Extended Review

The Integral State and the Philosophy of Praxis


Antonio Gramsci is one of the most influential theorists in education and has been so for quite a number of years, even preceding the publication of Harold Entwistle’s 1979 book, *Antonio Gramsci. Conservative schooling for radical politics*. In Italy, books concerning Gramsci’s influence on education appeared much earlier and included works by Mario Alighiero Manacorda and Angelo Broccoli, to name but two. Two important structuralist philosophers, Louis Althusser and Nicos Poulantzas, who had such a considerable influence on Marxist approaches to sociology of education, also drew heavily on Gramsci’s work. So did key figures in the cultural studies tradition who became very important sources of reference in educational thinking: Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall. The stature of Gramsci within studies concerning education can also be gauged by the number of volumes dedicated to his ideas on or related to education, including anthologies such as the one I edited as a special issue of this journal.

And yet there has been great controversy over the interpretations of several concepts attributed to Gramsci as well his conceptualization of such important aspects of educational policy such as, for instance, the state. Peter Thomas’ extremely well-researched *The Gramscian moment* provides a valuable corrective to some of the misconceptions that have accrued over the years, without minimizing in any way the importance of the studies targeted in his volume, notably Perry Anderson’s well-known essay in the *New Left Review* concerning the antinomies of Antonio Gramsci and Althusser’s own writings on Gramsci. I think Peter Thomas sets the record straight on a number of issues connected with Gramsci’s thought, not least with regard to his concept of the ‘integrated’ state, which is of relevance to education and to studies of Gramscian inspiration that concern education policy making.

What really emerges from Thomas’s and other accounts (notably those by Joseph A. Buttigieg) is a comprehensive view of the state’s role in the consolidation and the provision of a context for the contestation of hegemonic relations. The separation of political and civil society, the latter used by Gramsci in a manner that differs from the way it is used today as a third sector between the state and industry, is done specifically for heuristic purposes. The state embodies both, as Thomas underlines. Equally heuristic, in my view, is the separation between the ideological and repressive,
as the two cannot be entirely separated unless in terms of degree (as Althusser himself admits).

If we take education as an example, this institution of civil society, viewed in its institutional sense and not in the all-pervasive sense that emerges from the Quaderni (education is central to the workings of hegemony itself since the quest for transforming relations of hegemony, within the interstices of its various components, is a quest, a long-term quest, for an intellectual and moral reform), has both its ideological and repressive sides. The former seems self-evident to readers immersed in writings on the politics of education and the various ideological underpinnings of different educational experiences. Yet repression is there in both its subtle and not so subtle forms, the latter writ large, for instance, in those aspects of public education in the USA that Giroux regards as a manifestation of the all-pervasive carceral state. Witness the US high-school model with armed security guards making their presence felt in a heavy-handed manner (Giroux, 2009).

And yet it would be no stretch to argue that the apparent violence perpetrated is itself symbolic because it signals to the students something about their identities, perhaps that of potential criminals who can eventually be incarcerated, a signal that is very much in keeping with the function of an ideological state apparatus (ISA) as conceived by Althusser. In this regard, Thomas argues against any kind of opposition between civil society and the state, and that the two (civil and political society) exist within the notion of the integral state, a term which, as Thomas indeed shows, is used by Gramsci in the Quaderni.

Hegemony, much more elaborately conceived of by Gramsci than gegemoniya in Russia (without his providing any systematic exposition, one must remark), is the means whereby social forces, manifest not only throughout civil society but also what is conceived of as political society (again the division is heuristic), are, as Thomas notes, transformed into political power within the context of different class projects. I would also add to this conceptualization the view, mentioned by Thomas and certainly by Gramsci, following Marx, that the integral state has a strong relational dimension. This emerges quite clearly in Gramsci’s early and later formulations concerning the relationship of the Factory Council and the Socialist State, the former ‘prefiguring’, to use a term adopted by the recently deceased Paula Allman, a new form of state, through its more democratized horizontal social relations of production. This prevents us from reifying the state as a ‘thing’, from engaging in ‘thingification’, as Phil Corrigan (1990) would put it. It is also manifest in Gramsci’s conceptualization of every relationship of hegemony as being a pedagogical relationship.

The importance of this theorization for those who believe in a politically engaged education for the gradual ushering in of a different world, through proletarian revolution, cannot be missed, and it is perhaps for this reason that Gramsci has had such a considerable influence on that area of educational theorization and empirical research known as critical pedagogy, as the works of authors such as Paula Allman, Jean Anyon, Michael Apple, Antonia Darder, Henry Giroux, Deb J. Hill, Margaret Ledwith and David W. Livingstone so clearly indicate. And as Thomas himself shows, also echoing Anderson, there is, in Gramsci, no distinction between East and West and, I would add, North and South, as far as the state goes; the social formations on
each side of the divides exist in the same temporality—a key observation and clarification in the book. Despite any ease of access to political power on one side of the divide, there is still that intense ‘labour of criticism’ (part and parcel of a lengthy ongoing war of position) which needs to be carried out in that long revolution that can lead to an intellectual and moral reform; hegemony needs to be renegotiated and built in a manner that immerses the concepts and practices involved in popular consciousness. Any conquering of a gelatinous state, as Gramsci referred to the situation in pre-Bolshevik Russia, needs to be followed by this work. What emerges from Thomas’s careful exposion is the notion, emphasized by Gramsci, that different historical formations are at different levels in terms of their development of civil society. These formations differ in the quality of the relationship between state and civil society. This applies to both East and West since, as Thomas rightly notes, there are social formations in the West, including the most Western of the West (see notebook xxii on Americanism and Fordism), which are bereft of many institutions of civil society, and yet the absence of such institutions in the USA is a matter of strength for industrialists as hegemony is born in the factory, not requiring political and ideological mediations (see pp. 200–201).

The hegemonic apparatuses need to be built and consolidated to become the channels of the ruling class’s life-world (lebenswelt), ‘the horizon within which its class project is elaborated and within which it also seeks to interpelleate and integrate its antagonists’ (p. 225). Thomas rightly points out that the ascent of this vision needs to be consolidated daily, if the class project (in Gramsci’s view, the proletarian class project) is to continue to assume institutional power (p. 225). The implications for educational activity are enormous. Education is viewed in the broadest sense and not in the sense of simply a Unitarian school as expounded on in Notebooks 1V and XII, therefore incorporating all elements of the hegemonic apparatus including adult education institutions and projects (these include projects of the kind in which Gramsci was himself directly involved in teacher, student and organizational capacities), media institutions, etc. His major pedagogical philosophy, inferred from his overriding philosophy, would be a ‘pedagogy of praxis’ deriving from his elaboration of the philosophy of praxis which connects with people’s common sense. Common sense contains elements of good sense that, however, need to be rendered more coherent, less contradictory. The philosophy of praxis must transcend it in a manner, Thomas explains, that is not speculative, as in the case of Croce’s philosophy, and that does not become doctrinaire or a definitive system of ideas, as in the case of Bukharin’s Manual (the subject of critiques by Allman, 2002). The Philosophy of Praxis ought to be characterized by what Thomas highlights as absolute historicism (Chapter 7), which renders possible the translation of philosophical and conceptual perspectives into intellectual resources for hegemonic organization, absolute immanence (Chapter 8), a moment of conceptual clarity and organization inherent in determinate social relations, and absolute humanism (Chapter 9). The last mentioned refers to a conception of the subject or person as an ‘ensemble of historically determined social relations’, a situation which also allows us to view theories and philosophies in terms of their being institutionally embedded, serving as a hegemonic apparatus and being integrated in and therefore being ideologically overdetermined by the integral state. Educators, seeking
to highlight the politics of education, can draw on this insight, well expounded on by Thomas in three lengthy chapters and summarized in the last one. They can engage in uncovering ways by which dominant educational philosophies serve as hegemonic apparatuses for the ‘integral state’. In these times, for instance, this concept would enable educators to expose the dominant philosophies of lifelong learning closely connected with the hegemonic notions of ‘responsibilization’ and ‘employability’ as linked to the neoliberal integrated state and its relations with, for instance, the supranational state that is the European Union.

This is an extremely erudite piece of work which provides ample material for a proper understanding of the fragments and more elaborate writings by Gramsci intended for a work für ewig but which, carried out under very trying and isolationist conditions, were scattered across several notebooks which, together, came to be referred to as the *Quaderni del Carcere* (Prison Notebooks)—a masterpiece of twentieth century political thought. One final point I would like to make concerns some contemporary relevance of the notion of the integral state (the book is about more than this).

Despite a very strong difference in its underlying politics, Gramsci’s theorization of the integral state leads me to consider some of the modern managerial technical–rational conceptions of the state. The state and its agencies are nowadays said to work not alone but within a loose network of agencies—governance rather than government in what is presented as a ‘heterarchy’ of relations (Ball, 2010) and therefore what Martin Carnoy and Manuel Castells (2001) call the ‘network state’. A Gramscian perspective would nevertheless underline that, despite appearing *prima facie* to be heterarchical, such relations, under capitalism, are, in actual fact, hierarchical and less democratic than they might appear to be. This certainly applies to relations between state and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or labour unions characterized by the ever-present threat of co-optation, often within a corporatist framework. On the other hand, one encounters situations when NGOs, especially those based in the West, are powerful enough to have leverage over certain states (e.g. Oxfam during the Brown government). Structured partnerships between state and business as well as between ‘public’ and ‘private’ tend to emphasize the link between the state and the imperatives of capital accumulation. For Gramsci, the agencies, constituting bourgeois civil society (*burgherliche gesellschaft*) and political society, were integrated within the state. I should mention here a point made by Nicos Poulantzas (1978) and which perhaps was not that relevant to Gramsci’s times, namely that the state also engages in economic activities which are not left totally in the hands of private industry. Poulantzas stated that, under monopoly capitalism, the difference between politics, ideology and the economy is not clear. It is blurred. The state enters directly into the sphere of production as a result of the crises of capitalist production itself (Poulantzas, in Carnoy, 1982, p. 97). One might argue that this point is relevant to the situation today. In the first place, industry often collaborates in policy formulation in tandem or in a loose network with the state just like NGOs or labour unions do. Nowhere is the role of the state as economic player more evident than in higher education (Giroux & Searls Giroux, 2004), an area which, though traditionally vaunting relative autonomy as most education institutions do, constitutes an important domain of
hegemonic struggle. The division between public and private in this sector is increasingly blurred. So-called ‘public universities’ are exhorted to provide services governed by the market and which have a strong commercial basis. Furthermore, the state engages actively through direct and indirect means, and, in certain places, through a series of incentives or ‘goal cushions’ (Darmanin, 2009), to create a higher education competitive market as part of what Phillip G. Cerny (2007), echoed by Bob Jessop (2002) and, in education, Stephen J. Ball (2007), calls the ‘competition’ state (English & Mayo, 2012).

This vindicates Gramsci’s position regarding relations between different institutions and agencies constituting what he calls ‘civil society’/‘political society’ and the capitalist integral state. The state regulates these agencies by working in tandem with them. It also engages in structured partnerships with industry to secure the right basis for the accumulation of global capital. In this regard one can argue that the state is propped up not only by the ideological institutions of what Gramsci calls ‘civil society’ but by industry itself (of which it is part), while it sustains both (propping both the ‘civil society’ institutions and industry) in a reciprocal manner to ensure the right conditions, including the cultural conditions, for the accumulation of capital.

This strikes me as the best exposition of and discussion around Gramsci I have seen in the past 20 years or so and the range of sources is impressive, with even Aristotle quoted in classical Greek (p. 295). Perhaps the book could have done more to move forward beyond exegesis to provide concrete examples from contemporary life, something on the lines of my reference to the dominant hegemonic discourse of lifelong learning and its relation to the hegemonic apparatus. The same could be said of the notes on Italian history (which follow on the interrupted manuscript ‘Alcuni temi sulla quistione meridionale’) and the relevance of the debate on the Meridione with contemporary issues (see the more recent text by Pino Aprile, 2010) including that of immigration across the Mediterranean basin (Mayo, 2007). The concrete examples in The Gramscian moment derive, for the most part, from Gramsci himself and therefore hardly extend beyond 1937. These examples would have continued to underline the contemporary relevance of Gramsci’s writing and explain its survival and resurgence in many parts of the world, notably Latin America, Australia, India, Canada, Germany, the UK, Turkey and Spain; there is less resonance in his native Italy (‘mai profeti in patria’/nemo profeta in patria—never a prophet in your own country), where his name is too much associated with the old Partito Comunista Italiano (PCI) and lost its strong currency following the collapse of the Berlin Wall and therefore ‘il socialismo reale’/’actually existing socialism’) (Mayo, 2009).

But this is perhaps carping. The Gramscian moment is a great book, impressive in its attention to minute details, the breadth of references in various languages, the thorough explanation of origins of certain concepts associated with Gramsci and the persuasiveness of its arguments. This is a big book which deserves a wide readership. Its publication in paperback this year is therefore most welcome. Citing this book should be de rigueur for anyone attempting to engage seriously with Gramsci from now onward.
Note
1. I sat down to write this review at the time when Dr Paula Allman, who has written extensively on Gramsci, historical materialism, adult education and critical pedagogy (Allman, 1999, 2001, 2007), was having her private funeral in Nottingham, Tuesday, 15 November 2011, at 11 a.m. (GMT). Her passing is a great loss to scholarship. I will sorely miss her as a great friend and important source of inspiration. Quite frequently in the past, I would forward the first draft of a piece of writing such as this to her for feedback. I am sure she would have loved Peter Thomas’s book!

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2012.721619

References


