



Antonio Gramsci

Subaltern Social Groups: A Critical Edition of Prison Notebooks 25

Joseph A. Buttigieg, and Marcus E. Green (eds. and trans.),
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About the reviewer

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“To a social elite, the components of subaltern groups always have something barbaric and pathological about them” (3)

“*Siamo tutti Gramsciani!* We are all Gramscians!”

The emphatic answer of a middle-aged woman working in a bar in the charming Sardinian town of Ales, Italy, to the question whether or not Antonio Gramsci continued to be remembered and appreciated in his place of birth, left me first and foremost very elated. I was genuinely happy and relieved to hear that, given the current Italian political climate, increasingly dominated by the unashamedly fascist far-right, Gramsci’s legacy was still proudly and openly – how much longer? – affirmed. Continuing my walk through town in search of the nearby Gramsci mural depicting the famous hedgehog story from his 1932 letter to his son Delio and then on to the adjacent Gramsci monument created by avant-garde sculptor Giò Pomodoro to commemorate the 40th anniversary of Gramsci’s death at the hands of his forever foe Mussolini, I was wondering whether Gramsci’s ongoing, deeply affective appeal among Italy’s popular classes can be said to apply to the more disembodied universe – or shall we dare to say industry? – of the seemingly ever-expanding field of Gramsci studies with its incessant, often wonderfully argued but at times rather overintellectualized engagement vis-a-vis Gramsci’s life, concepts and theories. In other words, did we all become Gramscian and if yes, is to be Gramscian the same independent of whether one belongs to the so-called “simple” (62) or “humble” (68-69) people or whether one is a member of an intellectual and social elite, whose relations are so often marked by “sentimental detachment” (116) and a “feeling of [the latter’s] undisputed superiority” (69)?

Granted, the answer to the question whether we are all Gramscian may not be of any larger practical relevance. The same cannot be said, however, about the relationship between what Gramsci called the 'subaltern social groups and classes' and the intellectuals, which, 85 years after Gramsci's death/murder by the fascists, continues to be one of the most pressing contradictions informing and all too often hampering left struggles across the planet. Gramsci's 1934 (Special) Notebook 25 "On the Margins of History: The History of Subaltern Groups" (*Ai margini della storia. Storia dei gruppi sociali subalterni*), translated and edited by the late Joseph A. Buttigieg and Marcus E. Green, offers an in-depth opportunity to further the investigation of this relationship through the lens of Gramsci's practical and theoretical solidarity with the subaltern and their relation to history, education, ideology, folklore, popular science (or common sense), spontaneity, religion, the national-popular, the state and yes, intellectuals.

Gramsci's reflections begin with the historical analysis of subaltern groups who are "subject to the initiative of the dominant class[es]" (20) because of their religion, race, sex (what Gramsci calls 'masculinism') class position, etc. This is analysed, first, in the classical and medieval period (e.g., the Spartacus Revolt, the Ciompi uprising) and eventually arrive at early 19th century (e.g., Jurisdavidic Christians, the bands of Benevento) and finally modern subaltern groups (the up and coming Italian bourgeoisie of the Risorgimento, the industrial proletariat): a journey from autonomy in the form of a "separate life, [and] their own institutions" to the "subordination to the active hegemony of the ruling and dominant groups", albeit with the birth of new types of relative autonomy such as "parties, trade unions and cultural associations", to the total subjugation to an authoritarian and totalitarian state that abolishes all forms of autonomy and legally centralizes the entire life of the nation in the hands of the dominant class (9-10).

The proof of what Gramsci is trying to say in 1934 about the abolishment of autonomies under the legal processes of a state in an authoritarian or totalitarian form can easily be found in contemporary authoritarian countries such as, for example, Turkey. After the thwarted *coup d'état* in 2016, many civil society organizations were closed and individuals and groups from nearly all social strata, including members of political opposition parties, workers, students, lawyers, women rights defenders and LGBTIQ+ people, have been systematically prevented from exercising their freedom to assemble and demonstrate following bans and effective interventions by the police. The same is true of other countries across the globe.

Increasing repression notwithstanding, in recent years, subaltern protests and uprisings have taken place in different parts of the world against these

authoritarian regimes. In this regard, applying a Gramscian lens to our analysis of these mass uprisings may be useful, for instance his reflections on spontaneity. Gramsci defines “spontaneity” as a “multifaceted phenomenon”, “characteristic of the ‘history of subaltern classes’ and, especially, of the most marginal and peripheral elements of these classes who have not attained a consciousness of the class per se and who, consequently, do not even suspect that their history might possibly have any importance [...] to leave documentary evidence of it”. Important to mention that Gramsci affirms that “‘pure’ spontaneity does not exist in history”, and that “every spontaneous movement” has at least a “rudimentary element of conscious leadership” (32-33). Furthermore, Gramsci states that in these movements there is a “multiplicity of elements of conscious leadership but none of them predominates” (33). Returning to the case of Turkey, the 2013 Gezi Park Protest in Istanbul may be considered one such spontaneous subaltern movement. Analysing Gezi in terms of Gramsci’s understanding of subaltern groups, one could find in this particular scenario a number of different such groups – feminist collectives, members of the Kurdish resistance, Kemalist supporters, gay activists, homeless youth, among others – all of whom had their own “elements of conscious leadership” that help them “suspect that their history might possibly have importance” (32). Then again, one may argue that the beautiful diversity in the park was unable to transform itself into a united and organic bloc of different subaltern people and demands capable of “real political action”, eventually resembling a “mere adventure by groups that appeal to the masses” (34).

Following Marx, Gramsci emphasizes the historical capacity of subaltern social classes and groups to *change* and *transform* society into a just one. In this regard, Gramsci indicates how subaltern groups who are “historically most passive” can over time become the most active and decisive force: “History is a continuous struggle by individuals or groups to change society, but in order to succeed, such individual and groups must consider themselves superior to society, educators of society, etc” (60). In other words, when subaltern groups consider themselves as subjects of their own destiny they can begin to transform an unjust society into a just one, and in the process transform themselves from being passive objects of other groups’ initiatives to becoming active protagonists of their lives, politics and history. This is what Gramsci calls the ‘philosophy of praxis’.

Differentiating philosophy of praxis from vulgar materialism, “the philosophy of praxis is itself a superstructure, the terrain on which certain social groups become conscious of their own social being, their own strength, their own tasks, their own becoming” (70). What differentiates philosophy of praxis from other, including liberal and fascist, ideologies is that the latter are “nonorganic

creations” because they are ultimately created to merely “reconcile opposed and contradictory interests” (70) instead of overcoming them. What Gramsci wants to say here, I think, is that in “nonorganic creations” there is a deliberate gap between lofty theory and inhumane praxis since there is not a real desire or will to change existing precarious situations, that is, these ideologies are deceptive and illusionary – and when exposed and challenged – repressive in nature. Erdogan’s ‘new Turkey’ is a case in point. Hence, philosophy of praxis can never serve governments to help the dominant classes to keep the “humble” within the limits of common sense, obtain their consent, and thereby exercise power over them. Instead, philosophy of praxis is meant to lead subaltern groups to a “higher conception of life” and “to construct an intellectual-moral bloc that would make politically possible the intellectual progress of the mass” (81). “[It] is the expression of these subaltern classes who want to educate themselves in the art of government and who have an interest in knowing all truths, including unpleasant ones, and avoiding the (impossible) deceits of the upper class and, even more, their own” (70). Philosophy of praxis thus allows subaltern groups to approach critically their previous mode(s) of thinking, i.e., it is “first and foremost” “a critique of ‘common sense’” (79).

This critique of common sense, however, must occur “only after it has based itself on common sense in order to show that ‘everyone’ is a philosopher, and that the point is not to introduce a totally new form of knowledge into ‘everyone’s’ individual life but to revitalize an already existing activity and make it ‘critical’” (63). For Gramsci, the critique of common sense by philosophy of praxis means to make everybody a philosopher who can help “define the new problems of the present time” (63) and even “bring into being new modes of thought” (Gramsci 1992: 9). In this regard, philosophy of praxis must also be viewed as a critique of the philosophy of the intellectuals. Returning one last time to my home country Turkey, the Turkish Left has in modern times been condescendingly good at criticizing common sense, but have failed to criticize existing (Kemalist) philosophy beyond a critique of the capitalist mode of production, ignoring key social and cultural issues such as the Kurdish question.

In conclusion, this book is important both because of its content as well as its format/presentation. Content-wise, Gramsci’s meditations can help us to better analyse concrete historic and contemporary political, ‘organic’ crises and the various ways subaltern groups have responded and may still respond to different kinds of repression. What is more, Gramsci’s unshakable faith in the power of subaltern groups to transform them/ourselves from “a thing” to a “historical person”, “an active agent” (61) who ‘abolishes the present state of things’ (*The German Ideology*) serves as a strong reminder to all of us to “patiently persevere”

and harness our “formidable force” to finally create our own just society (61).
Optimism of the will.

In terms of format, first a word of caution is due. As indicated above, I consider this collection of Gramsci’s writings to be an invaluable contribution to a whole series of conceptual and practical concerns. However, reading an individual notebook such as this one and/or focusing exclusively on Gramsci’s complex use of one particular concept, no matter how well annotated it may be, runs the risk of overlooking and in the worst case underestimating and thereby weakening the totality and power of Gramsci’s theories and analyses. Having said that, one of the important aspects of this book is precisely the editors’ inclusion of detailed endnotes and additional materials that “illustrate how Gramsci worked – how he recorded, organized and revised his ideas” (X). In addition, Buttigieg and Green have done a great job to give full quotations and references to many of the texts by Marx and Engels Gramsci sometimes only touched upon in his reflections. This helps the reader understand more fully what Gramsci might have wanted to say. And perhaps most importantly, it re-affirms the deeply Marxian nature of Gramsci’s thinking, which has in recent times been repeatedly questioned, ignored, invisibilized and misappropriated by liberal intellectuals. These intellectuals are intent on creating the image of a deradicalized and domesticated Gramsci without Gramsci, i.e. a Gramsci without Marx, without Revolution and without Socialism.

Fortunately, the many “humble” people I met on my trip to Sardinia disagree with this self-serving misrepresentation. They know and remember where Gramsci stood and will always stand, together with the subaltern social groups and classes of the world. In this sense, given the ever-deteriorating state of our “great and terrible and complicated world” (Gramsci 1965: 437), Antonio Gramsci – his writings, personal courage, his strong heart and mind – unquestionably continues to be a fundamental source and inspiration for our comprehension of this world and the numerous popular struggles for individual and collective emancipation. Or in the words of an elderly man sipping a late afternoon beer in Gramsci’s childhood town of Ghilarza, *Forza Gramsci!*

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