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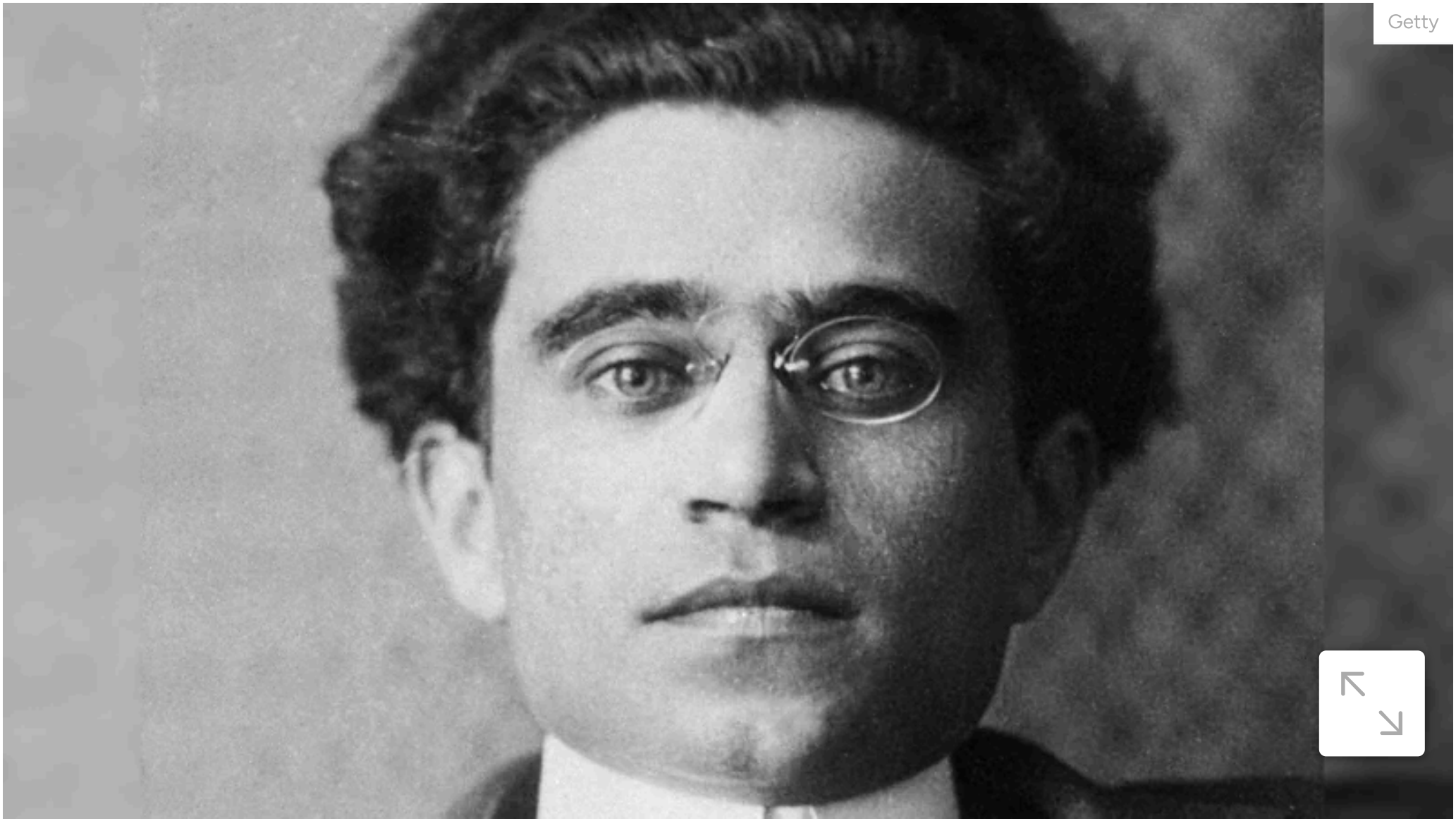
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|---|---|
| Title | Why Antonio Gramsci's work has never been more pertinent |
| Authors | Bufacchi, Vittorio |
| Publication date | 2026-11-06 |
| Original Citation | Bufacchi, V. (2026), 'Why Antonio Gramsci's work has never been more pertinent', RTE Brainstorm, 6 November. Available online: https://www.rte.ie/brainstorm/2026/1106/1597830-antonio-gramsci-italy-fascism-marxism-hegemony/ |
| Type of publication | Other |
| Link to publisher's version | https://www.rte.ie/brainstorm/2026/1106/1597830-antonio-gramsci-italy-fascism-marxism-hegemony/ |
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| Download date | 2026-11-12 12:59:19 |
| Item downloaded from | https://hdl.handle.net/10468/19600 |



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# Why Antonio Gramsci's work has never been more pertinent

Updated / Friday, 6 Nov 2026 15:54




Antonio Gramsci in Moscow in the 1930s. Photo: Laski Diffusion/Getty Images

**Analysis: 90 years after his death, the Italian philosopher's lessons and ideas on fascism remain perpetually dangerous to any totalitarian regime today**

On 8 November 1926, one of the most influential thinkers of the 20th century was arrested and sentenced to 20 years in jail by the fascist regime in Italy. His name was Antonio Gramsci, an iconic figure in the fight against fascism and a lasting inspiration for millions of people worldwide.

The fact that a fascist regime would conjure up fictitious evidence to throw in jail the leader of the opposition is hardly surprising, nor is the fact that the victims of fascism were brutalized in jail, shortening their life-expectancy. What is remarkable in Gramsci's case is that when Mussolini's chief prosecutor, Michele Isgrò, sentenced Gramsci to jail, he also proclaimed that "we must prevent this brain from functioning for 20 years".

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***From History After Dark, why Mussolini feared Antonio Gramsci***

Gramsci died in 1937, killed by the appalling conditions he was subjected to during his incarceration. In the course of the last 11 years of his life he lost all his teeth, was in constant pain and intentionally sleep-deprived for long stretches of time. He was also moved from jail to jail via extremely long and tortuous train journeys, all the while chained to his companions with both wrists clasped tightly by manacles.

These conditions would have been unbearable for anyone, but especially for Gramsci due to his chronic weak physical constitution, a combination of a childhood marked by a meagre diet in his native Sardinia due to family poverty, and Pott's disease, a form of spinal tuberculosis. As a result, he suffered from a prominent malformation of the spine which made him hunchbacked and stunted his growth: Gramsci was 4'11" tall, or 1.50 metres.

Prison may have broken Gramsci's body, but not his spirit or his mind. While in jail, Gramsci put down his thoughts in a series of 33 notebooks on an improbable range of different topics, including history and politics, philosophy and economics, literature and linguistics. These are

known as the *Prison Notebooks*, more than 3,000 pages written with cunning elusiveness to circumvent the censorship of the prison authorities.



IL GRIDO DEL POPOLO

ANTONIO GRAMSCI E' MORTO!

Il fascismo lo ha assassinato!

Manifestiamo dappertutto contro questo nuovo delitto! Esigiamo la liberazione degli altri combattenti della libertà in pericolo di vita!

L'estremo saluto del Partito

Alla memoria del Capo del Partito Comunista e del proletariato d'Italia

How Il Grido del Popolo announced Gramsci's death in 1937. Photo: Universal Archive/Universal Images Group via Getty Images

We also have many of the letters that he wrote from prison to his wife, his sister-in-law, and his family. Gramsci never got to meet his second child, Giuliano, born in 1926 in Russia only three months before his father was arrested. Perhaps his most enduring contribution from what Gramsci wrote in his prison cell is the formulation of the concept of hegemony, still a fundamental term in social theory, political philosophy, and even international relations today.

Resurrecting a Hegelian intuition too hastily dismissed by the more positivistic-minded Marxist tradition in his days, Gramsci argued that authority is not only secured via force and coercion, but also crucially by cultural domination. Gramsci coined the term 'cultural hegemony' to capture the idea that political power cannot rely exclusively on force, it must also secure the consent of the oppressed. Even the most brutal punishment is most effective only when it enjoys the acquiescence of the community at large, perhaps even of those close to the punished, as the history of the mother and baby homes in Ireland reminds us.

From Gramsci we learn that the best, perhaps only way to fight against a despotic, authoritarian regime is not to match its force, but to push back at the cultural level. The cultural hegemony of the ruling power must be countered by an alternative cultural hegemony. Where cultural change leads, the rest will follow.

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***An introduction to Antonio Gramsci, his Prison Notebooks and the concept of hegemony***

Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* are testimony to the power of culture, and Gramsci himself a tribute to the subversive power of thinking. Hannah Arendt, author of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), famously wrote that "there are no dangerous thoughts; thinking itself is dangerous".

The fascist regime knew that, but so did Gramsci. Even when isolated in jail and in constant pain and agony, his brain never stopped functioning. He never stopped thinking, and his work remains perpetually dangerous to any totalitarian regime today.

> ***The first sentence of the article reads "I hate the indifferent", before going on to explain that indifference is the dead weight of history***

As a young journalist writing for the socialist newspaper *La Città Futura*, Gramsci penned a piece in 1917 on 'The Indifferent', where he condemns political apathy. The first sentence of the article reads "I hate the indifferent", before going on to explain that indifference is the dead weight of history, while living means being partisan. "The events that occur, the evil that befalls us all .... are not due to the initiative of the few who are active, but to the indifference, the absenteeism of the many".

90 years after Gramsci's death, as fascist-inspired far-right governments around the world raise their heads again, Gramsci's lessons have never been more pertinent. This is the time of monsters, but also time to act, to be partisan, to engage in what Gramsci called a 'war of position', the cultural struggle to change ideas and institutions. Thinking is a privilege and a duty; indifference is not an option.

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