

## Gramsci in Scandinavia – Notes On Ehnmark’s Gramsci

By Ronny Kjelsberg

### Gramsci in Scandinavia

The Scandinavian countries have perhaps not been among the countries where Antonio Gramsci's thoughts have been very well known and had a great influence on political and social scientific debate. The "Eurocommunist" tradition which is often in part attributed to the influence of Gramsci's ideas has never been a strong ideological force in Scandinavia, and the radicalization that followed the 1968 uprisings in Scandinavia in general, and Norway in particular, to some extent was channeled through Maoist parties. In the 1970s, there, however, was a certain influence on the Scandinavian left socialist parties.

There has been published a few books of Gramsci's writings, particularly in Denmark - which is geographically (and perhaps culturally) closer to continental Europe than Norway and Sweden. In 1972 Kjeld Østerling Nielsen edited *Politik og kultur* (Politics and culture) (all translations from Scandinavian languages into English are the authors) – a short selection from all of Gramsci's writings (Gramsci, Nilsen, 1972). The following year a collection of Gramscis writings on worker councils was published, edited and translated by Jørgen Stender Clausen (Gramsci, Clausen 1973). In 1991, Gert Sørensen edited a two-volume selection from the *Prison Notebooks* (*Fængselsoptegnelser I* and *II*) (Gramsci, Sørensen, 1991a), (Gramsci, Sørensen, 1991b). Sørensen also edited the book *Gramsci og "den moderne verden"* (Gramsci and "the modern world") published in 1993 (Sørensen, 1993).

In Sweden a collection of Gramsci texts originally edited by René Coeckelbergh, was published in one volume in 1967 titled *En kollektiv intellektuell* (A collective intellectual) (Gramsci, Coeckelbergh, 1967), and an edited translation of *Lettere dal carcere* was published in 1981 (*Brev från fängelset*) (Gramsci, Ekerwald, 1981), with a second edition in 2007 (Gramsci, Ekerwald, 2007).

In Norway the debate on Gramscian thought has been even more limited. A search using the news analysis service *Retriever* gives between 10 and 20 hits per year for the term "Gramsci" in Norwegian newspapers from 2003 to the present. Before that, normally only one or two articles containing Gramsci's name were published per year. The most important reason for the growth in interest of Gramsci in Norway during the past decade is a surge of interest from the leftist daily *Klassekampen* (The Class Struggle), which has a large intellectual following. It has perhaps also been helped by the establishment of a Norwegian language-version of the French international newspaper *Le Monde Diplomatique*, which has opened up the world of continental European philosophical thinking to a nation that has in many areas traditionally been more oriented towards England and the USA. It is however probably also due to a more general phenomenon – the fact that Antonio Gramsci over the past years has come into fashion in some western intellectual circles. Apart from a Norwegian edition of Østerlings book - *Politikk og kultur* (in the original Danish however, with a Norwegian cover only) (Gramsci, Østerling, 1973), and a 1992 publication of three articles in a series of publications from the Institute of Sociology at the University of Oslo (Gramsci, 1992), no books were published by or about Gramsci in Norwegian until 2006. (A 1977 issue of the left-socialist journal *Kontrast*, however, was dedicated to the subject of Gramsci, PCI and Eurocommunism (Berg et.al., 1977).)

The popularity of Gramsci among a much wider array of Western intellectuals than is normally accredited to Marxist thinkers could of course in part be owed to the fact that his ideas on hegemony and culture are open to interpretations, where the intellectuals themselves become center players in the development of human history and not simply supporting actors of the working class. This should, however, not discredit the idea that Gramsci might actually have something important to say, also about our present society.

### **Notes on Ehnmarks Gramsci**

The only book that has been published in Norwegian about Gramsci in recent years, is a

translation of the Swedish essayist Anders Ehnmark's book *En stad i ljus. Antonio Gramscis slutsatser* (2005) (A city in light. The conclusions of Antonio Gramsci), published in Norwegian in 2006 (2006).

The author, Anders Ehnmark is a long time member of the Swedish Left Party, but his short pamphlet on Antonio Gramsci seems more characterized by a general liberal mood that has developed in parts of the western intellectual and academic community over the past three decades. This does not mean however that he does not make important contributions, particularly in pointing out the way in which Gramsci breaks with the deterministic view of history that often dominated The Second International (2006:71-78), but Ehnmark's attempt to use Lenin and the term "Leninism" as a sort of divide between Gramsci and some of the ideas he breaks away from, with Gramsci as the "anti-Leninist" is oversimplified at best (2006:100), (2006:136).

The mission of Ehnmarks essay seems to be to liberate Antonio Gramsci from Marxist thought, and establish him as a modern Western liberal (at best left-liberal) intellectual thinker. As Gramsci is undoubtedly a Marxist thinker, this seems as an impossible task, and Ehnmark seems to make a few shortcuts, to neglect aspects of Gramsci's thought, and finally to substitute Gramsci completely with a few more liberal thinkers, with the sporadic insertion of how some of their thoughts in some manner bore similarities to some of Gramsci's. Altiero Spinelli and Ernesto Rossi (famous authors of the "Ventotene Manifesto") are used in this manner, but any strong links between either of these or their thoughts and those of Antonio Gramsci are not documented in Ehnmarks book (2006:109-125).

As Ehnmarks pamphlet is an essay, and not a scientific publication, the possibilities of strategic omissions and enhancements, politically charged formulations and even a few rhetorical tricks are easier to adapt into the text.

A good example of the attempt to remove Gramsci from Marxist and communist thought is when Ehnmark writes: "Gramsci has a long experience with closed ideological systems - the church, fascism and communism" (2006: 101), whereupon he continues to write about Gramsci's insistence on democracy.

Gramsci's democratic ideas are obvious, but this is not something that separates him from Marxism or communism as such. His reputation as an inspiration of

Eurocommunism, which was a strong ideological and political force during large parts of the 20th century, is evidence of this. It could be considered quite incredible that an author can write a book about Antonio Gramsci and at the same time maintain an idea about *one* communism, rather than the historical reality of a plurality of *many* communisms. Similarly it seems strange in a book which salutes the thinking of a man that was a leader of the Italian Communist Party to easily put that communism in the same category at the authoritarian 1930's Italian Catholic church and Mussolini's Fascism.

It is ironic how an author can first write about Gramsci that "He does not believe that the class thinks within a man. One must ask the man himself, what he thinks" (Ehnmark, 2006:60), whereupon he himself then seems to twist reality to conform to typical ideas of liberal Western intellectuals. It should be quite obvious that people, including intellectuals, think their own thoughts. It should however also be obvious that these thoughts are influenced by their experiences and situation in life, in which class is a central component.

To take the subject even further, the essayist Ehnmark, close to the conclusion of the book sums up Gramsci's ideas by painting an image of cultural struggle, stating "He is really promoting an essayistic style..." (2006:138). Ehnmark is not wrong in focusing on a cultural struggle, but it is also obvious that he is strongly influenced by his own position.

The penultimate paragraph in Ehnmark's pamphlet goes as follows:

The conclusion, the way I interpret Gramsci, is that what is left of socialism, is the road there, meaning democracy. The rest, the part that is about reaching the goal, is contradictory or meaningless, and was so already then. The future, at Gramsci's time, was so close he could see it. (2006: 145)

In 146 pages, an Italian 1920's revolutionary Marxist and Leninist has thus become a Scandinavian 2000's liberal academic. Ehnmarks genuine political and philosophical points would have been made much stronger, without such blatant exaggerations. When he resorts to formulations like this, one could almost suspect him of trying to prove the opposite of his claims by *reductio ad absurdum*.

There was some public debate in Norway after the publication of Ehnmarks book.

Notably Bendik Wold, then working at previously mentioned daily *Klassekampen*, wrote a critical article in the Philosophical journal *Agora* (2007a), with a shorter version published in *Klassekampen* (2007b).

Wolds's main focus is one of the points I have been discussing, namely how Ehnmark tries to turn Gramsci into a single free thinker in an otherwise stagnant and deterministic tradition. Ehnmark thus neglects the fact that Gramsci certainly was a Leninist, underestimates the great variety in Marxist thought in the 20's and 30's and neglects the entire tradition that runs from Gramsci, via Karl Korsch, Georg Lukács and to the Frankfurt school of thought.

It could seem Ehnmark in part has fallen into the trap that Joseph A. Buttigieg warns of in his preface to Antonio Santucci's *Antonio Gramsci* where Buttigieg writes that "Gramsci's own philological rigor has not safeguarded his text from distortion..." (Buttigieg, 2010: 14), and goes on to warn about how Gramsci, and Gramscian quotes are often taken out of context.

The limited idea of one Marxism, and ultimately one Socialism, as opposed to a multitude of Marxist and Socialist ideas and traditions of thought, is thus the dominating weakness in a pamphlet where Ehnmark at times shows potential of interesting connections and reflections around the ideas and the world of Antonio Gramsci.

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