment, but the tide of history is working for me in the long term'" (*SPN*, 336).

Once, however, we are talking about a specific time and place, subalterns, for Gramsci, are always particular kinds of subaltern. Tellingly, as Buttigieg has pointed out, the notebooks never speak of the subaltern in the singular; they talk of subaltern classes or subaltern social groups, as in the title given to Notebook 25: "On the Margins of History (The History of Subaltern Social Groups)." It is a mistake, Buttigieg stresses, to seek "a precise definition of 'subaltern' or 'subaltern social groups/classes' as conceived by Gramsci: he does not regard them as a single, much less a homogeneous, entity. It is precisely why he always refers to them in the plural" (Buttigieg 2013, 36). The point is that if we want to define *subalternity* precisely, then we need to know which particular subalterns, at which particular historical moment, we are talking about. What defines their specific form of subalternity? And here it is important to remember, as Peter Thomas has stressed, in a talk in which he too draws attention to the fact that "the term subaltern in the singular does not appear in Gramsci's work" (Thomas 2015), that subalterns do not exist in isolation from the state. Indeed, the nature of their subalternity is in large part defined by the specific ways they are incorporated into the state—the state here being understood in the wide sense of "the entire complex of practical and theoretical activities with which the ruling class not only justifies and maintains its dominance, but manages to win over the active consent of those over whom it rules" (*SPN*, 244).

It is precisely subalternity's lack of specificity as a general term that makes it a useful concept for those interested in analyzing inequality but resistant to the rigidities of simplistic, overly economistic versions of Marxism. It is useful because it is not limited to a specific type of oppression, such as economic exploitation, but includes the many different ways inequality and subordination can manifest themselves. Inequality can, for instance, burrow deep into the mind. A letter Gramsci wrote to his wife toward the end of his life, when he and his wife resumed contact after a long hiatus, provides an example of subalternity as internalized "mind-forged manacles," to quote William Blake: "In general, however, it seems to me that you put yourself (and not only in this connection) in a subaltern rather than a dominant position. That is, you assume the position of someone incapable of historically criticizing ideologies by dominating them, explaining and justifying them as a historical necessity of the past; of someone who, brought into contact with a specific world of emotions, feels attracted or repulsed by it, remaining always within the sphere of emotion and immediate passion" (*PLII*, 318). More generally, to borrow the

words of Aimé Césaire used by Frantz Fanon in the epigraph to *Black Skin, White Masks*, we could say of subalterns who are subordinated mentally that they "have been skillfully injected with fear, inferiority complexes, trepidation, servility, despair, abasement" (Fanon 1967, 7). The psychological dimension of subalternity is another of the notebooks' leitmotifs.

In sum, Gramsci's concept of subalternity encompasses subordination in all its many forms, including internalized subordination. If we want to go beyond this general level and map the specific and highly variable forms it assumes in any given time and place, we need to undertake careful empirical analysis of that time and place. The next chapter moves from the concept of subalternity to that of intellectuals, the second of the three major concepts I see as central to Gramsci's approach to class.