

Santucci, Antonio A. 2010. *Antonio Gramsci*. New York: Monthly Review Press. ISBN 978-1-58367-210-5. Paperback: 15.95 CAD. Pages: 207.

Thomas, Peter D. 2009. *The Gramscian Moment: Philosophy, Hegemony and Marxism*. Leiden: Brill. ISBN 978-90-04-16771-1. Cloth: 167.00 USD. Pages: 478.

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The fortunes of Antonio Gramsci as a Marxist thinker and Communist Party leader have been so curious it is worth foregrounding their recent past within academic and intellectual circles.¹ Particularly in the English-speaking world, Gramsci's popularity has undoubtedly only *increased* since the fall of the Soviet bloc, the advance of neoliberalism and the deeper disorganization of the Left. Such a phenomenon leaves us asking why it is that *this* Marxist revolutionary has been spared the same fate as Marx and Engels, who either have continued to be held in disrepute or, worse, been relegated to irrelevance. In this case, however, the exception proves the rule. The growth of the "Gramsci industry" in the past few decades has been due mainly to the fact that he is *not* typically read as a Marxist and a Communist. Indeed, as a "theorist of the superstructures" Gramsci is frequently promoted as an *alternative* to the crude economism of the Marxist tradition. In part due to the earlier instrumentalizations by the Italian Communist Party's (PCI) official postwar "Gramscianism," as well as the later academic interpretation of Gramsci's perspective as rooted in the trenches of a non-political "civil society," the Italian Communist thinker ultimately found a warmer reception in cultural studies than he did in either political science or sociology. Peter D. Thomas's fresh reassessment of the *Prison Notebooks* and the late Antonio A. Santucci's recently translated biography serve as important correctives to this non-political, "cultural studies" Gramsci.

Both Thomas and Santucci are emblematic of the "philological turn" steadily gaining momentum in Gramscian studies since the 1975 Italian publication of Valentino Gerratana's critical edition of Gramsci's *Prison*

¹ This review has benefited enormously from the generosity of comrades and teachers alike. I especially want to thank David McNally, Paul Gray, Jeremiah Gaster, Stephen Hellman and Greg Albo, whose advice and recommendations have done much to inform and improve the views laid out here.

Notebooks. His enhanced sensitivity to the literary construction of Gramsci's texts has done much to reverse the initial historical reception of his work. Following the end of the Second World War, Gramsci's prison writings were transported back from their wartime haven in the Soviet Union to Italy where, under the guidance of the PCI, they were thematically reorganized, repackaged and published as a completed work in six massive volumes. Gerratana's republication of the notebooks *as they were actually written* allows the reader to trace the formation and progression of Gramsci's categories as a work in progress. Since then, Gramsci's work, both before and during his incarceration, has been subject to careful reconstruction and elaboration, providing a more accurate depiction of the Communist leader and his thought.

The difference this interval of sustained scholarship has made can be gleaned from a comparison between Santucci's new biography (written in 1987, but just translated into English) and the long-standing classic, Giuseppe Fiori's *Antonio Gramsci: Life of a Revolutionary*, first published in 1965 (translated into English by Tom Nairn for New Left Books in 1970 and *still* in print from Verso). While Fiori's book is a standard chronological depiction of Gramsci's life, conveying the rich texture of his Sardinian childhood, the electric political atmosphere of Turin and the horrid nightmare of his later confinement, Santucci's account is organized according to the forms taken by the posthumous publication of Gramsci's writings, titling his chapters "The Political Writings," "The Letters From Prison" and "The Prison Notebooks." As a Gramscian philologist, Santucci's attention is thus divided between Gramsci's life and ideas as well as the precise literary form they took. It is not going too far to suggest that Santucci has written a biography of both Gramsci *and his texts*. This approach does a valuable service in reminding readers that understanding Gramsci's ideas is always double task: cutting through the labyrinth of Gramsci's notes on the one hand, while sifting through the manifold layers of (mis)interpretation on the other.

Equally important to note is that Gramsci's pre-prison "political writings" occupy the largest chapter of Santucci's biography. This is a vital corrective to the vast and ever-growing literature that has almost exclusively focused on exploring Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* without equal effort dedicated to elaborating and integrating the politics of his earlier journalism. Indeed, the periodization of Gramsci's ideas into pre-prison and incarcerated phases must always be remembered to demarcate an exogenous and *forced* discontinuity in his life and political activity; his

prison sentence inducing a necessary intellectual reorientation rather than any “epistemological break” in his thought.

Santucci’s book also includes other valuable tools, ideal for readers approaching Gramsci for the first time. In addition to short introductory remarks from Eric Hobsbawm and Joseph A. Buttigieg, the text is appended with a succinct chronology of Gramsci’s life as well as a biographic glossary of the main historical and political figures that crop up throughout the book. Considering all the constraints of a small introductory text, the only real demerit of Santucci’s book (and this criticism extends to his English translators as well) is that of all the intriguing passages extracted from Gramsci’s writings and assembled throughout the text, not one citation is given for their location in the existing English editions. Oddly enough, Santucci’s citations for the quoted passages of the *Prison Notebooks* are not even given in the standard international format (providing the notebook number, followed by the number of the note), but instead rely on the pagination of the specifically Italian edition of 1965. While this may not provide such a formidable obstacle for seasoned veterans of Gramsci’s *Notebooks*, who are most likely already familiar with the select passages, it seems a puzzling curiosity for an introductory biography that ostensibly hopes to whet readers’ appetites for more.

Citations notwithstanding, the translation of Santucci’s *Antonio Gramsci* is likely to make a very important contribution to the ongoing attempt to capture how intensely political Gramsci’s project was. While certainly not supplanting Fiori’s classic account of Gramsci’s revolutionary life, Santucci’s book is a perfect compliment. Probably best read before Fiori, together the two provide the best introduction to Gramsci’s life and work available in the English-speaking world.

Peter Thomas’s intervention into the terrain of Gramscian studies (now available in affordable paperback from Haymarket) delivers a very severe blow to the “cultural studies” Gramsci who has become so familiar to western audiences. Thomas’s intention to re-politicize and re-historicize Gramsci’s project within the context of the Communist International (Comintern) is the book’s singular achievement. The book neatly divides into two sequential threads. Firstly, Thomas offers a response to Perry Anderson’s influential 1977 interpretation (in *New Left Review*) of Gramsci’s political theory. Secondly, Thomas takes up Louis Althusser’s criticisms of Gramsci’s philosophy as laid out in *For Marx* and *Reading Capital*. Thomas’s selection of targets is apt: Anderson and Althusser are not only towering intellectual figures in their own right, but it is precisely Gramsci’s theory of the state and his philosophy of praxis that Thomas

claims to be the key concepts at the centre of the *Prison Notebooks*. Their displacement or occlusion by Anderson and Althusser therefore must be dealt with before the key perspective within the *Prison Notebooks* can be understood.

In addition to problematizing more than a few popularly held beliefs of the standard interpretation of the *Prison Notebooks* along the way (e.g. Gramsci's use of "code words" to evade the prison censor, such as "philosophy of praxis" as a synonym for Marxism or historical materialism), Thomas attempts to present Gramsci's prison research project as having a much greater internal coherence than is often argued. What is typically said is that Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* elaborate tentative and unsteady theses concerning his theory of "hegemony," reputed to be the key concept in his vocabulary. Thomas, of course, does not deny hegemony its central place within the *Notebooks*, but argues that it can only be properly understood when situated within Gramsci's truly "novel contribution to Marxist political theory: the concept of the 'integral State'" (137). Indeed, against those who would locate Gramsci's theory of hegemony solely within the boundaries of a non-political civil society, Thomas insists that:

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It is only within the problematic of the integral state as a dialectical unity of both civil society and political society that Gramsci's theory of proletarian hegemony becomes comprehensible, as a theory of the political constitution of an alliance of subaltern classes capable of exercising leadership over other subaltern social groups and repression against its class antagonist. It must necessarily progress to the dismantling of the state machinery upon which its antagonist's power is founded, and which provides the ultimate (coercive) guarantee for the bourgeoisie's (consensual) hegemony (137-8, footnote 8).

As the social basis for power in the state, any class project for hegemony must begin in, but never be confined to, civil society. Hegemony, in Gramsci's usage of the term, must therefore be understood as a practice spanning both civil society and political society (the state narrowly conceived). As the terrain of hegemony, civil society and political society together constitute the "integral state."

By situating Gramsci's concept of hegemony within his theory of the bourgeois integral state, Thomas draws our attention to Gramsci's prison-time engagement with the earlier debates of the Comintern. Specifically, it is Gramsci's peculiar form of Leninism that begins to explain his unique emphasis on mobilizing subaltern social groups in civil society in order to delegitimize and debase bourgeois state power. Gramsci, intently focused

on the 1921 New Economic Policy (NEP), tried to theorize the *practice* of “Lenin’s last struggle” when, after the post-WWI revolutionary wave had definitively *receded*, he proposed a “cultural revolution” to consolidate the insurgent working classes and rebuild their capacities through basic (often defensive) class struggles alongside non-revolutionary workers and peasants. With this form of hegemonic politics in mind, Gramsci invokes Lenin and Trotsky’s tactical recommendation to the west, the united front, as the strategic basis for consolidating the social forces of civil society into a “proletarian apparatus” during a period in which taking state power was off the immediate agenda.

This, however, is only the first half of the book, and is its most profound argument. In the second half, where Thomas takes up the cudgel against Althusser, the centrality of the integral state recedes as the argument shifts to the terrain of philosophy. For those who have come of age since the fading of Althusser’s star and are unfamiliar with the controversies surrounding “historicism,” “humanism” and so on, Thomas could have made the stakes of this debate clearer. The younger generation of readers may well wonder why the “Althusserian moment” continues to be the spectre haunting Marxist philosophy. Unfortunately, what the uninitiated are left with is what feels like an extended (though certainly not uninteresting) detour en route to the final chapter, when the integral state makes its brief reappearance in Thomas’s discussion of intellectuals and hegemony. A more consistent and thorough intertwining of the two threads of *The Gramscian Moment* could have eased this discontinuity within the book.

Thomas’s overall assertion that Gramsci’s political and philosophical perspective—his “moment” in Marxism, so to speak—constitutes the most appropriate point of departure for any contemporary revitalization of historical materialism remains unfortunately underdeveloped. We are left with a detailed roadmap with which to navigate Gramsci’s wide-ranging project, but with no clear guide as to how that schema may relate to our contemporary surroundings. While such a demand exceeds the intentions of this book, its major point clearly requires it.

Thus one can only hope that Thomas’s book will reset the terms of debate for Gramsci scholars. It is not designed for beginners, but will serve its purpose if it reorients scholarly attention away from the “cultural studies” image of Gramsci and pushes forward a new research agenda that focuses more historiographical attention on Lenin’s NEP, develops a closer examination of the successes and failures of the united front strategy and

critically re-examines Gramsci's concepts in the context of contemporary capitalism. All these avenues are opened up for subsequent investigation. While these ambitious projects fall beyond the scope of Thomas's book, this important text will no doubt be a vital tool for that enterprise.

Kramer, Reinhold and Tom Mitchell. 2010. *When the State Trembled: How A.J. Andrews and the Citizens' Committee Broke the Winnipeg General Strike*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press. ISBN 978-1-4426-1116-0. Paper: 35.00 CAD. Pages: 443.

Francis, Daniel. 2010. *Seeing Reds: The Red Scare of 1918-19, Canada's First War on Terror*. Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press. ISBN 978-1-55152-373-6. Cloth: 27.95 CAD. Pages: 280.

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It would be an understatement to say that the history of the Canadian left has lost its lustre; it would be an overstatement to say that its lustre has been restored by *When the State Trembled* and *Seeing Reds*. Nonetheless, the fortuitous publication of these two books in the same year raises the profile of a history whose lessons Canadians can ill afford to forget. *When the State Trembled* is a "local" history placed in national and international contexts, while *Seeing Reds* is a national and international treatment whose central event is that "local" strike in Winnipeg in 1919. The interplay of the local, national and international on the one hand, and of the two books themselves on the other, means that both works are well worth reading, and even more worth reading together.

The central argument of *When the State Trembled* will not be new to readers who have read Tom Mitchell's work already published in *Manitoba History*, *Prairie Forum*, *Left History* and *Labour/Le Travail*. Readers will not be surprised to find that Kramer and Mitchell's book is meticulously researched, its impact heightened by the acquisition through the Access to Information Act of the correspondence between A.J. Andrews and the acting Minister of Justice, Arthur Meighen. That said, it remains an intriguing perspective that brings fresh insight to our understanding of Winnipeg 1919, the idea that it is the victors who have been marginalized