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Of Gramsciology

Review of *The Gramscian Moment: Philosophy, Hegemony and Marxism* by Peter. D, Thomas. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2009.

Mark McNally

Introduction

According to Peter Thomas Antonio Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* (1929-35) contain 'a vision of Marxist philosophy, radically different from many previous and contemporary formulations, which may permit a new generation of Marxists to recommence the elaboration of Marx's legacy in a new philosophical form' (p.xx). *The Gramscian Moment* is a book that thus firmly situates itself within a new body of literature that takes as its point of departure the necessity to revitalize the Marxist tradition today. The 'vision of Marxist philosophy' that Thomas believes has most to contribute to this agenda is Gramsci's 'philosophy of praxis', and in this comprehensive analysis and assessment of its key elements and its principal Marxist critics, the author mounts an authoritative and persuasive case for placing Gramsci's guiding lights right at the centre of the resurgence of contemporary Marxism.

Thomas's journey begins with two influential critiques of Gramsci's work by Louis Althusser (Chapter 1) and Perry Anderson (Chapter 2). In the following chapter he prepares the ground carefully for his attack on what he regards as their flawed accounts of Gramsci's Marxism by delineating the extensive and meticulous scholarship that has been carried out (mainly by Italian scholars) on the *Prison Notebooks* since the appearance of Althusser's *Reading Capital* (1965/1968) and Anderson's 'The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci' (1976). Chapters four, five and six are principally concerned with the Gramscian categories of 'passive revolution' and 'hegemony' and here Anderson is a continuous presence as Thomas engages in a blow by blow refutation of his attempts to identify Gramsci with the reformism of Karl Kautsky and a genre of Western Marxism that set him apart from his Bolshevik contemporaries.

The last three chapters of the book constitute its most original contribution to current scholarship, as Thomas engages in a penetrating analysis of the constituent parts of Gramsci's 'philosophy of praxis', focusing on his insistence that Marxism made a unique contribution to Western philosophy through its 'absolute historicism', 'absolute immanence' and 'absolute humanism'. Here it is Althusser who plays the role of major foil as Thomas demolishes the early Althusser's identification of Gramsci's historicism with the 'Hegelianisation' of Marxism; the abandonment of Marxist science; and a naïve humanism on a par with Sartre's 'exaltation of human freedom'.

The great strength of Thomas's book is undoubtedly the authority which he brings to the subject, as one is left in no doubt from *The Gramscian Moment* that this is a scholar who has painstakingly dissected the *Prison Notebooks* and the philological literature in exhaustive detail. Indeed, Thomas puts this scholarship to work effectively in his confrontations with Anderson and Althusser in a manner that is unequalled in studies of Gramsci to date. Among the most fertile and convincing encounters with Anderson is Thomas's refutation of the former's ultimate charge that Gramsci's hegemony 'slid into' a genre of reformism by suggesting that the crucial ramparts of the capitalist state were located in civil society, and revolutionary strategy should accordingly be confined to the battle for mass consent here. Against this reading Thomas provides a persuasive exposition of the 'dialectical' relationship between civil and political society defended in the *Prison Notebooks* and captured above all in Gramsci's conception of the 'integral state.' Anderson's 'spatial' account of Gramsci's hegemonic theory of the capitalist state and revolutionary strategy is thus rejected for a 'functional' approach that foregrounds the 'integral' nature of the relations between civil and political hegemony in the capitalist state and maintain that the revolutionary 'practice of consolidating social forces and condensing them' in civil society necessarily 'presents an immediate challenge to the attempt by political society [i.e. the existing capitalist state] ...to 'enmesh' the same.' Indeed, for Thomas's Gramsci 'civil hegemony has to progress towards political hegemony in order to maintain itself' (p.194).

It is, however, the final section of Thomas's book (chapters 7-9) that is likely to be of most interest to the readers of *Radical Philosophy* where he mounts a robust defence of Gramsci's 'philosophy of praxis' and posits this 'Gramscian Moment' as the basis for 'the elaboration of an autonomous research programme in Marxist philosophy today' that can 'inherit and renew Marx's original critical and constructive gesture' (p.448). Here the most illuminating and original contribution of the book is its comprehensive exploration of the conception of 'absolute immanence' in the *Prison Notebooks* (chapter 8). Against Althusserian charges that Gramsci was guilty of abandoning *the science of Marxism* by failing to theorize any possibility of a position of externality for it in the historical process, Thomas convincingly links Gramsci's conception of science to immanentist critique (as opposed to transcendence) and maintains that for Gramsci modern science had in fact made 'a decisive contribution to the elaboration of the philosophy of praxis'. In his work it was not, however, to be associated with some imaginary access to 'naked objective knowledge', but to its 'practical-experimental relationship...with nature' (p.314-5) which Gramsci took as a model for the necessity of revolutionary Marxism to emerge from practice; that is to say, to emerge *from within* the everyday experience and problems of the proletarian masses which it would render 'coherent' and thereby increase their 'capacity to act' collectively (pp.363-73).

While there is no doubting the quality of the scholarship in Thomas's book, there are nonetheless those who will question whether this work would not have reaped even greater dividends with a broader engagement with the literature on Gramsci outside the Marxist tradition. This is not to say that Thomas ignores this literature completely. It is rather to point out that in his determination to demolish Anderson's and Althusser's Gramscis there is necessarily much less space for confronting contemporary scholars who undoubtedly have a much greater claim to authority in this area - having benefited from much of the same philological work as Thomas - than either of his two key Marxist adversaries. Some may well regard the latter as decidedly *passé* and peripheral to contemporary debates on Gramsci. This is especially problematic given the virtual absence of any serious authorial criticism of Gramsci's work in this book. For example, we can only speculate as to what Peter Thomas makes of those more contemporary accounts of Gramsci's work which call into question his commitment to democratic politics, or

indeed, some of his key presuppositions (i.e. the centrality and validity of *class analysis*; the inevitable path of history towards disintegration, fascism or proletarian revolution; and the notion that only the proletarian class can lead a revolutionary hegemonic alliance). These presuppositions in particular undermine Gramsci's claims to 'absolute historicism', 'absolute immanence' and 'absolute humanism' and suggest - as this reviewer believes - that there is a lot less consistency in Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* than Peter Thomas maintains.

While these are issues which Thomas may well feel were beyond the remit of this book, we can look forward to this broader engagement with a justified sense of expectation. For *The Gramscian Moment* has clearly established Peter Thomas as one of the leading experts in the field of Gramscian scholarship and will no doubt become essential reading in the future.