



Michele Filippini, *Using Gramsci: A New Approach* (trans P J Barr), London: Pluto Press, 2017. ISBN: 9780745335698 (cloth); ISBN: 9780745335681 (paper); ISBN: 9781786800077 (ebook)

A New Approach?

The work of Antonio Gramsci has been read widely, deeply, over a long period of time. So it may seem a bit audacious to declare that one has a “new approach” to this mighty thinker. But Michele Filippini delivers on this promise, in a number of ways.

First, and most explicitly, the book seeks to provide a kind of conceptual guide for those who are reading Gramsci from within the social sciences, rather than from the perspective of engagement with, or reflection upon, emancipatory political struggles. Thus, while Marx and Engels are ever-present, we also hear from Durkheim, Weber, Pareto, and Mannheim. These influences lead Filippini to highlight the importance of the “organicity” of the social in Gramsci’s conceptual framework, as a central metaphor that helps us to grasp how Gramsci understood relations between the individual and social, the crisis, ideology, and temporality. There are many strong resonances between the core concepts developed here—they themselves are part of an organic structure that holds together without the imposition of any kind of totalization.

Spectres of Foucault

That leads me to the second way in which Filippini’s approach is novel, which is visible in an unspoken, perhaps somewhat unconscious, perhaps entirely unintended (non-existent?) inflection that strikes me as deeply Foucaultian.

For example, something that looks a lot like the governmentality thesis pops up when Filippini writes that Gramsci “formulates a notion of coercion that is not immediately ascribable to political power, since such coercion is exercised through dynamics of society as a whole, as the result of the random interaction of individual wills through reciprocal behaviour and

adaptation” (p.74). This understanding of how societies “function” is later linked to Gramsci's theory of revolution in the West: “power cannot be taken by attacking the ‘places’ of power, because power has been disseminated throughout society” (p.112). And in the discussion of the onset of organic crisis, we hear echoes of Foucault’s essay on genealogy: “[t]he search for the origin or triggering cause of the crisis is thus represented as necessarily misleading” (p.91).

I’m not sure that it matters whether Filippini “intended” to provide us with a Foucaultian reading of Gramsci, but given his interest in Italian autonomist Marxism, it should not be surprising to find this kind of influence. At any rate, and regardless of its origin or causes, I was deeply appreciative of the complexity-oriented, non-totalizing approach that Filippini takes. It makes for a much less programmatic relation to Gramsci’s thought than we are sometimes presented with, and thereby goes a long way to revaluing Gramsci for those who are not on the side of hegemonic approaches to social change.

An Immanent Critique

Gramsci has been read from a wide variety of conflicting political perspectives, and many of these readings tend to have the aim of using—or abusing—his work in order to score points for some particular ideological approach. (I myself have done this very thing.) But, the echoes of autonomist Marxism aside, Filippini seems to be reading mostly for the sake of understanding what Gramsci wanted to convey, in Gramsci’s own contexts. This is extremely refreshing and enjoyable in itself, but it also leads to the revaluation of some key concepts.

For example, Filippini argues that the distinction between organic and traditional intellectuals does not imply that organic intellectuals work for the proletariat, while traditional intellectuals are on the side of the bourgeoisie, as many primers on Gramsci’s thought tend to suggest. Rather, the organic/traditional distinction hinges on the “political” vs. “technical” functions of an intellectual. *All* classes give rise to organic intellectuals associated with that class, who have the political function of helping to establish a new hegemony. Traditional intellectuals

are the “holdovers” of previously emergent classes, who have the function of maintaining the currently dominant order as it is—which Gramsci sees as primarily a “technical” function. Organic intellectuals must themselves become traditional, in fact, in order to complete the revolution. It seems to me that the 20th and 21st centuries have provided many, and varied, examples of the validity of this hypothesis (USSR, China, Bolivia...).

The way Filippini develops the concept of “the crisis” (in Chapter 5) is also very interesting and compelling—and, again, very Foucaultian. Crisis is read, here, not as an event, but as a process, and a stochastic, non-linear process at that, so that the term “can no longer be employed in a teleological sense” (p.88). In fact, it seems that Hegelian sublation is impossible, given that crisis is understood as a continuous feature of capitalist development in particular, and perhaps of all possible social orders (this is my own extrapolation, but it seems to be where this sociological reading of Gramsci heads, i.e. to a kind of anti-functionalism). At the same time, Filippini does not want to throw out the possibility of radical social change—this was, to be sure, what Gramsci’s writing was all about. So crisis is maintained as offering “an opportunity for political struggle” (p.89), but nothing more than an opportunity. This, it seems to me, is in keeping with the reading of Gramsci by Laclau and Mouffe, which has been highly influential, and for which I have a lot of respect.

A Contextual Positioning

In addition to providing a sociological reading, Filippini also sets out to address what he sees as some problems in 21st century scholarship on Gramsci, namely interpretations of a “somewhat misleading or little documented nature”, and the “arbitrary disengagement of his concepts from the Marxist and materialist sphere in which they were forged” (p.2). As a corrective, Filippini works hard to sketch out relations between Gramsci and other thinker-activists of his day, without overloading the reader with excessive detail. I think he strikes a nice balance here. He also places “his” Gramsci within various traditions of Marxist scholarship, without, as I’ve

previously mentioned, too overtly joining in the fray. He also shows how Gramsci's thought changes over time, how concepts mutate, within and beyond the *Prison Notebooks*.

The Translation

Translating anything well is hard, and translating theoretical texts is particularly onerous work that is often under-appreciated. So I want to acknowledge translator Patrick J. Barr's skill in rendering a text that manages to preserve, at the highest level of abstraction as well as at the micro level of sentences and paragraphs, the conceptual unity of Filippini's reading of Gramsci. I haven't read the Italian manuscript, and I wouldn't be able to read it, but I am sure that the conceptual "organicity" of this text is no accident, and no easy feature to reproduce in another language.

The Recommendation

This book succeeds in doing most of what it sets out to do. I believe that it will be of value to scholars who are looking for an immanent, sociological reading of Gramsci that goes deeper than a primer, but does not delve excessively into historical data, theoretical disputes, or ideological diversions.

Richard J.F. Day
Department of Sociology
Queen's University
richard.day@queensu.ca

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