

Review - Antonio Gramsci

Written by John Holst

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JOHN HOLST, MAR 14 2017

Antonio Gramsci
Edited by Mark McNally
New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015

There has been a resurgence of interest in Antonio Gramsci, evident by the number of books and articles published on Gramsci in recent years. This book is a collection of chapters by established and renowned Gramscian scholars who have been at the center of Gramscian studies for a number of years. Therefore, for those just joining in on the resurgent interest in Gramsci, this text offers an introduction to the work of well-established Gramscian scholars. Yet, given that the editor Mark McNally asked these scholars to both draw on their previous work and to pose new reflections from their established research agenda, this book offers seasoned Gramsci scholars updates on their colleagues' ongoing Gramscian studies as well. In other words, this book offers benefits for scholars new to Gramsci and to those who have spent their careers studying Gramsci.

Edited texts pose particular challenges both for the editor and the reader. It is my opinion that this text overcomes many of these challenges in providing a very well organized collection of chapters which often build on one another. This does not read like a loose collection of unrelated chapters, but rather, as the editor intended, an introduction to major authors and major issues, debates, and controversies in Gramscian studies. McNally provides a good introduction and conclusion; the grouping of chapters into four Parts makes sense; McNally provides a detailed index with key concepts in bold text; and the book has both endnotes after each chapter and a full bibliography at the end of the book. In short, it is clear that a lot of work went into the organization and construction of the text and, readers will benefit greatly from these efforts.

Part I of the book, Historical Context, consists of two chapters. McNally's chapter addresses Gramsci's expansion on the Communist International's (Comintern) United Front strategy. McNally convincingly argues for the continued relevance of Gramsci's expanded notion of the United Front for forming and maintaining democratically-derived ideological unity across broad sectors of a society's majority. He does not, however, provide much detail or an example of what a contemporary united front would look like. Martin's chapter argues that Gramsci's critique of liberalism can help us assess and analyze the crisis of social democracy in the era of neoliberalism. Here too, however, this chapter is more about Gramsci's critique of liberalism with just a very short application of analysis of today.

Part II of the book, Key Debates, consists of a chapter by Fontana on intellectuals and masses, and a chapter by Carlucci on language. Both of these chapters build on McNally and Martin's chapters respectively. Fontana provides a good analysis of Gramsci's understanding of levels of consciousness related to the party, hegemony, and intellectuals. He is very helpful in showing the relationship between Gramsci and Machiavelli, particularly in terms of the masses/leader relationship, and the necessary pedagogical element of this relationship for hegemony, and the role of intellectuals as pedagogues. A central argument in Carlucci's chapter is that too many scholars have misinterpreted Gramsci's engagement with liberal thinkers. They create a false trajectory of Gramsci, in which he started out as an open-minded, non-dogmatic socialist, who fell under the sway of Russian communism and Lenin to become dogmatic between 1920-1926, to then return to a democratic form of socialism in prison, where he supposedly broke with the PCI and the Comintern. For Carlucci, this notion of Gramsci as a liberal pluralist, neo-

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Marxist or post-Marxist, is based on a faulty interpretation of his engagement with non-Marxist thinkers. This did not make Gramsci neo- or post-Marxist, but rather an open Marxist.

Part III of the book, Major Conceptual Issues, includes a chapter by Thomas on Gramsci's use of the term philosophy of praxis and a chapter by Liguori on Gramsci's use of the term subaltern. Thomas provides a very good and systematic summary of the philosophy of praxis in the *Notebooks*. He emphasizes the newness of Gramsci's conceptualization of philosophy of praxis, not as a code word for Marxism but as a way for Gramsci to name his unique contributions and advancement of Marxism. Similarly, Liguori provides a systematic analysis of the concept of the subaltern in the *Prison Notebooks*. He critiques civil societarian approaches which overemphasize culture to the detriment of class, and he emphasizes that, by using the concept of the subaltern, Gramsci was not lessening a focus on class or the need for a party. Liguori argues that Gramsci's subaltern concept has new relevance today.

Part IV of the book, Contemporary Relevance, consists of three chapters. The first chapter, by Bieler, Bruff, and Morton is probably the chapter of most immediate relevance to IR readers as this is squarely rooted in International Relations/International Political Economy (IR/IPE) literature and debates. The authors critique early Neogramscian IR/IPE scholarship by stating that it downplayed key Gramscian concepts, and it focused too much on scholarship inspired by Gramsci rather than on the work of Gramsci himself. The authors make several arguments for a Gramscian IR as a way past the pitfalls of Neogramscian approaches. Gramsci's starting point was a global not national position. Gramsci helps us understand that states are products of *international* relations in combination with *intranational* relations. Gramsci's idea of passive revolution is not just applicable to the national level, but helps us understand the uneven development of capitalism globally. Gramsci was keenly aware of shifts in productive power in global capitalism; his analysis of Fordism, for example, was about global capitalism and the shifts in global power. Gramsci allows us to see the state, society and the economy as interrelated; therefore, a neoliberal economy needs a neoliberal state, and produces a neoliberal society.

Marcus Green's chapter on subaltern struggles and spontaneity provides an excellent analysis of Gramsci's emphasis on revolutionary, participatory, democratic, and pedagogical leadership through political organization, in contrast to the horizontalism of the Occupy Wall Street movement. For Gramsci, educating spontaneity through organization is highly democratic, and not an assault on democratic forms. Moreover, Gramsci insisted that movements must not just resist conditions but must develop knowledge of conditions and capacity to transform these conditions.

Like the previous chapters on subalternity and philosophy of praxis, Darrow's chapter provides a sound sociological analysis and explanation of Gramsci's concept of historic bloc. This could have easily been placed Part III on Major Conceptual Issues, but the author does emphasize the contemporary relevance of the concept of historic bloc. He argues that the 1980s boom in Gramscian studies placed Gramsci within Western Marxism for his emphasis on folklore, language, religion, literature, and overall accent on the superstructural. But Gramsci's real relevancy today is in his unique conceptualization of the historic bloc as an alternative to the base/superstructure metaphor.

The last full chapter of the book is by Howarth, and, as a self-proclaimed "defense of Laclau & Mouffe", I found this to be my least favorite chapter. Unlike many of the other fine contributions which deepen Gramscian studies by deepening our understanding of Gramsci within the revolutionary tradition of which he was a part, this chapter, in my opinion, is merely a restatement of the distorting post-Marxist approaches to Gramsci. To appreciate this chapter, one has to accept the idea that Laclau & Mouffe, by equating Gramsci with post-Marxism, continue and advance the work of Gramsci. For me, this starting point makes the whole argument of the chapter untenable. It is unfortunate that this is the last full chapter in the collection.

I want to conclude with what I consider to be the major weakness of the text. McNally argues in his introduction that Gramsci is universal because he transcends his own context. If Gramsci is universal, then why are all 12 authors men based in the US and Western Europe? What are readers who are not of this global minority to think of the universality of Gramsci and the field of Gramscian studies? McNally does not claim that this body of authors is representative of the world's Gramscian scholars, but I think it would have been important for a text which proposes to be introductory to the field, and that argues rightly for Gramsci's universality, to be more representative of Gramscian scholars of all

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genders across the planet.

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