

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

**Kate Crehan**, *Gramsci's Common Sense: Inequality and Its Narratives*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2016. ISBN: 978-0-8223-6219-7 (cloth); ISBN: 978-0-8223-6239-5 (paper)

Kate Crehan's new book on Antonio Gramsci's work is an astute and accessible text that attempts to connect his ideas to current events in the United States. Staying true to the Gramscian spirit, Crehan spends the first four chapters contextualizing both his life and his work in order to show how his ideas evolved. Crehan then spends several chapters showing why these ideas remain useful in today's world; as Gramsci would have wanted, knowledge should be used for social change, not for the sake of knowing alone. What is most striking about the book is the lucid and engaging way in which Crehan writes. The reader is drawn into a world of Gramscian ideas, and is taken from a discussion on specific notes in the *Prison Notebooks* to events happening in 2016 in a matter of sentences. This text is refreshing amongst the ever-widening pool of Gramscian work precisely because it is both engaging to read and because it brings Gramsci to life today by bringing his ideas into conversation with current events.

So what are the core ideas Crehan tackles with regards to Gramsci? Culture is certainly the thread tying much of this book together, and because of that organic intellectuals emerge as the main actors. How does social change come about? How is hegemony constructed and dismantled? What is the relationship between the masses and intellectuals? This book argues that inequality is more than just a quantitative difference between one person and another. Inequality is much broader and much deeper; it is both economic and cultural. The book looks at the origins of narratives that explain why specific inequalities are inevitable, necessary, beneficial, unjust, and so on, in an attempt to show how hegemony is very much cultural as well as economic. It is "common sense" that provides the ideological power needed by the ruling class to dominate society.

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Crehan begins the book by juxtaposing some of Gramsci's ideas alongside those of prominent intellectuals such as Michel Foucault, Gayatri Spivak, Edward Said, and James Scott. This proves a useful way of showing why Gramsci is both similar to these thinkers, and why he has inspired many of them, as well as showing why Gramsci nevertheless remains unique in how he envisions both the role of culture and the role of the intellectual. Crehan argues that unlike Foucault, Gramsci believed that knowledge can and must act in the world; it is there for subaltern classes to make use of in their constant attempts to resist domination. Interestingly, she also argues against Said's reading of Gramsci on the intellectual. Where Said speaks of an individual intellectual who must speak truth to power, Gramsci moves away from seeing intellectuals as individuals, as well as arguing that an intellectual can never separate him or herself from power in order to speak to it from a position outside. Intellectuals' knowledge is always shaped by the beliefs, assumptions and attitudes of the world they live in (p.19) and thus Said's notion that intellectuals can be autonomous and independent is problematic. The starting point for Gramsci is not intellectual knowledge producers but the process of knowledge production itself (p.25-26). Where for Said—according to Crehan—intellectuals advance human freedom and knowledge, for Gramsci intellectuals are always the product of a specific time and place, and indeed may not be progressive at all. Because all intellectuals are the product of their context, the focus should be on this context rather than on the intellectual him or herself. While this comparison is interesting, I would argue that Said did not necessarily ignore this fact, and indeed his life's work was dedicated to unravelling the power of knowledge production in forming an entire region: "the Orient". Where there may be a disagreement is in Said's occasional tendency towards humanism—albeit a critical and non-Eurocentric form—and in Gramsci's tendency towards always analysing through the lens of class. This tendency, however, does not dominate Said's extensive corpus and in most of his work I believe he saw the intellectual in a very similar fashion to Gramsci himself. Similarly, Spivak's notion that the subaltern

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cannot speak does not contradict Gramsci's belief that the subaltern will never be able to fully understand nor formulate an alternative. Where they may disagree, I would argue, is in the role of organic intellectuals as a class who come in and "save" the subalterns. Moreover, in opposition to Scott's argument that the subaltern always resists and is always aware of their oppression in spaces outside the view of the ruling class, Crehan notes that Gramsci saw the subaltern classes as capable of rejecting only some parts of existing hegemonic narratives—but not all. Their condition of subalternity makes them incapable of forming a coherent alternative, and this is why organic intellectuals are needed (p.30).

This book further serves to reposition Gramsci's work within Marxist theory while also highlighting the ways in which it critiques orthodox Marxism. While Gramsci has sometimes been read as a cultural theorist, it is clear from his work, as Crehan shows, that he was firmly embedded within the Marxist tradition. Within this tradition, however, he was unique in the way in which he conceptualized the centrality of ideas. For Gramsci, ideas are material forces—a point he took directly from Marx—and these ideas have the power to move history forward. Where he went beyond Marx is by giving much more space to ideas and their connections to the economic "base" in his analysis of events in Italy.

One of the major insights of this book is Crehan's insistence that organic intellectuals are not by default progressive, and common sense is not by default radical. All classes have their own organic intellectuals, including the hegemonic class at any point in time (p.31). Her chapter on Adam Smith as organic intellectual is an excellent way of demonstrating this argument. There are no "free-floating groups of autonomous intellectuals who are ready to be called into service by a new class" (p.33). These organic intellectuals arise from within the class itself, and once this class and its intellectuals have established hegemony, its narratives will coalesce into institutions that propagate these forms of knowledge (p.34). Here she gives the example of the modern university as an institution that was born with the advent of capitalism. Organic intellectuals, however, can only arise through their connections to the

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subaltern classes—it is the lived experiences of these classes that provide intellectuals with the “raw material” to which they give coherent form (p.39).

Common sense, the subject of the third chapter, should also not be romanticized or seen as innately progressive. Common sense refers to the norms and beliefs we accept as normal because of the way we were socialized. It is neither a coherent system of meanings nor does it represent a set of truths. This incoherence I found particularly fascinating, because it goes a long way in explaining why subaltern groups are often unable to come together and resist a common form of domination. It brought to mind the ways in which large segments of the white working class in the US throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century were often unwilling to join forces with the Black working class, Black Power movements, or civil rights activists due to their racist beliefs. A subaltern group such as the white working class could very much hold common sense narratives that were racist, sexist, and so on, even while holding narratives that were against capitalist exploitation. Crehan points out that within the broader category of common sense there is what Gramsci called “good sense”. The incoherence of common sense, however, is what often makes forming a counter-hegemony difficult.

In her fourth chapter, on subalterns, Crehan traces some of the dilemmas subaltern classes face in resisting hegemony. The key insight is that our subjectivity is always formed in relation to others, and in particular in relation to the ruling class. “Living in a world where the dominant scripts have not been written by people like you is one of the defining characteristics of subalternity” (p.61). In resisting this, subalterns will often create their own narratives, or what Crehan refers to as “folklore”, following Gramsci. Folklore has been denigrated since the rise of the modern university with its emphasis on scientific knowledge production, but Gramsci argued that it is not something to be seen as odd but rather to be taken very seriously. Because organic intellectuals will base their knowledge on this raw material, it is crucial to take it seriously on its own terms. “Organic intellectuals are not bringing fully formed modern culture to the backward masses but rather bringing into being a

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new culture that draws from the good sense embedded in folklore and common sense as a whole” (p.68). Here Crehan states that for Gramsci the basic structuring opposition in any society is not between traditional and modern but between dominant and dominated (p.69). I have found this to be one of the most important assumptions underpinning Gramsci’s work. In my own work on the Middle East, culture has often been used to draw this distinction between a traditional Arab world and a modern Western one, a distinction created through imperialism. If we shift instead to analyse the Arab world through the lens of dominant and dominated, a very different set of power dynamics appear, and in turn a very different conception of social, political and economic change.

To demonstrate the ways in which each rising class needs its own organic intellectuals, Crehan spends Chapter Five outlining the rise of Adam Smith, whose book *The Wealth of Nations* remains one of the central texts of free market orthodoxy. Smith, she argues, should be seen as a bourgeois organic intellectual. With the dissolution of feudalism and rise of capitalism, the bourgeoisie emerged as a new class that would need organic intellectuals to form its historic bloc. Smith was one of these intellectuals, and his work was the first to articulate the essence of capitalism (p.83). The chapter begins by situating Smith historically, following Gramsci’s call to always emphasize the context from which individual intellectuals emerge. The Scottish Enlightenment of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the emergence of scientific knowledge, and the growth of economics as a science all led to the rise of the intellectual as someone connected to the bourgeoisie. “A new type of knowledge and a new type of knowers, and a new mode of relationship between the knower and what was to be known” (p.91). This was very much the result of capitalism and the rise of economics as a discipline. Crehan thus goes into a lot of detail in showing us how these historical shifts happened, as well as what Smith’s ideas were and how they were received. However, there is less on the concrete ways in which this new bourgeois class used Smith’s ideas in laying out the new structures that continue to dominate the world today. Elaborating on this would have

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made more explicit the link between what organic intellectuals produce and how these ideas become material forces when they are used by the ruling class to form hegemony.

Chapter Six takes us into the contemporary period with a case-study on the Tea Party in the United States. Crehan traces the rise of the Tea Party movement, and connects it to elements of the American capitalist class, namely “big business”. The spread of the Tea Party’s popularity can be linked to the feeling of many Americans that their way of life was declining. Unlike Occupy Wall Street, say, the Tea Party saw this decline as the result of government interference in the economy. The high taxation rates corporations and big business had to face were seen as central to this. The Tea Party is an interesting case study because although it is presented as a movement against North America’s ruling elite, its narrative, or common sense, in many ways reinforces the key tenets of the US capitalist historic bloc. The American Dream underpins these narratives, an idea that rests on capitalist assumptions about individual advancement and the freedom of the market—especially from government interference. I would argue that the Tea Party may be better conceptualized as reflecting a rift within the historical bloc itself, rather than an attempt at a counter-hegemony. Indeed structural divisions within historical blocs can be as important as attacks on the historical bloc from groups not included within it. The Tea Party is not presenting a new narrative that would displace the hegemonic capitalist narrative, a narrative that was immensely strengthened after Ronald Reagan. As Crehan emphasizes, the Reagan presidency cannot be underestimated because of the extent to which it strengthened neoliberal capitalism. What the Tea Party are calling for would lead to a shift in the neoliberal mode of accumulation, but would not necessarily displace it.

Occupy Wall Street, the subject of the seventh chapter, differ from the Tea Party in this respect; they do seem to be putting forward a narrative that aims to displace the neoliberal one. Crehan argues that OWS was able to locate the “good sense” within the broader common sense pervading US discussions on economic inequality. She argues that

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OWS forced the topic of inequality to the forefront of political debate in the US by critiquing capitalism as a system. Unlike the Tea Party, OWS did not have links to billionaires or influential members of the US ruling elite. OWS was a moment in which “various fragments of subaltern knowledge began coming together as a coherent political narrative” (p.153). It was a movement made up primarily of a white middle class that felt itself worse off in comparison to the generation before it; as Crehan notes, non-white and non-middle class Americans had never experienced the “American Dream”. Interestingly, the decline of white middle class support may indicate a decline or a crack in the hegemony of North America’s historical bloc; while people of colour and the working classes had never been part of the bloc to begin with, this was not the case with middle class whites, who had always formed a central part of the US hegemonic project and had always propagated the narrative, or common sense, of the American Dream. If OWS indicates that parts of this class are now turning against the historical bloc, then it may indicate that the hegemony of the bloc is in question.

Crehan uses Gramsci’s “war of position” as a concept through which to analyse OWS. A war of position, as opposed to a war of manoeuvre, focuses on slowly gaining influence in order to create a counter-hegemony. It is a struggle of ideas, rather than a struggle of force. Although the chapter does not focus on organic intellectuals, it does convincingly argue that OWS can be seen as a war of position because it influenced the US narrative on inequality. Because OWS is such a broad movement, however, it is difficult to tell whether their common sense was a direct attack on capitalism, or a call for a “different kind of capitalism”—a softer, more “humane” version. If the latter is correct, then, as with the Tea Party, it would not be a counter-hegemonic narrative that could displace the current hegemonic narrative. At the heart of this is the question of whether OWS, like the Tea Party, wanted to reform, or replace, capitalism. What would have been interesting in both these case studies is a comparison to a historical instance of a counter-hegemonic narrative displacing an existing

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hegemonic one. A concrete case of this would have provided a useful counterpoint to these movements, which, because of how recent they are, are difficult to classify.

Reading the cases Crehan focuses on, I found myself wondering where the rest of the world would fit into the story of the US historical bloc. How has the US historical bloc been built on US imperialism and the spread of the Washington Consensus across the rest of the world? How does the US historical bloc rely not only on narratives about the American Dream, but also on deeply racialized narratives that pervade US common sense among both ruling and subaltern groups? How do these narratives implicate debates on the Tea Party and OWS? Moreover, what is the particular role that people of colour have played in US capitalism? What does the American Dream mean for those on whose backs it was built, and in what ways is OWS a movement by those who have always benefited from the American Dream rather than those who have never been part of it? Gramsci's work was very much focused on Italy and the Italian ruling and subaltern classes. It is only over the past few decades that we see the rise of neo-Gramscian work that looks at transnational historical blocs and the ways in which capitalism in the core continues to condition capitalism in the periphery.<sup>1</sup> The case studies and analysis presented by Crehan is enlightening in its detail and insightfulness, and would only be strengthened by locating these cases within the global capitalist system, particularly given the US's role as the world's central imperialist power today.

Antonio Gramsci is notable amongst intellectuals for the ways in which his writing was constantly grounded and did not overly-employ the complex jargon that can often mystify the workings of capitalism as a system of domination. The most rewarding aspect of Crehan's book is of the same quality of writing; she does not mystify nor engage in the

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, from the *Antipode* Book Series, Marion Werner's (2015) *Global Displacements: The Making of Uneven Development in the Caribbean* and the collection *Gramsci: Space, Nature, Politics* edited by Michael Ekers, Gillian Hart, Stefan Kipfer and Alex Loftus (2012). For the debate among Gramscian scholars on transnational capitalism, see Burnham (1991) and Overbeek (2004).



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abstract theoretical debates that can characterize Marxist, or general political economy, scholarship. Instead she engages with Gramsci the way Gramsci arguably would engage with us if he were still alive today. Her aim is to spread these ideas, and show how relevant they remain. Doubtless this work will become a central part of the Gramscian archive, and I know I will come back to it in my attempts to understand the moment we live in today.

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