

Gramsci and Literature in the Anglophone World⁶⁸

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Abstract

The current study analyzes Gramsci's reflections on literature, focusing on recent research and with an emphasis on North American culture. Gramsci's influence is brought out and analyzed in the following works: *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*, an important collection of critical theory, and the debate between Marco Roth and Joseph North over the crisis in North American literary studies in a recent issue of the magazine *n+1*. Gramsci's thought can provide a solution to the methodological difficulties outlined in *n+1*. Showing his engagement with questions that have been examined in our own time by the theorists Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Žižek, Gramsci presents a critical vision which puts universality and contingency in relation to one another. Gramsci's concept of hegemony – the subject of many different interpretations starting at the end of World War II – can, in fact, be understood as an unconscious structuring force that is continuously active. The relationship between politics and culture, from this perspective, becomes an effort to construct a counter-hegemony, which is characterized by a sense of redemption in the face of the dominant powers. In thinking about art and literature, Gramsci elaborates an original and innovative approach, in which the binary coordinates of western thought are abandoned in favor of contingency.

Keywords

Gramsci. Literature. Hegemony. Anglophone context.

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Portrait of Antonio Gramsci⁷⁰

“The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to change it.” (MARX, 2002). This quote from Marx’s *Theses on Feuerbach* in turn becomes, most famously in the *Quaderni del carcere*, the impetus for much original thought by the imprisoned Antonio Gramsci. The challenge posed by this deceptively simple axiom goes beyond arriving at the right relation between theory and praxis, and Gramsci’s unique contributions to this long-standing debate; its resonance can also be traced if we view it as an entry point into the world of Gramsci studies and Gramsci’s own reception history. While Gramsci hewed to the importance of both interpreting and changing the world, and offered novel frameworks and possibilities for doing so, the transformative power of his ideas has been limited by multiple factors.

⁷⁰ Available in: https://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/Antonio_Gramsci#/media/File:Gramsci.png.

Let me explain: Gramsci is well-recognized as an intellectual giant of the twentieth-century, and as a central part of the academic and philosophical genealogy of what is known as cultural studies. This is not a matter of debate. However, the loose translation and dissemination of many Gramscian concepts and keywords—hegemony, organic intellectual, national-popular, historic bloc, subaltern, etc.—alongside a strategic marshaling of Gramsci’s authority by the PCI (and other political groups) in the complicated world of Italian politics after World War II, has led to an uneven general understanding of Gramsci’s actual texts and the trajectory of his thought over time. The textual and philological challenges of publishing the *Quaderni del carcere* have been myriad, including the politicized editing process initially undertaken in the late 1940s and early 1950s. These challenges continue to be visible in the still-ongoing work to publish the *Edizione Nazionale*: definitive editions of all of Gramsci’s writings in the original Italian. When it comes to the strategic usage of Gramsci, the main debates have centered around what Gramsci means by the term civil society in his reorientation of the traditional Marxian relationship between base and superstructure. Often enough, this new emphasis on culture and civil society has been misread and taken to indicate a weakened Marxist commitment, or a kind of creeping liberalism. Despite this, however, Gramsci’s ideas, most notably his specific concept of hegemony, have still been disseminated as radical thought, and as such have currency in the international world of critical theory and cultural studies, even where they have not sufficiently been digested in their original context.

Perhaps the best illustration of this partial reception can be found in the volume *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*, first published in 2000 and republished in 2011 by the fabled press Verso Books⁷¹. The book consists of questions the scholars Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Žižek pose to one another and answer in turn; as one can imagine from the title of the book, the questions begin with a consideration of Laclau’s theory of hegemony, which comes from his own reading of Gramsci, and its relationship to the poststructuralist turn in critical theory and the implications of its view of subjectivity for the political realm, as exemplified primarily by Jacques Lacan and Jacques Derrida. It is not that Gramsci is absent from the conversation; on the contrary. However, it becomes clear, even in Laclau’s analysis, that Gramsci’s writings, unlike those of Hegel, Foucault, and Kant, function more as a pretext for the articulation of other ideas, rather than a shared background interpreted variously over time and by different thinkers. In a sublime kind of irony, then, Gramsci’s theory of hegemony, despite the best efforts of Laclau

⁷¹ New York: Verso Books, 2011.

in this volume and those of other academics and public intellectuals over time, has not achieved sufficient visibility as a frame of reference in its own right. Crucially, the fate of Gramsci's work is also the same in the discipline and institutions of cultural studies in the United States, and Gramsci's absence from them, except as a figurehead: a curious combination of both presence and absence.

Cultural studies, although often understood as an academic discipline, is best understood as denoting a methodology: an approach to the study of texts, objects, and social practices that foregrounds their relationship to dynamics of power. As such, the development of cultural studies has relied upon, and continues to make use of, an understanding of 'hegemony' and 'the subaltern' originally filtered through, among others, Stuart Hall and the Birmingham School, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and the Subaltern Studies Group. Gramsci's ideas, in this sense, function more as legitimations for collapsing the distinction between culture and politics than as concepts pulled from a body of texts worthy of study in their own right. What has been taken from Gramsci's heterodox Marxism is the situating of culture as a site of political struggle, and as the battleground where political consensus is enforced. Therefore, to speak of Gramsci and literature, especially in the Anglophone context, initially seems a bit odd; the general wisdom is that Gramsci has little to offer for literary analysis that has not already been subsumed under the updated category of 'cultural production'. In fact, however, careful study of Gramsci's writings, from all major periods of his life, reveals sustained engagement with and careful attention to questions of literary criticism and aesthetic analysis, both in their own right and in their relation to politics and power.

The work of recuperating this engagement has been undertaken by scholars in the United States, Italy, and, indeed, all over the world, including Walter L. Adamson, Joseph Buttigieg, Alessandro Carlucci, Marco Gatto, Renate Holub, and Peter Ives. There is not space here, unfortunately, to examine that research in all the detail that it deserves. It should also be said that the gap between academic research, or the work of the scholar-intellectual, and the public realm of popular culture, or the world of 'common sense', is one of the distinctions at stake in this discussion. For that reason, I am taking into consideration here both academic contributions and those aimed at a general, educated audience. What can be accomplished through this look at Gramsci and cultural studies in the United States, however brief and exploratory, is a sketch of why recuperating Gramsci's conception of aesthetics matters, and what it can offer to those interested in Gramsci, as well as to those more broadly interested in art, culture, and politics, and the way all three realms intersect. One way of doing

so, as I shall demonstrate, is by looking at what Gramsci might have to offer to current debates surrounding literary studies and the positions it stakes out vis-à-vis the nexus of politics and culture.

In the American leftist literary journal *n+1*, a recent review essay by Marco Roth entitled “Tokens of Ruined Method” (subtitled “Does literary studies have a future?”), begins by outlining Roth’s evaluation of Joseph North’s 2017 *Literary Criticism: A Concise Political History* (ROTH, 2017, 179-189.). North’s book argues for a realignment of aesthetics and politics in literary criticism by tracing the history of Anglophone literary scholarship in the twentieth-century, following the bifurcating paths of what he terms “an institutional program of aesthetic education,” most closely associated with the New Criticism, and “the historicist/contextualist paradigm,” which can otherwise be understood as the methodology of cultural studies referenced above. The rise of cultural studies in the academy has coincided with the worldwide rise of neoliberalism, which has led, in the United States, to a growing crisis of adjunct and precarious academic labor. As Roth puts it, the animating question here is “what has allowed for this unholy symbiosis of leftist content and neoliberal form,” in which an increasingly professionalized professoriate produces evermore ‘radical’ knowledge, meant to act in the world but somehow merely reinforcing the status quo.⁷² Roth, breaking with North’s more tepid calls for marrying criticism to scholarship, ends by agitating for a re-engagement with pedagogy and the possibilities of teaching, both inside and outside the university. I share Roth’s evaluation of our contemporary moment, in which, contra North, the way forward is not better knowledge, but rather a reconsideration of what, and how, we know.

It may not be immediately clear what this might have to do with Gramsci. Roth and North both, in different ways, acknowledge the existence of some kind of impasse in the world of Anglophone literary studies and attribute it to the rise of the cultural studies paradigm, and the way this paradigm rewards the production of knowledge over aesthetic contemplation and cultivation. What I would like to point out is that in Gramsci’s own thought, we can find a way out of what has been signposted as an impasse; there is no other imagined outcome for what is normally understood as an essential opposition between these two modes, while such an opposition does not, ironically, exist for Gramsci. Furthermore, Gramsci is known for his interest in, and contributions to, radical pedagogy and the possibility and necessity of alternative forms of education. This can be seen in the recent and ongoing

⁷² “Tokens” 185.

scholarship on Gramsci and education, most prominently in the work of John Holst, Peter Mayo, and Nico Pizzolato, among others.

For Gramsci, in an echo of the concerns raised by Butler, Laclau, and Žižek in their book (as referenced above), the central problem is one of universality and contingency. As it is often rather bluntly applied, ‘hegemony’ is understood as an unconscious, oppressive structuring force that is eternally operative. However, in a more nuanced understanding of Gramsci, the concept of hegemony is an explanation of how power structures in politics and society work: the goal is to build a counter-hegemony which itself is not free from further challenges to its control via consensus. The work of politics and culture is to build and sustain a responsible, liberating counter-hegemony to the dominant form. In considering works of art, Gramsci pioneers a similar approach, in which strictly binary modes of thinking are abandoned in favor of a framework capable of accommodating contingency, but without sacrificing rigor. There is one notebook among the *Quaderni del carcere* entirely devoted to literary criticism, Quaderno 23, while the most important note on the subject can be found in Quaderno 15 §38 (GRAMSCI, 2007).

Gramsci explicitly tangles with the question of what makes art ‘art’ rather than another form of discourse, and engages the slippery boundary between considerations of aesthetic judgment and those pertaining to political import or relevance. In Gramsci’s own words, from Quaderno 15 §38, dated, according to Gianni Francioni, May 1933 (FRANCIONI, 1984: 144.):

Is the concept that art is art and not ‘willed’ and directed political propaganda in itself an obstacle to the formation of specific cultural currents that reflect their time and contribute to the strengthening of specific political currents? It seems not; indeed it seems that such a concept poses the problem in more radical terms, those of a more efficient and conclusive criticism. Given the principle that one should look only to the artistic character of the work of art, this does not in the least prevent one from investigating the mass of feelings and the attitude towards life present in the work of art itself. Indeed, one need only consult De Sanctis and Croce himself to see that this is accepted by modern currents in aesthetics. What is excluded is the idea that a work is beautiful because of its moral and political content and not for its form with which the abstract content is fused and becomes one. Furthermore, one should examine whether a work of art might not have failed because the author was diverted by external practical (that is, artificial and insincere) preoccupations. The crucial point of the polemic seems to be this: X ‘wants’ to express a definite content in an artful way and fails to create a work of art. The artistic failure of this work shows that in X’s hands that particular content was unpliant and refractory (since he has proven to be an artist in other works that he has really felt and experienced). It also shows that his enthusiasm was fictitious and externally willed, that in that specific case he was not really an artist, but a servant who wanted to please his masters⁷³.

73 Antonio Gramsci. Selections from Cultural Writings. Trad. William Boelhower. pp. 108-109. “Il concetto che l’arte è arte e non propaganda politica ‘voluta’ e proposta, è poi, in se stesso, un ostacolo alla formazione di determinate correnti culturali che siano il riflesso del loro tempo e che contribuiscano a rafforzare determinate

Here, we see clearly that Gramsci is attentive to the same debate that animates the very contemporary concerns of Roth and North in the Anglophone context: the discrepancy between a political-moral judgment of an aspect of a work of art and an evaluation of a more aesthetic nature, which Gramsci here elevates into the philosophical question of the relationship between the particular and the universal and, in turn, its implications for the political.

It is not, therefore, necessarily the case that Gramsci offers a clear answer to the complex problems of an ideal or right relationship between politics and literary interpretation; it is most valuable, in my view, to see that an intelligent (and prescient) thinking-through of the dilemma is possible, even amid a difficult and potentially hostile environment. The issue, moreover, is not with any of the specific allusions to Gramsci in the wider academic world, but rather with the fact that a paradigm of thinking about art and literature indebted to Gramsci might overlook some of his most pertinent thoughts on the topic. As an accident of history, it has a certain ironic humor, but one that stands to be corrected.



Portrait of Antonio Gramsci⁷⁴

correnti politiche? Non pare, anzi pare che tale concetto ponga il problema in termini più radicali e di una critica più efficiente e conclusiva. Posto il principio che nell'opera d'arte sia solamente da ricercare il carattere artistico, non è per nulla esclusa la ricerca di quale massa di sentimenti, di quale atteggiamento verso la vita circoli nell'opera d'arte stessa. Anzi ciò che sia ammesso dalle moderne correnti estetiche si vede nel De Sanctis e nello stesso Croce. Ciò che si esclude è che un'opera sia bella per il suo contenuto morale e politico e non già per la sua forma in cui il contenuto astratto si è fuso e immedesimato. Ancora si ricerca se un'opera d'arte non sia fallita perché l'autore sia stato deviato da preoccupazioni pratiche esteriori, cioè posticce e insincere. Questo pare il punto cruciale della polemica: Tizio 'vuole' esprimere artificialmente un determinato contenuto e non fa opera d'arte. Il fallimento artistico dell'opera d'arte data (poiché Tizio ha dimostrato di essere artista in altre opere da lui realmente sentite e vissute) dimostra che quel tale contenuto in Tizio è materia sorda e ribelle, che l'entusiasmo di Tizio è fittizio e volute esteriormente, che Tizio in realtà non è, in quel determinato caso, artista, ma servo che vuol piacere ai padroni" Ed. Gerratana, 3: 1793-1794.

⁷⁴ Available in: https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Antonio_Gramsci#/media/File:Gramsci_foto_segnaletica.jpg.

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GRAMSCI E LITERATURA NO MUNDO ANGLÓFONO

Resumo

Este artigo analisa as reflexões de Gramsci no campo literário, focando na atualidade de tal visão. A ênfase é colocada no contexto cultural norte-americano. Influências gramscianas são encontradas num importante volume de teoria cultural, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*. É evocado o debate entre Marco Roth e Joseph North, que ocorreu na revista *n+1*, discussão dedicada a pensar a crise dos estudos literários norte-americanos. O pensamento de Gramsci pode indicar uma solução para as dificuldades metodológicas discutidas em *n+1*. Preocupado com questões que serão tratadas no nosso presente por teóricos como Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau e Slavoj Žižek, Gramsci propõe uma visão crítica que combina universalidade e contingência. O conceito gramsciano de hegemonia – objeto de múltiplas interpretações desde o fim da Segunda Guerra Mundial – pode, de fato, ser entendido como uma força estruturante inconsciente que é eternamente ativa. A relação entre política e cultura, segundo essa perspectiva, converge na direção da construção de uma contra-hegemonia caracterizada pela luta contra o poder dominante. Teorizando acerca da arte e da literatura, Gramsci escolhe uma abordagem original e inovadora, na qual as coordenadas binárias do pensamento ocidental são abandonadas em favor da contingência.

Palavras-chave

Gramsci. Literatura. Hegemonia. Contexto anglofono.

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