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# Gramscian Philology and *Subaltern Social Groups*

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*Antonio Gramsci's prison notebooks, in their integral critical edition, are a fragmentary, intricate, and unfinished record of his philological method of investigation. They weave together multiple fragments and threads of inquiry that intersect and overlap, making it difficult to examine one concept or motif without examining others. As Joseph A. Buttigieg argued in several of his essays, Gramsci's enduring relevance lies not in isolated ideas or concepts but in his distinctive method of inquiry, which one can grasp only by engaging with a complete edition of the notebooks. Yet anthologies of notebooks are useful entry points into Gramsci's writings, as average readers will unlikely become interested in his work solely through a complete critical edition. The anthology* Subaltern Social Groups *provides a translation of Notebook 25, "On the Margins of History: History of Subaltern Groups," and a thematic selection of notes pertaining to the topic. As the commentators in this symposium demonstrate, Notebook 25 provides several entry points into the major themes of the prison notebooks.*

**Key Words:** Antonio Gramsci, Philology, Prison Notebooks, Social Groups, Subalterns

In memory of Joseph A. Buttigieg (1947–2019)

As a posthumous publication, Antonio Gramsci's prison notebooks have generated ongoing debates and discussions on how the seemingly fragmentary and incomplete nature of the texts should be edited, published, read, and interpreted. In several of his essays, Joseph A. Buttigieg emphasized the importance of engaging with the critical edition of the prison notebooks and being attentive to the ways Gramsci composed his notes and elaborated his ideas. For instance, in a 2006 *Rethinking Marxism* symposium on the first two volumes of his English translation of the critical edition of the *Prison Notebooks*, Buttigieg (2006, 38) argues that the fragmentariness of the notebooks is not a problem to be overcome, but rather their incompleteness illustrates Gramsci's multidirectional and multilayered mode of inquiry, which is "patently decentered, open, tentative, provisional, exploratory."

Drawing from Notebook 4 with the first note in the series, "Notes on Philosophy: Materialism and Idealism," on the question of method, Buttigieg suggests



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that the notebooks should be studied in the way Gramsci outlined how to study the posthumously published unfinished works of authors such as Marx. In the note, Gramsci specifies the "scrupulous accuracy and scientific honesty" required when studying "a conception of the world that has never been systematically expounded by its author-thinker," especially "when dealing with a non-systematic thinker, with a personality in whom theoretical and practical activity are indissolubly intertwined, and with an intellect which is, therefore, in continuous creation and perpetual movement." In studying such a thinker, Gramsci argues, a distinction should be made between the works the thinker published himself and those which remained unpublished during his lifetime. To study "the works that were printed not under the direct responsibility of the author, but by others after his death," Gramsci argues that "it would be good to have a diplomatic text"—that is, a text not rearranged or reconstructed by an editor and that provides a philologically accurate reproduction of the original text (Q4§1, Gramsci 1996, 138). To study such a thinker, according to Gramsci, one should focus on: "1. *biography* in great detail, and 2. *exposition* of all the works, even the most negligible, in chronological order, sorted according to the different phases: intellectual formation, maturity, the grasp of a new way of thinking and its confident application. The search for the *leitmotif,* the rhythm of the thought, more important than single, isolated quotations" (Q4§1, Gramsci 1996, 137). Thus, to read Gramsci in a Gramscian way requires an examination of his complete manuscripts and the multiple fragments in order to identify the rhythm of his thought and the leitmotif in his work in relation to his political activity and intellectual formation. The point of such an approach, as Gramsci clarifies, is to identify "those elements which become stable and permanent" in the development of a thinker's body of work: that is, "those elements really adopted by the author as his own thought" (Q4§1, Gramsci 1996, 137).

In his 1990 essay "Gramsci's Method," Buttigieg demonstrates how seemingly cryptic and isolated fragments in Gramsci's early notes reappear in later notes, exhibiting permanent elements of his thought. The fragmentary character of the notebooks, in Buttigieg's (1990, 64) view, is representative of the complex, multidirectional, and inherently open-ended nature of Gramsci's project and not simply a result of the prison conditions in which he worked. As Buttigieg (1994) argues in "Philology and Politics: Returning to the Text of Antonio Gramsci's Prison Notebooks," Gramsci's enduring relevance lies not in isolated ideas or concepts but in his distinctive method of inquiry, characterized by antidogmatic critique, flexible theoretical articulations, attention to historical and material specificities, and the unity of knowledge and political struggle. Gramsci himself conceived his method of historical and political investigation as philological and consistent with the philosophy of praxis. In his words: "The experience on which the philosophy of praxis is based cannot be schematized; it is history in all its infinite variety and multiplicity, whose study can give rise to 'philology' as a method of scholarship for ascertaining particular facts" (Q11§25, Gramsci 1971, 428). The prison notebooks

themselves can be conceived as a "variety and multiplicity" of fragments documenting "particular facts," woven together through multiple lines of inquiry that intersect and overlap, making it difficult to examine one motif without examining others. In this sense, the fragmentary, intricate, and unfinished nature of the prison notebooks are a material record of Gramsci's philological method of investigation. However, as Buttigieg (1994, 130) argues: "These Gramscian traits can be brought into relief and their significance assessed only through careful, patient analyses of the integral text of the prison notebooks." For these reasons, Buttigieg argues that thematic and anthological editions of the notebooks on their own are insufficient sources for Gramscian scholarship, as interpretations based solely on them are inherently limited by their lack of engagement with the complete text (105).

This is especially the case with the reception of "subaltern social groups" in English. The relatively few notes on the topic in *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (Gramsci 1971), which served as the primary source for subaltern-studies scholars for many years, contributed to the widespread misinterpretation that Gramsci used the phrase "subaltern social groups" to camouflage his use of "proletariat" and circumvent fascist prison censors. Yet, when considered in light of the critical edition of the prison notebooks, there is no textual basis to support a such claim (Green 2002; 2011), and it appears that this misinterpretation exists exclusively in the Anglophone world, as no equivalent claims exist in Italian Gramscian scholarship.

Along similar lines, Buttigieg (1994, 103) criticized scholars who engaged in what he described as the "philological coercion" of Gramsci's texts: that is, those who attempt to systematize Gramsci's ideas by identifying key concepts or main threads of thought, extract them from their complex textual web, and reconstruct them into a coherent framework. Such an approach not only divorces Gramsci's historical investigations from his political theorizations, which he thoroughly criticized in his notes on Croce and Bukharin, but it also completely ignores the method that generated his insights in the first place. Instrumentalist readings of Gramsci also typically involve forms of textual distortion and coercion to justify ideologically motivated (mis)interpretations of his work, as has been the case with the post-Marxist, Crocean, Stalinist, determinist, and liberal readings that have contributed to his contested legacy (Davidson 1972; Frosini 2008; Liguori 2022). As Buttigieg (2006, 38–9) points out, Gramsci himself opposed such facile treatments of texts. In Notebook 6, §198, for instance, Gramsci warns against "importuning the text": that is, "When out of zealous attachment to a thesis, one makes texts say more than they really do." Such philological errors, according to Gramsci, deserve "intellectual and moral sanction," whether committed out of deception, negligence, or incompetence, just as selling goods of lesser quality or weight than has been agreed upon deserves sanction (Q6§198, Gramsci 2007, 141).

At the same time, Buttigieg (1994, 104) also warns against using "a strict philological litmus test ... to judge the merits and usefulness of various editions and interpretations of [Gramsci's] text." While a thorough study of the prison notebooks in an integral critical edition is essential for fully understanding some of Gramsci's most significant contributions to social and political theory, there is a genuine risk that an excessive focus on philological rigor could lead to unintended consequences. As Buttigieg writes:

> To be sure, every interpretation of Gramsci is more or less convincing, gains wider or narrower attention, and has lasting or ephemeral effects according to how deeply rooted it is (or appears to be) in Gramsci's text. Close adherence to the text is at the basis of every valid interpretation, but it cannot be the sole criterion by which to evaluate the usefulness and importance of a hermeneutic act—otherwise, an absolutely perfect interpretation of a text would consist in nothing more than a flawless, precise reproduction/representation/repetition of the text itself. (106)

Such rigid philological approaches to the text would be absurd, and even less strict ones could result in a shift toward a methodologically fulfilling but unproductive scholarly activity where philology is valued for its own sake and is detached from political engagement. As Buttigieg (1994, 113) points out, Gramsci (1994, 38) criticized this tendency in his prison letters, likening it to the behavior of Dante scholars, "who make a religion out of some poet or writer, and perform strange philological rites in his honor."

Given the intensification of the philological turn in Gramscian studies since the early 2000s, there has been a growing concern that rigid approaches to the text have the potential to depoliticize Gramsci's legacy. This topic was the theme of the 2017 International Gramsci Society Conference, held in Campinas, Brazil (Bianchi, Mussi, and Areco 2019). In his contribution to the conference, Buttigieg stressed the importance of the connection between philology and politics in Gramsci's thought, and he argued that it is not the philological turn in Gramscian studies that threatens to depoliticize his work but rather the selective readings and ideologically motivated (ab)uses of his text, especially those that render his views as being compatible with, instead of an alternative to, mainstream liberalism or neoliberalism (Buttigieg 2019). Only with meticulous focus on the integral texts and their historical context can one combat and respond to such abuses and misinterpretations. As Buttigieg argued in 1994, it is precisely the number of partial readings, distortions, and (mis)appropriations of the text that prompted the philological turn. For these reasons, Buttigieg (1994, 112–13) promoted the idea of adopting "a flexible approach to Gramscian philology, an approach that in stressing the importance of studying Gramsci's text in its integral form steers clear of rigid, exclusionary dogmatism."

Given the emphasis Buttigieg placed on the importance of studying philologically accurate reproductions of the prison notebooks, one may get the impression

that he was fundamentally opposed to anthologies, but this is far from the truth. As Buttigieg (1992, xxi) writes in the acknowledgements to volume 1 of his edition of the *Prison Notebooks*, he originally planned to produce "an annotated anthology of Gramsci's writings on cultural politics," but Paul A. Bove and Edward W. Said persuaded him to undertake a complete translation of the Italian critical edition of the *Quaderni del carcere* edited by Valentino Gerratana (Gramsci 1975). Said refused to support the publication of an anthology with Columbia University Press but championed the publication of the critical edition. As I point out in the introduction to *Subaltern Social Groups*, Buttigieg was astutely aware of the necessity of anthologies in making Gramsci's writings accessible to a wide audience. In his words: "Average readers cannot, and will not, become interested in Gramsci if their only way of encountering him is through a complete critical edition of the prison notebooks" (Buttigieg 1994, 112). The reception of Gramsci in English was generated entirely through anthologies prior to the publication of volume 1 of Buttigieg's edition of the *Prison Notebooks*. The major English anthologies *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (Gramsci 1971), *Selections from Cultural Writings* (Gramsci 1985), *An Antonio Gramsci Reader* (Gramsci 1988), and *Further Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (Gramsci 1995) have all provided valuable contributions in disseminating Gramsci's work and making it accessible to a broad spectrum of readers and students. If not for the success of those anthologies, as Buttigieg (1994; 2018) recognized, there wouldn't have been sufficient interest in Gramsci's work to justify producing a critical edition of the prison notebooks in English.

With our edition of *Subaltern Social Groups*, Buttigieg and I sought to provide both a critical edition of Notebook 25 and a thematic selection of all the notes directly pertaining to the topic, drawn from the miscellaneous and special notebooks, giving readers a thorough representation of Gramsci's treatment of the concept over time. Notebook 25, although relatively short, previously had not appeared in English in complete form. The thematic portion of the volume retains some of the basic characteristics and chronological sequence of notes with little apparent connection between them, reflecting the fragmentary nature of the original text. Additionally, we utilized Gerratana's cross-referencing apparatus for readers to find the location of the first- and second-draft versions of the notes. With my introduction to the volume, I situate the emergence of "subaltern classes"/"subaltern social groups" in the prison notebooks and describe the composition of Notebook 25 in relation to the general trajectory of Gramsci's project. Out of philological care and the potential for "importuning the text," I refrained from explicating the concepts or providing definitive interpretations of the text, with the intention to instead open it to new readings and interpretations.

In his reflections on the volume, Jordan T. Camp (2025) shows that Notebook 25 provides insights into Gramsci's understanding of class and difference, political organization, the composition of the integral state, the Southern Question, and fascism, which together enrich current understandings of conjunctural analysis. Gramsci's notion of conjunctural analysis emerges out of his delineation of the

methodological criteria for examining political situations, criteria which include economic shifts, political formations, and ideological processes, as well as the composition of social groups and their "degree of homogeneity and self-consciousness" (Q4§38, Gramsci 2021, 38). As Camp explains, Gramsci's criteria provide a foundation for examining how political and ideological processes shape common sense and political organization among subaltern groups while also considering long-term structural forces within specific historical and geographical contexts. Camp (2025, 175) explains that the current conjuncture is characterized by the rise of a "neo-fascist common sense" that merges hostility toward "globalist elites" and the "deep state" with nationalism, an emphasis on law and order, and the criminalization of subaltern groups such as "migrants, the unemployed, the homeless, and LGBTQI communities." As Gramsci (2021, 9–10) points out in Notebook 25, §4, the fascist dictatorships of his period suppressed the autonomies of subaltern groups through the state as the ruling class expanded its dominance, becoming "totalitarian." As neofascist movements emerge globally in the current situation, Camp argues, the dialectic of subaltern revolt and reaction underscores the necessity of examining the common sense that mediates the dominance of the state and capitalism.

In her contribution, Kate Crehan (2025) explores the shift in Gramsci's use of "class" in his first-draft notes to the use of "group" in Notebook 25. Crehan argues that the shift in terminology reflects more than a need to avoid censorship. It embodies in effect Gramsci's conception of the philosophy of praxis as "absolute historicism" and his commitment to grounding theoretical categories in historical realities rather than imposing predetermined classifications on specific situations. Crehan suggests that Gramsci's change in terminology may call into question the Marxist notion of "class-in-itself," in that "group" does not imply a latent class-in-itself with the potential to transform into a politically cohesive class-for-itself. The use of "group," as Crehan argues, provides a more expansive category that encompasses a wide array of subordinate social groups—such as slaves, peasants, religious communities, women, racialized groups, and the proletariat, among others—and this requires historically grounded analysis in specific contexts. As I point out in the introduction to the edited volume of Notebook 25, Gramsci's shift in terminology from "subaltern class" to "subaltern social group" is an issue that has eluded scholarly consensus (Green 2021, xxxviii–xl), and Crehan presents it in a way that not only reenforces the necessity of concrete historical analysis but also enhances the analysis of the gradations of subordination, agency, and autonomy.

In his reflections, Mossimo Modonesi emphasizes the point that Gramsci's theorization of subaltern social groups is not only a category of analysis but also an investigation into the empowerment of subaltern groups, from gradations of subordination and organization to autonomy and ultimately hegemony. As Modonesi explains, Gramsci characterizes subaltern groups as existing within a dialectic of subordination and resistance in which they are subject to the initiatives of

dominant groups and the internalization of their values, but they simultaneously exhibit varying traces of autonomous initiative in moments of rebellion and resistance. As Modonesi (2025, 192) writes: "On the one hand, [Gramsci] points to spontaneity as a characteristic of the behavior of the subaltern classes, as a correlate of the absence of a full class consciousness *for itself* as well as of organization and direction. On the other hand, he recognizes potentialities and embryonic elements, nested in what he calls 'popular science' or 'common sense,' that translate into practices and behaviors that we could define as antagonistic." Understanding and developing the potentialities of subaltern political organization and conscious leadership were central to Gramsci's thinking. As Modonesi aptly puts it, "Gramsci is not a theoretician of subalternity; on the contrary, he is a theoretician of the exit from subalternity" (187). To correct one small point in Modonesi's contribution, I do not suggest "that Gramsci probably inherited the formula 'subaltern classes' from reading Gioberti" (188 n2). Rather, I mention Gioberti simply as an example of an author who used the phrase prior to Gramsci and who Gramsci had read, as the phrase had been commonly used in Italy as early as the eighteenth century. Presently, there is no evidence to confirm the source of Gramsci's adoption of the phrase.

The open and provisional nature of the prison notebooks is indicative of Gramsci's philological method, and it is that method that guided his investigations in understanding and transforming social and political structures in all their multiplicity, including the conditions of subaltern social groups, from their position in the class structure and the state to their modes of thought, common sense, language, intellectual representations, culture, political organization, and levels of autonomy. Because the complete critical edition of the prison notebooks is a difficult starting point to study Gramsci's fragments, hopefully *Subaltern Social Groups* will provide a productive entry point into the complexity of his carceral writings.

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