In a preface to his *Intellectual History of the Caribbean*, Silvio Torres-Saillant makes two observations that are pertinent to the question of Gramsci’s influence on Caribbean thinkers. First, he tells us that the ideas he foregrounds in his book ‘occur in the wake of a human chronicle that opens with the conquest [in 1492] and the colonial transaction, going through successive stages of domination, insurrection, resistance, adaptation, and nation building’. Second, concerning our own moment in time, Torres-Saillant speaks of the Caribbean region’s ‘pervasive economic decline, with the attendant diasporic uprooting that has increasingly widened the contours of the Antillean world through the rise of enclaves in urban centres of Europe and the United States’.1

Although he did not focus his interest specifically on the Caribbean archipelago, Gramsci had so many important things to say about colonial and class oppression, and about forms of resistance to oppression that it comes as no surprise to discover that his writings have been used by thinkers concerned with unjust and exploitative power relations in many parts of the world, including the Caribbean. Terms and concepts associated with Gramsci, such as hegemony, national-popular, organic intellectual, passive revolution and others have turned out to be both convenient and useful analytical tools that have served the interests of radical and Marxist intellectuals throughout the Caribbean.

On the basis of this historical perspective, my aim is to describe briefly how a number of Caribbean intellectuals,

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from the Trinidadian C.L.R. James to the Jamaicans Stuart Hall and Tony Bogues, from
the Cubans Juan Jorge Luis Gonzalez and Ilyanas Mena Fernandez to the Guyanese
Walter Rodney, have responded explicitly or implicitly to Gramsci.

The Cuban intellectuals I cite are, as far as I know, living and working in Cuba, but the
diasporic experience to which Torres-Saillant refers has marked the lives of C.L.R. James,
Stuart Hall, Tony Bogues and, indeed, countless other Caribbean figures.

While doing research at the beginning of this century for a political biography of
the Trinidadian revolutionary C.L.R. James, I began to notice various points of contact
between him and Gramsci. One of these is the way in which young Gramsci and young
James articulated their views on colonialism. James was born and raised in a British
crown colony, Trinidad, while Gramsci, a Sardinian, was a citizen of the Italian state
that was still ruled, at least in formal juridical terms, by the Savoy Monarchy. But quite
ev早 in his life, Gramsci began to see the relationship between the Italian state and its
Southern territories as essentially ‘colonial’ in nature, marked by social and economic
practices every bit as exploitative as those imposed on their colonies by the European
imperialist powers.

For C.L.R. James, a black man born in 1901 in one of the crown colonies of the Brit-
ish Empire, it was natural to express his indignation in racial as well as political terms.
But even on this score, we should note that young Gramsci was not indifferent to
what W.E.B. Du Bois was later to call ‘the color line’ separating the world’s haves from
millions of its have-nots in Africa and Asia. For example, listen to what he had to say
about this facet of colonialism in an article of 9 June 1919, in the then-weekly journal
L’Ordine Nuovo:

For several years we Europeans have lived at the expense of the death of the colored
peoples…but today flames of revolt are being fanned throughout the colonial world.
This is the class struggle of the colored peoples against their white exploiters and mur-
derers. It is the vast irresistible drive towards autonomy and independence of a whole
world, with all its spiritual riches.2

As this article makes clear, Gramsci, like James, thought of racial and class-based exploi-
tation as inseparably intertwined. We should note, also, that the young Gramsci did not
conceive of the struggle for independence by oppressed peoples and classes solely from
the point of view of political economy. He was eager to emphasise the spiritual and
intellectual development of subject peoples. Hence his stress on the expanding ‘spiritual
riches’ that would come with the struggle for autonomy and independence. This idea is
one of the animating principles of his 1916 essay ‘Socialism and Culture’, and it is also
what inspired James to think of revolution as an inherently transformational event in
every sense, spiritual as well as material.