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Hegemony and Education. Gramsci, Post-Marxism and Radical Democracy Revisited (Review)

Mike Donaldson
University of Wollongong, miked51@bigpond.com

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Abstract

Review of Hegemony and Education. Gramsci, Post-Marxism and Radical Democracy Revisited Deb J. Hill, Lexington Books, Rowman and Littlefield Publishers Inc, Lanham, Boulder, New York, Toronto, Plymouth, 2007.

***Hegemony and Education. Gramsci, Post-Marxism and Radical Democracy Revisited*. Deb J. Hill, Lexington Books, Rowman and Littlefield Publishers Inc, Lanham, Boulder, New York, Toronto, Plymouth, 2007**

Reviewed by Mike Donaldson, Sociology, University of Wollongong.

Deb Hill proficiently and persuasively engages with the principal exponents of post-Marxism through a careful consideration of Antonio Gramsci's early works and his *Prison Notebooks.* She does this to defend socialism against claims that it should reconstitute itself as a radical form of democracy, or disappear.

Hill identifies the key attitudes of the post-Marxists as expressed over more than 20 years in the writings of Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe, Sue Golding, Colin Mercer, Glynn Daly, Anna Marie Smith, Norberto Bobbio and Jacob Torfing. They developed post-Marxism because they have discovered in "tired" and "antiquated" Marxism, a "fundamentalism" that must be eradicated using the tools of post-structuralism, the later Wittgenstein and post-Heidegerrian hermeneutics. "Traditional" socialist theory is "closed" and "claustrophobic" and commits against diversity and difference a symbolic violence that can best be combated by the development of an "anti-essentialist stand" which is the *sine qua non* of a new vision for and of the left. The concept of "collectivity", too, must be rejected. Social unity is unsustainable, illusory and antithetical to real democracy. Not surprisingly, then, post-Marxists deny the salience of classes as key historical and political forces acting through their political parties and other organisations. The task of revolution is superseded by the political project of "radicalizing" the modern democratic tradition, of developing a rapprochement with key liberal ideas that moves beyond both socialism and liberalism toward a "Third Way".

Having identified post-Marxism's key contentions, Hill commences her defence of socialist theory by clearly and systematically restating Gramsci's "overarching objective". This was no less than the development of humankind's self-creative

capacity to build a qualitatively richer human culture and fuller human relationships against a capitalism engineered into everyday patterns of living, thinking, talking and feeling. Even after the destruction of the Italian left and the triumph of fascism, the *only* way that Gramsci could see this happening, was through the sustained efforts of the history- and culture-making proletariat to produce its own new and expansive hegemony.

Among many other things, this required the proletariat to replace its predominantly alienated personality with a socialised and liberated psyche, with an active class-consciousness subversive of existing values, understandings and practices. This would contain an integral vision of life and its own philosophy and morality.

According to Gramsci, the "initial act of liberation" to achieve this socialist hegemony was for socialists to associate with like-minded individuals in an organisation that in order to be revolutionary, would be moral, encouraging a liberty of the mind, a capacity for tolerance, self-discipline and a disregard for self-interest. This association would promote study and research and logical thought sensitive to the non-rational and aesthetic dimensions of knowing. It would build solidarity, democracy and reciprocity in a collectivity that could only be as strong and effective as the character and practices of its individual members because the proletariat's new progressive hegemony was not a project of the future, but was how it lived now. For Gramsci, human agency and self-capability was *the* central feature of this new form of political party, this new "collective will" in which everyone actively participates intellectually and organisationally. The quality of the relationships within the party would determine the worth of the socialism that it would help to construct.

Arrayed against the counter-capitalist movement were the extensive and powerful civic, political and economic organisations of the bourgeoisie, a reality that the post-Marxists largely ignore. To defeat them, the proletariat, through an "interior revolution", develops new ways of thinking to create a communist movement, and Hill brilliantly expresses what Gramsci thought this new way of thinking involved.

In a nutshell, because the concerted application of voluntary effort on the physical world reveals the future, "new thinking" requires, as its starting point, involvement in human sensuous activity, in an open-ended, first-hand critical engagement with the concrete. It would accentuate human agency, subjectivity, in its interaction with the objective historical and political situation, considering its effects critically and analytically. And yet, this dialectical approach is synthesising, drawing together disparate and discrete elements, seeing their organic interconnectedness and relatedness within the social totality. In this process, new thinking restores the balance of head and heart, mind and emotion, feeling and judgement. Revolutionaries, becoming critics and activists simultaneously, learn to reflect critically on their personal and social realities, recognising that their selves and their thinking are part of the problem.

With clarity and insight, Hill rigorously applies the elements of Gramsci's new thinking, as briefly summarised here, to the post-Marxists themselves. She finds that their thinking does not measure up at all. She explains that the key concepts that post-Marxists use, such as "positionality", "inclusion" and "incommensurability", lack explanatory ability and represent "a naïve under-theorisation of the nature of power and…the abandonment of the concept of hegemony". However, Hill freely admits that the post-Marxists sometimes get some of it right, but when they do she convincingly shows how Gramsci expressed it more clearly, without abandoning Marxism.

If the post-Marxists have any credibility in any sort of left in any country, it is largely because of their regular invocation of the name of Antonio Gramsci, a profound and highly respected thinker undeniably of the left but definitely neither reformist nor Stalinist. Hill reminds us of Joseph Buttigieg's comment over a decade ago that there is "a certain discomfort on the part of the [post-Marxist] authors with the fact that Gramsci was a Marxist; a certain anxiety (although not always explicit) to show that the best elements of Gramsci's thought are those that can be collocated within the ambit of currently fashionable 'post'-discourses: post-structuralism, post-Marxism, post-modernism". What Hill's careful scholarship reveals beyond any

doubt, is that post-Marxism is not “based on”, “inspired by” or “in the tradition of” Gramsci, as the post-Marxists claim, but that it is thoroughly and fundamentally anti-Gramscian.

Hill concludes by pointing out that the post-Marxists’ understanding of Marxism itself is “alarmingly facile and shallow”, presenting “an extraordinarily simplistic and pernicious picture of Marxism”. But in the end, it does not really matter what the post-Marxists have said about Marxism. As Hill reminds us, Gramsci was very clear that the test of a theory is in its effects on the historical and concrete world, and he strongly insisted that ideas that bear only a “theoretical relationship” to the concrete are ”illusory”. In more than 20 years, post-Marxism has existed almost entirely in a few university departments largely in the metropoles of the northern hemisphere, and it can claim Tony Blair as its finest fruit. Post-structuralism and post-modernism, no longer in fashion, have run their course. For all the good reasons that Deb Hill has carefully explored in her book, post-Marxism is expiring along with them.