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### Antonio Gramsci Edited Volume

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Published: 01/06/2016

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*Citation for published version (APA):*

McNally, M. (2016). *Antonio Gramsci Edited Volume*. Paper presented at Updating Gramsci: Recent Publications in English, 2012-15, London, United Kingdom.

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## **Conference Presentation on *Antonio Gramsci* (Palgrave, 2015)**

(Delivered at *Updating Gramsci: Recent Publications in English, 2012-15*, IMLR, University of London, 21 May 2016)

**Mark McNally (Volume Editor)**

### **Introduction**

This book is published in the *Critical Explorations in Contemporary Political Thought* Series. The Series aim is to provide authoritative guides to thinkers ‘with a strong resonance in the present.’ Working from the conviction that Antonio Gramsci fits perfectly into this mold, as editor, I planned the book to explore in-depth just what it was about Gramsci’s thought that provides this strong resonance in contemporary thought, and of course, to use this opportunity to widen understanding of Gramsci’s political thought and extend awareness about contemporary scholarship in the field. As set out in its introduction, the book thus seeks to explore the contemporary significance of Gramsci’s political thought and engage with the problem of how Gramsci can continue to ‘speak to us’ today and to supply us with critical resources to interrogate the present given the very specific set of politico-historical problems his thought was designed to confront. The idea was not though to do this in a way that was overly specialist, but rather, to make it an accessible ‘advanced introduction’ to Gramsci that would be useful to higher level undergraduates and postgraduate students who were interested in understanding

Gramsci's thought and applying it in their developing research projects. To turn to the theme of today's discussions, however, the book was also planned as a vehicle to update – Gramsci and non-Gramsci scholars - on some key developments in contemporary scholarship on his thought. Indeed, each of the contributors sought to do this by building on their published research to provide new and innovative responses to the question of the contemporary relevance of Gramsci's ideas.

In today's talk I will provide a flavor of what the volume provides to the reader in the above terms and in line with the theme of this conference. I can only, however, focus on a narrow selection of the ten essays in the volume which I hope will be of particular interest to today's audience – including my own which I can of course best account for. Two other key contributors – Alessandro Carlucci and Peter Thomas – are fortunately present and they are of course much better placed to discuss their own chapters with you in person which I will only touch on in passing. Since the title of the conference is *Updating Gramsci* I want to turn now to three areas in which I see this volume as providing new insights into Gramsci's thought, and indeed, how it can continue to inform a critical perspective on the contemporary social and political world.

### **Contemporary Marxism and Historical Materialism**

The first of these areas is contemporary Marxism, or perhaps it is better described as the tradition of Historical Materialism given that most of these contributors are by no means averse to drawing on thinkers beyond Gramsci and the Marxist tradition to enrich their approach. Contributions by Peter Thomas (*Ch.5*), Darrow Schechter (*Ch.9*) and Andreas

Bieler, Ian Bruff and Adam Morton (*Ch.7*) demonstrate that Gramsci's thought remains an important critical resource for contemporary Historical Materialist approaches to the state, political economy and ideology in an age of neo-liberal capitalism and crisis. All of these three chapters in their own way illustrate how the sophisticated character of Gramsci's Marxism - developed through his critique of Second and Third International Marxism with its flawed logics of economism, class reductionism and teleological and mechanical accounts of dialectical materialism - can still throw light on our present conditions.

For example, Bieler, Bruff and Morton in their chapter – 'Gramsci and the 'International: Past, Present and Future,' – find in Gramsci's account of capitalist modernization and its 'uneven and combined development' rich and important insights into contemporary politics and especially the recent rise and fall of globalized neo-liberalism. Their work is broadly situated within the Neo-Gramscian Historical Materialist approach to International Relations (IR) and International Political Economy (IPE) developed on the back of Robert Cox's groundbreaking interventions of the early 1980s. In this chapter, however, they return to the letter of Gramsci's account of 'the international' to engage with Cox and other Neo-Gramscians in IR/IPE by arguing that their assumption that Gramsci's thought requires a 'scaling up' from the national to the international needs to be 'updated' or redressed (p.139). In this sense, we might regard Bieler, Bruff and Morton as more Gramscian than Neo-Gramscian in their approach.

They thus insist that Gramsci's own writings on the interdependent nature of capitalist development and class conflict at the levels of the global political economy are pregnant with insights for our own period. Bieler, Bruff and Morton in fact argue that Gramsci's

account of 'passive revolution' as 'a revolution from above' is conditioned by his wider appreciation of the uneven spread of global capitalism, especially at the periphery. They point out how for Gramsci such 'revolutions' (and their accompanying 'restorations') sometimes involve 'elite-engineered social and political reform that draws on foreign capital and associated ideas while lacking a national-popular base' (p.141). In these conditions, as Gramsci intuited in his accounts of the authoritarian solutions of peripheral capitalist states such as Italy in his day, class conflict at the level of the nation-state is shaped by attempts to pursue a 'catch-up strategy' and to suppress the social resistance from below that inevitably follows (p.143).

For these writers, there are manifest parallels with the contemporary development of 'authoritarian neo-liberalism' and resistance to it in Gramsci's account of the international, especially with the onset of the economic crisis in 2008. They maintain that the Gramscian insight that 'laissez-faire economics' is too a form of state regulation - operating at both the national and international level - has become patently obvious as the aforementioned interventionist and authoritarian solutions have increasingly come to the capitalist center. Accordingly, policies of 'permanent austerity' and the suppression of class resistance from trade unions and social movements have figured centrally in the effort to regain some form of balance in the global economic and political order post-2008 (pp.148-9). Bieler, Bruff and Morton argue that opposition to these reconfigurations of global Capital can only – as Gramsci taught – take the form of 'transnational solidarity' (p.146), and in their chapter they point to the possibilities and initial green shoots of such a resistance forming.

## **The Subaltern and Popular Movements**

The volume also confirms and updates Gramsci's contribution to the area of subaltern studies and popular movements. Scholars interested in the exploration of the condition of 'subalternity' in Gramsci's writings and his ideas on what was necessary to overcome it, have sought to draw on his work to bring insights to the dynamics of popular disempowerment and the obstacles they are confronted with in attempting to mobilize popular resistance movements. The essays by Benedetto Fontana (Ch.3), Guido Liguori (Ch.6) and Marcus Green (Ch.8) make a valuable contribution to this body of literature drawing on their earlier work.

For example, while Gramsci's account of subalternity has been particularly important for the study of postcolonial, underdeveloped and developing countries where such movements are often a recurring feature of their political experience, in an interesting variation on this approach Marcus Green's chapter in the volume brings Gramsci's insights in this area to popular mobilizations in the developed West. He does this by examining the contemporary Occupy movement from a Gramscian perspective. Green, in fact, draws on Gramsci's account of subalternity to engage in a crucial contemporary debate on political movements and the desirability of forms of spontaneity, leadership and political organization within them. He then critically applies the lessons of this discussion to the performance of an important recent example of a popular subaltern movement in the West: 'Occupy Wall Street.' Responding to those who privilege 'spontaneous,' 'rhizomatic,' 'horizontalist' and 'prefigurative' modes of political organization (for example, contemporary strands of anarchism) and who are critical of Gramsci for his supposed 'vanguardism,' 'elitism' and even popular 'manipulation' (p.157), Green makes a robust

argument in defense of Gramsci's position that the escape from subalternity requires political organization and 'conscious political leadership.' The latter he defines, following Gramsci, as leadership informed by coherent revolutionary theory and 'rooted in a systematic understanding of the historical conditions that define subalternity' in a particular socio-historical context (p.156). In his discussion of Gramsci's analysis of peasant and worker struggles in Italy, he in fact demonstrates how the Italian's preference for 'conscious political leadership' is not opposed to spontaneity *per se*, or informed by an elitist attempt to manipulate the subaltern masses. It is rather, guided by Gramsci's own political praxis and especially his desire to harness these spontaneous surges of the subaltern to democratically educate and empower them to take control of their own political future.

These Gramscian insights are then deployed in a critical analysis of the Occupy Wall Street Movement that emerged in the United States and spread across the world in the wake of the onset of the financial crisis in 2008. Green argues that though the Movement could be praised in Gramscian terms for its capacity to capture the public imagination and mobilize the masses 'horizontally,' it lacked the 'conscious political leadership' to sustain this and mount a serious challenge to the political and economic structures of capitalist exploitation. As he puts it, for Gramsci 'subaltern struggles require a molding of both prefigurative politics – of building new forms of community – with a strategic politics of developing formal organizations that are capable of achieving structural transformation' (p.171). Gramsci's account of conscious political leadership and political education (as a reciprocal dynamic between the leadership and the mass base), thus remains for Green an important alternative mode of political organization for subaltern movements that are

serious about transforming the structural foundations of capitalism and escaping their conditions of subordination. Indeed, he suggests that the developing praxis of Post-Occupy has led some among them at least to similar Gramscian conclusions (pp.173-4), and his contribution is therefore an important intervention on the continuing debates on the proper organizational forms of subaltern movements today in both developing and developed societies.

### **Democracy and Post-Marxism**

The final theme in contemporary politics and political thought that this volume has engaged with and updates to some extent is in the field of liberal and radical democratic theory and politics. In this part of the volume the work of Laclau and Mouffe are ever-present as the most important contributors to a post-Marxist elaboration of Gramsci's ideas. David Howarth (Ch.10), for example, provides an insightful and lucid account of their reconstruction of Gramsci's conception of hegemony in their efforts to develop a novel way of analyzing power in late capitalist societies. He makes clear how the Post-Marxist engagement with Gramsci has for the most part involved a certain critical reading of the residual economistic and class reductionist elements of Gramsci's thought. Some of course have argued that overplaying these criticisms somewhat controversially places his thought in close proximity to liberal pluralist and even poststructuralist traditions of thought. Alessandro Carlucci's essay in the volume (Ch.4) thus engages critically with attempts to re-read Gramsci as proximate to the liberal-democratic or pluralist traditions (especially in the work of Franco Lo Piparo) through an exegesis of the Marxist linguistic influences on his thought. James Martin, while also casting doubt on the idea of a liberal-

democratic Gramsci (Ch.2), suggests though that 'Gramsci understood the cultural and historical efficacy of liberalism and recognized a need to think revolution partly in its language' (p.35).

My own contribution to the volume seeks to draw on and engage with Post-Marxist attempts to enlist Gramsci's political thought for radical democratic theory in the present through a genealogical reading of Gramsci that defends the continuing viability of elements of his approach to mass democratic politics. I thus explore the democratic strategy at the heart of Gramsci's theory of hegemony contextualizing its emergence in relation to the Comintern's short-lived attempt to pursue a politics of winning over the masses in the West under the banner of the United Front in the early 1920s (pp.13-16). The argument is partly historical in that it redresses the misleading notion in the literature that Gramsci was a 'Western Marxist' who had an utterly distinctive approach than that of the Russian Marxists of his day. On the contrary, I argue that Gramsci's Western Marxism had its roots in the politics of the United Front pursued in the 1920s by the Comintern, and the democratic strategy at the core of Gramsci's theory of hegemony is an elaboration on its strategic coordinates that can be retrieved and critically appropriated to engage with contemporary democratic politics.

I thus share Laclau and Mouffe's interest in Gramsci as a thinker who can inform radical democratic politics today. I maintain, however, that there is an alternative and more viable route to theorizing democratic strategy in Gramsci than that taken by Laclau and Mouffe whose work relies heavily on poststructuralist, Lacanian and Schmittian theoretical themes. The chapter, in fact, concludes by arguing that Gramsci's illuminating reliance on the language of balance and equilibrium, which the United Front would eventually lead

him to, can accommodate an alternative conception of democratic agency centered on the political party as a key vehicle for the reconstitution of popular ideologies and the manufacture of consent in contemporary Western conditions of pluralism (pp.27-8; see too, 222-223). A Neo-Gramscian account and critique of the role of the political party in terms of democratic hegemony and equilibrium calls on us therefore to at once scale down the ideological ambitions of political parties to one of *leadership over* rather than wholesale conversion of civil society. Thus Gramsci's thought provides us with an important resource for revitalizing this crucial institution in Western democracies, where careerism, a narrow focus on elections and the negligence of 'grassroots politics,' has meant that parties are increasingly failing to exercise the role that many - like Antonio Gramsci - assigned to them of forming a crucial and stable bridge between the political institutions of the state and the masses in civil society.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, I hope that the book demonstrates how the ideas of Antonio Gramsci are continuing to inform a broad range of currents in contemporary political thought. Some of his ideas, have, of course fallen by the wayside. Others have endured in their original form. While still others have been reconfigured (and are being reconstituted) in novel elaborations that borrow from modern intellectual traditions in ways which Gramsci himself could not have imagined - though they still retain something of their core formulation in his work. This of course is how it should be given that Gramsci himself showed an acute awareness of the necessity for each generation to temper the weapons of critique to their own particular era and above all, to address the problems of the

oppressed and disadvantaged masses as they are historically constituted. Indeed, his innovative and radical interventions in a whole host of intellectual fields in his day bear adequate testimony to this. The extent to which we are required to move beyond Gramsci's theoretical coordinates to meet new contemporary challenges of course remains - and no doubt will remain – a healthy bone of contention between the various contributors to this book and among scholars of Gramsci more widely. In one way or another, Antonio Gramsci's thought is therefore likely to continue to have a voice in debates on contemporary social and political theory well into the future.

McNally, Mark. (ed.) (2015) *Antonio Gramsci*. Basingstoke-New York: Palgrave-Macmillan.