

REVIEW ARTICLE

Peter D. Thomas, *The Gramscian Moment: Philosophy, Hegemony, and Marxism*. Brill, 2009.

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There is a need to overcome the integument of myth surrounding the revolutionary thinker Antonio Gramsci in academia and elsewhere, impeding a proper understanding of his philosophy. It is a need all the more pressing from new political struggles, pushing us to appreciate Gramsci more than just an icon of events past, or an idol of departments present. Fortunately Peter Thomas has helped to overcome those establishment images of Gramsci, as his new study breaks down the mystique Gramsci's legacy accumulated for so many decades in Anglophone circles. Thomas brilliantly weaves together in one volume the philosophical and political theses of Gramsci's thought in terms of Gramsci's own historical, political and cultural contexts, and he does so with an intimidating philological expertise, establishing Gramsci's seminal *Prison Notebooks* free from semantic distortion. However, the main and most successful thrust of Thomas' book that stops and reverses the process of mummification is by situating Gramsci in the present *Kampfplatz* of contemporary Marxism. It is a *Kampfplatz* constituted by Gramsci, Louis Althusser, and Perry Anderson, acting as key players in defining the theoretical contours of Marxism for the 21st century. But the extraordinary theatre of theoretical struggle Thomas sketches goes beyond the immediate problems of Gramsci's own thought to ask more fundamental questions about the relationship of philosophy, theory, and practice.

Thomas' study traverses an enormous amount of political and philosophical territory that sets out to demolish mistaken receptions of Gramsci's thought in the academy and elsewhere. In the first two sections, Thomas offers a probing and methodical reconstruction of the arguments of Gramsci's foremost critics, Althusser and Anderson. According to Thomas, the latter's criticisms form the foundation of a hermeneutical anarchy that has occluded Gramsci's actual philosophy and politics, providing a bad theoretical surplus for further distortions of his legacy, i.e. of sinking Gramsci down to the level of caricatured culturalist or historicist themes. But before Thomas debunks Althusser and Anderson, and liberates Gramsci from opacity, he exhumes for his Anglophone readers the unknown continent of Italian scholarship on Gramsci's carceral writings, insisting upon the philological expertise one needs to even adequately address the dimensions of his project. The final sections are devoted to negating the consensus of Gramsci's thought through affirming an authentic and positive

Gramscian politics and philosophy.

Thomas starts with Louis Althusser's early criticisms in *Reading Capital*, where Gramsci is labeled as one of the incarnations of "historicist Marxism" (along with Lukacs and Korsch), and abjured on those same "historicist" grounds in favor of structuralist Marxism. For Althusser, as brilliant and important Gramsci was for the Marxist tradition and for revolutionary socialism, he cheapened Marxism from a scientific theory of history to a mutant Hegelianism, or a subjective philosophy of practice and self-consciousness. This alleged liquidation of Marxism of its scientific credentials threw out the sharp distinction between science and ideology that Althusser underscored in the latter's earlier efforts.

After Althusser, Perry Anderson unveiled a Gramsci divided against himself in the 100th issue of *New Left Review*, in an astonishing essay entitled "The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci". According to Anderson, as time passed in prison, the Sardinian regrettably moved towards a notion of hegemony that over-emphasized the nature of establishing ideological consensus, at the expense of heeding the coercive character of the bourgeois state. For Anderson, this had the consequence of moving Gramsci closer to the strategies of the Second International under Karl Kautsky, and then of opening up a space posthumously for the parliamentary road of Eurocommunism. Unintentionally perhaps, Gramsci was linked to these reformist currents in prioritizing ideological over properly political struggle against the state, rendering revolution unnecessary if the struggle could be reduced to an ideological one of forging a new consensus for socialism in the parameters of the bourgeois state. Anderson concludes that with these political presuppositions about the nature of the bourgeois state in the West, Gramsci was at loggerheads with the Bolshevik strategy and the strategy of Marx to smash and overthrow the bourgeois state.

Thomas tries to dispel this thesis of Anderson's by demonstrating Gramsci's commitment to revolutionary socialism, with his idea of the "integral state". Far from treating civil society and the political society as two disconnected substances, Thomas, uses an analogy from Spinoza to argue how Gramsci unites civil and political society as two attributes inhering in one substance: the integral state. This allows Gramsci not to neglect the coercive nature of the state in the conditions of Western capitalism, but to specify how the bourgeois state is both a social and a political relation. Instead of seeing what goes on in civil society as non-coercive and distinct from the state, Gramsci for Thomas sees its activity as complementary to the state's repressive power. Gramsci follows Marx's critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*, understanding civil society as the "true ground" of the state, while at the same time functioning as something primarily political. But expecting to localize the over-determined nature of hegemony at a single site, or at any one level of the social formation of capitalism, is simply impossible. This model of the integral state has the benefit of preserving the relative autonomy of the state vis-à-vis civil society, without seeing the state as separate from the operations of capitalism. To borrow an expression from Marx's *Grundrisse*, both political and civil society are bathed in the ether of the "integral state" that illuminates the whole.

Thomas is able with this reconstruction to restore Gramsci's revolutionary credentials away from reformist conceptions of treating the bourgeois state as a realm of consensus, and reasserts Gramsci's notion of the united front that was central to Bolshevik strategies. What needs to be further demonstrated though is whether Gramsci's notion of the united front does not exhibit different features than Lenin or Trotsky's conception. But Thomas points to Gramsci's opposition to certain aspects and policies of the Stalinist bureaucracy, and that there is more commonality between Gramsci and Trotsky than the former would have liked to admit.¹

Thomas' arguments on Althusser's relationship to Gramsci are some of the most fascinating sections of the book, and he addresses each of Althusser's theses against Gramsci one by one, in the final three chapters on historicism, materialism and humanism. What is revealed in these chapters is a Gramsci recalcitrant to these characterizations. Contra Althusser's claim that the "philosophy of praxis" stood for a vulgar Hegelianism, of how the real essence of history could be grasped through a unitary self-conscious subject, Gramsci conceived knowledge as something incomplete and always partial. He does this not by turning Marxism to a philosophy

without a subject, but by accentuating the struggle to create “the conditions of a genuinely human objectivity”, a truth fully immanent to the world and not guaranteed by the transcendental scientific structures Althusser originally proposed.

Thomas’ chapter on “Absolute Historicism” brings attention to how Gramsci viewed Marx’s philosophy as grounding theory and practice not in an aprioristic metaphysics, but in terms of their historical constitution and in social relations. Thomas points out the moments of translatability between ideas and hegemonic socio-political formations, on how ideas exist in concrete space and time as relating to the projects of different classes. Gramsci here continues the Marxist idea of translatability between languages, or how the seemingly different conceptual languages of British political economy, French socialism, and German idealism, dialectically flowed into each other to meet concrete historical needs. As an illustration to this idea of translatability cited by Gramsci, the German poet Heine made a profound statement that contains an actual kernel of historical truth, of how German philosophy for him was nothing more than dreams the French revolution inspired. From Heine’s insight into the history of thought, one may say that Kant cut the head off of God, while Robespierre cut off the head off a king,² with the example displaying how two supposedly different events share a similar historical significance. From this idea of translation integral to Marxism, observed in Marx’s *Holy Family*, Thomas points to the necessity to always “historicize” the realm of conceptuality, where the realm of concepts does not exist in a Platonic heaven, but is part of the ideological and cultural textures of social being.

Through Gramsci’s “anti-metaphysical” conceptions, Thomas explains in the chapter on the “Absolute Secularization and Earthiness of Thought” that the validity of our ideas only comes from the practical nature of thought itself, and the willingness to test these ideas in practice. This is kept in mind against the transcendental and metaphysical lures of Benedetto Croce’s idealist reading of history, a reading brilliantly outlined at great length. For Thomas, Crocean idealism is overcome by Gramsci with a “*philology of the relations of force*”, or the study of different social practices in terms of their “intensity, efficacy, and specificity”. Gramsci’s philosophy of praxis thus the fleshing out of Marx’s second thesis on Feuerbach, that the question “of whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory, but a practical question”.

The study presents Gramsci as rendering the identity of theory and practice as the result or product of a striving for a coherent worldview, i.e. an attempt to render practice more coherent in light of real social problems. It is the attempt to constitute coherence, as an active working out of the raw material from the “incoherent” common sense of society, that philosophical good sense is produced. Against Croce’s and Althusser’s firmness that there is a qualitative break between philosophy and ideology, Gramsci sees them as only being “quantitatively” different, and only different in the level of coherence. Philosophy and good sense are dependent on common sense as the “raw material” to develop an effective conception. And since coherence is dependent upon social and political and everyday practice, coherence is not merely a matter of logical consistency, but relates to the ability to act politically and consciously in what is the “incoherence” of “normal” conditions of existence. For the bulk of social practices that predominate, and that function incoherently, this has the baleful consequence of ideologically trapping “subaltern” social positions that have yet to constitute a coherent picture of the world needed guide action against oppressive hegemonic structures.

The last chapter “Absolute Humanism” focuses on the active political dimension of philosophy in re-making the world. Identities of theory and practice for Gramsci come from the side of concrete human activity, itself is inscribed in a historical process. But unlike pronouncements of the “death of the subject” from older quarters of continental philosophy, Thomas uses Gramsci to re-activate the category of subjectivity in Marxism of a different type. He develops a “Gramscian” view of the individual with a conceptual detour through Spinoza’s own specific meditations on identity formation in the *Ethics*. Here identity is problematized as something more fragile, where it is conceived as part of a continuous process, formed by certain pressures that either can sustain or shatter a person’s conception of themselves. This is illustrated in the context of Gramsci’s own terrible incarceration, where a “slow” and “molecular” process of transformation affected his own reality after suffering years of physical and mental torment in fascist jails. But while Spinoza develops his conception of

identity as a metaphysical modification of the one eternal and unchanging substance, Gramsci roots identity in “the substantive and aggregate nature of historical experience.”

Accordingly, Gramsci’s form of subjectivity is not a part of any neo-Kantian matrix for a transcendental ego, but is something concretely emerging from the vicissitudes of a historical struggle. He expands the dimensions of identity in order to propose a collective subject needed for political action. This process calls forth the need for a democratic philosophy and a democratic philosopher. The democratic philosopher is conceived by Gramsci as someone “anti-Platonic”, i.e. as a philosopher that tackles problems as they relate themselves socially--not abstracted from the concerns of the masses.

As an illustration of Gramsci’s overcoming of Plato, in the *Republic*, to understand the nature of justice, Socrates starts with the larger unit of the just city in order to better see how justice operates in the individual. But Gramsci inverts this procedure, and starts with the concrete person and historical experiences, and from there strives towards a more coherent and general picture. Hence he develops an “anti-Platonist Platonic allegory” of the educational process, with the problem being not how to fit experience into a grand metaphysical vision, or to distill the particular from the general, but how to see the efficacy of philosophical vision as derived from dialectically working out personal and historical experience. With relating questions of philosophy to hegemony, the elitist-contemplative representation of philosophy is overturned, recast as a democratic and pedagogical activity to change the world.

This understanding of philosophy in Thomas can be defined as “a relationship of hegemony,” that “does not deflate the metaphysical pretensions of other systems of thought in order to inflate its own claims to an a-historical validity.” Specifically, it is “not a fratricidal coup in the throne room of speculation.” The critique of speculative philosophy through the *Prison Notebooks* historicizes “truth”, away from its eternal and absolute status, and as re-articulated in terms of practical and provisional value. Questions of historical causation and law, and conceptions of knowledge and objectivity are addressed in Thomas’ chapter on the “Philosophy of Praxis is the Absolute Historicism”, where what is metaphysical and speculative are cited as flaws in philosophies as ostensibly different as Croce’s neo-Hegelian idealism and Bukharin’s vulgar materialism.

However—and as a potential response to Thomas’ interpretation of Gramsci’s thought--there may be a speculative and realist dimension to Gramsci himself, of how certain philosophical truths remain permanent and irreducible to their historical conditions in the production of knowledge. Thomas cites the work of Esteve Morera in passing, whose research claims there is a distinction made internal in Gramsci’s thought between the history of truth as having an ideological function, (appearing as a social phenomenon), and knowledge as truth per se, objective from human consciousness. Thomas finds Morera’s scholarship untenable, but one wonders about the evidence Morera cites for Gramsci’s “realism”. The more robust claims of realism come out clearly in Gramsci’s discussion of particle physics, where scientific theories are “the reflection of an unchanging reality”. There is also the question of his appreciation of French materialism as an essential “moment” and component of Marxism, functioning as its “ultra-realist” element³. And even going beyond Morera and Thomas’ accounts, an incredibly speculative dimension springs up when Gramsci discusses teleology and “real necessity” contra Bukharin, who found absolutely no place for the category of “final causality” in his mechanical version of Marxism⁴.

In the Hegelian tradition of Marxism Gramsci remains a significant part of, relating the concrete and the practical to what has been traditionally called speculative gives practice much needed philosophical depth, since speculative thought can see the “absolute” within the relative. These “absolute” ideas are those that are necessarily assumed for us to think any historical movement. Hence we can understand the place Gramsci gives to Hegel, as the theoretical precursor of the democratic movements of the 19th century, while he describes pragmatists as “only contributing to a Rotary Club movement and to the justification of conservative and reactionary movements”⁵. And, as Thomas makes clear, questions of practice necessarily lead to questions of theory, which arguably leads to more speculative questions necessary to ask to make sense of and to raise the

level of practice.

Indeed, by uniting in his work questions of philosophy and politics so admirably, Thomas has written one of the finest treatments of Gramsci from a Marxist perspective. In terms of philosophical reflection, it is an amazing resource that will set the bar for any serious theoretical engagements with the Gramsci's historicism for some time to come. The defense of historicism is linked to the political importance of philosophy, and why philosophy is indispensable for any politics. It is an essential account that cannot be ignored by those who continue to see him through culturalist or post-revolutionary lenses, and establishes beyond doubt that Gramsci's legacy continues to be relevant as a source for current and future struggles.

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NOTES

1. There remains though the thorny issue of divergence, particularly on the perspectives of socialism in one country, and Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution that Gramsci rejects. These issues are further grappled with and problematized in Emanuele Saccarelli in an account cited by Thomas, which may provide an interesting supplement to the question of overlap and tension between Gramsci's and Trotsky's Marxism. See Emanuele Saccarelli, *Gramsci and Trotsky in the Shadow of Stalinism*. Trans. Adrian Jackson. New York, Routledge, 2008.
2. See Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks, Vol. 3*. Trans. Joseph A. Buttigieg. New York, Columbia University Press, 2007, 355.
3. See Esteve Morera, "Gramsci's Realism" in *Antonio Gramsci: Critical Assessments of Leading Political Philosophers, Vol 2*. Edited by James Martin. Routledge, 2002, 216-226.
4. See Gramsci's discussion of teleology in his notes on "Fundamental Problems of Marxism" in Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks, Vol 2*. Trans. Joseph A. Buttigieg. New York, Columbia University Press, 1996, 158.
5. See Gramsci's remarks on Hegel and pragmatism in his notes on the "Study of Philosophy" in *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*. Trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith. New York, International Publishers, 1971, 373.