

## REVIEWS AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

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**Introducing Antonio Gramsci and the *Prison Notebooks*: A Review Article of George Hoare and Nathan Sperber, *An Introduction to Antonio Gramsci. His Life, Thought and Legacy*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016, and John Schwarzmantel, *The Routledge Guidebook to Gramsci's "Prison Notebooks."* London and New York: Routledge, 2015**

### Introduction

Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937) was a prominent Italian Marxist philosopher and politician, co-founder of the Italian Communist Party, an influential thinker and critic of contemporary politics, society and culture. The 21<sup>st</sup> century has seen a strong revival of interest in his work, especially in the use of Gramscian concepts in a wide variety of disciplines (from literary and cultural studies, translation theory, social studies, and international relations theory to political philosophy, history of Marxism);<sup>1</sup> at the same time important introductory companions and guides to his work and achievement have been published. This review is concerned with two such introductory publications: George Hoare and Nathan Sperber's *An Introduction to Antonio Gramsci. His Life, Thought*

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<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, the studies in Francese (ed.) (2009), McNally and Schwarzmantel, eds. (2009), Ives and Lacorte, eds. (2010), Carlucci (2013), and the most recent publication, Filippini (2017).

and Legacy and John Schwarzmantel's *The Routledge Guidebook to Gramsci's "Prison Notebooks."*<sup>2</sup>

Gramsci's encyclopedic breadth and depth of thought has been often commented upon, recently by, among others, Joseph Francese who also stresses that his impact:

on social and political thought, critical theory and literary methodology is profound. Gramsci was an Italian journalist, activist, and social and political theorist whose writings are heavily concerned with the analysis of popular and elite culture and political theory. He is notable as a highly original thinker within the Marxist tradition, especially for his ideas concerning the role of civil society as lynchpin between the economic base and the ideological superstructure of societies. He is also renowned for his theorization of the importance of cultural hegemony as a non-coercive means of maintaining bourgeois dominance in capitalist societies. (Francese, 2009: 1)

John Schwarzmantel underlines that the main themes of Gramsci's thought were developed in close connection with his life and activity (as a socialist journalist, political leader and political prisoner), and that:

They can be summarised as a deep concern with the importance of culture and of intellectuals in civil society; the creative role of the working-class movement and its potential emergence from a subaltern or dominated position to one of the leadership of all society; and reflection on the distinctive characteristics of Western Europe compared with the society in which the Bolshevik revolution had taken place. (Schwarzmantel, 2009: 1–2)

***An Introduction to Antonio Gramsci.  
His Life, Thought and Legacy***

Advanced Gramscian studies are developing intensively, nevertheless there is still constant demand for introductory texts and guidebooks. George Hoare and Nathan Sperber offer such a most recent introduction to Gramscian studies, putting the life, thought, activity and achievement of the Italian Marxist philosopher into a wide context. *An Introduction to Antonio Gramsci. His Life, Thought and Legacy* (hereafter *Introduction*, followed by appropriate

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<sup>2</sup> This review incorporates material published earlier in *Marx & Philosophy Review of Books*: <http://marxandphilosophy.org.uk/reviewofbooks/reviews/2016/2154>, and <http://marxandphilosophy.org.uk/reviewofbooks/reviews/2016/2317>. Permission for publication of this material in *International Studies* is gratefully acknowledged.

page reference) comprises a short introduction, four parts dealing with, respectively, life, thought, applications and legacy, followed by a guide to further reading, bibliography and index.

Hoare and Sperber commence the introduction with a brief section on “Thinking through Gramsci,” observing that there exists a whole “Gramsci industry” with “a great many different Gramscis. Thus we see a Gramsci in International Relations, in Cultural Studies, in Political Theory, in Literary Theory and in Postcolonial Studies. There is a Gramsci used by the Right and one claimed by the Left” (*Introduction* 1).<sup>3</sup> Against these diverse and proliferated approaches to Gramsci, the authors argue for “a unified and consistent Gramsci, a Gramsci essential for critical thought today” (*Introduction* 1). Though the task of producing a “unified Gramsci” might turn out impossible, it is very important that a recent attempt has been made for a consistent interdisciplinary (or multidisciplinary) presentation of Gramsci, his achievement and legacy.

Part One is devoted to Gramsci’s biography, his intellectual development, and some of the early writings. Gramsci’s life, at every stage, from Sardinian origins, shaped his thought and, conversely, and tragically, his thought shaped his life. His early involvement in politics (first the Italian Socialist Part, next the Italian Communist Party) radicalised his thought, whereas experience in political journalism “instilled in him a talent and a taste for polemics” (*Introduction* 11). Part One also provides relevant information on Gramsci’s trial and imprisonment, and concludes with a powerful fragment from the activist’s 1928 letter to his mother “I’ve always refused to compromise my ideas and am ready to die for them, not just to be put in prison” (*Introduction* 23).

Part Two discusses Gramsci’s “Thought,” and is divided into chapters on culture, politics, philosophy, and hegemony, respectively. This part of the book might be used as a self-contained concise guide to the most important aspects of Gramscian thought relevant in the different disciplines. In the chapter on culture, the authors note that though Gramsci never provided a systematic explication of his theory of culture, his conception was both social

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<sup>3</sup> Additionally to the “many Gramscis” issue and superficial interpretations, “much too often, Gramsci is cited because he is important, and he is important because he is cited” (Buttigieg, 2009: 22). Buttigieg’s suggestion that “this is the time to start re-reading Gramsci” (2009: 31) has lead him to initiate the *Reading Gramsci* series (with Pluto Press).

and political (an observation which can be carried over to his other fields of interest), and he considered culture as the antithesis of a system, a “succession of quotidian practices” (*Introduction* 28), accessed through the “combined ways of acting, perceiving and feeling of all people” (*Introduction* 29).

Chapter 2 also discusses intellectuals, education, journalism, and popular literature. According to Gramsci, intellectuals and education are tightly linked, since education trains and forms intellectuals, and the intellectuals are constituted by their social role, which consists in the production and diffusion of knowledge in society. This is a very modern approach to the social characteristics of intellectuals (and one which differs from the traditional Marxist inclusion of intellectuals into the bourgeoisie). However, as observed by Hoare and Sperber, despite “his consistent rejection of vulgar economic determinism, Gramsci stays faithful to Marx’s original insight that intellectual life is always situated in a socio-historical field of forces in which class struggle is the primordial reality” (*Introduction* 34), at the same time this new intellectual “should never go as far as to doctor the truth in the name of the revolution” (*Introduction* 38).

María Zambrano, a Spanish philosopher and essayist, with a decidedly different ideological background and orientation, but also writing in turbulent times, described politics as a strictly human activity whose analysis reveals the greatest dramas, conflicts and glories of man.<sup>4</sup> This description tunes in very well with the approach advocated by Gramsci. In Chapter 3 Hoare and Sperber focus on politics, stressing that it was understood by Gramsci as an “essential moment of social life” (*Introduction* 53). They discuss the triangle of concepts: civil society–political society–the State, the “cornerstone of Gramsci’s theory of politics” (*Introduction* 55), devote separate sections to the interpretation of modern politics, and the modern Prince. The authors note that Gramsci’s historical-political research reveals “an epistemological caution that is complementary to his theoretical audacity” (*Introduction* 60), and that his approach to analysis of politics is inductive, with theory emerging from concrete findings. Throughout this chapter it is clearly visible that for Gramsci a careful analysis of the present as it is (socially,

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<sup>4</sup> “La actividad más estrictamente humana y su análisis nos descubre los mayores dramas, conflictos y glorias del hombre,” María Zambrano, *Horizonte del Liberalismo* (1930), quoted in Sánchez-Gey Venegas (2016: 40).

politically) is an essential prerequisite of any transformation (including, crucially, the revolutionary one).

The strict ties linking theory and practice are also obvious in Gramsci's approach to philosophy, the subject of Chapter 4. As well known, Gramsci redefined philosophy, viewing it in the context of everyday life, and asserting that "every man is a philosopher" (*Introduction* 83); furthermore, philosophy is a certain conception of life to which an ethical attitude is attached. Other parts of this chapter introduce the topics strongly related to philosophy in Gramscian thought, namely ideology, economy, Americanism, Fordism, and the concept of praxis. Additionally, Hoare and Sperber devote some pages to the influence (and final rejection) of Giovanni Gentile and Benedetto Croce on Gramsci's thought, and in conclusion of the chapter they note that ultimately "for Gramsci politics and philosophy are most intimately joined together through the revolution of common sense" (*Introduction* 116). Common sense (*senso comune*) is discussed in more detail in Chapter 6.

The last chapter in Part Two is devoted to the reconstruction of Gramsci's most famous concept, that of hegemony. Hoare and Sperber aim to show how this concept relies on other stipulations, especially the ones concerned with intellectuals, culture, society and politics. Very basically, hegemony serves for Gramsci to stress the cultural, moral and cognitive aspects of leadership, the dimensions of "the exercise of political power" (*Introduction* 118). Hegemony constitutes a form of knowledge and signifies an ethical renewal, it is constructed through various mechanisms of political negotiation and intellectual persuasion, and at the same time it is a fundamentally cognitive and moral process. Similarly to other concepts in Gramsci's thought, hegemony has a dialectical and dynamic aspect. The authors also discuss the historical stages of hegemony (from the pre-hegemonic state to the regulated society), and also hegemonic consciousness as catharsis, i.e. a moment of intensity resulting "in the intellectual liberation of the subject" (*Introduction* 131). The discussion of culture, philosophy, politics and hegemony demonstrates that these concepts represent "complementary aspects of a unified project of the renewal of historical materialism" (*Introduction* 142).

Whereas the first two parts of the book provide necessary background information and analyses of relevant concepts, Part Three, "Applications," brings two very interesting chapters on "thinking through Gramsci" in political theory and in political economy, and Part Four is concerned with Gramsci's legacy in

Western Marxism, Italian communism, post-Marxism, and also in postcolonial studies and cultural studies. Chapter 6 offers a critical analysis of the notion of Left/Right as part of the “common sense” of modern politics and modern life. The applied methodology contextualises common sense, traces the historical development of the notion of Left/Right, analyses the sources and implications of the metaphor, and finally interprets Left/Right as a story about society and politics (i.e. as a political narrative). It would be most interesting to see (and interpret) how the metaphor and discourse developed and changed on both sides of the Iron Curtain, also historically, before, during and after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Chapter 7 shifts attention to political economy, and investigates neo-liberalism and hegemony in Britain and France in the 1980s. Hoare and Sperber stress that “Gramsci’s concepts are at their most potent when they are refined in order to adhere as closely as possible to concrete historical situations” (*Introduction* 202), and they show how Gramscian categories may sharpen the understanding of the diffusion of neoliberalism across the globe; they refer to Stuart Hall’s interpretation of Thatcherism as a hegemonic project, they briefly discuss the socialist politics in France before 1981, and the consequent developments. The Franco-British comparison shows that whereas economic transformation was utilised as a mobilising cause by Thatcher in Britain, in France it became an argument for popular demobilisation.

In Part Four, Hoare and Sperber attempt to map “Gramsci’s influence on contemporary critical thought”; they caution, however, that such a map is by necessity limited and schematic “not least because Gramsci has had an influence on virtually all subjects within the humanities (...) and with the availability, strengths and weaknesses of collections of his prison writing” (*Introduction* 205). The chapter places Gramsci within the perspective of the first generation of Western Marxism (alongside such figures as Georg Lukács, Walter Benjamin, Max Horkheimer and Herbert Marcuse), Italian post-war communism, and also post-Marxism, on the one hand, and postcolonial studies and cultural studies, on the other. The authors conclude this part with a brief overview of the influence of Gramsci’s thought in international relations, and especially the sub-discipline of international political economy, with attention to Robert Cox’s innovative work on a neo-Gramscian approach and internationalising the concept of hegemony. In an attempt to assess Gramsci’s future they suggest that his concepts and method “and in particular his extension and renewal of Marxism are useful tools for

thinking through capitalism today”; they also observe that Gramsci is “one of the foremost theorists of defeat in the history of critical thought” (*Introduction* 234), which, not that paradoxically, also makes his writings attractive, and they finally suggest retaining a healthier “*Gramscian pessimism* rather than a useless *defeatism*” (*Introduction* 234).

The book concludes with a concise guide to further reading, with separate sections on Gramsci in English, publications devoted to Gramsci’s life (including reference to the documentary “Everything That Concerns People” available on YouTube), secondary sources and other electronic resources. This guide chapter includes also a short section with a suggestion on reading Gramsci, especially useful for a potential reading group.

George Hoare and Nathan Sperber have produced a modern, methodologically consistent, introduction to Antonio Gramsci, his thought and legacy; an excellent guide to interdisciplinary Gramscian studies.

### ***The Routledge Guidebook to Gramsci’s “Prison Notebooks”***

Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks*, recently republished by Columbia University Press as a three volume set (Gramsci, 2011), are a classic text of twentieth century political and social thought, exerting considerable influence on contemporary debates in political philosophy, as well as theory and history of ideology, international relations, cultural studies and also translation studies. At the same they are complex and often difficult to read, especially without background knowledge of the appropriate historical, philosophical, ideological, and intellectual context and influences. Peter Ives and Adam David Morton have recently observed that reading Gramsci

[i]s no easy task. He plunges into the complexities of debates of his time that are now obscure to many readers and engages in an enormous range of topics that at first seem unrelated. Moreover, the prison conditions and his own method yield a set of open-ended, fragmented and intricately layered *Prison Notebooks* whose connections and argumentation do not lead linearly from one note to the next, but seem to ripple and weave in many directions. (Ives and Morton, 2017: xi)

A detailed guide to this work is therefore more than welcome, and John Schwarzmantel (already quoted above in this review),

who has published widely on citizenship and identity, ideology and politics, and, crucially for the topic discussed here, he co-edited (with Mark McNally) a volume on Gramsci and global politics (McNally and Schwarzmantel, eds., 2009), has all necessary expertise to author such a publication.

In the introductory chapter of *The Routledge Guidebook to Gramsci's "Prison Notebooks"* (hereafter *Guidebook*, followed by appropriate page number) "Gramsci before the *Prison Notebooks*," Schwarzmantel explains Gramsci's political career and his writings before the imprisonment in November 1926, he also reminds that Gramsci started writing his notebooks in February 1929, and "filled twenty-nine notebooks (school exercise books) with his reflections on history, politics, philosophy and culture, as well as four notebooks filled with translations from German, English and Russian texts, which Gramsci used as language exercises" (*Guidebook* 2). Schwarzmantel briefly explains Gramsci's use (often polemical) of Marx and Marx's writings in his early journalism, and stresses that the Sardinian's early focus on Marxism understood "not as a form of economism in which politics was determined by economics, but of Marxism as precisely the expression of human will and creative action" (*Guidebook* 6). This approach was developed in *PN* as the famous *philosophy of praxis*. The introduction shows Gramsci as a political actor "situated in the milieu of the Italian and international communist movement, and grappling with problems of how to organize the working class movement in a period of capitalist reaction" (*Guidebook* 28).

In chapter two, "The Nature and Genesis of Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*," Schwarzmantel discusses the key themes and originality of the text, he stresses that the *Notebooks* "have to be understood (...) as a fundamentally *political* text, if politics is understood in the broadest terms as the understanding of a historical epoch and an analysis of the forces acting to preserve and to change the nature of a political and social order" (*Guidebook* 30–31). The discussion in this chapter shows, among other things, how Gramsci's work defined and redefined politics (again, in connection with his concept of philosophy of praxis), also through his interpretation and reinterpretation of such terms as hegemony, civil society, the state, passive revolution, and Americanism and Fordism. Additionally, Schwarzmantel comments in this chapter on the limitations of the English-language selection of *PN* (in comparison with the full original Italian version).



The following four chapters concentrate on the issues crucial to *PN* and Gramsci's thought in general: intellectuals and education (Chapter 3), history and modernity (Chapter 4), politics, state and civil society (Chapter 5), and philosophy and Marxism (Chapter 6). The question of intellectuals was one with which Gramsci was deeply engaged; however "his concern with intellectuals and with education was a broader one, going beyond the specifically Italian role of intellectuals," it was a contribution to "a debate central to socialist and Marxist movements of his time (...) but Gramsci's theorization of intellectuals and his analysis of their role are both much wider and more penetrating than anything on the topic carried out previously by socialist theorists" (*Guidebook* 70–71). Gramsci defines intellectuals as the agents of legitimation of the existing order, as the functionaries of the superstructure (at two levels: civil society and state), the dominant group's deputies. Important parts of this chapter are devoted to Gramsci's analyses of Benedetto Croce's thought (further discussed in chapter six), on organic intellectuals and the political party, and on education. Schwarzmantel stresses that Gramsci is concerned with education understood as "a democratic force, and as a means of breaking down rather than reinforcing class divisions" (*Guidebook* 90–91), hence his critique of vocational schools, and advocacy of more general type of formative schools.

Chapter four focuses on "History and modernity." Many of Gramsci's most significant concepts, such as hegemony and passive revolution, are developed through careful analyses of historical events, especially the Italian Risorgimento, the complex process of Italian unification and independence from foreign rule, which ended in 1861 with the declaration of Victor Emmanuel as King of Italy. Gramsci's historical analysis "pointed out lessons for the politics of his own time. He saw the process of the Risorgimento as a passive revolution (...) [which] had left Italy with a defective legacy. It had been an incomplete revolution which it was the task of the working class movement to bring to fruition and in that way complete the process of making Italy a truly modern nation" (*Guidebook* 98). Sections of *PN* show Gramsci as a political visionary (especially his notes on Americanism and Fordism), some of his visions and solutions, however, never materialised; on the other hand it is also possible to see in Gramsci a precursor theorist of modernity, and contemporary "analyses of the present state of the global economy do in a sense follow in Gramsci's footsteps by exploring the political

and economic and social implications of the transformed structure of the economy” (*Guidebook* 148).

In Chapter five Schwarzmantel considers “Politics, state and civil society,” and discusses in considerable detail the sections dealing with topics crucial to Gramsci’s thought: the nature of politics, theory of the state and its relation to civil society, revolutionary politics, and the strategy dubbed war of position. Schwarzmantel stresses that these sections “were written in an attempt to analyze the victory of fascism in Italy and the reasons for the defeat of the revolutionary surge in Italy and beyond” (*Guidebook* 150–151), and the whole chapter demonstrates the practical dimension and commitment of Gramsci’s historical, political, and ideological considerations. Important sections of the *PN* are devoted to interpreting Machiavelli, and to constructing the concept of the political party as the modern Prince. Other issues discussed in this chapter include leadership and the masses, and concepts of the state. In his prison writings Gramsci “is formulating a new language of politics, even if he is using the same words (party, state, civil society) that have been used by earlier theorists of the political” (*Guidebook* 212).

Chapter six deals with Gramsci’s ideas on “Philosophy and Marxism,” concentrating especially on the notion of philosophy of praxis, since, as observed by Schwarzmantel, “the philosophy of praxis conveys and summarizes Gramsci’s distinctive interpretation of Marxism” (*Guidebook* 214). Philosophy is not seen by Gramsci as a specialised activity carried on by professional philosophers, but rather as “a process of imparting intellectual order, reinforcement and coherence to the mass of beliefs held in a particular society” (*Guidebook* 220), furthermore it “educates and transforms common sense and is the means through which a new culture and *Weltanschauung* (view of the world) is transmitted to the mass of the people, and this is an essential part of the revolutionary transformation of society” (*Guidebook* 219). For Gramsci, this philosophy of praxis can achieve the task of linking intellectuals with the non-professionals, in ways neither religion nor liberal idealism could manage. An important final section of this chapter is devoted to Gramsci’s critique of (and occasionally dialogue with) Benedetto Croce. Gramsci recognised the importance of Croce, both for his concept of hegemony, and for highlighting the significance of ideas and culture in a particular society; however, his “engagement with Croce’s idea should be understood not just as an intellectual exercise but as a profoundly political task” (*Guidebook* 246), he also argued that “Marxist historiography could apply the insights

of Croce's historicism, but purge that philosophy of its speculative and transcendent aspects" (*Guidebook* 255).

The last chapter is concerned with "The afterlife and influence of Gramsci's *Prison Notes*." Schwarzmantel discusses Gramsci's influences and presence in post-war Italy, and in the debates outside Italy. He focuses on neo-Gramscianism, understood as the use of categories and concepts derived from the *PN* in particular fields of academic enquiry, such as international relations, international political economy, and cultural studies (*Guidebook* 266–67), and stresses that the interpretation of Gramsci as the theorist of the superstructure "whose key concept was civil society certainly opened up a new perspective on Gramsci, and fitted in with (...) the rediscovery of civil society, seen both as the arena for struggle against one-party rule in communist systems and as the sphere of diversity and difference characteristic of liberal-democratic society" (*Guidebook* 274). Recent political developments in Europe (though not limited to Europe) show that the tools worked out by Gramsci can be still precisely applied for the purpose of ideological and political analyses. Schwarzmantel very aptly stresses (quoting the Italian scholar Guido Liguori) that the *PN* are the work of a classic author, "of someone whose interpretation of his own time remains relevant at all times" (*Guidebook* 285). This chapter also includes a short section on the use of ideas derived from the *PN* to analyze British politics and the phenomenon of Thatcherism (especially in the work of Stuart Hall),<sup>5</sup> and a conclusion on the status of *PN* today, where Schwarzmantel declares the new season of Gramsci studies, which "opens up for the first time a more adequate understanding of those complex reflections on history, philosophy, politics, language and culture, with their single theme underlying the many paragraphs and notes: how could subordinate groups end their subaltern position? How can a process of moral and intellectual reform be initiated and carried to a successful conclusion?" (*Guidebook* 292).

The discussion of individual topics is accompanied throughout the book with detailed referencing and cross-referencing (often comparing the English and Italian versions of *PN*), and every chapter concludes with detailed suggestions for further reading. The final bibliography is divided into studies directly concerned with Gramsci

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<sup>5</sup> For a comprehensive discussion of Gramsci and contemporary British politics, see the chapters in Part III of McNally and Schwarzmantel, eds. (2009).

in English, studies in Italian, and other works referred to in the book (furthermore, a list of Gramsci's own works precedes the chapters).

*The Routledge Guidebook to Gramsci's "Prison Notebooks"* will definitely become a most useful resource for Gramscian studies. John Schwarzmantel has achieved his aims, formulated in the Preface, and the *Guidebook* "introduces readers to Gramsci's highly original and exciting reflections on politics, history, philosophy and culture, which can help us make sense of our present epoch, different though it is in crucial aspects from the era in which Gramsci wrote his notes in the cell of a fascist prison" (*Guidebook* xii).

### Conclusions

The *oeuvre* of Antonio Gramsci remains open to further interpretations and reinterpretations. As observed by Mark McNally (2009: 199), "his writings continue to illuminate, provoke and inspire political thought and analysis, and are likely to do so well into the new millennium," whereas Filippini (2017: 122) claims that Gramsci "constantly reformulated and reutilized the vocabulary of other theoretical traditions different from Marxism – such as sociology, anthropology and linguistics – which today, 80 years after his death, has been revived in contemporary debates." It would be fascinating to see profound comparisons with the achievements of philosophers as diverse as, for example, José Ortega y Gasset (and his analyses of leadership and the masses in *The Revolt of the Masses*), on the one hand, and Hannah Arendt (with her concept of *vita activa* developed in *The Human Condition*, but also the insights offered in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*), on the other.

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