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Antonio Gramsci: Letters from Prison

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The English language, as is well known, enjoys a hegemonic status in transnational cultural relations, its cultural capital remaining, as of yet, largely unimpaired. Anti-democratic interests have long been aware of the advantages such status confers. Pro-democratic forces seem to be catching up. By recently initiating the publication of a new substantive edition of Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks* in English, Columbia University Press seems to have chosen to participate in the important project of providing easier access to an icon of the pluralistic left. As it turns out, this decision may not so much affect potential readers far away, as it may do so regarding readers near by. For the entire oeuvre of Gramsci, now finally beginning to be available to the anglophone world, has been accessible to the scrutiny of Latin-American Spanish or Portuguese readers for many decades for one, and excerpts of his work, similar to the ones to which we have been treated in English by the classical Hoare-Smith edition of 1971, have also been available in Finnish, Czech, Japanese, Arabic and Greek, to cite just a few languages, for another. No point in bemoaning the past, I suppose. Some things come better late than never. As is the case with the two volumes under review here, again published by Columbia UP, of Gramsci’s *Letters from Prison*, which not only assure, however belatedly, accessibility to the complexity of Gramsci’s work, but also, and above all, help to focus on the extent and the limits of the relations between Gramsci’s theories and his personal life. Gramsci’s letters, since they are replete with theoretical issues, easily lend themselves to relegation to supplementary status with regards to Gramsci’s main theoretical writings, the *Prison Notebooks*, that is, and most previous commentators have responded to such invitation accordingly. It is to the enormous credit of Frank Rosengarten, the editor of these two volumes of *Letters from Prison*, that the boundaries between intellectual work and personal relations no longer resolve at the expense of the latter, and that the fluidities between public and private, the political and the personal, no longer abide at the expense of the former. Rosengarten puncters the dialectic of Gramsci’s inner life. As he emphasizes in his thoughtful introduction, the letters are about the ways in which Gramsci as prisoner reviews and reconstructs his life, tries to define his primary relationship and struggles to maintain his sense of identity. Indeed, the letters invite reflections on Gramsci’s personal life. In this sense, while surely subscribing to the standard assessment of the prison letters as supplements and support of many of the theoretical issues raised by Gramsci in his prison notebooks, Rosengarten simultaneously displays a sensibility— hitherto unusual for editors of Gramsci’s letters—for the effects of Gramsci’s prison existence on his primary personal relations. The most elementary
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relation concerns of course, as Rosengarten well knows, Gramsci’s wife. For this reason alone it was worth the wait for a more complete edition of Gramsci’s works in English in general, and for his letters in particular. I will in the following first address those features of this new edition of Gramsci’s prison letters which strike me as the most obvious, and then turn to those which are not so obvious.

The two volumes legitimately pride themselves as “the complete and definitive edition of Gramsci’s prison letters.” They could also have added the formulation “the most beautifully translated” to their self-congratulatory advertising list. Translated by one of the most eminently credentialled North American translators of literary texts from Italian to English, Raymond Rosenthal, this version superbly renders in English the specificity of Gramsci’s epistolary style: its attention to detail, precision, and clarity mixed with a penchant for systematically incorporating, without falling into banalities and redundancies, as many experiential features as possible typical of his structure of everyday prison life. Gramsci’s extensive activities as a political journalist in his pre-prison years had probably provided him with the experience not only of writing within deadlines, but also of stylistically satisfying a public by whom he wanted to be understood. While it is not clear whether his epistolary sentences crafted in prison indeed always literally say what he actually means to say—hidden messages may indeed be conveyed by his correspondence—his letters do carry this mark of his earlier no-nonsense journalistic rhetoric as they reproduce spatially and temporally inflected reflections of his prison life. Yet it is not only due to Raymond Rosenthal’s superbly performed transliterary tackles between content and form, respecting the stylistic integrity of Gramsci’s letters, that these two volumes command our admiration. It is also due to a more general spirit of integrity emanating from the combined project of translating and editing alike. Rosenthal and Rosengarten restore to Gramsci’s letters what previous editions, whether in English or in other languages, for that matter—and with one notable exception—have attempted to obliterate: inquisitiveness about the fate of Gramsci’s wife.

As Gramsci developed his intellectual projects in prison which are known as the Prison Notebooks, he discussed these pursuit—theory of history, theory of intellectuals, economic theory, cultural theory etc—in the letters he was allowed to write. Since the letters were almost the only means to maintain contact with the outside world, there is no doubt that they fulfilled not only an important informational but also an emotional function. Their status in Gramsci’s psychological economy is undisputed and the greater completeness of this edition under review here leaves little doubt about the ways in which the quality of Gramsci’s relation with the outside world, detectable from a variety of his reactions to events as recorded in the letters, effected his prison existence. The way in which Gramsci relates to the outside world in large part appears to hinge on the
quality of his relationship with his wife. In the past, introductions to English editions of the letters, whether edited by women or men, have noted that Gramsci’s wife, Giulia Schucht, somewhere along Gramsci’s long prison sentence became ill and veiled herself into intermittent silence, thereby aggravating Gramsci’s psychological state. Quantitative measures support this thesis. Since the letters Gramsci was allowed to write in prison were letters to his family only, most of the letters he did write were addressed to the women in his family life (wife, sister-in-law, mother, sisters), and most of the letters he directly received were written by family women as well. From the data mainstream Gramsci scholars have at their disposal, Giulia Schucht, Gramsci’s wife, did not write as many letters to Gramsci as Tatiana Schucht, Giulia’s sister, and Gramsci’s sister-in-law, did. From Giulia about 80 letters are known or so at the moment, and from Tatiana over 600. The most obvious explanation is that while T. Schucht, residing in Italy, functioned as essential intermediary between the prisoner and the outside world, which included not only his family, friends, and comrades but also the relations Gramsci entertained, however fragmentary and peripheral, with the authorities or with some forms of medical counsel, G. Schucht, residing with her two children, older sister and parents in the Soviet Union, was in contact with her imprisoned husband mostly via her sister Tatiana and via the relation her sister Tatiana entertained with the larger Schucht family with whom Giulia resided in Moscow. Introductions to previous editions of Gramsci’s letters from prison do not distinguish themselves by probing more deeply into this apparent discrepancy in letter writing habits between the two sisters. Most editions subscribe to the explanation that while Giulia’s relative epistolary underproduction, often addressed by Gramsci in his own letters, is intrinsically connected to a psychic illness, Tatiana’s overproduction is not separable from the innumerable functions she performed for the prisoner’s material, physical, psychological, and moral well-being. And moreover, most editions do not contend themselves with this common-sensical explanation but assume a moralistic or even judgmental tone vis-à-vis Giulia Schucht, perhaps inadvertently emulating a pitch which is surely not absent in quite a few of Gramsci’s own letters to his wife. What is interesting is that although Rosengarten based his English edition on the standard 1965 Italian Einaudi edition of the prison letters, expanded by an 1988 Unità edition, both of which equate Giulia’s silence to her so-called illness, Rosengarten refuses to reiterate that equation. And he does not pontificate with respect to the quantity or quality of Giulia’s epistolary performances either. I do not know what Rosengarten’s motivations are. Yet a few things are certain: what really accounts for Giulia’s intermittent silence can only be answered with a measure of certainty once we know more about the degree of G. Schucht’s involvement with Gramsci’s own involvement with Italy’s exiled Communist Party dur-
ing the Fascist era, and once we know more about her relation to his relation to the Soviet leadership during the same period. Since relations are usually dialectical, we would also have to know what the leadership of the Italian CP, or which factions thereof, expected or did not expect from Gramsci, or from Giulia Schucht for that matter. And the same holds, of course, for the leadership of the international communist movement, the Komintern. And so before we raise other questions concerning Giulia Schucht’s intermittent silence, we might first have to ask whether she in fact was intermittently silent. We would have to get a hold of as many of the letters she wrote to Gramsci in particular, and the letters the other women wrote to Gramsci in general, in order to find out more details about the circumstances. Ursula Apitzsch, a renowned sociologist at Frankfurt University, has precisely begun to do that with her Gefängnisbriefe. Briefwechsel mit Giulia Schucht (Hamburg/Frankfurt: Argument/Cooperative, 1994), volume one of a series which publishes the letters written to Gramsci by the major women in his prison life. Rosengarten, to be sure, whose edition focuses on the letters written by Gramsci, and not on those written to him, has less of a reason to get involved with the problem as to how the content of these women’s letters might reveal the extent and quality of the prisoner’s relations with individuals, groups, or political agencies alike. But by approaching the topic of Giulia Schucht in a sensitive way and thus against tradition, by setting a tone of endowing her memory with respect and dignity, with time, place, agency, and history. Rosengarten’s edition with its excellent introduction bring us much closer to wondering about the extent to which the primary relations in Gramsci’s life are not only as personal as they are political, but also as political as they are personal.

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By David Simpson.

This book cogently examines the postmodern turn in the academy. The object of Simpson’s concern is not a global “condition of postmodernity” but specifically what the author calls “the rule of literature” in academia. For Simpson, the “completely new configuration of knowledge” vaunted by many “postmodernists” is in fact the much more modest result of the exporting of literary-critical modalities into disciplines that had previously resisted them because they were more confident of the sufficiency of their own. Thus, he claims, the purported new paradigm of knowledge can be better described as “the narrative turn in contemporary aca-