

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

Michael Ekers, Gillian Hart, Stefan Kipfer and Alex Loftus (eds), *Gramsci: Space, Nature, Politics*, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012. ISBN: 978-1-4443-3970-3 (paper); ISBN: 978-1-4443-3971-0 (cloth); ISBN: 978-1-118-29560-1 (ebook)

Gramsci is less present in geography than many other fields in the humanities and social sciences. Indeed, a search of GEOBASE and Web of Science shows that, compared with other disciplines (especially in cultural studies, political theory and social analysis), references to the Italian by geographers were rare until recently and mostly invoke his concept of hegemony. Furthermore, this notion was usually not elaborated directly from Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* or located within his broader theoretical and political approach but cited at second-hand, especially from Stuart Hall's more culturalist reading and, less often, Raymond Williams' cultural materialism and John Berger's Marxist humanism. This illustrates Perry Anderson's (1976) remark that the spread of Gramsci's renown is not matched by any corresponding depth of inquiry into his work; and the pithier comment attributed to Michel Foucault, that, of all social theorists, Gramsci is among the most cited but least read (see Buttigieg 1992). In contrast, this edited collection is a beacon of critical engagement with Gramsci's philosophical and theoretical work and his political practice. This could be expected from the co-editors, each of whom has already critically appropriated and applied Gramsci's ideas, and they have now added 12 impressive contributors to their number. All show direct knowledge of Gramsci's analyses; creatively explore the interconnections among diverse concepts (hegemony, state, civil society, passive revolution, common sense, conceptions of the world, subaltern classes, alliances, historical bloc, Fordism, nature, second nature, and so on); assess their relevance to issues in critical geography, political ecology and political economy; and contrast the potential of Gramscian analyses with the limits of alternative approaches.

Antipode

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Despite claims to the contrary, Gramsci did not ignore geography or regard it as irrelevant to his distinctive ‘philosophy of praxis’. He studied geography and its implications, taught it in prison, and took spatial issues seriously in his philological, economic, political, socio-cultural and philosophical analyses. Indeed, Gramsci’s project makes spatiality central to his arguments and he developed some key insights into this dimension of social relations. This is a key theme in the long introduction by Ekers and Loftus, in which they argue that space, nature and politics are foundational, interrelated moments of Gramsci’s philosophy of praxis, form part of his dialectical approach, shape his analysis of the spatio-temporal specificities of historical periods, political conjunctures and the balance of forces, and guide his committed, reflexive approach to the radical, transformative politics. They add that concepts and categories drawn from his work can provide important critical tools and strategic insights for struggles over the environment and issues in political ecology more generally.

This important collection begins with two brief ‘framings’: one from the editors, on the Sardinian background to Gramsci’s personal, intellectual and political development; the other by John Berger, about the Sardinian landscape in which Gramsci grew up. Ekers and Loftus then introduce the importance of space, nature and politics to Gramsci’s theoretical studies and political practice, provide brief but careful summaries of the individual chapters, and note their points of agreement and (occasional) disagreement as well as their interconnections. The three terms in the sub-title also inform the rather artificial division of the collection into three parts, somewhat undermining the claim about their interconnectedness despite the cross-cutting, interlinked nature of all chapters.

Part I addresses space. Adam David Morton, a leading contemporary Gramscian scholar, emphasizes the spatiality of passive revolution (one of his long-standing interests in Gramsci’s work) and argues that spatiality is not just a source of metaphors but also a real force that shapes political struggles through uneven development and its impact on the scope

Antipode

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for alliances. David Featherstone covers much ground (no pun intended) in exploring the geographical aspects of Gramsci's reflections on the Southern Question (in part to critique the geographically insensitive interpretation of this text offered by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, who mistakenly claim that Gramsci viewed alliances as forged mechanically among pre-given classes with fixed identities and interests). He also explores Gramsci's views on cosmopolitan and internationalist solidarities, taking the Scots communist, translator of Gramsci's prison letters, and political activist, Hamish Henderson, as an exemplar in this regard. Stefan Kipfer contrasts Gramsci's 'spatial historicism' favourably to other forms of historicism and summarizes Gramsci's views on the historical development of Italian cities. But he also emphasizes the limits of the Italian's account of tension between countryside and city, the potential for communism to overcome this tension, and the relation between urbanity and rurality as moments of struggle in Italian politics and, more recently, the Arab Spring. Geoff Mann then reflects on the importance of money in mediating the political sphere and civil society and laments Gramsci's underdeveloped account of money compared to Hobbes and Hegel – and, one might add, Marx in *Capital* and elsewhere.

Part II includes a philological essay by Benedetto Fontana, another well-known Gramsci scholar, on the concept of nature in Gramsci, his treatment of 'man' as an ensemble of social relations and conditions of life, and its relation to ecology, politics and hegemony. Abdurazack Karriem draws on Gramscian insights to analyse the spatial and political strategies employed by the landless peasants' movement in Brazil and the mutual interaction of their ecological and political practices in moving from an economic-corporate consciousness to more revolutionary actions. Joel Wainwright reconstructs Gramsci's concept, deployed across many fields of analysis, of conceptions of the world and shows its relation to a Marx-inspired concept of nature that differs from Engels' dialectics of nature. Alex Loftus builds on Fontana by showing the nuanced character of Gramsci's concept of nature, with its dialectical transcendence of a crude nature-society opposition that bears on

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

ideology and common sense. He then explores its implications for how to make agrarian reform in the countryside, win it in cities and suggests how these ideas can be scaled up to political ecology. Nicola Short interrogates Gramsci's discussion of racialized and gendered difference in his remarks on the Southern Question and the sexual question respectively and shows the links between the ideational/subjective and structural/material moments of the political practice. Michael Ekers explores how Gramsci denaturalizes sexual identity and conduct (whilst retaining heteronormative assumptions) and critically examines the imbrication of sexuality and capitalism. Critiquing and supplementing this analysis, Ekers then emphasizes the need to integrate queer theory and to take desire seriously in studying the erotics of labour.

Part III begins with Jim Glassman's use of Gramsci's notes on Americanism and Fordism to explain the developmental dialectics of resistance rooted in the contradictions of uneven social development. Sketching some micro-histories of the Maoist rebellion in Nepal, Vinay Gidwani and Dinesh Paudel interpret them in the light of Gramsci's insistence that the study of subaltern movements must embrace a whole cycle of rebellion to see how revolutionary common sense is forged in the face of repression, fragmentation and defeat, and eventually triumphs. India illustrates Judith Whitehead's account of accumulation through dispossession and/or growth, their roles in class differentiation, and the scope for Gandhian ecosocialism and Maoism as alternative subaltern movements. Gillian Hart builds on her earlier analyses to examine the changing articulation of populism and nationalism in post-Apartheid South Africa, criticizes Laclau's recent psychoanalytic turn as a backward step in the analysis of populist reason, and suggests that Gramsci's remarks on how language, spontaneous grammar and the politics of translation can illuminate the tensions and potential for violence in the current conjuncture. The volume ends with critical comments by Kipfer and Hart on the turn to a purely speculative, declarative politics and the need to extend

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

Gramsci's emphasis on the spatial and temporal character of the politics of translation to develop a critique of political ecology.

As can be inferred from my opening remarks, my brief comments on the overall purpose of this collection, and my even briefer comments on individual chapters, this is an important contribution to the urgent critical work of recovering, appropriating and recontextualizing Gramsci's concepts, methods and analyses, and, above all, 'translating' them for the current conjuncture, in which issues of political ecology as well as political economy are ever more critical to human flourishing.

References

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