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# The Complex Convergence: Gramsci and Foucault

## **Abstract**

This is a review by Giacomo Tarascio of *Gramsci and Foucault: a Reassessment*, edited by David Kreps

## **Keywords**

Gramsci, Foucault, reassessment, comparison of positions, individuals, institutions.

# ***The Complex Convergence: Gramsci and Foucault***

Giacomo Tarascio

After years of a difficult relationship between the political reflections of two exponents of the utmost importance in global critical thought, the literature that has put Antonio Gramsci and Michel Foucault together has now reached such a level as to require a first mapping and review. It is here that the volume *Gramsci and Foucault: A Reassessment* edited by David Kreps<sup>1</sup> finds its place, a volume that gathers together the development of the ideas of the two thinkers within the challenges of contemporary global politics.

The volume consists of a preface by Stephen Gill, an introduction by Kreps, eight essays and a final chapter, again by Kreps. The variety of themes concerns different areas of research, following the vast reception that Gramsci and Foucault have received in the social sciences and humanities. This publication therefore offers the occasion to deal with some of the pivotal cruxes, which emerge from this comparison: it will primarily give space to the use of the Gramscian concepts, highlighting the problems and the potential developments in these types of analysis, carried out side by side with Foucault's theory.

The scope of the themes of the volume clearly starts from Gill's enthralling preface (*An Archaeology of the Future, to be Excavated by the Post-Modern Prince?*) in which, beginning from the proposal of his of a "post-modern Prince", a reflection is suggested on a number of potential aspects of the global conjuncture. Gill moves in the direction of researching new forces in global politics, associated with complex epistemologies and practices, which identify the limits of the dominant forms of development, in the sense of a different, fairer and more sustainable global order.

Observing power in a "macro sense" one can identify a hierarchically structured global order, which acts to increase systematically social capital and the privileged social strata. However, it does not mean that the power of capital is uncontested: on the contrary, one

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<sup>1</sup> Farnham, Ashgate, 2015, pp. XXIV-185.

of the reasons why this power is not hegemonic is due to its distributive consequences, which raise fundamental matters of inequality and social justice. Gill therefore speculates that the current neoliberal form of market civilization is specified historically by means of combining the old with the radically new. Among the political forms that characterize this market civilization, “passive revolution” becomes central, defined through Gramsci in a less pertinent philological way as “a non-hegemonic form of intellectual, moral and political change that relied on dominance and the imposition of rule from above, in the absence of consent to the leadership of a ruling class” (p. xvi).

The “stakes” concern the new images and mechanisms for the future of global governance, in which it is necessary to search for alternative forms of power/knowledge to challenge neo-liberal common sense. From this point of view, an innovative form of theory and global praxis could emerge, shedding light on new potentialities for a transformative politics which Gill defines as the post-modern Prince: this is not a traditional party but a democratic process in local and plural formation, included in a common development of imaginary and real alternatives to disciplinary neoliberalism and to market civilization.

In the introductory chapter Kreps briefly analyses the bibliography that connects Gramsci’s and Foucault’s thought highlighting, among other things, the interpretative line, which also characterizes some of the book’s contributions: that is to say, the bipolar concept according to which Foucault’s attention is directed “to the micro-levels of power over individual bodies”, while Gramsci turns his attention “to the macro-level of institutions” (p. 2). This kind of interpretation moves from the belief that a summary of the two thoughts goes beyond them taken singularly, offering a wider image of society. It is evident how, from a Gramscian point of view, the position described could lead to an interpretative dysfunction, reducing the content of the *Prison Notebooks* only to the level of the institution, to the detriment of a certainly more articulated analysis. Gramsci’s attention, directed to the micro level of the relations of power, is made clear by the reference to Peter Ives, which shows the points of contact between

the notions of “grammars” and “discourse”.<sup>2</sup> From the same tensions an alternative, and opposite, line of reading also develops, which sees Gramsci and Foucault as “separate worlds”, (p. 4) where hegemony is in contrast with discursive formations. As Kreps observes, a deviation among paradigms is created “within radical thought that has undoubtedly been detrimental to the broader aims of both sides of the divide: social change” (p. 5).

In the second chapter (*The Politics of Truth: For a Different Way of Life*), Alex Demirović examines the relation between discourse and reality through the positions of Foucault and Gramsci on truth, considering them complementary. Foucault is interested in how dominance in the relation of power is formed from below, universalized and imparted from a variety of different power practices. Rationality, truth and knowledge become power strategies “in the imposition of specific knowledge orders with which the one is dominated by the other” (p. 16). According to Foucault, truth is a form of violence, which is in contrast with the savage nature of the word, calling into question institutions, which rule discourse.

Gramsci is more interested, from his historical point of view, in the way in which such a discourse could bring very different ruling powers to a compromise, but yet precarious unity with those social groups they rule. In this regard, the conflicts between hegemonic dominance and subaltern groups, which arise within the articulation of power, are more deeply outlined. Gramsci analyses the conflicts within civil society and how the intellectuals, functional to the superstructures, develop the concepts with which the subaltern is dominated by the bourgeoisie.

Last, Demirović observes how Foucault concentrates more on the ethic of truth as an individual position, while Gramsci is more concerned with the problem of a politics of truth, of the struggle for the means of knowledge and the ability to impose a certain “objective reality” within a hegemonic struggle. Science represents a moment in the formation of a world vision. Therefore, Gramsci is interested in the problem of truth as a collective position and asks this question in the context of socially assimilated general process.

In the next chapter (*Rethinking the Gramsci–Foucault Interface: A Cultural Political Economy Interpretation Oriented to Discourses of Competi-*

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Ives 2004.

tiveness) Ngai-Ling Sum explores further the complementarity between Gramsci and Foucault, developing an oriented approach to re-examine their work in terms of connections and synergies. This approach is based on what Gramsci defined the regularities of the “determinate market” and their relationship to the integral state, placed side by side with what Foucault called liberal and neo-liberal economic rationality in relation with governability and statecraft. Specifically, Sum focuses on what concerns the change of the economic image of competitiveness, the development of competitive subjects, the technologies of the discourse of competitiveness and the wider implications for the state in its integral sense.

“Gramscianizing Foucault”<sup>3</sup> and analysing the development of the emerging agenda of the cultural political economy, Sum presents a heuristic scheme of six “discursively selective” moments in the production of hegemonies. Then she explains this case study applying it to the discourses on “competitiveness”, drawing from Gramsci’s analyses of Americanism and Fordism, in addition to Foucault’s work on liberalism.

In the fourth chapter (*Power and Resistance: Linking Gramsci and Foucault*) Marcus Schulzke goes partly on Sum’s perspective, adding Foucault’s influences to Gramsci’s theories. Specifically, Schulzke searches for a Gramscian interpretation to Foucault’s theory of power, functional to theorizing a resistance to overcome the numerous forms of power in modern life. In this sense, “Foucault’s theory of power can incorporate Gramsci’s thoughts on political action” and “Gramsci’s social transformation can be further developed with the help of Foucault’s work” (p. 57).

With the theory of hegemony, Schulzke offers an explanation of the agent, the tactics and the goals of resistance throughout the political party. Foucault’s analysis of power finds a limit in the lack of a convincing explanation to how individuals could become aware of disciplinary constraints, being able to act against them when they are not able to use power intentionally. Gramsci provides a strong theory of resistance which can fill this gap, highlighting how activists can appropriate power for themselves for their goals even when power is beyond intentional control.

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<sup>3</sup> “Gramscianizing Foucault” is a concept first introduced by David Harris (1992) p. 156.

The form of the party, developed from these premises, is composed in a unifying structure, able to provide a strategy to overcome the expressions of disciplinary power and to replace the agent of resistance. In the party “members perform vital roles in challenging hegemony and developing counter-hegemony” (p. 67). Hegemony supports the interests of the élites, but institutions and hegemonic values acquire an autonomous existence and, for this reason, they are not directly controlled by the élites themselves: revolutionary change is therefore located in the existing institutions, which can work to undermine the élites.

Continuing in an opposite way, Jean-Paul Gagnon (*Building a Gramsci–Foucault Axis of Democracy*) researches the construction of democracy directly in individuals, without the party’s mediation. Indeed, Gagnon builds his argumentation on the idea that “Gramscian and Foucauldian theory support a democracy focused on citizen-experts who actively resist power” (p. 75): for this purpose, he analyses the objects, which relate to criteria associated with the ontology of democracy at the heart of Gramsci’s and Foucault’s work, particularly politics, culture, discourse, hegemony and [the individual](#). Following this selection of the primary works, the author continues with a programmatic investigation of the literature regarding Gramsci’s and Foucault’s contribution to democracy, which compares the democratic concepts of both.

Particularly interesting is the sixth chapter (*Subalternity In and Out of Time, In and Out of History*), in which Sonita Sarker shows how the dialectics of subalternity is located in an unstructured stream of time, outside hegemonic history. Dialectics is addressed in all its breadth to avoid defining identities in a basic way and without a context, since focalizing on a part of dialectics would preserve the hegemonic hierarchy between “powerful” and “powerless.” According to Gayatri Spivak, subalternity is understood as an inherent condition in group identities, so that the subaltern should indicate “a position without identity”:<sup>4</sup> that is to say not an inherent condition, “but made to appear as such as a historically understood position” (p. 92).

Sarker puts the dialectics of subalternity between time and history, so that hegemonic forms become evident as methods to co-opt history in the domain of modernity and to exclude outside time

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Spivak 2005, p. 476.

those not considered modern. In this sense, hegemonic forces try to eliminate opposition, moving its insurrectional potential to a different category of space-time: “pluralization can function as a form of colonialism in which diversity can be controlled by hegemonic forces that either subsume it or relegate it to a disempowered zone” (p. 94). Still with an excessive attention to isolate the supposed postmodern elements in Gramscian thoughts, underestimating for example the concept of passive revolution, the author retraces a line of thinking from “subaltern” to Foucault’s “subjugated knowledge.” Sarker’s analysis concludes in the present with the description of the *Indigenous Women’s Network* (Texas, USA) and the *International Dalit Solidarity Network* (Copenhagen, Denmark), defining the notion of subalternity in a current usage.

The seventh chapter by Jelle Versieren and Brecht de Smet (*The Passive Revolution of Spiritual Politics: Gramsci and Foucault on Modernity, Transition and Religion*) deals with the conceptualizations of modernity and transition in Gramscian and Foucauldian analyses. Specifically, the authors focus on the relation between religion and modernity throughout the different historical cases of France, Italy and Iran. Moving from a discussion of Gramsci’s conception of modernity, supported and integrated with an elaboration of the notion of hegemony, they highlight through Peter Thomas’s thought how the Gramscian historicist methodology has the ontological status of a dialectical, organic and open totality.<sup>5</sup> In this sense, Gramsci goes beyond the archetypical trajectory that sees modernity as a coherent formation of bourgeois hegemony, giving, rather, visibility to the elements of transition and break that give shape to a passive revolution. Indeed, outside the borders of the French revolution “the absence of a political revolution paralleled a lack of cultural-religious transformations that would reorient the dominant feudal worldviews towards bourgeois notions” (p. 117). Versieren and de Smet accomplish a less convincing connection on the concept of passive revolution with those of biopower and governmentality, in which the Gramscian conceptualization loses its material basis. In this direction, after analysing Foucault’s reading of 1979 Iranian revolution, the conceptions of both thinkers on modernity, religion and transition

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Thomas 2009, pp. 8–31.



are placed side by side, collocating “the praxis of spiritual politics in the fluid zone of transition towards modernity”: spiritual politics represents therefore “an unarticulated appeal to an ethics of justice which is rooted in the intersection between the modern and the pre-modern” (p. 125).

In the eighth chapter (*Post-Neoliberal Regional Integration in Latin America: Alianza Bolivariana para los Pueblos de Nuestra América “ALBA”*) Efe Can Gürcan and Onur Bakiner analyse counter-hegemony, which develops from the regional integration and is alternative to the hegemony of the neoliberal paradigm. The theory and practice of regional integration became fields for struggle after the failure of Latin America neoliberal reorganization, emerging as a political, economic and cultural alternative to the hegemony of capitalist globalization. In this sense, counter-hegemony concerns the “alignment of progressive forces that seek to overcome domination embedded in structures of material production, political decision-making, and the production of knowledge and social values in late capitalism” (p. 131).

According to Gürcan and Bakiner, the difference between Gramsci and Foucault lies in the idea of the former of “institutional resistance”, which is alternative to capitalist hegemony and different from the idea of the latter, according to which “there is no standpoint outside of the existing discursive relations that would provide social actors with the leverage to act and think toward human emancipation” (p. 135). However, with the intention of increasing the distance between the Gramscian critique and the Foucauldian one, the two authors exclude the possibility of a common connection in the concept of hegemony, introducing at least two disparities. Indeed, crossing in this sense the Gramsci of the “factory councils” with that of the *Prison Notebooks*, on the one hand they introduce an institutional moment, which is preparatory to the resistance but risks making “historic[al] awareness” come first compared to political action. On the other hand, they risk losing the “relational”<sup>6</sup> value of hegemony, in putting it dichotomically in contrast with resistance and not as a means of it.

In the last article, Heather Brunskell-Evans (*The Hegemony of Psychology: The Practice and Teaching of Paediatrics in Post-Invasion Iraq*)

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<sup>6</sup> Liguori 2015, p. 43.

deals with a case study concerning the reorganization of paediatric psychosocial education in post-occupation Iraq. Gramscian and Foucauldian studies are structured in relation to the types of micro-political relations which emerged from the USA's attempt to change the regime. Starting from the introduction of the Western scientific canon in Iraqi paediatric practice, Brunskell-Evans examines the effects of a normalizing, and functional to post-war westernization, knowledge. The connection with the Foucauldian analysis is immediate: where "the human subject is the product of power there is no place of freedom outside of power to which we can escape" (p. 166); therefore freedom is achievable with critical investigations into the concrete practices of liberal government.

The Gramscian point of view shows its effectiveness in the psychological analysis of power relations, even if Brunskell-Evans seems to limit it to a social level. From here, a development takes place of the reflection on the Gramscian idea, taken from Marx, of human nature as the complex of social relations: from this definition, it follows how "the formulation of psychology was rational in that it released the human being from a previous oppressive interpretive framework" (p. 159). Psychology is therefore part of those utopian, religious and scientific fields of knowledge which constitute the historical development of man and the transformations necessary to the achievement of freedom. Brunskell-Evans therefore outlines a background teleology, which nonetheless is ascribed to the same Gramscian notes, assuming a determinate reading of the concepts that are used: under this point of view, the Gramscian strategy of resistance has to be considered unwieldy compared to the Foucauldian one, because, before operating on the level of liberation, it should first connect with capitalist economic interests until the liberal government "fails to achieve a free society and reproduces class divisions" (p. 168).

In the conclusions (*The Complexity of Social Systems: Could Hegemony Emerge from the Micro-Politics of the Individual?*) Kreps searches for the way to re-read Foucault and Gramsci inside the theory of complexity, where nominalism makes the former appropriate to this landing place, whereas the theory of the latter would be limited by existentialism. Here Kreps retraces the critical position, which

Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe<sup>7</sup> carry out on the concept of hegemony, which should be valid only inside a relational totality that has no predetermined centre, allowing different and variable relations of dominion among its constituent parts.<sup>8</sup> However, these positions come from a “static” assumption of the Gramscian notes.<sup>9</sup> On the contrary, from a philological reading it is possible to see that a successful answer to the contradictions, again suggested by Kreps, is provided by the concept of “the relations of forces”.<sup>10</sup>

Connecting back to the first chapter, Kreps outlines complexity theory as the possible convergence between Gramsci’s theory and that of Foucault, being potentially able to provide “a far better picture of society and the relationship between the group and the individual than either does on their own” (p. 179). Therefore, if language and discourse are understood as a self-organizing complex system, “the conditions of possibility for hegemonic articulation become likewise susceptible to complexity theory” (p. 180).

All the essays in the volume move in the direction of a theoretical integration between Gramsci and Foucault, even if not in a definitive form, but open to political research. The results are therefore heterogeneous and sometimes in mutual contradiction, but they allow various developments to be glimpsed. However, a rigid confinement of Gramscian theory on the macro-level of politics is evident, to which a tendency is often added to Foucauldizing the notes of the *Prison Notebooks*. In this sense, the term “counter-hegemony” is often used as if it were formulated by Gramsci, even if, on the contrary, this conceptualization does not exist in his writings. The authors do not seem to be aware of this misunderstanding, failing therefore to use the Gramscian text with clarity.

This weakness in the usage of Gramscian theses is due to the mastering only in rough outline of the concepts, from which it is difficult to understand the articulation and the dialectical tension. Even the collocation next to complexity theory cannot take place, except by deploying all the philological complexity of Gramsci

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Torfing 1999, p. 36.

<sup>8</sup> According to Laclau such an idea is precisely what Gramsci means with his notion of historical bloc (Cf. Laclau 1981, p. 53).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Frosini 2009, pp. 108-10.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., pp. 110-15.

himself, however little **this is** inclined to be reformulated in a positivist approach. It is therefore desirable that the way shown by this volume should be developed in the direction of a research discourse shared by the two thinkers, but this can only pass through a more conscious application of Gramscian concepts.

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