

On the Anniversary of Gramsci's Birth, a Few Words about Writing Letters

Laura E. Ruberto (January 29, 2008)



In re-reading Antonio Gramsci's letters from prison in memory of his birthday, one can't help but wonder about the current state of cyberwriting.



Antonio Gramsci—son of Sardinia, co-founder of the Italian Communist Party and [L'Unità](#) [2], intellectual—was born January 22, 1891. His life ended prematurely, after spending over a decade in a Fascist prison, incarcerated by his former Socialist Party comrade Benito Mussolini.

His letters from prison—not just the fierce political analyses, but the fluffier personal notes too—fascinate me. There's something fitting, I think, in using cyberspace to write about Gramsci, whose fame comes in large part from the writing he produced behind bars, under strict censorship. I think Gramsci would have marveled at the possibilities afforded by cyberspace (although I should add that I'm posting this on the 22nd here in California, while here at i-Italy it's already the 23rd). I understand that the Internet is hardly a free, unmonitored, perfectly democratic space, but it surely grants more freedom of expression than il Duce's lockup.

Gramsci was well aware of this intellectual repression. In writing to his wife, Julia Schucht, he reminded her: "le mie lettere sono 'pubbliche,' non riservate a noi due" ("my letters are 'public,' not reserved for us two") (December 7, 1931). I can't help but think of electronic messages—emails, text messages, you name it. And while I certainly don't want to sound like I'm waxing nostalgic for the long-lost days of pen, paper, and envelope, I wonder sometimes what will happen to all the text we produce online. Whose i-Italy blog posts will still be around in a hundred years? Will they have been collected in a multivolume set: Italian American Bloggers, The First Wave? What about all of the emails we write? Will we have cyber Eloise and Abelard that university students will read in their "Great Texts of the Twenty-first Century" course?

Yet I also can't help but chuckle—because I feel for him, I sympathize—when I read Gramsci, a serious thinker I admire, bothered by his own sometimes-unintelligible prose: to Julia, he writes, "se dovessi io stesso rileggere le mie lettere dopo qualche settimana, mi pare che ne proverei un certo disgusto" ("if I were to re-read my letters after a few weeks I think I would find them a bit distasteful") (November 30, 1931). Would he have written differently if he knew his letters would be published in books, cited at conferences, taught in universities, and posted online?

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