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## Millennium Gramsci: Some Features of his Current US Reception

### Abstract

This is the Abstract of the English-language article by Mauro Pala opening the session on the current position of Gramsci in the Anglophone world, here with special reference to the United States.

### Keywords

Gramsci; Buttigieg; James Madison; hegemony; civil society; culturalism

## ***Millennium Gramsci: Some Features of his Current US Reception***

Mauro Pala

‘Perhaps one can venture a generalization. The frequency with which Gramsci is cited [nowadays] suggests that he has attained the status of a classic’. Such was the comment by Joseph Buttigieg (Joe for colleagues and friends) in 2009 on the reception of Gramsci. And immediately after he added: ‘even so, one would want to know what that means and what to make of it’.<sup>1</sup> This is the pivot around which I intend to develop this brief opening intervention for our Anglophone panel. In Buttigieg’s view what is of importance is not the status of ‘classic’, which runs the risk of being consigned to the museum, but the uses to which that thought have been put and the perspectives that have opened up. There immediately springs to mind the example of Juan Carlos Portantiero, which is not centred on the biography of the man as a politician, but on the uses of Gramsci’s thought in Latin America, on its outcomes, up to the possible exhaustion of its function. An effective summary of Gramsci’s reception in the United States, or if you like in the Angloworld, has recently been formulated by Fredric Jameson: ‘Much of Gramsci’s fascination lies in the ambiguities of his thought, attributable not least to the character of that “open work” that the *Prison Notebooks* shares with [...] other monumental yet incomplete projects such as Pascal’s *Pensées*, Benjamin’s *Arcades*, or even Lacan’s *Seminars*’.<sup>2</sup> It is significant that in half a century of research and militancy during which he has ranged from Proudhon to Lukács, from Lenin to Deleuze by way of the Frankfurt school, North America’s most famous Marxist critic has never concentrated his attention on Gramsci, and this certainly not through an aversion or lack of respect: ‘Gramsci in the world: [...] the philosopher of the “Southern Question” [turns out] to be perfectly at home in the world today, from India to the Andes, [...] he proves relevant there where

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<sup>1</sup> J. Buttigieg, *Reading Gramsci now* in J. Francese (ed.), *Perspectives on Gramsci. Politics, Culture and Social Theory*, London, Routledge, 2009, p. 20.

<sup>2</sup> F. Jameson, *Gramsci in the World* in R. Dainotto e F. Jameson (eds.), *Gramsci in the World*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2020, p. XI.

the peasant still exists as well where he has become extinct, from the old Third World to the postmodern West'.<sup>3</sup> But why did such a global reception not act as a spur to our Duke University critic?

What has held Jameson back, on top of the objective complexity of Gramsci's work, is the its controversial reception in the Anglo-phone world, on which there has weighed heavily on the left the State-centred interpretation of Anderson,<sup>4</sup> flattened as it was on the anachronistic position of Althusser. Among historians, attempts to rescind any possible contact between Gramsci's work and the present have certainly not been lacking: 'we should be careful not to overestimate [Gramsci's] contemporaneity. To analyse hegemony today requires us to be critically aware of the distance that separates us from Gramsci'.<sup>5</sup> Once again Joe Buttigieg comes in, confirming that Gramsci 'was no system builder' while firmly pointing out the contradiction that hindered Gramsci's reception: on the one hand, it is expected that an author capable of attracting an important following in a period different from that in which s/he lived should have produced a theoretical scheme worthy of being handed down. On the other hand, to concentrate on an individual existence right down to its minute details implies the risk of not producing data that can be transposed or applied to the future.

These two positions, which we might identify with the figures of the theoretician and of the biographer, as we know, characterized the debate on Gramsci between 1989 and the end of the century, leaving polemical trails in its wake in publishing which have also had their influence in the United States.<sup>6</sup>

In the United States, as elsewhere in the world, the use to which Gramsci has been put comes over as a delicate operation, in which the guiding concepts of a contingent situation have to be extrapolated and it has to be verified how much these concepts may be appropriated for the analysis of a conjuncture in a different time and place, but one which shows affinities at the cultural level with the starting-point situation.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. P. Anderson, *The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci*, London, Verso, 2017 (1<sup>st</sup> edition 'New Left Review' I (100), Dec. 1976-Jan. 1977).

<sup>5</sup> J. Martin, *Gramsci's Political Analysis*, New York, St.Martin's Press, 1988, p.171.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. G. Liguori, *Gramsci conteso*, Roma, Editori Riuniti, 2012, in particular the chapter *Gramsci nel Duemila (Gramsci in the twenty-first century)*, from p. 373. In *English Gramsci Contested*, trans. R. Braude, Leiden and Boston, Brill, 2021, pp. 288-317.

For reading and interpreting Gramsci the same recommendations hold that the made in his *‘Questions of method’*:

If one wishes to study the birth of a conception of the world which has never been systematically expounded by its founder (and one furthermore whose essential coherence is to be sought not in each individual writing or series of writings but in the whole development of the multiform intellectual work in which the elements of the conception are implicit) some preliminary detailed philological work has to be done (Q16§2, p.1840; *SPN* p. 382).<sup>7</sup>

As well as conceiving practical and theoretical as ‘indissolubly intertwined’ (*loc. cit.*), Gramsci speaks of continuous movement and self-construction through self-criticism. The very idea of reflection and self-reflection, which produces the celebrated ‘rhythm of thought’ (Q16§2, p. 1841; *SPN* p. 383), allows us to understand that understanding presents itself as the exact opposite of a mechanical situation. On this question, partly seriously and partly ‘with tongue in cheek’ Stuart Hall expressed himself on Gramsci in these terms:

We can’t pluck up this ‘Sardinian’ from his specific and unique political formation, beam him down at the end of the twentieth century, and ask him to solve our problem for us: especially since the whole thrust of his thinking was to refuse this easy transfer of generalizations from one conjuncture, nation or epoch to another.<sup>8</sup>

With British irony Hall lays stress on the immanent character of Gramsci’s writing, a factor we shall return to, understood as the refusal of generalizations, an attention to the contingent aspect and a close relation between theory and change.

What Hall was alluding to then turns out to be the opposite of Gramsci’s reception in the United States as from 1967, the year when John Cammett’s volume *Antonio Gramsci and the Origins of Italian Communism* brought Gramsci out of the restricted circle of militants, often of a Trotskyist orientation, who had read him in the first publication in English.

[Gramsci’s] intellectual force and the originality of his writings, which exhibit both a profound depth and a sweeping breadth, propelled him to a

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<sup>7</sup> *SPN* will be used in the text for *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Q. Hoare and G. Nowell-Smith, London, 1971 and International Publishers, New York, 1971.

<sup>8</sup> Stuart Hall, *The Hard Road to Renewal: Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left*, London, Verso, 1988, p.161.

status as a thinker whose work has become central to contemporary cultural and intellectual life in the United States [...] In effect, Gramsci is not only indelibly embedded in American scholarly discourse; he is also a major presence in contemporary polemical and political conflicts between conservatives, rightists and republicans on the one hand, and left liberals, progressives and the left, on the other.<sup>9</sup>

On the basis of these hermeneutic premises Buttigieg maintains that a correct understanding of Gramsci's thought requires a translation:

Gramsci's concepts and insights cannot be readily transferred: what they call for, rather, is careful translation in the broader sense of the term. [Translating Gramsci in this sense] brings his views to bear on the present conjuncture without unmooring him from the circumstances that generated his work.<sup>10</sup>

The capability to translate evidently does not refer here solely to the consideration of a hypothetical biographer of Gramsci but also, and at the same time, the theoretician. In the first case, namely to understand the sense of the prison programme, in order to grasp the *modus operandi* of the writing of the *Notebooks*, one has to take note of the fact that 'the intellectual is a language operator, underlining that language is not an instrument to the contents, but is one with them',<sup>11</sup> considering language itself an ideology or a conception of the world. The crucial node of this dynamic relation is the one enclosed in the formula *Traducibilità dei linguaggi scientifici* (Q10§6IV *Introduzione allo studio della filosofia*, p. 1245).<sup>12</sup>

Gramsci 'seems to differentiate between two forms of translatability: a first, more restricted, case and a second, more general one'<sup>13</sup> and begins to ask himself what really lies behind the concept of the translatability of languages (*linguaggi*), in other words of paradigmatic discourses'<sup>14</sup>. 'Translation', evidently, is to be understood as the capacity to transmit an entire 'national experience' outside one's own boundaries. This is what, to give a prime example,

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<sup>9</sup> Benedetto Fontana, *Power and Democracy* in Francese 2009, cit., p. 81.

<sup>10</sup> Buttigieg 2009, cit., p. 23.

<sup>11</sup> F. Frosini, *Gramsci e la filosofia*, Roma, Carocci, 2003, p. 34.

<sup>12</sup> Q10§6IV *Introduction to the Study of Philosophy: The Translatability of Scientific Languages*, in *Further Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (henceforward FSPN in the text), ed. and trans. D. Boothman, London, Lawrence and Wishart 1995 and Delhi, Aakar 2014, p. 306.

<sup>13</sup> D. Boothman, *Traduzione e traducibilità* in F. Frosini e G. Liguori (eds.), *Le parole di Gramsci. Per un lessico dei Quaderni del carcere*, Roma, Carocci, 2007, p. 250.

<sup>14</sup> Boothman, 2007, cit., p. 247.

Giuseppe Ferrari, the Action Party's chief agrarian expert, was unable to do when he sought to recount the French Revolution in Italy (Q1§44, p. 49).<sup>15</sup> We may also recall Lenin's famous reproof at the Fourth Congress of the International when he complained that 'we have not been able to translate our languages into those of Europe' (Q11§46, p. 1468; *FSPN* p. 306), lamenting in this case the inability of exporting the revolution.

Gramsci's ability to translate the United States, as shown in his notes on Americanism and Fordism, was quite simply extraordinary.

He did not adopt a narrowly economically determinist view of American economic progress here – let alone a simplistic technological determinism. Instead he examined the specific historical and material conditions that had enabled a new techno-economic paradigm to develop there, including the establishment of an *economia programmata* (programmed economy) at the level of the enterprise, the factory town, and the wider society.<sup>16</sup>

Gramsci did not limit himself to grasping the tendencies that, in *his* time, were excluded by the Comintern, which had denied the possibility of a shift in the economic centre of gravity of the world from Europe to the United States. He had understood that the US Taylorist model could become the basis for a new model of social development – I would recall on this matter the interest with which Giorgio Baratta and Beppe Vacca analysed the phenomenon – but above all Gramsci created a new approach. This is the point of interest for our discourse. Here lies his great contribution to the ways that the uses would be made of *his own* theory. The uses of Gramsci in the Angloworld and, especially, in the United States were conceived and defined by Gramsci himself.

It is to him that those intuitions can be ascribed which, beginning with the 1970s, would orient the most penetrating and perspicacious criticism, beginning with geographical awareness.

Gramsci's geographical awareness makes it more appropriate for late-twentieth century criticism, which has had to deal with disjunctive formations and experiences such as women's history, popular culture, post-colonial and

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<sup>15</sup> In English *Prison Notebooks* Vol. 1, ed. and trans. J. A. Buttigieg and A. Callari, New York, Columbia University Press, 1992.

<sup>16</sup> Bob Jessop, *State Power*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2008, p. 111.

subaltern material that cannot be assimilated easily, cannot be appropriated and fitted into an overall scheme of correspondences.<sup>17</sup>

Certainly, that quality which Said designates as a ‘powerful geographical sense’ were transmitted from master to pupils, starting with Said himself. Homi Bhabha, Timothy Brennan, Joseph Buttigieg, Kate Crehan, Renate Holub, Esteve Morera, Gayatri Spivak, down to the generation of Peter Ives and Marcus Green, here with us today. I have on purpose limited myself to a certain number of scholars who have taught or are teaching in a United States academic institution, otherwise obviously they would be even more numerous. How much are these brilliant academics representative of the broadened reception to which reference was made by Benedetto Fontana (a Gramsci scholar from the United States, despite his name) when he observed that Gramsci is also ‘a major presence in contemporary political conflicts between conservatives and progressives’?<sup>18</sup>

But let us go back to the 1980s: starting from then the Republican Right of Patrick Buchanan and Rush Limbaugh – among others – took over a number of terms such as ‘hegemony’ or ‘organic intellectual’ and made use of them, totally at odds with the meaning that they have on Gramsci’s writings, as synonyms respectively for ‘unlimited power’ and ‘intellectual totally devoted to a cause, and lacking critical capacity’. From then onwards Gramsci has been periodically identified by the reactionary groupings as an effective thinker – and as such respected, because he has been identified as a winner – but at the same time an evil genius, the personification of the moral corruption that is threatening the basic values of the nation.

Currently, as we have been hearing, Gramsci is the victim of similar attacks in Bolsonaro’s Brazil, fomented by the same phobias.

This Manichaeian interpretation is, obviously, the opposite of that centred on equilibrium, measure, the rhythm of thought. Again quoting Fontana the conservative front that is attacking him makes reference to the thought of Alexander Hamilton and James Madison, two of the most influential figures among the founders of

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<sup>17</sup> Edward Said, *History, Literature and Geography*, in E.S., *Reflections on Exile*, Cambridge (MA) Harvard U.P, 2002, p. 458.

<sup>18</sup> Benedetto Fontana, *Power and Democracy* in Francese, 2009, cit., p. 81.



the United States, authors of the Federalist Papers (1787-1788). In a nutshell, these two intellectuals made use of the Enlightenment categories of 'nature' and 'faction' to hypothesize a society characterized by the competition among all its components for money and power in accordance with the natural laws of 'self-love and passion' which were invariably transformed into 'ambition' and 'passion'. In a world that recalls the 'all against all' of Hobbes the demand for equality loses all sense since it just hides the desire for power of the weakest, rejected as an unacceptable gesture.

the Madisonian conception of politics leads directly to Gramsci's notion of hegemony. They mutually imply one another precisely because they are antithetically opposed to each other. One desires to preserve a newly established order, the other desires to overthrow a misbegotten pre-existing order in order to establish a new one.<sup>19</sup>

Gramsci's demand, aimed at transforming the state set-up, is articulated on two distinct levels, which may be identified with the two categories of big and minor politics ('grande e piccola politica'):

Big politics and minor politics. Big politics encompasses issues related to the founding of new states and to the struggle for the defense and preservation of a given socio-political structure. Minor politics concerns quotidian, partisan issues that arise among various factions of the same political class. Big politics, then, entails the effort to keep big politics itself out of the domain of the life of the state and to reduce everything to minor politics. By contrast, it is amateurish to raise issues in such a way as to make of every element of minor politics an inevitable question of big politics – that is, a question that brings into play the reorganization of the state. International politics reflects both forms: (1) big politics for questions pertaining to the relative structure of individual states in their reciprocal relations; (2) minor politics for small diplomatic issues within a structure that is already firmly established.<sup>20</sup>

This detailed distinction contains within itself the essential and perfectly constructed lines of a United States political culture, which has developed in the alternations of minor and big politics both on the domestic front and on the international one. In other words, Gramsci 'sees' an alternation of hegemony and consent which he then underlines in Notebook 13:

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<sup>19</sup> Fontana 2009, cit., p. 90.

<sup>20</sup> Q8 (miscellaneous section), §48, *Machiavelli. Il Moderno Principe*, p. 970; in English *Prison Notebooks* Vol. 3, ed. and trans. J. A. Buttigieg, New York, Columbia University Press, 2007, p. 264.

Machiavelli examines in particular the questions of big politics; the creations of new states, the conservation and defence of organic structures as a whole; questions of dictatorship and hegemony on a wide scale, that is over the entire area of the state. Russo, in his *Prolegomeni*, makes *The Prince* into Machiavelli's treatise on dictatorship (moment of authority and of the individual), and *The Discourses* into his treatise on hegemony (moment of the universal and of liberty). Russo's observation is correct, although there are allusions to the moment of hegemony or consent in *The Prince* too, beside those to authority or force. Similarly, the observation is correct that there is no opposition in principle between *Principato* and republic; what is involved is rather the hypostasis of the two moments of authority and of universality (Q13§5, p. 1564; partial translation in *SPN*, p. 125, note 3, here extended).

For Gramsci 'there can be no doubt that [international relations] follow' (Q13§2, p. 1562, *SPN*, p. 176) the fundamental social relations, and the set-up that defines them in the United States stems directly from Madison's schema. The equilibrium between principate and republic, between economic necessities and the extension of an alliance going beyond the circle of corporativism marks a highpoint of his analysis, taking on an anthropological depth:

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 group, 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 super-structures; it is the phase in which previously germinated ideologies become "party" (Q13§17, p. 1584: *Analysis of situations: relations of force*, *SPN*, p. 181.<sup>21</sup>

That moment, or phase, is programmatically and systematically outside the range for the United States political system.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> The *SPN* translation reads 'economic class'; we here reinstate Gramsci's 'economic group'.

<sup>22</sup> This is indirectly demonstrated in two books which have had a profound echo on the American political scene, *A Promised Land* by Barack Obama, and *Trust* by Pete Buttigieg, both of which were published in 2020 at the height of the pandemic crisis. Both the ex-President and the brilliant democratic candidate, son of the great Joe Buttigieg, have a solid schooling as left liberals, and are well aware of the limits of the system of government and the social problems that wrack twenty-first century America, but neither of them, in their respective texts, criticizes or proposes a reform of the system, well knowing that in this sense it would compromise their careers.

More than a preamble this is a conclusion which underscores the intrinsic limits of the North American political experience within its legislative limits, a determinate element even for conditioning Stars-and-Stripes Gramscian studies in the course of the twenty-first century.

Here we at least partially repeat a balance sheet which had already been drawn up in 2009 by Benedetto Fontana:

Discussions of Gramsci in the United States tend to accentuate the elements of consent, persuasion, and opinion formation while de-emphasizing elements such as force, coercion, violence and domination. Because the former are located within civil society much time and space are devoted to expounding the various groups, institutions and organization that together constitute this type of society.<sup>23</sup>

According to many commentators, this politics – centred on ‘civil society’ – gives precedence to culture at the expense of what is currently associated with the juxtaposition and confrontation between rival political forces, at the level of the ability of a group or a party to prevail. By removing the essence of Gramsci and highlighting traits that more properly belong to the tradition and thought of social democracy,<sup>24</sup> the tetragonal system elaborated by Madison risks no damage.

On this point the hypothesis suggested in this brief introduction coincides with Michael Denning’s diagnosis of the *effective* reception of Gramsci in the United States:

the cluster of concerns that had so moved the New Lefts to which Gramsci’s notes spoke – the role of culture and ideology, the state apparatuses of education and mass communication, the peculiarities of the national-popular – seemed to vanish into thin air, as globalization, the movements of capital and fundamentalisms of the market, the intricacies of debt, finance, and the international division of labor took center stage. The very specificity of Hall’s conjunctural analysis came to seem a limitation.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Fontana, 2009, cit., p. 95.

<sup>24</sup> ‘The global (mis-)fortunes of this culturalist Gramsci are undoubtedly tied to the name of Norberto Bobbio. On several occasions, Bobbio insisted on the idea that “Gramsci expounds a frankly idealistic interpretation of Marxism”’: Roberto Dainotto, *Introduction*, in Dainotto e Jameson, 2020, cit., p. 7.

<sup>25</sup> Michael Denning, *Why No Gramsci in the United States?* In Dainotto e Jameson, 2020, cit., p. 162.

Michael Denning's detailed chronology reviews the various periods of the radical movement and sensitivity towards Gramsci, from the first artisan publications of a number of his writings by the Trotskyist communities in New York to the unexpected fame of the Talk Shows, in which Gramsci became the bogey-man of the post-Reagan Right thanks to the heart-rending appeals against him made by the Republican Rush Limbaugh.

On the whole, over the course of the decades there have been many references to Gramsci, there have been many quotations from his writings, but fundamentally much noise has given rise to (relatively) little in political terms, with the exception of a number of discerning and talented precursors, amongst whom Eugene D. Genovese stands out for the slave system-capitalism connection, and Stuart Hall for his Gramsci-inspired studies on Margaret Thatcher, which clarified to the Americans the significance and historical importance of Reagan.

Thanks to these two intellectuals the media have given accounts of Gramsci at a high level of popularization and, at the same time, in more recent times the media together with the social networks have promoted a shared and felt rethink at the grass-roots level about the deep-seated reasons for the Civil War and, more in general, for the race question, which has never been at the centre of a bitter public debate as it has been over the last few years.

Denning's message is clear: it is high time for Gramscian philology to undertake its Hard Road to Renewal, in the wake of Hall's famous self-criticism, understood as a common sharing of and accessibility to data, an untiring dialectic with a public part of whom are non-specialists and a super-national visibility. From this stance, and from many directions, a Gramscianism of an ecological nature has come forward in America, one that is highly attentive to the local scene and is also characterized by solid socio-economic bases.

Gramsci, while writing about laissez-faire economics, pointed out that liberal economists adhere to the separation between state activity and civil society institutions, including the market economy. He suggested this was not an organic distinction, but rather a methodological separation that disguises the role civil society plays in consolidating the state's regulatory legitimacy.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Harold Perkins, *Gramsci in Green: Neoliberal Hegemony through Urban Forestry and the Potential for a Political Ecology of Praxis*, in 'Geoforum', 42, 2011, p. 564.

Since in Marxist circles too ‘the separation and hierarchical asymmetry between the human and the natural have long contributed to the removal of the nature of the horizon of involvement and of politico-social thought’,<sup>27</sup> I would argue that one may single out in one shared chronotype the deep sense of two important studies that in giving them a direction have characterized the united States panorama of Gramsci studies over the last few years. I am here referring to Kate Crehan’s *Gramsci’s Common Sense. Inequality and Its Narratives*<sup>28</sup> and to the long-awaited critical edition of Notebook 25 on the subaltern social groups,<sup>29</sup> edited by Marcus Green and completed on the basis of Joe Buttigieg’s translation. For both these volumes it is worthwhile quoting Kate Crehan’s statement regarding the – highly reassessed – concept of class:

one of the forms class assumes is particular worldviews. As human beings, we make sense of our lives through the narrative our particular time and place have made available to us – accounts of ‘how things are’ with deep but never simple roots in the fundamental social relations of the world we inhabit. We may challenge or even reject those narratives, but the webs of intelligibility in which our socialization wraps up from the day of our birth are a reality from which we all begin; we are all, to some degree, creatures of popular opinion.<sup>30</sup>

Beyond national research confines, Kate Crehan, in turning to the Anglophone world, activates a research praxis that has deep-rooted origins in Cultural Studies, but at the same time opens up to the decisive perspective of activating Gramscian big politics.

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<sup>27</sup> Niccolò Scaffai, *Letteratura e ecologia. Forme e temi di una relazione narrativa (Literature and Ecology. Forms and Subjects of a Narrative Relationship)*, Roma, Carocci, 2017.

<sup>28</sup> Kate Crehan, *Gramsci’s Common Sense. Inequality and Its Narratives*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2016.

<sup>29</sup> Marcus Green e Joseph A. Buttigieg (eds.), *Subaltern Social Groups. A Critical Edition of Prison Notebook 25*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2021.

<sup>30</sup> Crehan, 2016, p. XI.