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Abstract

A Classic for Today: Gramsci's Political Thought (on McNally's Edited Volume)

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The article reviews the volume edited by Mark McNally *Antonio Gramsci*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan 2015.

Keywords

Gramsci, English, Historical Context, Key Debates, Major Conceptual Issues, Contemporary Relevance

*A Classic for Today: Gramsci's Political
Thought
(on McNally's Edited Volume)¹*

Francesca Antonini

The volume edited by Mark McNally, lecturer at the University of the West of Scotland, is an excellent example of the most recent literature on Antonio Gramsci. Among the collected volumes on the Italian thinker recently published in Anglophone academia, McNally's book is the only one that deals specifically with Gramscian political thought and its contemporary relevance.²

As clearly stated by the editor in the introduction (pp. 1-8), the primary scope of the volume is to explore "how Gramsci can continue to 'speak to us' today" (p. 5). Furthermore, it aims to "equip new readers [...] with an account of some of the major theoretical issues, debates and controversies that characterize his thought" and, at the same time, to raise the interest of "more seasoned Gramscian scholars" (*ibidem*).

In order to achieve this multiplicity of goals, the editor has gathered ten selected contributions by experienced Gramsci scholars with different backgrounds and from different generations.

The book is divided into four sections (*Historical context; Key debates; Major conceptual issues; Contemporary relevance*), followed by a closing chapter by McNally (*Conclusion: Contemporary themes*), in which he emphasizes the points of resonance of Gramscian themes in present times.³ Parts I, II and III share a similar approach toward Gramsci's work and the issues raised here partially overlap. Part IV has a clearer identity and stands out as the most original section of the book.

¹ Mark McNally (ed.), *Antonio Gramsci*, in the series "Critical Explorations in Contemporary Political Thought", Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan 2015, pp. XIII-247.

² Cf. Ives and Lacorte 2010; Mayo 2010; Green 2011; Srivastava and Bhattacharya 2012; Zene 2013; Ekers et al. 2012; Kreps 2015. A volume edited by Aaron Bernstein, Lorenzo Fusaro, Robert Jackson and myself is forthcoming with Brill.

³ The volume contains also a general bibliography and a useful index. As to the general editing of the volume, however, there are unfortunately more than a few inaccuracies, especially with regard to Italian names and expressions (often misspelled, both in the chapters and in the index).

The first chapter of the volume deals with the political tactic of the United Front and reappraisal by Gramsci (*Gramsci, the United Front: Comintern and Democratic Strategy*, pp. 11-33). By effectively reassessing Anderson's focus on Gramsci's 'Eastern sources', Mark McNally connects the elaboration of a 'democratic' trend within Gramsci's thought to the inclusive political strategy from below promoted by the Comintern in the early 1920s. Even if some issues might have required a stronger problematization (e.g. the relationship with Gramsci's formula of "relations of force" and its fore-runners and his unconventional reading of the category of democracy), this essay offers an original insight into a still under-explored aspect of Gramsci's political thought before his imprisonment.

The investigation of Gramsci's pre-prison experiences is a pivotal feature of the volume.⁴ This attention to Gramsci's historical and political background is displayed clearly in the second chapter by James Martin (*Morbid Symptoms: Gramsci and the Crisis of Liberalism*, pp. 34-51). Martin aims at sketching Gramsci's reaction to the crisis of the liberal order and depicts Gramsci as a thinker of the "interregnum", as we may say, using a famous expression from the *Notebooks* (Q 3, § 34: cf. Gramsci 1996, pp. 32-33). Of particular interest is the comparison between Gramsci's and Gobetti's attitude toward the crisis of Italian liberalism in the aftermath of WWI (cf. in particular pp. 41-42); also fruitful is Martin's focus on Gramsci's "narrative of crisis" (p. 44), as it develops in his prison writings.

The essay by Benedetto Fontana (*Intellectuals and Masses: Agency and Knowledge in Gramsci*, pp. 55-75) reaches the core of Gramsci's political thought, insofar as it deals with the relationship between the people and the intellectuals, i.e. the issue of collective political organisms. In doing this the author relies on his previous Gramscian research, as to content and method.⁵ Of course, this is a thorny issue, which is difficult to tackle within twenty pages, but a closer engagement with the recent literature on the topic might have led the author to a deeper analysis.⁶

⁴ While in Italy the pre-prison writings have remained for a long time in the shadow of the *Prison Notebooks*, in the Anglophone world Gramsci's production before 1927 experienced a precocious success among scholars, as demonstrated by the number of editions (cf. in particular Gramsci 1977-1978, Gramsci 1985 and Gramsci 1994) as well as by the flourishing secondary literature.

⁵ Cf. in particular Fontana 2003.

⁶ Despite a few important exceptions, Fontana's references are mostly outdated, neither

Chapter 4 is remarkable for its capacity to integrate different levels of investigation (*Gramsci, Language and Pluralism*, pp. 76-94). While investigating Gramsci's linguistic interests and background, Alessandro Carlucci shows how this affects his conception of politics. Furthermore, he offers a brief but extremely fruitful contextualization of the debate on Gramsci and pluralism (adding significantly to the picture outlined in chapter 2). He also discards – with sound reason – a recent interpretation put forward by Franco Lo Piparo.

The fifth and sixth chapters, written respectively by Peter D. Thomas (*Gramsci's Marxism: The 'Philosophy of Praxis'*, pp. 97-117) and Guido Liguori (*Conceptions of Subalternity in Gramsci*, pp. 118-133), provide a thorough insight into Gramsci's prison writings and track down the 'genealogy' of some of the political concepts here elaborated. Relying on the most advanced findings of Italian philology (concerning essentially a diachronic and philological reading of Gramsci's texts),⁷ on the one hand Thomas highlights the multi-sided nature of the category of "philosophy of praxis"; on the other hand, Liguori tackles the concept of "subaltern/subalternity", which has experienced a late and wide-reaching fortune, but whose meaning still needs a substantial clarification.

To sum up, chapters 1-6 give a well thought-out account of various aspects of Gramsci's political thought. The contributions are different in many respects, both as regards their approach toward Gramsci's text (either philological or theoretical; focused either on the pre-prison writings or on the *Notebooks*, or on both) and as regards the reading they give of the debate on the individual topics, which is something highly desirable in an introductory volume such as this. Despite this heterogeneity, they represent a useful companion to Gramsci's conception of politics as well as the necessary counterpart to the texts gathered in the fourth part of the volume.

taking into account the most recent developments in Italian philology (cf. *infra*, n. 7), nor its readings in the Anglophone world (cf. especially Thomas 2009, but also his most recent publications on the category of the Modern Prince – Thomas 2013a, 2013b and 2015).

⁷ As is known, a new critical edition of Gramsci's writings is in preparation (2007-). Besides this, we may mention at least the project of the *Dizionario Gramsciano* (Liguori-Voza 2009) and the most recent Italian publications on Gramsci, some of them already translated into English (cf. among others Giasi 2008; Frosini 2010; Cospito 2011 and 2016; Liguori 2006 and 2015).

The distinction between sections 1-3 and 4 stands out clearly. On the one hand, in the essays already mentioned the attention to the contemporary relevance of Gramsci's reflections was juxtaposed to the investigation of his thought and more or less effectively integrated into the previous analysis. On the other hand, the very essence of chapters 7-10 is the effort to utilize Gramsci's reflections in order to deal with contemporary political issues. Thus, this updating is the key feature of the fourth part, whose focus is the legacy of Gramsci's thought in our times.

Each chapter adopts a different way to read Gramsci today. The seventh chapter, co-authored by Andreas Bieler, Ian Bruff and Adam David Morton, investigates the use of Gramsci within the research fields of International Relations (IR) and International Political Economy (IPE) (*Gramsci and 'the International': Past, Present and Future*, pp. 137-155). On the basis of a critical evaluation of Cox's path-breaking interventions in the 1980s and of the development of a neo-Gramscian trend in the 1990s, the authors (who are among the most authoritative representatives of this trend) offer a balanced and fruitful outlook on the topic. Their thesis is that a genuine global perspective is already present in Gramsci, since "particular histories exist only within the frame of world history", as they say picking up Gramsci's own words (p. 140). If there is no need to 'internationalize' Gramsci, the connection between the national and the supranational levels has to be sought within the Gramscian account. In particular, Bieler, Bruff and Morton identify the category of "passive revolution" as an essential conceptual tool to conceive the process of "uneven and combined development" (p. 141). Its importance "extends beyond his life-time to more recent periods in capitalist history" (p. 144), up to the actual neoliberal age, which is characterized by growing authoritarian features.

Chapter 8, by Marcus E. Green, investigates the positive aspect of Gramsci's thought, his 'revolutionary faith' and its fruitfulness for contemporary struggles (*Gramsci and Subaltern Struggles Today: Spontaneity, Political Organization and Occupy Wall Street*, pp. 156-178). Historical contextualization, philological investigation of Gramscian texts and a deep sensitivity to the most recent political developments are happily synthesized in this essay, which discusses the

concrete case-study of the Occupy Wall Street movement.⁸ As regards the theoretical dimension of Green's chapter, the main novelty lies in his articulation of the category of subalternity. In fact, he does not conceive of it as an indivisible category, but as a "conceptual cluster", that keeps together different elements. In particular, he analyses two of them, "spontaneity" and "conscious leadership". Also noteworthy is the connection between themes already evoked in other chapters, such as democracy and liberalism.

The reflection on Gramsci as 'thinker of the crisis' returns in chapter 9, by Darrow Schecter (*The Historical Bloc: Toward a Typology of Weak States and Contemporary Legitimation Crises*, pp. 179-194). He aims to demonstrate the centrality of the category of "historical bloc" (conceived of as a development of the couple structure-superstructure) and its aptness for analysing the current political situation. In particular he affirms that Gramsci is a "historian of the instability of weak states" (p. 180), i. e. states, like Italy, "with inadequate constitutions in several senses of the term" (*ibidem*) and that "are far more likely [...] to undergo authoritarian transitions such as fascism and other kinds of passive revolution" (p. 181). From this point of view, the comparison between Gramsci and Foucault sketched by the author (p. 184) is pivotal.

The tenth chapter of the volume is written by David Howarth and is devoted to the investigation of the reappraisal of the Gramscian category of hegemony by Laclau and Mouffe (*Gramsci, Hegemony and Post-Marxism*, pp. 195-213). Although not dealing directly with Gramsci, the chapter is interesting insofar as it offers a balanced overview on one of the most successful political theories of the last few decades, which, in turn, might suggest innovative understandings of Gramsci's own thought.

The volume closes with a conclusion by the editor, in which he makes the point of the present-day significance of Gramsci's thought (*Conclusion: Contemporary Themes*, pp. 214-224). McNally identifies three main topics – *Contemporary Marxism* (pp. 214-216), *The Subaltern and Popular Movements* (pp. 216-219), *Democratic Theory and post-Marxism* (pp. 219-223) – around which he organizes a summary of the ten contributions of the book. This closing chapter

⁸ Kate Crehan, in her latest book on Gramsci, has also chosen Occupy Wall Street as a case-study to show the up-to-dateness of the Sardinian's categories (cf. Crehan 2016).

is without doubt useful and it opens the doors for a general investigation of the contemporaneity of Gramsci's thought. In particular, it stimulates reflections on the narrative that emerges from and connects the different chapters, in particular the ones that focus directly on the contemporary relevance of his account (7-10). Despite the differences among them, I am convinced that it is possible to track down at least one unifying *Leitmotiv*, represented by the category of hegemony and its transformations.⁹

As shown recently, far from being exhaustively explored in all its facets, this Gramscian macro-concept is still very fertile and deserves a thorough exploration.¹⁰ It is not by chance that chapters 7-10 stress, even if sometimes only incidentally, the existence of a conception of hegemony that transcends its more traditional meaning, related to the 'long' nineteenth century and to the rise of the bourgeoisie and its rule over the other classes. This is only the first and most obvious application of this category in Gramsci's thought. In fact, the concept of hegemony evolves in parallel with his political reflections and it is equally employed to analyse both the past and the present situations, on an Italian, European or global level.

That means, first, that the social and political coordinates that characterize Gramsci's own time affect also the category of hegemony, which is used to understand the growing authoritarian characters of western societies and their 'democratic-bureaucratic' features.¹¹ This broader conception emerges clearly, for instance, from the last miscellaneous Notebooks – 14, 15, and 17 – whose importance is still under-estimated.¹² This further meaning of hegemony could be very fruitfully extended to our own times, by

⁹ Another *Leitmotiv* is for example the concept of 'crisis'.

¹⁰ For an overview on the debate on Gramsci's category of hegemony cf. now Liguori 2015, pp. 176-191. For the latest achievements of the scholarship on the topic cf. among others Frosini 2016, Cospito 2016 (these essays are the results of the first edition of the Ghilarza Summer School, held in Sardinia in September 2014 and focused on the concepts of hegemony and subalternity). The category of hegemony was at the centre of a series of international workshops organised by Fabio Frosini and other scholars from 2014 to 2016 (*Egemonia dopo Gramsci: una riconsiderazione / Hegemony after Gramsci: a new assessment*).

¹¹ For the 'democratic-bureaucratic' features of hegemony cf. again Frosini 2016: for the term itself, see Gramsci 1975, Q 8, § 22 and Q 12, § 1; in English Gramsci 2007, p. 250 and Gramsci 1971, p. 13..

¹² As regards Notebooks 14, 15 and 17, a path-breaking investigation was conducted in a seminar recently held in Urbino, Italy (*Verso la nuova edizione critica dei "Quaderni del carcere" di Antonio Gramsci: gli ultimi quaderni miscelanei (1933-1935)*).

making this concept a key to interpret the social and political trends we are experiencing; trends that could be compared, *mutatis mutandis*, with the ones described by Gramsci.

As Bieler, Bruff and Morton affirm, “Gramsci would be interested in the rise of the authoritarian neoliberalism” that “would remind him of the 1920s and 1930s” and their “series of counter-revolutions” (p. 149).¹³ Green writes: “One of the major lessons that can be drawn from OWS [Occupy Wall Street] and Occupy, following a Gramscian analysis, is the state’s readiness to utilize surveillance, the use of force and coercion to disrupt and suppress an explicitly nonviolent political movement” (p. 171). Schecter’s parallel between Gramsci and Foucault is eloquent from this point of view, stressing “the rise of de-centered, transnational, biopolitical instances of control and surveillance”, p. 184).¹⁴ Finally Howarth, too, wants a return to the category of hegemony, not limited either to the level of the superstructure or to that of the structure, but, “in the spirit of Gramsci’s dialectical thinking”, in the framework of “more complex conceptual infrastructures”, at the same time as recovering “questions of coercion, violence and imposition” (p. 209). For their part, chapters 1-6 provide the necessary basis for an investigation of this broader conception of hegemony and for a useful application of it to our times.

To conclude, in the panorama of recent Anglophone literature on Gramsci, McNally’s book is an excellent example of non-occasional reflection on Gramsci as a ‘classic’ of political thought, absolutely noteworthy in itself but perhaps even more for its echoes in the present. The chapters included in the volume, although different as regards their topics and their approach toward Gramsci’s thought, could lay the foundations for thorough exploration of Gramsci’s contemporary relevance, by fulfilling the

¹³ The authors stress the coercive dimension of political action in the “post-2007 period of crisis”, interpreted as an effort of neoliberal ideology to remain the “dominant discourse” (p. 148). In particular they highlight the increased level of state repression and the fact that “justifications of political violence and the mobilization of juridical power have become a routine part of events across the globe” (p. 149).

¹⁴ Cf. also: “One finds similar spatial models of power and resistance throughout Gramsci’s works. His writings manifest a similar impulse to deconstruct what are often assumed to be unified concentrations of power, such as ‘the state’, which he breaks down into civil society and political society. [...] power relations in complex societies are constituted in capillary channels that do not respect near boundaries or mechanical models of causality” (p. 184).

ambitions expressed in the conclusion of the volume.

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