An Overview of the Gramsci Situation in North America

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Abstract

This is the Abstract of the English-language article by Marcus Green, giving an overview of the current Gramsci situation in North America, with special regard to the United States.

Keywords

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In the first two decades of the twenty-first century, 'morbid phenomena' have emerged in the crisis of neoliberal hegemony in the United States. The election of President Barak Obama in 2008 appeared as a moderate alternative to the failures of George W. Bush's presidency and the neoconservative Project for the New American Century. However, in the wake of the global financial crisis of 2008-2009, in which approximately 3.8 million Americans lost their homes, the rightwing populist Tea Party movement emerged to thwart President Obama's agenda. The weakness of the Obama Administration in addressing the causes and consequences of the economic crisis gave rise to Occupy Wall Street in September 2011, in which activists occupied Zuccotti Park in New York City's financial district to protest growing economic inequality and corporate influence in politics (Dube and Kaplan 2012). Within a matter of weeks, Occupy developed into a political movement across the United States, becoming one of the most significant leftist political developments in 40 years, before city and federal government agencies systematically dismantled encampments across the county in November of 2011. Drawing on anti-immigrant and anti-globalization sentiment, Donald Trump successfully drew upon the populism of the Tea Party to generate support for his 'Make America Great Again' movement, which provided a base for his presidential victory in 2016 (Crehan 2018, Hart 2020). Emboldened by Trump's presidency various white supremacist groups – including members of the Ku Klux Klan, neo-fascists, neo-Nazis, and right-wing militias – converged in Charlottesville, Virginia in August 2017 for the 'Unite the Right' rally, which became a symbol of the resurgent white nationalist movement in the county. The Trump administration's failure to respond to the coronavirus pandemic in early 2020 exacerbated the public health crisis and contributed to the subsequent economic crisis, as tens of millions workers filed for unemployment insurance. The murder of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and other

African Americans in the summer of 2020 sparked the largest protests in U.S. history, with 15 million to 26 million people participating in Black Lives Matter demonstrations in hundreds of cities across the county (Buchanan, et al., 2020). After losing the 2020 presidential election, President Trump organized the 'Save America' rally in Washington, D.C. on January 6, 2021, and in one of the worst attacks on American democracy, his supporters stormed the U.S. Capitol Building in attempt to overturn the election results. Against the backdrop of these social and political developments, North America experienced increasing catastrophic weather events – including hurricanes, tornadoes, floods, droughts, and wild fires – caused by climate change. The growing internal divisions, popular discontent, and disillusionment with the political establishment over the past twenty years has culminated in a 'terminal crisis' of hegemony (Silver and Payne 2020, cf. Fraser 2019).

In this crisis, there are fractures between some segments of the popular masses and traditional ideologies, and other segments remain attached to traditional ideologies but skeptical of the authority of the ruling class. As new ideologies emerge to address the current situation, reactionary forces and government agencies have sought to prevent them from becoming popular (cf. Gramsci 1975, Q3§34, pp. 311-2; 1996, pp. 32-3).[1] A number of scholars working in the North America have utilized Gramscian categories to analyze aspects of the current conjuncture, particularly in the areas of capitalism and common sense, immigration and racism, and climate politics.

As millions of Americans lost their jobs, homes, and savings, the global financial crisis of 2008-2009 drew public attention to issues of class and inequality, and it provided a critical opening to question popular common sense notions of capitalism. In her book *Gramsci's Common Sense: Inequality and Its Narratives* (2016), Kate Crehan utilizes the Gramscian notion of common sense to examine the views of the Tea Party movement and the Occupy movement. As Crehan explains, the Tea Party was a combination of top-down and bottom-up populism, drawing support from corporate-funded organizations, such as FreedomWorks, as well as from grassroots activists. The Tea Party arose in response to the prospect that the newly-elected Obama Administration planned to bailout home-

[1].

owners, and it developed a 'makers and takers' narrative that rallied against irresponsibility and unearned government handouts (Crehan 2016, pp. 139–9). They viewed themselves as patriots and often claimed 'We want our country back' (NPR 2010). As Crehan argues, Tea Party common sense reflected a capitalist worldview with 'its unwavering faith in free enterprise, its objection to taxation, and its commitment to untrammeled rights for all business owners, from the individual entrepreneur up to the largest corporation' (p. 145). In contrast, Occupy Wall Street's (OWS) slogan 'We are the 99%' provided the foundation for a narrative that highlighted the power of the wealthy minority over the bleak prospects of the majority. It helped provide coherence to common sense understandings of people's lived experience by connecting it with what Gramsci called 'good sense' (Crehan 2016, pp. 146-83. Cf. Rehmann 2013, Green 2015). Whereas the Tea Party is often viewed as a successful political movement because it moved the Republican Party to the right and successfully supported electoral campaigns, the Occupy movement is often viewed as a failure, because it did not move the Democratic Party to the left or translate into electoral victories, which, in fact, were not OWS's goals. As Crehan argues, 'the point is not OWS's failure to bring about any lasting change, but its role in bringing to the fore an existing, but suppressed, good-sense understanding of fundamental problems inherent in the current American system' (p. 176).

As Gramsci posits, common sense encompasses common modes of thought, opinions, and conceptions of the world, which are often incoherent and contradictory, but, in his words, there is a 'healthy core of common sense, that component of it which can, in fact, be called good sense and which deserves to be developed and made more uniform and coherent' (Q11§12; Gramsci 2021, p. 77). Making elements of common sense 'more uniform and coherent' as 'good sense' provides a basis to develop a 'new common sense' (or critical consciousness) in which people strengthen their intellectual and organizational capacities in the process of transforming their lived conditions. (Green and Ives 2009; Green 2015). However, such processes are complex and contradictory. For example, in his book The *Discourses of Capitalism: Everyday Economists and the Production of Common Sense*, Christian Chun documents how elements of both common sense and good sense are reflected in the ways in

which everyday people view and make sense of capitalism and its impact on their lives. As Chun writes, people's engagements, perceptions, and narrations of capitalism present 'contradictory discourses' which 'maintain existing hegemonic institutions and their practices, and simultaneously provide avenues of thought, articulations, and actions to imagine and create economic alternatives' (p. 22). In his follow-up book *A World without Capitalism?* (2021), Chun further explores sociolinguistic and ethnographic examples of Gramscian good sense in the anti-capitalist imaginaries of people's lived experiences.

In their book *Consequences of Capitalism: Manufacturing Discontent and Resistance* (2021), Noam Chomsky and Marv Waterstone initially present a more pessimist view of the potential openings for developing 'good sense'. Drawing from Gramsci and the work of Mark Fisher, Chomsky and Waterstone view prevailing common sense as capitalist realism (ix, p. 59). With the notion of 'capitalist realism', Fisher sought to capture the idea, attributed to Fredric Jameson, that 'it is easier to image the end of the world than it is to image the end of capitalism' (Fisher 2009, p. 2; cf., Jameson 1994, p. xii; 2003, p. 76). As Fisher explains, capitalist realism reflects 'the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it' (Fisher 2009, p. 2). Though it is certainly true that capitalist common sense reflects the current popular mentality, such a position narrows the opening for developing 'good sense' and for envisioning alternative political imaginaries. However, Chomsky and Waterstone indicate that there are fissures in common sense capitalist realism demonstrated in public discontent and in the recent activity of numerous social movements struggling for social, political, economic, and environmental justice. Given such resistance, élites have however effectively exploited public discontent by pitting elements of society against each other with populist strategies of nationalism, patriotism, and nativism,

in which blame for present conditions is placed on the most vulnerable segments of populations (immigrants, non-dominant communities, the old, the young, the differently abled, 'deviants' from sexual or other norms), who are then relentlessly scapegoated for the sake of the 'virtuous' and deserving elements of society (Chomsky and Waterstone 2021, p. xi).

The populist elements of nationalism, patriotism, and nativism were visible in the Tea Party movement, and in his 2016 presidential campaign Donald Trump effectively channeled them into his 'Make America Great Again' movement. Trump constructed a narrative that the American way of life was under attack from immigrants, Muslims, the media, certain elites, free-trade, and crime. In his speech of June 16, 2015, in which he announced his candidacy, he drew upon a longstanding nativist fear of immigrants, targeting Mexicans specifically. Trump said:

> The U.S. has become a dumping ground for everybody else's problems. (APPLAUSE)
> Thank you. It's true, and these are the best and the finest. When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best. They're not sending you. They're not sending you. They're sending people that have lots of problems, and they're bringing those problems with us. They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people.
> But I speak to border guards and they tell us what we're getting. And it only makes common sense. It only makes common sense. They're sending us not the right people (Trump 2015).

Though Trump's appeal to 'common sense' reflects the American notion of sound and practical judgement, his use of the phrase inadvertently contains Gramscian implications, in that he draws upon a traditional narrative that it is just a matter of practical judgement that immigrants are the cause of America's decline, whether it be from crime, drugs, the taking of jobs, the weaking of American norms and values, or introducing supposedly un-American ideas and languages into the culture. As Kate Crehan argues, Trump was able to generate a narrative of America's decline and of its causes that resonated with people and appealed to their common sense (Crehan, 2018). Though many suggest that Trump's rhetoric appeals largely to the conservativism of white evangelicals, Gillian Hart argues that Trumpism attracts a larger base drawn to Christian nationalism that is predominately but not completely white (Hart, 2021). 'Seen within the longer sweep of American history', according to Philip Gorski, 'Trumpism is not really so novel. Most of its central tropes – racism, conquest, apocalypse, and nostalgia – have been core elements of American religious nationalism since the late 17th century' (as quoted by Hart 2021, p. 65). As Hart explains, although Christian nationalism draws

significant support from white evangelicals, the two groups are not synonymous. Rather than appealing to religious piety, Christian nationalism utilizes Christian language to draw racial and religious boundaries that correlate with 'white supremacy, anti-immigration sentiment, fear of Muslims, and antipathy to most other religions' (Hart 2021, p. 66). Trump successfully drew upon the themes of Christian nationalism to create a narrative that suggested that the American way of life was under attack from outsiders, particularly from Muslims and Mexicans, and that it was necessary to 'secure' the southern border, as reflected in his speeches and in the 'build the wall' chants (referring to the border wall) at his rallies. With such a narrative, Trump was able to construct a coalition of support across class boundaries (Hart 2020; 2021). His supporters believe their way of life is under attack and that Trump is the savior who will 'Make America Great Again'. The storming of the Capitol on 6 January, 2021 to prevent the certification of Joseph Biden's presidential nomination demonstrates the extent to which Trump's followers perceive Biden's moderate neoliberalism as a threat to their authoritarian neoliberal worldview. The siege of the Capitol, which has resulted in more than 800 arrests, included members of rightwing militias, Christian evangelicals, Christian nationalists, and white-supremacist groups, among others (Gjelten, 2021)

Though Trump's views on immigration appear extreme, he draws upon a longstanding anti-immigrant sentiment that runs through American culture that largely targets Latino migrants. In his book *Reform Without Justice: Latino Migrant Politics and the Homeland Security State* (2013), Alfonso Gonzales utilizes a Gramscian framework to demonstrate that an anti-migrant hegemony exists in the U.S., pervading think tanks, radio and TV talk shows, and local governments to Congress and the national security state. Anti-migrant hegemony is framed around the idea that authoritarian solutions are required to address the 'immigration crisis', and it is supported by a 'good immigrant v. bad immigrant' binary, in which 'good immigrants' may potentially stay in the U.S. but 'bad immigrants' who step out of line 'must be policed, detained, and deported' (Gonzales, 2013, p. 7). With the consolidation of the national security state after 9/11 in which there was an acceleration of mass deportations, immigrant reformers essentially accepted the ideology of the anti-migrant hegemony, instead of adopting a

framework of human rights or racial justice, which in turn narrowed the opportunities for reform. Between 2002 and 2012, as Gonzales notes, more people were removed from the U.S. than in the past 110 years combined (2). Three million people were deported during the Obama Administration alone (Guerrero 2021), and the rate of deportations actually decreased during the Trump Administration (Gramlich 2020). Gonzales situates U.S. race relations and the state of immigration in the context of the 'organic crisis of North American capitalism'. The transition from a Fordist to a post-Fordist economic model, as well as the implementation of neo-liberal reforms, increased the relocation of production to the Global South, which in turn increased the rate of deindustrialization in the U.S. and produced the rise of the service sector, which is 'dependent on a highly flexible labor force…made up of unskilled, nonunionized migrant workers' (p. 16). Though some have argued that Trump signaled the end of neoliberalism because of his anti-globalization and isolationist positions, Gonzales argues that Trumpism represents an authoritarian form of neoliberal govern-ance that promotes a more repressive state and antagonist racial politics (Gonzales, 2017). Echoing the politics of Christian nationalism, authoritarian neoliberalism, Gonzales argues, includes a 'resurgent racism that moves society toward a more openly authoritarian political posture that targets racial and social minor-ities, migrants/refugees (even children), women, members of the LGBT community, and nearly all political dissenters' (Gonzales 2018, p. 547). In contrast to mainstream Latino politics, which remains trapped in anti-migrant hegemony, Gonzales argues that a Gramscian theoretical perspective to Latino politics, what he calls 'subaltern Latino politics' offers a framework to challenge authoritarian neoliberalism (Gonzales 2018).

The U.S.'s authoritarian and racialized approach to immigration is mirrored in its approach to policing and incarceration. The mas-sive Black Lives Matter demonstrations in the summer of 2020 were a continuation of the movement that initially emerged in 2013 and 2014 after police and vigilantes murdered several African Ame-ricans. Though the movement for black lives itself is a continuation of the long struggle for black liberation in the United States (Taylor 2016), its current manifestation is a response to the crisis of policing that grew out of the emergence of neoliberal capitalism

(Camp and Heatherton 2016). In his book, *Incarcerating the Crisis: Freedom Struggles and the Rise of the Neoliberal State*, Jordan T. Camp argues that the rise of mass criminalization, aggressive policing, and mass incarceration emerged as a 'common sense' response to the crisis of neoliberalism. What he labels as the 'neoliberal carceral state', which is rooted in the Cold War-era prioritization of security, took shape in the 1970s with counter-insurgency mobilizations against the civil rights movement and in the neoliberal restructuring of the state. This occurred in the context of capitalist restructuring which created 'accumulation of wealth and affluence for the few, on the one hand, and deepened poverty, unemployment, mass homelessness, and declining real wages for poor and working people on the other' (p. 16). Neoliberal austerity measures that cut funding to public housing, education, health care, employment, and other social safety net programs, which 'disproportionately impacted poor and working-class people of color, who endured unemployment at Depression-era levels for decades' (p. 16). As Camp shows, 'moral panics around race, crime, disorder, security, and law and order became the primary legitimating discourse for the expanded use of policing, prisons, and urban securitization in the state's management of social and economic crises' (p. 15). The over-policing of poor and racialized communities, which has been supported by both major political parties in the U.S., became the common sense approach to respond to structural inequality and poverty, which is reflected in rates of incarceration. The prison population grew from 200,000 in the late 1960s to 2.4 million in the early 2000s, and by 2016 there were 6.9 million people in the criminal justice system, including jail, prison, parole and probation (p. 3). This coincided 'with a shift in the racial composition of prisoners from majority white to almost 70 percent people of color', with disproportionate rates of incarceration for 'the unemployed, under-employed, and never-employed Black and Latino poor' (p. 3). In the context of the neoliberal carceral state, the movement for black lives demonstrates the crisis of policing across the country (Camp and Heatherton 2016). Despite the unprecedented number of demonstrators across the country in 2020, as Eyako Heh and Joel Wainwright show, the state's response to the protests resulted in increased surveillance and heightened policing. 'Indeed,' they write, 'the ubiquity of urban surveillance, the militarization of policing,

and the crisis of neoliberal capitalism all point to greater struggles ahead' (Heh and Wainwright 2022, p. 16).

The political and economic crises of neoliberalism exist alongside an ecological crisis that worsens by the day. As the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) releases bleaker and bleaker reports on the state of the climate and humanity, the world's biggest emitters of greenhouse gases continually fail to respond to the crisis. As Hans-Otto Pörtner (Co-Chair IPCC Working Group II) stated in February 2022: 'The scientific evidence is unequivocal: climate change is a threat to human wellbeing and the health of the planet. Any further delay in concerted global action will miss a brief and rapidly closing window to secure a liveable future' (IPCC 2022). The IPCC's scientifically-based recommendations for action have been reinforced by popular support. In September 2014, one day before the United Nations Climate Summit, an estimated 311,000 people participated in the People's Climate March in New York City to demand action on climate change (Foderaro 2014). Despite being one of the biggest political marches in U.S. history and in the presence of world leaders, the Climate March had little to no impact on the political establishment. The current conjuncture is marked by an interregnum of capitalist realism in which ruling classes are incapable of conceiving an alternative to carbon-emitting capitalism or even proposing effective policies to mitigate its effects. A growing number of scholars, largely from the field of geography, have applied the Gramscian concepts of space and nature to address the issues of political ecology and the climate crisis (cf. Ekers et al. 2009; Ekers et al. 2012; Camp 2022). In *Climate Leviathan: A Political Theory of Our Planetary Future* (2018), Joel Wainwright and Geoff Mann utilize a Gramscian perspective to envision the planetary future by examining the possible ways political and economic institutions may respond to climate change. Given liberal democracy's inability to address the problem, Wainwright and Mann speculate that an authoritarian, Hobbesian-type planetary sovereign (i.e., a 'Climate Leviathan') may emerge to address the disorders created by climate change, while also maintaining a capitalist mode of production. As an alternative, Wainwright and Mann envision a postcapitalist, nonplanetary sovereign social formation, what they call 'Climate X', as the possible solution to the current crisis.

Though exceedingly nascent, Climate X requires 'a movement of many movements', drawing from the Zapatista slogan, and tying together 'the most radical strategies of the climate justice movement – mass boycott, divestment, strike, blockade, reciprocity' (p. 197). At its critical point, creating Climate X will require the mobilization of the masses into the political realm to challenge and overcome ruling-class hegemony. However, in his book, *Fugitive Politics: The Struggle for Ecological Sanity* (2022), Carl Boggs argues that such a strategy is perhaps too optimistic. Given the gravity of the climate crisis and liberal democracy's inability to address it, he argues for the formation of a Gramscian-style 'Climate Jacobin' (pp. 6, 8, 60). Drawing from Lenin and Gramsci, Boggs argues that 'revolution both from above and below' is necessary, one that is 'strong enough to dispatch ruling elites and launch an ecological path forward – that is, a return to some kind of 'external element', or vanguard force, with a strategic eye on state power', which will function as a 'wellspring of radicalized mass opposition' in the formation of a national-popular force (pp. 60, 59; cf. pp. 137-9). Boggs stresses the necessity of political renewal and highlights the prince-like features of Gramsci's notion of the modern prince: 'the primacy of politics, popular mobilization, ideological consent, creative leadership' (p. 140). Addressing the situation in the U.S. requires overcoming the 'unprecedented challenges' of corporate-state power, the largest military-warfare state in known history, powerful oligarchic elites, intrusive technological surveillance, and intensifying globalization. 'Under such conditions', Boggs writes, 'a Jacobin-inflected ecosocialism might at least offer prospects of a more rational, more peaceful, more sustainable planetary habitat' (p. 144).

Though the current conjuncture in the U.S. is split between progressive and authoritarian forms of neoliberalism, there are emerging political forces – as demonstrated in the Occupy, immigrant justice, black lives, and climate justice movements – that provide entry points for developing a new common sense in the struggle for hegemony. However, the prospects for radical transformation are bleak. There is a growing "movement of many movements," but they constitute a collection of dispersed wills. They have not translated into political power in the same way as the Tea Party movement has, and they triggered reactionary responses, such as the surveillance state, Trumpism, and a reenergized white

nationalist movement, that weakened their momentum. Even with the existential crisis posed by climate change, as Boggs points out, current social movements are too weak and dispersed in the face of corporate power to push for a Green New Deal, let alone ecosocialism. In large part, this is a result of the fact that the U.S. has lacked a viable socialist or workers party historically. As Michael Denning notes in his article *Why No Gramsci in the United States?* (2020), the political reception of Gramsci in the U.S., unlike the U.K., has not been tied to a communist reformation or to a political party. However, in Denning's view: 'The age of the party is over: this seems true not just in the US, but in the US-ification of other parliamentary election regimes' (2021, p. 44). Yet, in Denning's view, Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* still 'offer a way of rethinking popular politics – the reformation of the national-popular collective will – in the workplace, the neighbourhood, the household, the police precinct, the schools, even the legislature: that is, in all the places where norms of conduct are lived and must be transformed' (ibid.). Such a project appears to embrace the already existing social movements and leaves open the question of how to form an effective national-popular collective will to address national and planetary struggles. In response to the crises of his time, Gramsci conceived the modern prince as a new type of party form and as an organizer of national-popular collective will (cf. Thomas 2020). If the age of the party is indeed over, it is still necessary to think of how to organize diverse movements into a hegemonic force. As Robert F. Carley shows, Gramsci's insights on strategy and tactics can help expand affinities between social movements, particularly around class and racial domination (Carley 2019), which is a necessary theoretical and political step in the formation of a modern prince as an organizer of collective will. Considering the political movements of workers, immigrants, racial minorities, and the existential dangers posed by climate change, what is required is a "Climate Modern Prince" at the national and planetary levels to trigger a new common sense, found a new social order, and provide an alternative to carbon-emitting capitalism.

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