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Reseña / Review

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Latin American Gramscian Thought

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Gramsci en las orillas [*Gramsci on the Banks*¹] is the result of an effort to reflect on Gramsci and his ideas in general, and, in particular, how those ideas have played out in political theory and practice in Latin America and continue to do so. This edited volume, compiled by Chilean academic and author of *Postsoberanía: Literatura, política y trabajo*, Oscar Ariel Cabezas, is divided into three sections: "I. The infinite book of praxis"; "II. José Aricó's devil"; and "III. Untimely geographies." These sections can be understood as: 1) a continuation of the writing of Gramsci's 'open book' of praxis by the contributing authors; 2) a retrospective analysis of Gramscian theory in Latin America focusing on the work of José Aricó and other key figures; and 3) the situated praxis of Gramscian ideas carried out in specific political contexts. Each section presents its own distinct frame of analysis however, in order to flesh out a critical

¹ This and all other excerpts and quotes from *Gramsci en las orillas* were translated from the Spanish by the review's author, unless otherwise indicated.

reflection, this essay will address all of them in three different streams of analysis: Marxist theory, praxis and translation.

Gramsci, in Cabezas's words, is a "heterodox Latin American"-heterodox in the sense of the 'heretic' role his work plays with respect to more orthodox Marxist thought, in part due to his marginal existence on the banks of "Western" European communism and on the banks of society (as an incarcerated intellectual). Cabezas further elaborates in an online interview on his intention to show Gramsci in all his complexity, as a thinker that defies facile binary logic that establishes false dichotomies, thus rendering "[...] (anti-state) social movements and state-centred tendencies a false problem, much like the categorical distinction between civil society and the state, and war of position and war of movement [or manoeuvre],"2 to instead embrace a more broader view of politics. Nonetheless, this complexity does not make up for a certain neutralization stemming from the academic and aesthetic co-optation, for which Cabezas and contributors place Gramsci squarely in the tradition of committed intellectuals whose work is neither beholden to professional aspirations nor to partisan dogma.3 The story of Gramsci that unfolds in this book is also one that goes beyond the more recent uses in Argentine politics (i.e., the influence of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe in 'Kirchnerismo'), stating that, "In any case, I think that in Gramsci, unlike in Ernesto Laclau, there is no theory on populism."4 Rather, it draws from the historical underpinnings that saw his texts get circulated and discussed much earlier in Latin America than in other parts of the world. Finally, the book also puts forth an argument for the on-going relevance of Gramscian thought, in spite of its "current undertakers"⁵ (104), looking to question the validity of categories such as hegemony in a globalized, neoliberal order, in which the nation-state form has been subsumed by the unimpeded circulation of financial capital.

² Pacheco Chávez 2016.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Although Cabezas does not directly mention this publication, it would be safe to assume that one of the "undertakers" is Jon Beasley-Murray and his 2010 publication *Posthegemony: Political Theory and Latin America.* This is because Beasley-Murray not only questions the idea of hegemony as a determining political force, but also uses the case of Latin America to develop his argument. In addition, Cabezas worked for a short time at the University of British Columbia, where Beasley-Murray also teaches. There are also others, those with more of an 'apocalyptic' tone, according to Cabezas and contributor Ángel Octavio Álvarez Solís, who have appreciated Gramscian theory but no longer consider it insightful for the post-Cold War era, often characterized with the prefix "post." One such thinker is Néstor García Canclini, who once claimed that "Unlike Gramsci's evolutionary, modern and unilateral aspirations, our postmodern condition has given us a lived experience of fragmentation and multiplicity" (235).

One thing made clear by this volume is the fact that Gramsci has and still does constitute an important alternative for Latin American Marxist thought. From their inception, Marxist movements in Latin America have never sprung out of the supposed conditions necessary for revolution—Cuba being one clear example—in which a well constituted proletariat, following the establishment of a liberal bourgeois order would provide the necessary "conditions" for a communist revolution. To the end, Cabezas affirms that it is Gramsci's "heterodoxy, and not the understanding of Marxism as party doctrine, that makes it possible for his theory to break with mechanistic renderings, like Karl Kautsky's stage theory, and the determinisms of historical materialism" (98). In this sense, the incarcerated intellectual's writings provide an underpinning for an important current of Latin American Marxism that dates back to the time in which he was still alive, as can be appreciated in one of the first prominent Latin American Marxist thinkers, who also happened to be familiar with Gramsci: José Carlos Mariátegui. The Peruvian knew Gramsci before his incarceration by the fascist regime, having lived in Italy in the early 1920s and having mentioned Gramsci as one of the contributors to the socialist newspaper Ordine nuovo in a 1921 article in Lima (93). María Pía López unpacks this affinity between Mariátegui and Gramsci citing Aricó: "Mariátegui read Marx through the lens of Italian historicism [...]" (17). This is key, since Mariátegui would often be at odds with the more Bolshevik-leaning communist tendencies, which were the dominant force in Latin America at the time.

The core of this history, however, centres on the intellectual work of Argentine José Aricó, who is mentioned in about half of the chapters and to whom the second section is dedicated, and is said, by López, to have drawn the parallels between Gramsci and Mariátegui—thinkers who tried to make sense of soviet communism vis-à-vis of their own respective contexts in similar ways (18). However, it was not just the Italian humanistic tradition that put Gramsci at odds with the orthodoxy. In what is by far the most exhaustive and comprehensive contribution, Marcelo Starcenbaum traces the history of Gramscian and Althusserian thought via the magazine *Pasado y Presente* (PyP) during the time in which it was edited by Aricó. The periodical was a veritable laboratory of political thought, in which, among other debates, the opposition between Althusser and Gramsci, young Marx and old, "humanism" and "science," structuralism and historicism were unpacked and problematized, so as to determine their complementarity rather than incompatibilities. As stated by Starcenbaum, Althusserianism played a role that was "corrective and modernizing of the Gramscian tradition" (196), since "the problem of historicism could no longer be thought of in the

same way as it was before Althusser" (195). This profoundly intellectual, yet nonsectarian pursuit is important to point out, since, Ángel Octavio Álvarez Solís and Jaime Ortega Reyna state, in areas where most communist intellectuals firmly took sides (in the case of Mexico with Althusser) Gramsci did not have a very far-reaching effect. Instead, Aricó and colleagues at *PyP* set out to seriously consider and debate these two Marxist traditions in order to, in the words of Aricó cited by Starcenbaum, "overcome the false dilemma in question [between humanist and structuralist interpretations of Marxism] and achieve a practical reinscription of historical materialism in all of its dimensions and revolutionary efficacy" (202-3; information in brackets by Starcenbaum).

Beyond its crucial historical examination, by far one of the book's most significant contributions is the fact that it, in itself, constitutes a new chapter in Gramscian Marxist theory in Latin America. For instance, Miguel Valderrama explores the aspect of catharsis in the construction of hegemony through the lens of Hannah Arendt's work on the "tears of remembrance." In it, structure and superstructure are placed in parallel with ergon (the work, represented by catharsis) and parergon (the complement of said work, represented by hegemony) in order to highlight the importance of the cathartic moment, brought about by the tragedy of the historical present as lived experience or praxis, synthesized through the formation of hegemony (38-9). Horacio González's exploration into Gramsci's 'living book' leads him to interrogate the similar life and work-both steeped in action-as well as the reception of, Gramsci and Antonio Negri in Argentina. This living action-book (much like the 'work' or ergon stated by Valderrama), can be thought of as the immanent enactment of praxis rather than a dialectical resolution (54) in which the dispute for hegemony is played out more through political engagement rather than structural contingency (47-8). In the words of González, "It had to be an action-book, with its arguments stemming not from expository reasoning, but rather from language in its dramatic form" (60). Dante Ariel Aragón Moreno, bringing the conversation squarely into the realm of current political philosophy, delves into the question of Gramsci and biopower-particularly that notion of biopower further elaborated by Roberto Esposito off of Michel Foucault's previous work, with the Gramscian notion of passive revolution. Specifically, Aragón Moreno looks at the passive revolutionary, or biopolitical, aspects of *Immunitas*, as compared to Communitas, that is "[...] autonomous life that is only possible in a regulated society or communitas. It is fundamentally about life that removes itself from domination, or from the state as a mechanism of immunization" (70). In order to achieve autonomous life, said life must be open to contagion (that which is foreign) and

the subject must no longer be indivisible, but rather divided between itself and the collective body. Finally, Cabezas's contribution, beyond what I have already and will mention, places emphasis on Gramsci's early reception in Latin America as a phenomenon not linked to "fashionable" schools of thought in academia or elsewhere, nor to any sort of essential connection. Instead, the appeal stems from a certain 'plasticity' that can be seen in recent practical interpretations, such as in the Plurinational State of Bolivia and *Podemos*⁶ in Spain, thus demonstrating the materiality of the incarcerated intellectual's unfinished writings as a "new lexicon inside and outside the limits of Marxism, and, therefore, inside and outside the limits of geographical production" (103).

In general, one of the more questionable aspects is a certain reliance on a conceptual baggage expressly identified as part of "Western" "modernity," taking place in such a way that-although it does indeed engage with and broaden Gramsci's own conceptual horizon-it does not go far enough to continue his subversive qualities as a thinker on the banks, considering that much of the volume is dedicated to continuing the writing of his 'living book.' This is particularly reflected in the ideas articulated by Carlos Nelson Coutinho7 on the westernization of capitalist societies via Gramsci's assumption that civil society is a "Western" conception not known in the "East," where the state is ubiquitous in public, political life. To be fair, the East/West divide that Gramsci was thinking about, which had more to do with Russia and Western Europe in the wake of the "unlikely" yet successful Bolshevik revolution, would make sense given the context. However, removed from 1930s Europe, the idea of East and West does not necessarily square with Gramsci's idea of the Westernization of European societies through capitalism from the 1870s on (307). In general, the idea of certain traits characteristic of "Western" and "Eastern" societies, considering Said's still seminal critique,⁸ is mainly indefensible, in that it concentrates more on cultural heritage

⁶ Although *Podemos* is a Spanish political movement, the influence of Latin American political praxis is openly acknowledged. Founding member and leader Pablo Iglesias, along with other key party-members, worked as a researcher of and political advisor to many left-wing Latin American governments (Seguín).

⁷ It is important to bear in mind that the chapter by Coutinho (who passed away in 2012) was the only contribution not made for the volume, but was rather reprinted in *Gramsci en las orillas* from a 1986 publication in *Cuadernos políticos*.

⁸ In *Orientalism* (1978), Edward Said demonstrates the emergence a certain idea of the "East" that had more to do with what the "West" (read, colonial European powers) felt to be antithetical to their own existence, in three main areas: 1) an academic field of study; 2) a form of thought that makes a ontological and epistemological distinction between East and West; 3) "a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (Said 2-3). To be clear, the idea of East versus West that I am questioning here is related to the second

Smith

(administrative, linguistic, religious, etc.) than the power relations that give these cultural aspects meaning and operability. These conceptions are also taken back up by Cabezas—in terms of the *Occidente criollo*, or "Creole" West, as the place occupied by Gramscian thought in Latin America (93)—Ortega⁹ and Gajanigo (whose chapter is specifically on the legacy of Coutinho). What I mean to say is not that the thinkers espousing these ideas are "wrong", but rather that it seems problematic to sustain the idea of a "West" existing outside the "West", (in that it feeds into the self-identity narrative of central, imperial states) and politically neutralizing to take a conceptualization of Russia versus Western Europe to a worldwide, interstate level in which countries such as Brazil are perpetually exoticized and only given cursory access to Western institutions insofar as they are able to control capital.

Another one of the few, yet relevant, aspects that the book leaves inadequately addressed is the question of co-optation. Perhaps one of the most anticipated contributions is also one that leaves the most to be desired, considering the volume's intention to bring Gramsci back into the realm of political praxis. The chapter by Álvaro García Linera,¹⁰ political theorist, former militant¹¹ and current Bolivian vice-president (with president Evo Morales), describes how the transition from former governments—mostly of the authoritarian and/or neoliberal kind in which the Bolivian state worked in such a way that it was present for a small group of citizens and in small pockets of the national territory, and promoted a political culture of the few with privilege and power—in 2005 (the year that Morales and García Linera were elected) inaugurated a state model built on inclusion and popular participation. By way of comparison with a concept coined by Bolivian political theorist René Zavaleta Mercado—the *Estado aparente* or 'apparent state,' which is a type of fragmented, illusory state (313-4)—due to its Plurinational character, in which the leadership of Evo Morales

category, as this book has nothing do with the first, and the third (in a contemporary sense) is more reminiscent of thinkers such as Samuel Huntington (1996) who have attempted to shut Latin America out of the West for not being part of the imperial community. Nonetheless, reaffirming Western identity does not challenge the *Clash of Civilizations* paradigm but rather *reaffirms* its relevance by rearranging its composition.

⁹ Here, however, the usage of East/West takes on a more metaphorical sense with regard to the work of Mexican political theorist Carlos Pereyra and his interrogation of the role of civil society and state (and consequently state-based coercion) in Mexico (248).

 $^{^{10}}$ A chapter that is, in fact, the transcription of a speech he gave to the Bolivian legislature in 2010.

¹¹ García Linera was part of the former Túpac Katari armed resistance movement.

is but one of five pillars,¹² Bolivia could now be considered, in Gramscian terms, an integral state (319). One of the main issues with giving so much credence to the Gramscian aspects of the redefining of the state in Bolivian society is precisely that, although the unitary and homogeneous notion of the nation has been properly problematized, the state ends up becoming even further reified (in contrary to the notion of 'regulated society' that ought to progressively diminish the role of the state).

Nevertheless, the advent of Gramscian politics in Mexico seems to have offered an alternative to a politics fraught with top down, corporatist practices, in which the Communist Party of Mexico (PCM) maintained an avant-garde approach, not to mention a more orthodox, Althusserian theoretical framework (231). In this context, the possibility of transitioning from a war of movement (systemic, political violence) to a war of positions allowed for the democratization of political struggle, eventually leading to the dissolution of the PCM in favor of a broader leftist front.¹³ It is here, at a juncture in which the Mexican left was actively looking for "conceptual and strategic alternatives that would allow them to put forth renewed emancipatory horizons" (237), where distinctions such high and popular culture or mainstream and particular causes are called into question and displaced, much like that of the ostensible gap between the intellectual and the worker. This can be seen, as explicated by Ortega Reyna, in the work of one of the PCM's main Gramscian proponents, Arnoldo Martínez Verdugo, who backed the feminist movement's demands for women's right to choose whether to have an abortion at a time when many in the party were vying for support in more conservative areas of the country, thus paving the way for the party's eventual integration of the movement's core tenants as part of its push for a general democratization of society (255-6). Similarly, in a bid to challenge the integrationist and assimilationist policies in place since the Mexican Revolution, the party took a stance supporting indigenous people's autonomy, with Martínez Verdugo stating in 1983 that the racist acculturation and integration should be replaced with a politics of freedom and autonomy (256-7).

¹² The other four being the rural indigenous movement, the ability to mobilize large parts of society, a hegemonic leadership capacity and the program of transformations derived from the demands of social movements between 2000 and 2005.

¹³ In joining with other parties and movements, the PCM became the Unified Socialist Party of Mexico (PSUM), eventually changing its name and orientation several times throughout the following years.

Yet, perhaps the most significant and original contribution offered by *Gramsci* en las orillas is on the matter of translation.¹⁴ Translation is ubiquitous, addressed in one way or another in nearly all of the book's chapters, be it explicitly or implicitly, regarding its application and/or theorization. In fact, one of the first elements of Gramsci's journey through Latin American political thought directly resonates with what Walter Benjamin puts forth in "The Task of the Translator," regarding the question of translatability:

[...] the law governing the translation: its translatability. The question of whether a work is translatable has a dual meaning. Either: *Will an adequate translator ever be found among the totality of its readers? Or, more pertinently: Does its nature lend itself to translation* and, therefore, in view of the significance of the mode, call for it? (16; my emphasis)

In the sociopolitical context in question, both of these questions find an affirmative response. In fact, the translation of Gramsci in Latin America often came before that of its European counterparts, as in the case of Brazil and Argentina (283). One can say that this is due, in part, to Latin America's social reality "on the banks" [orillera] that has seen most of its political systems and social structures—first as a colonial imposition and then as an incessant obsession (also colonial in nature) on the part of elites to modernize their respective societies in the image of Euro/North American models-stem from a world from which it has been marginalized and inferiorized. Arguably, in this sense Latin America would have been an even more appropriate setting to work through many of the questions Gramsci posed in his Prison Notebooks, such as the linguistic and economic tensions between the industrialized northern and downtrodden southern Italy. In fact, it is not unheard of for translation to supersede, redefine or even give life to a text where it may have been marginal in its "original" form.¹⁵ In the case of the Prison Notebooks, publication was tellingly out-ofsync with its context of production, having been written in and smuggled out of prison in 1930, later published in Italian in the late 1940s and early 1950s, and then published

¹⁴ Neither this edited volume nor my review is alone in pointing this out, as the recently released book by Horacio González *Traducciones malditas La experiencia de la imágen en Marx, Merlau-Ponty y Foucault* analyses the arrival of several now-canonical texts of political philosophy as a question of translation rather than mere reception, dedicating a chapter to the matter entitled "La traducibilidad como cuestión gramsciana" (Translatability as a Gramscian Matter). That being said, I have not been able to obtain a copy of said book before finishing this review.

¹⁵ For several reasons, often related to political repression, lack of means to publish or even social settings more favourable elsewhere than in the context of production, a translation may gain notoriety well before its "original" and therefore set the stage as to how the original is received.

in Spanish translation throughout the 1950s and early 1960s by Lautaro editions, significantly earlier than their English translations in the 1970s.

Valderrama, in another piece in which he examines and elaborates on Pablo Oyarzún's conceptualization of "The Task of the Translator," suggests that the "task" of the translator—in terms of the semantic possibilities implied in the German-language term used by Benjamin, *Aufgabe*—is not only a task in terms of a duty with specific ends, but also the impossibility of overcoming the difference, or lack of knowing, that the translator is tasked with surmounting, thus occasioning a conscience abandonment (Valderrama 500-501). This proves quite fruitful when reflecting on the political nature of these translations. Since, if "The task of the translator consists in finding that intended effect *[Intention]* upon the language into which he is translating which produces in it the echo of the original" (Benjamin 19-20), then the task faced by Latin American translators of Gramsci, be it the translators of actual texts into Spanish or Portuguese, or of their political concepts into the cultural arsenal of the left, consisted of the establishing of symbolic *'placeholders'* that would give these ideas life (such as Coutinho's usage of passive revolution to partially explain the politics of the Brazilian dictatorship).

One of the most prominent 'placeholders,' as stated by Arnall, Draper and Sabau, was the upheaval in Turin in the 1920s that eventually culminated in a general strike—in which Gramsci and his associates were involved, partly through their newspaper Ordine nuovo—and the situation of José Aricó and associates' writing on Gramscian ideas in the context of the1960s expansion of the automobile industry in Córdoba, Argentina, in the magazine *PyP*. In a retrospective chapter in José Aricó's *La cola del diablo*, he addresses the question of translatability explicitly, eventually asking the question: "Were we Gramscian when publishing the magazine because we imagined ourselves in a Latin American Turin, o were we able to access Gramsci because Córdoba somehow was a Latin American Turin?" (145).

The question of translatability, is taken head on in the chapter by Verónica Gago and Diego Sztulwark. They explain that Grasmci's emphasis on subjectivity, will, historicism, culture, national context and the role of the intellectual constituted a common ground between the Italian thinker and his Argentine counterparts. However, it was mostly Gramsci's theorization of a transition from a Leninist "eastern strategy" to one in the capitalist West, in the likes of Marx's idea of a proletarian uprising in *Capital* that was of particular interest. Although the idea of the "Peripheral West" (125), espoused by many Argentine intellectuals, remains somewhat tedious, if not superfluous (as previously stated), it at least allows for a more nuanced take on the

East/West dichotomy by considering the colonial imposition of certain metropolitan institutions and their ensuing cultures that have left certain political traditions, to borrow a term from Silviano Santiago, in an 'in-between.'

María Pía López delves into another important aspect of the matter of placeholders,¹⁶ that is, the affinities between Mariátegui and Gramsci, as well as the similar translative and translational approaches adopted by Mariátegui and Aricó considering that:

[...] the discussion on an accurate translation, on the relevance of one word or another, is part of a larger scheme: the possibility of translating Marx in Latin America. This is why Aricó paid attention to the Gramsci that sought to Italianize the Soviet Revolution and the Mariátegui that strove to Peruvianize Marxism. (19)

In fact, as demonstrated by Álvarez Solís (223), it was partly because of the presence of South American exiles in Mexico, some of the very translators such as Aricó and others from *PyP*, that Gramscian ideas were finally able to gain traction. However, due to the predominantly university-based circulation of these ideas, it was PCM leader Arnoldo Martínez Verdugo that managed to "translate Gramsci into the conditions of political struggle in Mexico" (250) in a way that is reminiscent of the work done before him by Mariátegui and Aricó.

Of course, by translation I also mean the more standard definition of rendering "equivalent" meanings from one language to another (or one set of signifiers to another), of which *PyP* is a prime example. Not only did Aricó translate several sections of the *Prison Notebooks* published by Lautaro editions (124), but *PyP* also translated much of the Marxist polemics taking place in Europe, mostly in French and Italian, on Althusserian structuralist and Gramscian humanist perspectives (191). Regarding the Portuguese, Coutinho was also one of the translators working on the first editions of Gramsci in Portuguese (266). However, it is quite clear that these efforts were not fomented by the monetary incentives of the publishing industry (which often determine

¹⁶ In fact, the very idea of 'placeholder' that I have put forth—akin to the view of language as an infinite chain of signifiers—can also be understood through the Gramscian use of metaphor, posited by López, as the way in which new languages are developed through novel ways of using words and concepts that often render their etymological beginning opaque or even neutralized. This is made clear when she quotes one of Gramsci's more clever musings over the fact that, just like people no longer associate the word dis-aster with astronomy (astros), an atheist can use the word dis-grace without there being any consideration for predestination (26).

what gets translated), but rather a commitment to the 'task' of bringing into being a translated body of works by way of Latin American points of reference.

In sum, this book represents an immense undertaking with a diversity of approaches and perspectives that can be as overwhelming as it is revealing and suggestive. However, instead of a facile reinterpretation of Gramsci (as with so many other well-worn *oemres* that are made to say what the authors would like to convey), it focuses on the interstices of Gramscian thought, insofar as it constitutes a perspective articulated *on the banks* of a world capitalist system whose periphery is not at all marginal, but rather integral to its functioning, thus providing an insight that lends itself to other contexts where the echoes of regional subaltern conditions and political prison make intellectual production part and parcel of transformative struggle.

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