

Radical Politics. On the Causes of Contemporary Emancipation**Giulia La Rocca**Univerza v Ljubljani, laroccagiu13@gmail.com

Received: 15.03.2025 - Accepted: 05.05.2025 - Published: 30.06.2025**Abstract**

Radical Politics. On the Causes of Contemporary Emancipation di Peter D. Thomas è un'indagine su come concepire oggi una possibile politica emancipatrice radicale. Il suo intento è quello di tradurre Gramsci nel presente, con un duplice effetto. Da un lato, si tratta di comprendere ciò che, nel pensiero di Gramsci, può essere adattato al contesto attuale e diventare forza attiva per una politica emancipatrice contemporanea. Dall'altro lato, questa comprensione e appropriazione di Gramsci a partire dalle urgenze del presente consente una rilettura dei *Quaderni del carcere*, scoprendo – e creando – nuove possibilità interpretative. Attraverso l'analisi di esempi contemporanei di tentativi di politica radicale (come Die Linke in Germania, Izquierda Unida e Podemos in Spagna, il Bloco de Esquerda in Portogallo, SYRIZA in Grecia, il Front de Gauche e La France Insoumise in Francia, il Partito Laburista britannico sotto la guida di Corbyn, e i democratici statunitensi attorno a Sanders), la proposta di Thomas si articola come un'indagine sulle cause – secondo il significato aristotelico del termine – della politica radicale. Partendo dall'emancipazione come fine della politica radicale e dalle classi subalterne come suo soggetto, il testo affronta il problema della sua costituzione – proponendone una lettura come processo, e non come stato – e della sua forma di organizzazione, affrontando le questioni legate alla forma-partito, all'orizzontalismo e al verticalismo.

Keywords

Radicale, emancipazione, egemonia, subalterno, partito

Radical Politics. On the Causes of Contemporary Emancipation.**Abstract**

Peter D. Thomas's *Radical Politics. On the Causes of Contemporary Emancipation* is an inquiry into how to conceive possible radical emancipatory politics today. His attempt is to translate Gramsci for the present, with a double outcome. On the one hand, the task is to grasp what in Gramsci's thought can be adapted to the present context and become active force for contemporary emancipatory politics. On the other hand, this comprehension and appropriation of Gramsci from the point of view of the urgent needs of the present allows a re-reading of the *Prison Notebooks*, discovering – and creating – new interpretative possibilities. Through an analysis of contemporary examples of attempts at radical politics (such as Die Linke in Germany, Izquierda Unida and Podemos in Spain, Bloco de Esquerda in Portugal, SYRIZA in Greece, the Front de Gauche and La France Insoumise in France, the British Labour Party led by Corbyn, and the US Democrats for Sanders), Thomas' proposal articulates as an investigation of the causes – according to the Aristotelian meaning of the term – of radical politics. Starting from emancipation as the goal of radical politics, and the subaltern classes as its agent, the text deals with its constitution – proposing a reading of it as a process, and not as a status – and its organization (form), tackling the problem of the form of the party, of horizontalism and verticalism.

Keywords

Radical, Emancipation, Hegemony, Subaltern, Party

Radical Politics. On the Causes of Contemporary Emancipation

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Peter D. Thomas's *Radical Politics. On the Causes of Contemporary Emancipation* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2023, 289 pp.) is an inquiry on how to conceive possible radical emancipatory politics today. To this aim, the author develops an aitiology of emancipation, i.e. an investigation of the causes – according to the Aristotelian meaning of the term – defining emancipation as such. This latter is therefore analysed with regard, firstly, to its final cause or goal, secondly to its material cause, to determine its nature, then to its efficient cause, in order to outline its method, and finally to its formal cause, i.e. the organization of radical movements.

In raising the question about the emancipatory possibilities of radical politics, Thomas's concern is the need to comprehend the radical movements of the past thirty years – the EZLN, the alternative globalization movements, the pink tide of progressive governments in Latin America, the Arab Spring, the anti-austerity campaigns, etc. – i.e. of determining the limits that eventually caused their failure, but also their potential, if regarded as inscribed as precious attempts in the long-term process of emancipation.

The path Thomas goes through is a Gramscian reading of emancipatory politics. This book, however, does not simply explain today's problem availing itself of Gramsci's theory, thus reproposing past solutions for contemporary issues. Instead, Thomas's aim is more ambitious. His attempt is to translate Gramsci for the present, with a double outcome. On the one hand, the task is to grasp what in Gramsci's thought can be adapted to the present context for analysing it, and become active force for contemporary emancipatory politics. On the other hand, this comprehension and appropriation of Gramsci starting from the urgent need of the present allows a re-reading of the *Prison Notebooks*, discovering – and creating – new interpretative possibilities as responding to the new problems through which the text is interrogated.

The assumption underlying this interpretative approach is that Gramsci's aim in the *Prison Notebooks* is neither to grasp a supposedly universal form of politics nor the development of a political tactic sticking to the empirical contingent situation. On the contrary, his *Notebooks* are «a “translatable” theory of possibilities of emancipatory political action in societies dominated by the capitalist mode of production and structured as processes of subalternization» (pp. 9-10). Gramsci would thus develop an analysis of, and a response to the process through which societies based on a capitalist organization of the material relations of production produce and reproduce – as condition of their own existence – some social groups as subaltern. Both his inquiry on processes of subalternization, and his strategy to dismiss them and create an alternative organization – a new order – are not universal, but they individuate some structural dynamics, and can therefore be translated, adapted to different contexts, even the contemporary ones. Thomas's reading brings to its fruitful consequences Gramsci's theory of translation – whose meaning he had previously developed on¹ – applying it to Gramsci himself and to the contemporary world. The core of his proposal is a translation of Gramsci's concept of hegemony.

Such a reading, therefore, takes distance from those approaches to history and politics, which would rediscover past unfulfilled promises of a different future, and realize them in the present – what Thomas pejoratively calls «a “Benjaminianesque” historical perspective» (p. 20).

Starting with his aitiology of emancipation, Thomas deals with the final cause. At stake is the relationship between radical movements and the institution of the state, with regard to the goal of emancipation. The key question is, indeed, whether the achievement of emancipation requires, as its condition, to engage with the political power, the seizure of the state, and the constitution of an alternative to it.

Thomas warns from the miscomprehension according to which the state would be a totally external antagonist to emancipatory movements, which could thus simply oppose it. The state is today capable of absorbing those movements that contest it, statalizing them, that

¹ Cfr. P. D. Thomas, *The Task of Translatability*, «International Gramsci Journal», vol. 3, 2020, 4, pp. 5-30.

is englobing them into its system. As a consequence, emancipatory movements that oppose the state are in fact relating to the statalized forms of previous movements that raised their same claims. Thomas analyses, for example, how in the Italian context the majority of the radical forces of the 1960s – such as workerism (*operaismo*) – led to the Eurocommunist politics and the historical compromise of the 1970s-1980s. The question is therefore whether this statalization could work as a means by which radical politics can exert a control on the state, pushing the political apparatus towards the goal of emancipation.

The author brings Nico Poulantzas as an example of the attempt to conceive a radical politics from within the state. Indeed, according to Poulantzas, who starts from a reading of Gramsci but then takes distance from him, an opposition to the state would end up producing a dual power, the doubling of the state with a counter-state. Thomas points out that Poulantzas's misunderstanding lies in presupposing the political and the civil society as topographically separated. The power would be owned, as something substantial, by the dominant class, and the civil society would be excluded from it. On the contrary, the strength of Gramsci's analysis of the state lies precisely in conceiving the modern state as integral state: civil society has itself political relevance, and, conversely, political society avails itself of the institutions of civil society. However, Thomas also warns from those narratives which he frames as the narratives of the 'extended State', recalling Buci-Glucksmann's notorious reading.² These would describe the modern state as a process of expansion of the political sphere onto civil society, which would be conceived as something in itself pre-political or apolitical, and thus to be re-established in its purity. All the opposite – Thomas argues – Gramsci's innovative concept of the integral state allows to conceive the original relation of mutual dependence between political society and civil society, and the (re)production of subalternization through the dynamics of passive revolution. It is the process of absorbing emancipatory demands into the form of the state, thus depriving movements external to the state apparatus of their political power, i.e. their very emancipatory power. A de-politicized civil society – Thomas claims – is not a civil

² C. Buci-Glucksmann, *Gramsci and the State*, translated by D. Fernbach, London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1980.

society preserved in its purity, but a society deprived of its political force. It is a society that is kept subaltern, relegated to a mere associative instance.³

Therefore, differently from the attempts made by some recent political forces – such as *Die Linke* in Germany, *Izquierda Unida* and *Podem* in Spain, *Bloco de Esquerda* in Portugal, *SYRIZA* in Greece, the *Front de Gauche* and *La France Insoumise* in France, the British Labour Party led by Corbyn, and the US Democrats for Sanders, among others – to seek for a parliamentary way to the change, the goal of radical politics must to oppose the state and propose a power of different type.

Given this, Thomas turns to the material cause. The title of this chapter, *The Constitution of the Political*, is by itself telling of the author's intention. Indeed, the word 'constitution' can mean both nature or essence, and the process of constitution through which something comes to be what it is. Thomas rejects the first meaning, arguing against the theories postulating a supposedly authentic essence of the political, which should be reaffirmed against the fallen condition of the state – a tendency common to contemporary radical movements, otherwise different in the forms of their activities. This essence would be either an Idea to instantiate, according to a "Platonizing" style, or a lost origin to recover as the condition of possibility of the political, according to a "reconstructive-transcendental" style *à la recherche du politique perdu*, as Thomas writes paraphrasing Proust (pp. 98, 102). Instead, basing on Gramsci, he elaborates on a notion of the political as process and relation.

The challenge for radical politics is not to look for an authentic political elsewhere, in a place of redemption of the political beyond or outside politics. Suggestively recalling Plato's myth of the cave, Thomas holds that radical politics is the emancipation not for the one that leaves the cave and finds the true world outside of it, but it is the process of self-emancipation within the cave itself, uncovering and critically recognizing its dynamic for what it is.

³ Peter Thomas had developed on the link between integral state, passive revolution, and subalternization in some previous works, such as *Cosa rimane dei subalterni alla luce dello "Stato integrale"*?, «International Gramsci Journal», vol. 4 2015, 1, pp. 83-93; *We Good Subalterns*, in *Revisiting Gramsci's Notebooks*, edited by F. Antonini *et al.*, Leiden-Boston, Brill, 2019, pp. 177-194; Id., *Il cittadino sive subalterno*, «Rivista Italiana di Filosofia Politica», 1, 2021, pp. 175-192.

This critical work brings politics to deconstruct itself «to undo itself as a simulacrum» (p. 108). Gramsci can help us in this critique, comprehending the «speculative mode of production» operating in capitalist society (p. 113). This expression indicates the fixation of the mutual relationship between political and civil society into the hierarchy of the former on the latter. Subalternization is thus not the exclusion from the state. Instead, it consists of the relation to the state as a relationship of subjection, passivation. The political society is political insofar as it hypostatizes its hierarchical relation over the civil society.

Once traced this diagnosis, the question is how to elaborate a radical politics that could contrast this process of subalternization, that is what the efficient cause, the method of radical politics should be. In this chapter, Thomas's interpretation of Gramsci's concept of hegemony, and its translation to the present context find place. This is the core of Thomas's proposal. Indeed, the other causes of emancipation ultimately find their meaning in relation to hegemony, which is defined as «the goal, nature, method, and form of self-emancipation politics» (p. 163). First of all, the only possible method of emancipation as a practice of de-subalternization which would not be passivized by the state, is *self*-emancipation, i.e. self-authorized emancipation. It does not seek for recognition from the existing political form, which is based on privilege: it cannot be attained with a levelling up of some hitherto exploited groups to the privileged one. Instead, it is «the refusal to recognize the master as master», the dismissal of the same possibility of privilege: 'a plebian "levelling down"» (pp. 128-29).

In order to determine what can be translated of Gramsci's concept of hegemony, Thomas engages in a discussion of its manifold interpretations. In his previous work, the author had already provided readings of hegemony as the political strategy at the centre of the whole Gramscian political project, emphasizing its innovative character, not reducible to modern theories of political power, be this exercised through (active or passive) consent (Hobbes), the formation of the general will (Rousseau), techniques of civil society (in a Hegelian fashion), or geopolitical relationships (going back to the meaning that this term has by Thucydides).⁴ Moreover, he

⁴ Cfr. P. D. Thomas, *The Gramscian Moment. Philosophy, Hegemony, Marxism*, Leiden-Boston, Brill,

had traced the legacy of this Gramscian concept in the later debate⁵. However, here Thomas does not simply repropose the results of his studies, but offers a further articulation. He had previously opposed bourgeois and proletarian hegemony as ‘two practices of leadership that are substantively incommensurable’, the former ending up in the dynamic of passive revolution, the latter being the method for the self-emancipation of subaltern social groups.⁶ Now, instead, he elaborates one only concept of hegemony, which would fail in the case of the bourgeois attempt to exercise it, but which could be an emancipatory practice for subaltern social groups. Indeed, bourgeois hegemony fails because, structurally, it cannot satisfy «the emancipatory ideals that it rhetorically proclaimed» (p. 156). If emancipation is by definition universal emancipation – the abolition of privilege and hierarchy as such – the bourgeoisie cannot accomplish this task, because this would imply the negation of the condition of its own existence as a (dominant) social group. Hence the betrayal of the urban proletariat by the Jacobin, which put an end to the proper revolutionary moment of the French Revolution. For this reason, it is in passive revolution that bourgeois hegemony finds its perfection. Thomas, however, underlines that this failure is not simply inherent to the limitedness of the bourgeois program, but it is historically produced by the radical actions of subaltern social groups.

Conceptually, moreover, the failure of bourgeois hegemony lies in the impossibility to translate the Bolshevik conception of hegemony into the context of elite politics of Western Europe.

On the basis of this reading, Thomas develops on hegemony as hypothesis of a practice of self-emancipation, for «an ongoing process of autonomization without end» (p. 165). From such a perspective, he rehabilitates a concept of historical progress, distinguishing it from the linear, normative progress attributed to Enlightenment and today regarded as unusable. Rather, progress would consist in the emancipatory achievements of critical, radical political actions.

Furthermore, Thomas makes clear that the leadership of the proletariat in hegemony as hypothesis is not to be understood as the im-

2009; Id. *Hegemony, Passive Revolution and the Modern Prince*, «Thesis Eleven», 117, 2013, 1, pp. 20-39.

⁵ P. D. Thomas, *After (Post) Hegemony*, «Contemporary Political Theory», 20, 2021, 2, pp. 318-40.

⁶ Thomas, *Hegemony, Passive Revolution and the Modern Prince*, cit., p. 26.

position of the claims of the proletariat to the other subaltern social groups, nor as its primacy as a class. Rather, it is a matter of prestige, due to the fact that the political program of the proletariat is recognized as potentially satisfactory also by other subaltern social groups. So conceived, hegemony could be a way to self-emancipation.

Finally, the question of the formal cause: how to rethink the organization of the party for contemporary emancipatory politics. Thomas mentions Alberto Toscano, Peter Hallward, Jodi Dean, Bruno Bosteels, and Jan Rehemann, who, among others, tried to rethink the form of the party in the context of recent radical movements. In this regard, key points are the relationships between horizontalism and verticalism, and the combination of plurality and unity. Thomas examines some tendencies and theoretical positions, pointing out their potential as well as the risks they run.

With regard to the relationship between horizontalism and verticalism, he goes back to the Italian workerism, showing how this movement, initially aiming to promote horizontal experiences of autonomous organization of the workers, in fact ended up exposing itself to the risk of verticalism. On the one hand, Mario Tronti and Massimo Cacciari recognized the Italian Communist Party as the party representing the working class. A statalized party, the PCI should have for them be able to exert control over the state and prevent the process of subalternization in which it was actually involved. The party was therefore conceived as a political force «on behalf, rather than by, the working class» (p. 203). On the other hand, Toni Negri, later together with Michael Hardt, made various attempts to think and practise new possible forms of the party. Thomas underlines that, despite a continuous reworking, their theory remained ultimately trapped into the dichotomy between spontaneity and organization, thus multitude and party leaders. As a consequence, any effort to ensure horizontal practices would continuously risk to fall prey of verticalism.

Concerning the question of unity, moreover, Thomas deals with György Lukács's theorization of the party as a political subject, particularly with reference to *Towards a Methodology of the Problem of Organization* (in *History and Class Consciousness*). According to this essay, the class would become a political subject, capable of acting at political

level, only through the mediation of the party. The typical objection often raised against this thesis is that it conceives the mediation of the party as a relation external and hierarchical to the class. Thomas, however, develops his critiques differently. With regard to the problem of hierarchy, he points out that the vanguard of the party is not necessarily to be conceived of as external to the groups, to which it would impose the direction. Taken literally, a vanguard, that is ‘an advanced guard’, is the element that, within a broader movement – to which it must remain strictly linked in order to be its vanguard – explores paths that others later may follow (p. 212). A certain unevenness of the times with which a group moves – he adds – is unavoidable.

The hardest of Thomas’s critiques, however, focuses on the concept of subject. Deepening some arguments he had already exposed in *The Gramscian Moment*, he questions that this concept could be the most adequate to account for the possibility to act politically. Indeed – he argues – even if considered in a post-modern fashion – as a contingent construction and not as the agency expressing a supposedly essential human freedom, or the will of the People – it still remains that the concept of a political subject must be either a contradiction or a tautology. On the one hand, the modern tradition typically understands the subject as coincident with the interiority or consciousness, which would therefore be the non-political *par excellence*. On the other hand, if the consciousness is regarded as inherently political – denying the possibility of an interiority totally subtracted to its relation to the historical exteriority and independent of it – so any subject, as such, would be political, and there would be neither the criterion nor the need to account for the party as a specific political subject.

This discussion of the concept of subject allows Thomas to take reference to Gramsci’s modern Prince, of which in *The Gramscian Moment* he had already provided an anti-subjectivist explanation, conceiving it more properly according to the Latin term of ‘persona’, a character.⁷ The *persona* cannot be reduced to an essentialist account of the subject, and allows instead to be thought in its contingency, molecular transformations, and historically determined relations.

⁷ Thomas, *The Gramscian Moment*, cit., pp. 385-405.

The party, or a translation of the Gramscian modern Prince, could thus be conceived not as a fixed, hierarchical organization, but as a process, a laboratory of practices of de-subalternization.

With an emphasis on the experimental dimension of the organization of emancipatory hegemony, Thomas closes its aitiology of emancipation. Thereby, it is to be noticed that he is not providing any determination how hegemony should be organized. His aitiology, rather, could be regarded as an inquiry on the conditions of possibility for it as emancipatory politics. If hegemony must be emancipatory, then it must dismiss any domination and process of subalternization. As a consequence, firstly, its goal cannot be achieved within the bourgeois integral state; rather, a political power of different type – a new order – must be invented. Secondly, this cannot be found in the recovery of an alleged essence of the political, but must emerge from a critical knowledge of the processes of subalternization, in order to undo them. Moreover, thirdly, the method to abolish the bourgeois order and construct an alternative to it consists in forming a social bloc that struggles for a new type of organization of the relations of power and of production. Fourthly, this hegemonic movement requires an organization, which could experiment, within itself, this new order. This is not yet a determination. For example, Thomas gives no answer about how to constitute the social bloc, how to attract different subaltern social groups which, with their own interests, may not wish to recognize the proletariat's conception of the world as their own. Moreover, even if a vanguard does not necessarily imply the imposition of a direction, and it is rather the part that goes ahead in exploring, experimenting new forms of organization, this does not yet solve the problem of the relationship between horizontalism and verticalism, and between pluralism and unity in the functioning of the party: who takes part into the vanguard, what is the procedure for taking decisions, whether and in which form is dissent admitted. However, this is precisely Thomas's thesis: the form adequate to contemporary radical politics is not given, but it must be sought in experimenting new forms. It is by virtue of this approach that he can valorize recent radical movements, because he does not judge them for their failure, but rather he sees them as exercises of new practices. The most relevant example is probably that of the Zapati-

stas in Mexico, where, differently from other groups of *guerrilleros* in Latin America, an initial small group of Marxists engaged in a mutual education with the indigenous populations of Chiapas, creating new forms for the struggle. An analysis of this phenomenon could have been relevant in the framework outlined by Thomas.

Thus, Thomas's investigation on the goal, nature, method, and organization of radical politics is a precious scientific contribution that allows to understand the radical movements of the last thirty years within a broader, long-term struggle for emancipation. Instead of being regarded as insufficient, often naïve, thus unavoidably failed attempts to change the world, they are taken as efforts to develop new practices and a conception of a new world. They will have not failed in vain, if we are able to take them up again, and to empower them, under the conviction that «[o]nly the arrival of something entirely different could endow them, retrospectively, with their true historical meaning» (p. 181). To this aim, translating Gramsci does not mean going back to a classic which, as such, should be repropounded. Instead, it means rethinking it, discovering in it new possibilities of developing strategies to construct an alternative future. Thomas, therefore, really meets Gramsci's challenge, neither stopping to the contingency and failure of those radical movements, nor comprehending their happening in the fixed framework given by a classic.

It is however curious, one could argue, that all the attempts to construct the future by recovering unexhausted promises of the past are dismissed as a *Benjaminianesque* approach to history. Instead of regarding them as vulgar appropriations of Walter Benjamin's concept of history, it could be worth to valorize Benjamin as closer to Gramsci and to the author than this latter seems to admit. Thomas explicitly acknowledges that Benjamin's concept of translation is analogous to the Gramscian one (p. 10). Yet, he seems to see no continuity between this and Benjamin's conception of the re-activation of the past. Indeed, he lists Benjamin among those who think radical politics «as the interruption in the present of the totally unprecedented (a theory of miraculous event)» (p. 164). On the contrary, the revolutionary potential Benjamin finds in the citation of the unfulfilled past is neither that of an interruption from nowhere nor that of repropounding past promises. Citing the past means, at the same time,

inscribing the present experience of radical politics in a tradition of emancipatory attempts, and translating those attempts for the need of the present. This is precisely what Thomas does, affirming that past practices of radical politics, even the failed ones, receive their meaning only retrospectively, if considered as a part of a larger tradition of revolutionary struggles. This implies, as its condition, that new emancipatory movements take reference to them, and conceive themselves as the new actualizations of the same struggle. It is not a matter of revivifying the deads, but of keeping alive the effort to construct a new order, drawing strength – not solutions – from this tradition. Finally, precisely Gramsci's reinterpretation of the Jacobin revolution and of Machiavelli's Prince are both translations and citations. Indeed, *naming* the Jacobins – instead of simply appropriating and adapting their strategy – strengthens this present appropriation, because it makes it immediately identifiable with a tradition of radical politics.

To conclude, Peter D. Thomas offer us an engaging investigation to think, but above all to practise, hegemony as radical politics.