

Gramsci: the Democratic Philosopher

Daniel Hartley

Abstract:

Peter Thomas's *The Gramscian Moment* provides a definitive rebuttal of Perry Anderson's and Louis Althusser's influential critiques of the work of Antonio Gramsci. Throughout the course of the book, which ranges from discussions of the literary form of the *Prison Notebooks* to explications of the concepts of 'passive revolution' and the 'integral state' he demonstrates that Gramsci's work is characterized by 'absolute historicism', 'absolute immanence' and 'absolute humanism'. Hegemony, that is, constitutes a 'metaphysical event' or a 'philosophical fact': the passage between these last two conceptions delineates the 'Gramscian moment' of 1931-1932.

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Thomas, Peter D.: *The Gramscian Moment: Philosophy, Hegemony and Marxism*. Chicago: Haymarket, 2010. 508 pp., paperback, £ 25.99. ISBN: 978-1608461165

The Gramscian Moment is a prolonged critique of two readings that have dominated the Anglophone understanding of Gramsci's thought for the past forty years: Perry Anderson's 1976 *New Left Review* article, "The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci", and Louis Althusser's various remarks on Gramsci throughout *For Marx* and *Reading 'Capital'*. To Anderson's Gramsci, riddled with insuperable antinomies (East versus West, state versus civil society, 'war of manoeuvre' versus 'war of position'), Thomas proposes a truly dialectical one for whom, via such concepts as the 'integral state' and 'passive revolution,' the antinomies can be shown to have been, in theory and in practice, sublated. His response to Althusser's critique is much more difficult to summarize succinctly, though it ultimately amounts to comprehending the 'Gramscian moment' as offering an unfinished but coherent overcoming of, on the one hand, a self-proclaimed 'orthodox' Marxist philosophy (à la Bukharin) and, on the other hand, a certain post-Marxist syncretism in which Marxism and philosophy constitute absolutely distinct—and therefore mutually untranslatable—registers.

To say all of that, however, is still to fail to express the sheer excitement of reading this book. Each chapter, and the work as a whole, gradually builds itself up, layer by layer, painstakingly drawing itself up to its full philological height—usually via a series of meticulously close readings which draw upon the length and breadth, not only of the *Prison Notebooks*, but also of the whole of Western philosophy and of the Marxist tradition itself—before it plunges down into a surge of politics and philosophy, into a realm where, for example, the classical division between subject and object suddenly becomes transformed into a symptom of subalternity:

For a social group devoid of historical initiative, confined to the corporative level of civil society in the integral state of another class, the world can indeed appear as 'given' [...]. The religious 'residue' [i.e. the Church's teaching that, in Gramsci's words, 'the world, nature, the universe were created by God before the creation of man, and therefore man found the world ready made'] then takes on a precise political function: it encourages acceptance of 'objectification' by the 'subject' of the ruling class [...]. (p. 304)

What could it possibly mean for philosophy to think such a problem? A logical conundrum has been transmogrified before our very eyes into a political conjuncture. Which is another way of saying that Thomas's reading of Gramsci is an extended meditation on the latter's ingenious carceral development of Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach*. Its principal argument, which claims

that Gramsci's work is characterized by 'absolute historicism,' 'absolute immanence,' and 'absolute humanism,' I shall now attempt to summarize. Its guiding thread is that the 'Gramscian moment' of 1931 to 1932 consists in the passage from conceiving of hegemony as 'metaphysical event' to conceiving it as 'philosophical fact.'

The difference between philosophy and ideology is not one of kind, but of gradation. Whereas the former is a "conception of the world which tends to raise to the level of awareness of historical determination and to increase the capacity to act of an entire social class", the latter corresponds "to the perceived interests of a class fraction" (p. 280). Philosophy, then, is a thoroughgoing theoretical unification of the universal interests of an entire class project with a view to that class's long-term hegemony, whilst ideology is a short-term particularism rendered incoherent by its subjection to immediacy. A philosophy is an ideology which has won both coherence and the battle for the future. In this sense, philosophy becomes coextensive with history itself, though the two retain their unity in distinction via the mediator of politics: 'truth,' which is now understood as absolutely immanent to history itself—as "an internal grade of reality [Wirklichkeit] and power [Macht] traversing our practices from within" (p. 308)—like objectivity, is a political project. 'Coherence' and 'objectivity' are not things which can be achieved in the recesses of one's mind alone (although making an inventory of the elements of one's contradictory subjectivity, constituted as it is by the non-contemporaneity of the present, divided between residual and emergent ideologies all vying to become hegemonic philosophies, is a commendable first step); rather, they are political projects which aim to overcome the contradictory nature of the present and to increase a class's capacity to act (pp. 369-70).

Hegemony, and here I am still paraphrasing Thomas's explication of Gramsci's project, is the becoming-life of philosophy. The 'philosophy of praxis'—Gramsci's rearticulation of historical materialism—is the untranscendable philosophy, since it is the only one capable of thinking its own historical determinateness and of transforming this into a self-conscious politico-philosophical project. By immanently critiquing a given *senso comune* (the spontaneous philosophy of the masses, rendered incoherent by their subaltern position) and raising it to self-awareness, the philosophy of praxis "allows it to break with the incoherence and passivity imposed upon it by an incoherent present" (p. 374). The philosopher, however, is no longer an isolated member of an enclosed academic community, but rather an "expressive element of [the 'life of the people'] which it aims to cultivate, increasing its capacity for active relations of knowledge and practice" (p. 434). These 'democratic philosophers' are organically linked to the project of proletarian hegemony: they do not impose on the masses the perennial problems of philosophy, but rather "[work] out and make coherent the principles and problems which the masses have posed in their own practical activity" (p. 436). Together, the workers (who are, let us not forget, also philosophers) and the democratic philosophers combine in the 'modern Prince,' "a new type of political party and oppositional culture" engaged in "a new political and intellectual practice" (p. 437): "as a potentially mass institution of politico-gnoseological practice, it modified the relations of force within which philosophy was undertaken, creating

a new terrain of intellectuality" (p. 438). The 'modern Prince' is the communal philosopher of proletarian hegemony.

As should be obvious even from such a brutal abbreviation, *The Gramscian Moment* is an astonishing work of scholarship and one which should become a Marxist classic. It is terrifyingly erudite, beautifully written, and compellingly argued. If it has a weakness at all it is Thomas's failure to develop the importance for Gramsci of the concept of 'the unification of culture' which appears in quotations from the *Prison Notebooks* at certain crucial moments in his argument (pp. 306, 376, 431, and 432). Given the politically toothless uses to which Gramsci has been put in 'Cultural Studies,' however, this is a comprehensible anomaly. Not that that trend can now continue, of course: Peter Thomas has made Gramsci dangerous again.