

This article was downloaded by: [Marcus Green]

On: 22 June 2014, At: 06:54

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



New Political Science

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cnps20>

Gramsci's Political Thought

Marcus E. Green^a

^a Otterbein University, USA

Published online: 04 Apr 2014.

To cite this article: Marcus E. Green (2014) Gramsci's Political Thought, *New Political Science*, 36:2, 281-284, DOI: [10.1080/07393148.2014.894698](https://doi.org/10.1080/07393148.2014.894698)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/07393148.2014.894698>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Taylor & Francis makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the "Content") contained in the publications on our platform. However, Taylor & Francis, our agents, and our licensors make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views of or endorsed by Taylor & Francis. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with primary sources of information. Taylor and Francis shall not be liable for any losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

Carlos Nelson Coutinho, *Gramsci's Political Thought*, trans. Pedro Sette-Camara, Leiden/Boston, MA: Brill, 2012, 198 pp.

Gramsci's Political Thought, in Brill's Historical Materialism Book Series, provides a critical introduction to Antonio Gramsci's political theory and practice. Carlos Nelson Coutinho (1943–2012) was one of the leading radical intellectuals of the Brazilian left and integral to the dissemination of Gramsci's thought in Brazil and Latin America. After the military coup in 1964, Coutinho was instrumental in the project of translating Gramsci's writings into Portuguese, which he saw as urgent for analyzing the Brazilian situation. The publishing house Civilização Brasileira, in coordination with the Gramsci Institute in Rome, published anthologies of Gramsci's prison notebooks between 1966 and 1968, and beginning in the late-1990s, Coutinho, along with Marco Aurélio Nogueira and Luiz Sérgio Henriques, edited the critical Portuguese edition of Gramsci's complete works (ten volumes). Coutinho published several books and numerous articles on Gramsci's political thought in multiple languages, rendering him one of the most renowned interpreters of Gramsci's thought in Brazil and beyond, though his writings have been largely unavailable in English. *Gramsci's Political Thought*, which is a translation of *Gramsci: Um estudo sobre su pensamento politico* (1999), illustrates Coutinho's masterful ability to navigate the complexities of Gramsci's writings and to demonstrate their contemporary relevance.

The first three chapters of *Gramsci's Political Thought* cover Gramsci's formative years, from 1910 to his arrest by Mussolini's Fascist government in November 1926. The remaining five chapters address some of the major concepts of Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*, written between 1929 and 1935. The main body of the book is followed by three appendices of supplementary essays—two of which are available in English for the first time—that Coutinho originally published separately from the 1999 Brazilian edition of the text. By situating Gramsci's writings in their historical context, Coutinho traces Gramsci's intellectual and political formation, addressing the strengths and weaknesses of his thought in relation to the currents of the period. In addition to several interconnected themes, the book is tied together by the central examination of Gramsci's dialectical overcoming and conserving of Marx's and Lenin's contributions to revolutionary praxis.

Gramsci's early idealistic conception of socialism, Coutinho notes, originated in his youthful exposure to Sardinian nationalist and socialist literature. In his studies at the University of Turin, Gramsci was initially attracted to the neo-Hegelian philosophies of Benedetto Croce and Giovanni Gentile, largely due to their anti-positivism, which contrasted with the positivist evolutionism that was pervasive in the Italian Socialist Party (PSI) and in the Second International. Gentile's non-determinist interpretation of Marxism as a "philosophy of praxis" especially interested Gramsci and provided an alternative to the reformist and maximalist factions in the PSI, which Coutinho stresses were marked by passivity. This ideological view of socialism, as Coutinho argues, is apparent in Gramsci's early political activity, represented in his proposal for the creation of a Socialist Cultural Association and the Club of Moral Life (founded in 1917). This, Coutinho argues, revealed the strengths and weaknesses of Gramsci's initial conception of

socialism. The early Gramsci viewed socialism in “an idealistic, moralistic light,” not institutionally connected to political and economic transformation (pp. 10–11). However, the idea that the development of socialism required the creation of a new culture became a permanent element of this thought and central to his understanding of hegemony.

After the October Revolution, Gramsci’s focus on culture became more politically and organizationally focused. In April 1919, Gramsci, along with Angelo Tasca, Palmiro Togliatti and Umberto Terracini, founded the journal *L’Ordine nuovo*. Within two months, the journal’s focus on culture was articulated in the form of worker organization and empowerment. In Coutinho’s view, Gramsci radicalized his early conception of culture: he “took culture to mean a way of thinking about concrete reality, of intervening in its transformation” (p. 15). Through the period of 1919–20, *L’Ordine nuovo* supported the factory council movement in Turin and the wider factory occupations throughout parts of Italy. In this period, Gramsci viewed the political space of the working class from the factory to the state, but as Coutinho argues, the young Gramsci underestimated the role of the political party, at least until the defeat of the council movement and factory occupations, which did not receive the full support of the PSI. Through this experience, Coutinho argues, Gramsci assimilated two important points from Lenin’s thought: the importance of active socialist strategy in the struggle for state power (in contrast to the passive and spontaneist aspects of reformism and maximalism) and the creation of a new type of party capable of leading the working class and its allies. This focus on the party led Gramsci to support the communist split from the PSI and the creation of the Communist Party of Italy (PCd’I) in January 1921, under the leadership of Amadeo Bordiga, though Bordiga himself supported a maximalist, non-compromising position. Gramsci’s “passage to maturity,” Coutinho argues, occurred in the intensive years between 1921 and 1926, as he recognized the need of the PCd’I to develop into a national party capable of leading the masses. After May 1922, when Gramsci was sent to Moscow to represent the PCd’I on the executive committee of the Communist International, he had the opportunity to deepen his knowledge of Lenin’s political theory, and in the name of Lenin he began to openly criticize Bordiga’s fatalistic conception of revolution in support of the united-front strategy proposed by the Communist International. Coutinho highlights several passages in Gramsci’s writings in the final three years prior to his imprisonment that illustrate the emergence of hegemony in his thought. For Coutinho, Gramsci’s “greatest theoretical realisation” prior to his arrest was the idea that the struggle for hegemony of the working class required transcending corporatist interests and leading allied classes in a mass movement (p. 41).

After his arrest, Gramsci expected a long sentence and immediately formulated plans to study in prison. In a letter to his sister-in-law, he described his desire to produce something “für ewig” (for ever) that was more “disinterested” than his previous political activity. At Gramsci’s show trial, the Fascist prosecutor famously said: “We must prevent this brain from working for twenty years.” He received a sentence of twenty years, four months and five days. It took him nearly two and a half years to obtain permission to study and take notes while in prison. It is the consequences of his imprisonment, his critical

reflections on his political activity, and his desire to produce something *für ewig* that has led Gramsci to be known as a political theorist today. One of the central problems Gramsci undertakes in the *Prison Notebooks*, as Coutinho shows, is the question of why the experience of the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia was not successfully repeated in Western Europe, despite the apparent revolutionary situation that followed World War I. With this focus, Coutinho provides clear expositions of some of Gramsci's key concepts, demonstrating how they represent a "dialectical *overcoming*" of Lenin's thought and practice (p. 50). Gramsci's analysis of the differences between the East (Russia) and the West provide insights into the formulation of many of his concepts, including hegemony, the extended notion of the state (political society + civil society), collective will, the political party, war of position, and war of maneuver, among others.

In the final chapter, Coutinho discusses Gramsci's contemporary relevance and the analytical power of his categories in transcending the time and place of their formation. Coutinho also stresses that Gramsci's conception of socialism will remain relevant as long as capitalist society continues to exist. Gramsci's conception of hegemony, Coutinho argues, contains a fundamentally radical democratic foundation, in that it posits the establishment of socialism as the passage from economic-corporatist ("egoistic-passionate") interests to ethico-political (universal) interests (p. 127). This point is also taken up in the essay of the first appendix, in which Coutinho shows how Gramsci's notion of hegemony as "national-popular collective will" draws upon and overcomes Rousseau's notion of "general will" and Hegel's notion of "universal will." This conception of democracy, as national popular culture and collective will (consensual and hegemonic), overcomes the flaws of both "historical communism" and liberalism (p. 130). With this conception, Coutinho argues, Gramsci "taught us that without democracy there is no socialism, and neither is there full democracy without socialism" (p. 130).

The second and third appendices also demonstrate the contemporary relevance and applicability of Gramsci's categories. In the second appendix, Coutinho takes up Gramsci's concepts of "passive revolution" and "counter-reformation," arguing that the rise of neoliberalism is better understood as counter-reformation than as passive revolution, which provides an alternative interpretation to many Gramscian interpretations of neoliberalism. In the final essay, Coutinho provides an overview of the reception and uses of Gramsci in Brazil. The essay not only illustrates the ways in which Gramsci's categories can be utilized to understand contexts other than his own, but also demonstrates Coutinho's point that Gramsci's thought continues to remain relevant in the present moment.

Overall, *Gramsci's Political Thought* provides one of the most thorough introductions to Gramsci political theory and practice. Given the expansive nature of Gramsci's writings, Coutinho explicitly focuses on Gramsci's contributions to political thought, leaving aside his writings on literature, culture, education, and so on. In addition to putting Gramsci in conversation with his contemporaries and the classical work of Rousseau, Hegel, and Marx, Coutinho also demonstrates Gramsci's contributions in relation to the work of Georg Lukács, Jürgen Habermas, and Nicos Poulantzas. Readers interested in political theory, leftist

politics and Marxism, including Gramscian scholars, will likely find this work thought-provoking, enlightening, and original.

MARCUS E. GREEN

Otterbein University, USA

© 2014, Marcus E. Green

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/07393148.2014.894698>

Notes on Contributor

Marcus E. Green is Assistant Professor of Political Science at Otterbein University in Ohio, where he teaches political theory and American politics. He has published articles in *Historical Materialism*, *Postcolonial Studies* and *Rethinking Marxism*, and he is the editor of *Rethinking Gramsci* (2011). He is also co-editor of the journal *Rethinking Marxism* and Secretary of the International Gramsci Society. He is currently working on a book-length manuscript that examines Gramsci's concept of subalternity.

Jacquelin van Stekelenburg, Conny Roggeband, and Bert Klandermans (eds), *The Future of Social Movement Research: Dynamics, Mechanisms, and Processes*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013, 469 pp.

This collection of twenty-four essays and discussions includes the work of thirty-four scholars (twenty-three sociologists, four psychologists, three political scientists, and four from other fields), all but one of them from either Europe (seventeen) or the US (sixteen), offering views on the past and future of "social movement research" as they define it. Though there is an attempt to broaden the perspective to disciplines outside of sociology, the approach is ultimately so disciplinarily narrow, confining, and so centered on explaining only events in a short timeframe in almost a single type of Western society, that political scientists and other social science fields (even sociologists) will likely find it of little use. Much of the book seeks to explain the dead ends that sociologists are reaching in their research, but the book's own insularity is the best evidence of why the sub-field in sociology is failing to build on what were excellent and promising foundations.

Rather than start with the intellectual questions of the human social behaviors they are trying to explain, which would open the book to other disciplines and to a real social science agenda, the editors have constrained their objective within an odd business marketing model. The book is arranged in four sections: the "demand side" of participation in "social movements"; the "supply side" of "social movement organizations" and networks; the "dynamics of mobilization" for supply meeting demand; and the "context." In trying to fit within this framework, the authors are limited to discussion of "identities" and social networks and institutional tools for the marketing of collective action.

Of the book's twenty-four essays, five of them (roughly 20% of the book) are useful reading for any social scientist, for surveying what sociology has done in the past and can add to questions of social movement research. These could have