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Abstract

This is a review by Lorenzo Fusaro of Alfredo Gonzales's book Reform without Justice.

Keywords

Trump, migration, transnational capital, integral State, subaltern groups, collective political consciousness.

On Alfonso Gonzales's "Reform Without Justice"

Lorenzo Fusaro

In the beginning there were just tweets. And so it appeared that Donald Trump's agenda would be confined to the symbolic and that, following the liberal elite, as "Financial Times"'s Philip Stephens put it, "Mr. Trump could somehow be managed through his presidency – that the ignorance and prejudice that inform his worldview could be sidestepped and softened. With enough teeth-gritting indulgence and flattery, the argument has run, the president could be kept within boundaries" (FT 7.7.2018). Yet deeds followed: economic policy included the drastic reduction of taxes that particularly benefited big corporations and high-income brackets (which the liberal elite rarely mentions in its critique). In addition, and as is well known, the imposition of hefty tariffs has been accompanied by – following again the liberal concern – the upheaval or "axing" of the "liberal international order". Crucially, Trump's policies interested, of course, migration. After all, as the US President clearly stated when lecturing British Prime Minister Theresa May, "I won the election over migration" (BBC 13.7.2018). The (in)famous turning point has been his "zero tolerance" approach aimed at dissuading Mexicans, but especially (as we shall see, forcibly displaced) Central Americans attempting to cross the border from Mexico. The brutality of the turn is well captured by the remarks made by Attorney General Jeff Sessions when introducing the new zero tolerance policy:

If you are smuggling a child then we will prosecute you, and that child be separated from you as required by the law [...]. If you don't like that then don't smuggle children over our border (NYT 7.5.2018).

Trump's policies have led several critical authors to signal a shift towards regressive neoliberalism (Fraser 2017), authoritarianism neoliberalism (Bruff 2014, Gonzales 2017), or even fascism. And yet, does the presidency of Donald Trump really represent a fundamental break with previous administrations and in particular the Obama administration? Were we to follow Alfonso Gonzales'

book *Reform Without Justice* published in 2014 by Oxford University Press, the answer is definitively “no”. For as also the subtitle of the book – *Latino Migrant Politics and the Homeland Security State* – suggests, the authoritarian turn started long before the Presidency of Donald Trump, albeit the latter added specificities to it. Indeed, as the author puts it clearly in a later text:

Though Obama certainly made some concessions to African American, Latino, and Native American social movements under intense pressure, he nonetheless adhered to an authoritarian neoliberal mode of governance. One must be clear that the authoritarian reconfiguration of the state did not start with Trump’s presidency; it has been an ongoing process that transcends party lines. (Gonzales 2017, p. 151.)

Consider, for example, the topic of migration. Deportations passed from 188,000 in the year 2000 to 410,000 in 2012 – the last year reported in Gonzales’ analysis. Hence the author shows that “the United States has removed more people in the last ten years [2002-2012] than in the last 110 years combined” as, already at the time of writing the book, it spent fifteen times more on migration control than it did in 1986 (p. 2). This increase has been accompanied by the criminalization and detention of migrants long before the installation of Trump at the White House. As also Juaréz, Gómez-Aguñaga and Bettez (2018) argue “immigrant detention has skyrocketed over the past three decades”. They highlight the widespread privatization of detention centers concluding that “corporate interests have helped to fuel the growth of immigrant detention and to convert the criminalization of immigrants into a profitable industry”. One crucial element within such processes is constituted by the Illegal Immigration Control Act (2005) that purported to, in the words of Gonzales:

Make it a felony to be undocumented; expand border security measures; increase cooperation between federal and legal local police agencies on immigration-law enforcement; broaden the definition of aggravated felony to include certain misdemeanor charges; and expand the definition of human trafficking to include anyone who transports an undocumented person in an automobile, amongst other provisions. (p. 21.)

Gonzales’s great contribution in *Reform Without Justice* is to offer an “organic” grand narrative – to use Gramsci’s vocabulary – that, starting from the topic of migration, attempts to make sense of the

great transformation the US went through over the past few decades. In order to do so, the author draws largely on Gramsci's thought and categories. What also strikes positively is the method of "critical discourse analysis and critical ethnography" that makes the book distinctive and very interesting to read. To give an idea, here is a passage of an interview to Javier, who has been deported to El Salvador as a result of "criminalization by association". Under this praxis, Gonzales explains, migrants are charged with possession of drugs with the intent to sell even if they may have never been in possession thereof:

I went to the US when I was three years old; I got deported when I was 27. I spent most of my life over there. I went to elementary school, middle school; I went to high school, and I worked for KFC. They deported me ... over a mistake over identity, over who had the dope and who was around. They took my papers, they took me to El Salvador, I came over here to the penitentiary, twice to jail over here. (p. 111.)

But let's return to Gonzales' narrative. The issue of the state is taken up in chapter one "State-Civil Society nexus" and reiterated in a more informed way in the final chapter "Beyond Immigration reform". The Homeland Security State, in the words of the author "is an integral racial state that emerged from a contentious history over the politics of race in general and with Latinos in particular" (p. 13). Hence adopting the Gramscian concept of integral state as the unity of civil society and political society, Gonzales presents an original version of the "racial state" compared to existing literature. In particular, the author extends the analysis focusing especially on the so-called anti-migrant bloc, "composed of a constellation of think tanks, intellectuals, grassroots organizations, and politicians operating at both the state and civil society" (p. 22). Their underlying idea is that

the nation is composed of white Americans and those willing to assimilate uncompromisingly into their way of life. And the "enemy" is the "alien" who symbolically is presented as foreign, criminal, and most often Mexican (pp. 41-2).

Gonzales shows how through several means (lobbying, political and economic pressure but also coercion) these ideas have been generalized. Incidentally, the anti-migrant bloc's proposals (such as

the Illegal Immigration Control Act) the author shows, have even been adopted by the Democratic party: “The majority of Democrats rejected only the most draconian aspects of the original bill submitted by the Republican leadership” (p. 43).

Yet the centrality of Latino politics is not discussed only “from above”. Hence Gonzales strongly focuses on the struggles arising from below, going as far as to argue that these represented a “counter hegemonic movement”, only, eventually, to be coopted through a process of passive revolution. More specifically, in chapter two Gonzales gives a vivid and informed account of the 2006 “mega marches” against the Immigration Control Act of 2005. Yet, as the author remarks, “[d]espite the ascendancy of the Latino social bloc, the counter-hegemonic moment was lost almost as fast as the bloc congealed” (p. 68). The result has been a compromise at the expense of the demands posed by the movement:

While this vision of reform included real short-term benefits for a select group of undocumented migrants (such as a work permit and, in some cases a pathway to citizenship) it sacrificed any radical challenge to the authoritarian nature of the homeland security state, the structural causes of migration, or the fundamentally racist policing, detention, and deportation of millions of Latinos and other migrants from other parts of the third world. (p. 122)

Whilst Gonzales’s deployment of Gramsci’s concepts is very promising, the way he does so – and as is usual with Gramsci’s concepts – might be debatable. For example, were we to follow Gramsci’s “*Analysis of situations*”, where the process of attainment of hegemony is discussed, we notice that the author (like Marx) starts from structural transformations in the economy giving rise to a fundamental class that might have the potential to become hegemonic, after going through a complex process of creating “collective political consciousness” (Gramsci 2001, Q13§17, p. 1583; [Gramsci 1971, p. 181]). Even if using the concept of counter-hegemony, Gonzales notes that Gramsci never made use of the latter. Nevertheless, it is perhaps the third moment presented in Gramsci’s “*Analysis of Situations*” that comes closest to the idea of a *counter hegemonic* movement able to challenge hitherto existing hegemony. There Gramsci writes:

A third moment is that in which one becomes aware that one's own corporate interests, in their present and future development, transcend the corporate limits of the purely economic class, and can and must become the interests of other subordinate groups, too. This is the most purely political phase, and marks the decisive passage from the structure to the sphere of the complex superstructures; it is the phase in which previously germinated ideologies become “party”, come into confrontation and conflict, until only one of them, or at least a single combination of them, tends to prevail, to gain the upper hand, to propagate itself throughout society – bringing about not only a unison of economic and political aims, but also intellectual and moral unity, posing all the questions around which the struggle rages not on a corporate but on a “universal” plane, and thus creating the hegemony of a fundamental social group over a series of subordinate groups. (Gramsci 2001, Q13§17, p. 1584; Gramsci 1971, pp. 181-2.)

I wonder whether the same could be applied to the sort of sporadic movement, even important as it was, that arose during the period of struggles Gonzales analyses. Would it not be more fruitful to adopt the concept of subalterns? Of course, also the latter concept has led to a series debates within the literature (see Green 2001; Thomas 2018a). As Guido Liguori (2016) argues, a characteristic of subaltern groups is their spontaneity and difficulty to conform a coherent bloc able to successfully challenge the hegemony of the ruling class. As Gramsci maintains, in some instances subaltern struggles might even reinforce existing hegemonic relations (see Gramsci 2001, Notebook 25).

A similar problem might be identified when Gonzales employs the concept of passive revolution in order to characterize the “cooption” of the anti-migrant bloc mentioned above. As is well known the concept of passive revolution has led to an important discussion within the literature. Notably, Gramsci himself uses the concept to characterize, following Cuoco, the specific situation observable in Naples, then the Italian, and later, more generally, the European transition to capitalist modernity (Thomas 2006; see also Thomas 2018b). Whilst here he deals with *epochal changes*, in its more extensive utilization of the concept, Gramsci also analyses changes *within* the same epoch. Interestingly, the concept – we might understand, perhaps, as *permanent* passive revolution – might be interpreted as a permanent way by which the ruling classes exercise hegemony. As a result of the existence of multiple interpretations, Callinicos (2010) has hence noted that there is risk of over-

stretching the concept thereby emptying it of its analytical force. That said, consider that Gramsci uses the concept in its more “extended meaning” in order to characterize mammoth transformations like “Americanism and Fordism” in the United States or fascism in Italy as a *sortie* from the organic crisis that was plaguing “the world as a whole” (Gramsci 2001, Q13§23, p. 1603 [Gramsci 2001, pp. 210-11]). While it might be an interesting exercise to characterize the emergence and maintenance of the Homeland Security State as passive revolution, I wonder whether the concept of passive revolution can be applied to the specific struggle considered by Gonzales in the way he analyses it.

One further big theme that runs through the book – and which covers chapters three and four – is the neo-Gramscian idea of a *fundamental* transformation of global capitalism as theorized by William I. Robinson (2005) amongst others. Gonzales well deploys these arguments in order to analyse the transformations that have occurred in the US (with particular emphasis on Riverside, California), and in Mexico and Central America. The interconnect-edness between neoliberalism in Mexico and Riverside, California, is thus presented as follows:

The ascendancy of neoliberalism in Mexico and economic restructuring in the United States are in fact part of the same process involving the reorganization of capitalist production around the globe to a transnational system of production, trade, finance and labour’. (p. 84.)

But with regards to the international (or transnational dimension) the focus is particularly on El Salvador thereby also capturing the shift of the migrant population: in the year 2000, as the Washington Post reports, 98 per cent of immigrants caught at the border were of Mexican origin, whilst in 2017, 163,000 persons came from Central America (El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala) and 128,000 from Mexico (Selsky in “Washington Post” 3.7.2018). As Gonzales points out, the war on terror and the “war on drugs”, amongst others, forced the implementation of neoliberal reforms that, actually, might be understood as the root cause for migration. As Gonzales puts it right at the beginning of the book, “[e]conomically displaced people, and those displaced by war, migrated either to the overpopulated urban centers of Latin America or to El Norte” (p. 15).

While the analysis in Chapter 4 “The Geopolitics of the Homeland Security State and Deportation in El Salvador” is relatively brief, Gonzales nonetheless very well captures the complex interconnection between the neoliberal transformation both in the United States, Mexico, Central America and migration. My main concern, when adopting the neo-Gramscian idea of transnational capital in general, is that this notion probably obfuscates economic and geopolitical competition amongst *different* states as well as *imperialism*. Thus, for example, as Josefina Morales’ analysis of NAFTA suggests, the latter, rather than being the result of transnational capital in general, has been a product of *US transnational capital* and *US imperialism*. As she puts it:

NAFTA was one of the mechanisms adopted by US transnational capital and US imperialism to counter the structural crisis of the 1970s, which, in the midst of the monetary and financial crisis, started to make its old pattern of accumulation obsolete. [...] It implied the emergence of new accumulation mechanisms based on a new technological revolution that opened the way to a new international division of labor. (Morales 2017, own translation)

Yet notwithstanding my differences outlined above, I believe that Gonzales’ idea to employ Gramscian concepts in order to analyse the important topic of migration in particular, and the great transformation the US went through over the past decades more generally, is very promising. And in doing so Gonzales has (re-)opened a decisive research agenda that might help us to better understand and change “the great and terrible world” (Gramsci) we are living in.

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