

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

Peter Mayo, *Hegemony and Education Under Neoliberalism: Insights from Gramsci*, New York: Routledge, 2015. ISBN: 9780415812276 (cloth)

In his new book *Hegemony and Education Under Neoliberalism: Insights from Gramsci*, Peter Mayo pays tribute to the educational influence of Antonio Gramsci, considered one of the greatest social thinkers and political theorists of the 20th century. Here, Mayo presents sound social theory, broad application and reinvention of Gramsci's ideas on hegemony, schooling and education under the mantle of neoliberalism.

Historically, Gramsci represented a break with traditional Marxian thought in which revolutionary change needed to occur through militant action, such as the seizure of the state and control from the top. Gramsci grounded his Marxism in the “lived experience” of subaltern classes, a spontaneous “common sense” out of which emerges a “good sense” that grasps the totality and its transformative potentialities (Burawoy 2012). For Gramsci, organic intellectuals, through their close connection to a revolutionary class, elaborate the “good sense” out of the “common sense”. Traditional intellectuals, on the other hand, think of themselves as autonomous and above classes, serving to stultify the good sense of the revolutionary class. Here Gramsci seeks a common sense vehicle that will serve the working class as the state serves the dominant classes.

For Gramsci, schooling and education, broadly-conceived, are deeply implicated in forging “common sense”, producing knowledge in the interest of ruling groups or producing a counter-knowledge and a different common sense that represents the interests and perspectives of workers and other subordinate groups. Consequently, Gramsci has been an inspiration to critical educators as he offers a view in which change is possible from below through educational

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work—the making of a new common sense, the project of building a new hegemony and the necessary work against the traditional intellectuals whose knowledge making activity represents the interests of capitalists. Like Paulo Freire, Gramsci’s view coheres with recognition of the necessity of transforming consciousness, not merely of seizing the instruments of social control. Gramsci (1971:340) writes that:

The struggle for hegemony is that of the education of one’s own forces. For the war of position it is not possible to rely solely on the mobilisation of the mass of workers behind immediate demands and slogans. Rather they have to be won over at the basic level of their world-view and welded into a “permanently organized and long prepared force which can be put into the field at the favourable moment”. To do this the party must ... work incessantly to raise the intellectual level of ever-growing strata of the populace.

Unfortunately for Gramsci and his party, at that time, this strategy was not strong enough to fend off the impending fascist state.

Yet, Gramsci’s ideas continue to resonate with scholars and educational philosophers in response to the onslaught of neoliberalism. Since the 1970’s, a number of critical educators, writing on the interrelationships among education, culture and contested publics, have appropriated Gramsci to put forward a vision for teachers to become transformative intellectuals (Giroux 1999), to recognize the politics of the curriculum as implicated in the struggle for civil society (Apple 2003), and to challenge how neoliberal and neoconservative ideologies, policies, and political projects inform the changing nature of educational privatization efforts by the Right (Saltman 2000). Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser’s (1970) scholarship on the educational

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dimensions of control through repression and the making of consent drew heavily on Gramsci. Yet one of the reasons that Gramsci remains so significant for the educational Left is that, unlike Althusser, Gramsci emphasizes the extent to which hegemonic power is always fragile—it is always held tentatively and always requires educational work. The work that teachers and other cultural workers do is always political in that it produces knowledge and ways of seeing that represent the material and symbolic interests of particular groups of people.

According to Henry Giroux (2002), Antonio Gramsci refused to separate culture from systemic relations of power, or politics from the production of knowledge and identities. Gramsci redefined how politics bore upon everyday life through the force of its pedagogical practices, relations, and discourses. As a result, Gramsci's work provides an important political corrective to those social theories that fail to acknowledge the pedagogical work at the core of politics in shaping and articulating the divide between diverse institutional and cultural formations. Gramsci's social theory expands the meaning of the political by being self-conscious about the way pedagogy works through its own cultural practices in order to legitimate its own motivating questions, secure particular modes of authority, and privilege particular "institutional frameworks and disciplinary rules by which its research imperatives are formed" (Frow and Morris 1993:xviii, quoted in Giroux 2002:42). For that reason, Gramsci remains a crucial corrective to both economistic Marxism and the resurgence it has seen in education as well as economistic neoliberal ideology.

Neoliberalism is of course not merely an economic program but a culture and body of knowledge. Actually, Jamie Peck (2013) contends rightly that neoliberalism is more of a "rascal concept" that has multiple and varied mongrel formations. So, for neoliberalism(s) to succeed requires not merely the economic dictates of banks but the educational work that teaches people

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to accept the framing assumptions that make possible consent to its financial violence: people are economic beings, society is a shark tank, debt is necessary, the public sector must be privatized, students are consumers, schools are businesses, and so on. Bringing Gramscian insights to bear on neoliberalism could not be a more important task at the present conjuncture.

Mayo fittingly argues that Gramsci is an antidote to neoliberalism. He contends that Gramsci is a key figure “with whom to think” and engage in “conversation” with respect to educational insights that collectively can serve as a remedy to prevailing hegemonic neoliberal discourses. Drawing on original sources, Mayo writes about Gramsci in the context of education, language, history, geographical locations, community education, and social work education. The book consists of ten chapters—some republished; others new—written by Mayo over his 25 years of bringing Gramsci to bear on public problems. The book also marks the culmination of both a personal and scholarly journey, as Mayo writes that:

Gramsci’s analyses of the Southern Question resonates personally with the place where I was born, bred and still live. It is as if Gramsci is speaking to my context which was historically, despite British colonialism from 1800-1964 and beyond, very much a cultural extension to Italy’s South, with the same type of pre-industrial mercantile context in which high status power lay with priests, notaries, lawyers, doctors, the petty bourgeoisie, high level civil servants and to a much less extent teachers. Traditional intellectuals held sway, cementing the power bloc, which was traditionally an agrarian bloc. British imperialism ruptured this to a certain extent, being, in relative terms, a modernizing force. It trained its own alternative elite and this is where the emerging class of civil service administration emerged. So Gramsci’s “Southern Question” enabled me to

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derive the conceptual tools to articulate the situation concerning my own country and what is happening to the wider Southern European/Mediterranean area.

The book begins with an introduction to Gramsci, underlining his relevance for discussions concerning hegemonic neoliberalism and its impact on education. Next, Mayo provides us with an overview of the literature on Gramsci and education, followed, in another chapter, by an exposition and discussion of the broader context of Gramsci's writings on the importance of education. Mayo further explicates Gramsci's conception of the state comprising both civil and political society, arguing that Gramsci conceptually separates the two only for heuristic purposes.

This chapter is followed by a discussion of Gramsci himself as an adult educator. Mayo stipulates that adult education is conceived here in its broadest possible sense and relates initiatives to Gramsci's conceptualizations of the state in its repressive, ideological and relational aspects. Mayo then expands this discussion on adult education by providing a 1990s case study utilizing a Gramscian analysis of an "on the ground" adult education/workers' education project at a particular time and in a specific context in his home country. Mayo argues that this shows how Gramsci's ideas can be used as part of a theoretical framework for qualitative analysis while providing an empirical dimension to an otherwise predominantly theoretical discussion.

The next chapter highlights Gramsci ideas about schooling as evidenced in his *Prison Notebooks* IV and XII, which led to a series of debates and controversies (Entwistle, 1979). Mayo insists on the importance of Gramsci's conceptualization of education, claiming that it is often overlooked in discussions concerning alternative and "emancipatory" education. He then moves to a discussion of Gramsci's writing around the issue of the "Southern Question". Mayo gives this aspect of Gramsci's writing a contemporary relevance. In this chapter, he illuminates

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key issues concerning the South in the context of neoliberal globalization—issues of colonial legacies, industrial underdevelopment, and the shifting and dislocation of Southern populations to suit neoliberal capitalist ends. Mayo also discusses some specific educational strategies, inspired by Gramsci’s writings, to combat the levels of exploitation involved in the Southern Question.

The book finishes by exploring Gramsci’s legacy, and discusses his influence on recent and current education scholars such as Paulo Freire, Henry Giroux, Michel Apple, and others. These last two chapters compare and synthesize ideas by Gramsci and Freire as well as some of most heralded critical pedagogues of the late 20th century. He juxtaposes Gramsci’s ideas on education against those of important critical pedagogues who are often drawn upon in critiques of neoliberal education and who write about neoliberalism itself, some in book-length studies (e.g. Giroux 2004). This is followed by a discussion of the impact of Antonio Gramsci on the larger body of critical pedagogy, and nuanced discussions on hegemony and education under neoliberalism.

The present neoliberal restructuring and pro-market reforms reshaping life, politics, economy—a radical reordering of persons, politics, praxis, and education—reminds me of the total restructuring of New Orleans schools ten years ago. This disaster demonstrated how painstaking pedagogical work prior to Katrina prepared the way for making neoliberal use of the disaster to privatize schools through chartering and vouchers; dismantle the teachers union; and restructure/close public schools (over 7,000). In New Orleans, people had to be educated into a project of human dispossession (Saltman 2007); the project was accomplished not just through force, but required the work of traditional intellectuals that linked together disaster and neoliberal privatization. Education scholars draw on Gramsci’s theory of good sense in the ideological

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construction of hegemonic social alliances to provide insights to reframe the struggle to defend public education by drawing on the real concerns of parents who ally themselves with education markets (Lipman, 2011; Pedroni, 2007). Likewise, drawing on Gramsci's concepts of hegemony and common sense, Apple (2013: 227) comments that:

For dominant groups to exercise leadership, large numbers of people must be convinced that the maps of reality circulated by those with the most economic, political, and cultural power are indeed wiser than other alternatives. Dominant groups do this by attaching these maps to the elements of good sense that people have and by changing the very meaning of the key concepts and their accompanying structures of feeling that provide the centers of gravity for our hopes

Finally, Mayo leads the reader to reconsider the political tasks for educators and cultural workers in the neoliberal era. The greatest praise that I can give to Mayo's collection is that it opened up questions for me; I found myself inspired to ask questions upon closing the book, including: What does it mean as an educator to be a "Gramscian permanent persuader" working for a new hegemony in the age of new media in which all are induced to permanently self-promote? How in the era of standardized testing, escalating corporeal control, and the standardization of knowledge and curriculum, can the school be expanded as a site and stake of struggle and the teacher become a transformative intellectual? How does the educator compete as a maker of a better common sense with massive multinational media corporations and work as a producer of knowledge and identity positions?

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In conclusion, Peter Mayo has written a book that will appeal to both experts on Gramsci and those newly interested in his work and education. Gramscian scholar Joseph Buttigieg (2015), writes in his preface that Mayo's book provides a "rich elaboration of ... [Gramsci's] early views on education as the acquisition of critical awareness and as the *sine qua non* in any effective political struggle for equality within a democratic society" (p.xii). For those new to Gramsci, the book offers pointed discussions on Gramsci's life, thought, and legacy regarding education. To those familiar with Gramsci's work, the book offers a well-written account his work on education and schooling and applies a Gramscian approach to contemporary issues. Thus, the book offers a basis for those wanting to engage with Gramsci's concepts and methods as tools to make sense of the impact of neoliberalism on education and the world.

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Sheila Macrine
School of Education

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University of Massachusetts Dartmouth

smacrine@umassd.edu

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