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# Past and Present, Subalternity and Revolution

## 1. Introduction

The collection *Revisiting Gramsci's Notebooks*<sup>1</sup> edited by Francesca Antonini, Aaron Bernstein, Lorenzo Fusaro and Robert Jackson includes contributions from some of the most esteemed Gramscian scholars worldwide. The volume is composed of eight parts, divided by themes, for a total of 25 chapters. More so than any other edited volume, this book originates from years of engagement with Gramsci's *oeuvre* and with the possible application of his thought to contemporary issues. In fact, all contributions spring from (and relate to) the long-term study and employment of Gramsci's thought by the different authors. There is thus no doubt that the essays contained in this volume will provoke extended debates among Gramscian scholars in the years to come.

As a testament to the incredible reach and wideness of Gramsci's intellectual achievements, the variety of contributions included in the volume is extremely vast and could interest scholars involved in almost all fields of social sciences. A brief account of the themes analysed is in order. The first section is called *Global Gramsci: Gramscian Geographies* and it describes Gramsci as a geographical thinker (Loftus), while also developing specific case studies in the political economy of Egypt (Roccu) and Thailand (Buddharaksa). *Language and Translation* emphasises the contribution of the Italian thinker in the study of language also connecting these reflections to key political underpinnings (Boothman and Sućeska), whilst Wróblewska provides an interesting analysis of Gramsci's texts employing his own approach to translatability. The section *Gramsci and the Marxian Legacy* digs deep in the relation between Gramsci and Marxism (and Marx more specifically), in order to address the theme of revolution (Frosini), the originality of the philosophy of praxis (Bernstein) and the use of historical analogy (Antonini). *Subalternity between Pre-Modernity and Modernity* provides new insights regarding Gramsci's concept of subalternity (Thomas and Freeland), whilst also applying it to contemporary issues of space and migration (Meret). The theme of subalternity also permeates the fifth section (*Postcolonial and Anthropological Approaches*) and is used to reinterpret Gramsci's *Southern Question* (Conelli) as well as Edward Said *Orientalism* (Vandeviver), while Ciavolella emphasise the role of anthropology in Gramsci's development of the idea of 'popular politics'. The sixth part, *Culture, Ideology, Religion* touches upon different themes, from Gramsci's approach towards the Catholic Church (Chino), to his interest in literature (Pohn-Lauggas), to the analysis of the concept of the 'mummification of culture' as used

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<sup>1</sup> Francesca Antonini, Aaron Bernstein, Lorenzo Fusaro & Robert Jackson, *Revisiting Gramsci's Notebooks*, Leiden: Brill, 2020.

in the *Prison Notebooks* (Jackson). *Historical Capitalism and World History*, uncovers Gramsci's thought in regards to key events in political economy: the passage from feudalism to capitalism (Douet), Fordism (Settis) and, more generally, to the role of the state in international relations (Fusaro). The last section, *Readings of Gramsci*, deals with different interpretations of Gramsci that have been offered in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Italy (Panichi), France (Crézégut and Neubauer) and Latin America (Cuppi).

As a whole, the collection speaks to the liveliness of Gramsci's thought as well as to the extended variety of applications that it can have in helping us understanding our own present. As argued by Anne Showstack Sassoon in the foreword, "Gramsci invites us to work with the material to understand better the difficult questions of our own times and to seek innovative responses" (p. xii). In this sense, the theme selected as a guideline for the collection, "past and present", is extremely apt and summarises more broadly the ways in which we should approach a thinker such as Gramsci, always reflecting on how he can help us better understand the present and act in it. In terms of methodology, the volume is valuable for the reliance that all authors show on the original texts, particularly coming from the *Prison Notebooks* but also from the letters and from the pre-prison writings. In this sense, to be extremely appreciated is the deep familiarity with Gramsci's writings that all authors display, even when working on specific empirical cases (see, for example, the chapters written by Roberto Roccu, Susi Meret and Lorenzo Fusaro).

A complete critical account of such a vast and nuanced array of projects would require much more space than the one that I possess here. In addition, a task that would be very much worth undertaking, but can find no substantial space in this essay review is to integrate the chapters included in the volume within the analysis of the long-term engagement of the authors with Gramsci's thought. For reasons of space, here much more selectivity will be needed. I shall argue that one of the key contribution of the collection as a whole is to point to Gramsci's continuous struggle to lift people out of subalternity. This is obviously more explicit in certain essays than in others. Yet, a key feature of the whole value is that the authors emphasise, also when treating the aspects of Gramsci's thought that are not strictly related to political struggles, the ways in which the Italian thinker was always concerned about the possibility of future emancipation. Although this is a recognised feature of Gramsci's thought, the ways in which the authors develop such argument at various points in the collection is particularly original and thought-provoking and could be of interest for scholars working on broader fields within Marxism and critical theory. In particular, the authors seem to repeatedly stress the fact that the need for the subaltern groups to free themselves is not only a normative stance, but also crucially one that has to do with the understanding of the social world. In fact, they highlight not only the need to build a collective project capable of lifting people out of subalternity; but in turn identify the absence of such a project as the main reason for capitalist continuity. Yet, in the second section, I will remark how within the collection one finds at least as many instances in which the authors seem to contradict the previous insights. The lack of a more coherent theorisation, I shall argue, also explains some of the discrepancies that can be found between theoretical accounts and their application to empirical cases. Thirdly, I will briefly refer to a possible way out of such conundrum by relying on some of the insights

that the authors give in their contributions, but that seem to be still under-developed both in this collection and in Gramscian scholarship more broadly.

## 2. The present we have created: on Gramsci revolutionary thought

Among the central features of the collection is the acknowledgement that Gramsci's thought is mainly concerned with the creation of a revolutionary project. This is true not only for the sections of his thought that deal with the need to create what he calls a Modern Prince, but actually permeates all sides of his theoretical elaboration, as well emphasised by all the contributions in the volume. Fabio Frosini (p. 125) evocatively argues that “for Gramsci ‘past’ and ‘present’ coincide respectively with ‘history’ and ‘politics’” and, going into further details, he remarks that the present is supposed to represent the criticism and overcoming of the past. In Gramsci's own words, “we must be more adherent to the present, which we ourselves have contributed to creating, having consciousness of the past and its continuation (and reliving)” (Q1§156, p. 136; cited in p. 133).<sup>2</sup>

Implicitly or explicitly following such an approach, practically all contributions focus their attention on the ways in which Gramsci's thought invite the subaltern classes to develop alternative forms of society. Alex Loftus, for example, focusses a non-determinist reading of Gramsci's approach to geography (p. 12). In his words, Gramsci's philosophy of praxis pays attention to the ways in which “social groups make histories and geographies, albeit not under conditions of their own choosing” (p. 21). This ultimately pushes us to explore, for example, “the manner in which the transformation of the city-country relationship might become part of the struggle for communist hegemony” (p.13). Susi Meret, perhaps with an overstatement, argues that Gramsci “was the first to show interest in the way the subaltern classes had organised throughout history in the fight to emancipate themselves from their oppressors” (p. 210). She insists that his “political and social experiences prompted him to study how networks of solidarity and autonomy can generate locally and eventually spark transversal alliances between groups of subalterns with a collective aim: to transform society” (p. 210). Francesca Antonini, in the chapter that – together with the one written by Ingo Pohn-Lauggas – more explicitly focusses on the relation between past and present, reminds us that the use of historical analogy itself in Gramsci “is essential to [...] intervene successfully in the political dynamic” (p. 164). The reference to Gramsci's continuous interest in the building of a revolutionary project is clear also when the authors engage with parts of his thought that are not necessarily linked to political processes. Alen Sućeska, for example, acknowledges that Gramsci's thought about language not as a linguist but as a revolutionary (p. 82). Similarly, Derek Boothman reminds us that ideology and language are a central part of the creation of collective subjectivities and, ultimately, of history itself (p. 67). All these accounts speak to the centrality of revolutionary political organisations within Gramsci's thought. As synthesised by Meret, “[t]he unification of the struggles, class solidarity and alliances are

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<sup>2</sup> References to the *Prison Notebooks* are made according to notebook number (Q), number of note (§) and page as in the Italian critical edition. All translations from the *Prison Notebooks* are my own.

central themes in Gramsci's writings from the early years of his political activism" (p. 211). This is not necessarily a novel feature within Gramscian scholarship (see Frosini 2010, Ives 2004 and Thomas 2009). Yet, given the centrality that it assumes within the collection as well as the way in which it is developed, it can definitely be thought-provoking and perhaps of interest also for scholars working on broader fields of Marxism and critical theory.

In particular, and here comes the most original aspect, at various points the authors highlight not only the need to build a collective project capable of lifting people out of subalternity; but in turn identify the absence of such a project as the main reason for capitalist continuity. In other words, Gramsci's revolutionary commitment is not only framed as a normative statement, but most crucially as an ontological one. As argued by Nicolas Vandeviver: "It is clear from Gramsci's writings that conscious and wilful actions of men are, after all, the prime motors of history" (p. 259). Similarly, Riccardo Ciavolella (p. 267) places great emphasis on the need for the subaltern classes to become hegemonic and to fight those tendencies that bring them to self-defeat (fragmentation, lack of cohesive project, passivity, spontaneity). Building on such intuition, Takahiro Chino (p. 292) highlights the role of common sense as a limited form of thought that must be overcome by good sense. This ultimately shows not only how a collective subject is a necessary pre-requisite of thorough societal change, but also how the lack of such unitary project tends to facilitate capitalist continuity.

Lorenzo Fusaro, though stressing the role that Marx's laws play within the *Prison Notebooks*, rightly insists that:

What Gramsci seems to elaborate throughout the *Prison Notebooks* is Marx's idea that epochal change has the potential to occur within the structure only in cases in which "men become conscious of this conflict". By implication, a lack in the acquisition of consciousness that occurs at the level of ideologies (hence Gramsci's interest in ideology, intellectuals, etc.) changes, to put it crudely, absolutely nothing (p. 364)

Fusaro also adds that, differently from Giovanni Arrighi, Gramsci believed that hegemony was a precondition for domination and not vice versa, and that "once political power has been grasped and hence domination attained, the exercise of leadership continues to be a condition for its maintenance" (p. 365). Perhaps, the most insightful chapter in the collection when it comes to the theorisation and empirical application of such insights is Meret's study of the refugee-led group *Lampedusa in Hamburg* (LiHH).<sup>3</sup> Stressing the fundamental role that consciousness and unity play not only in changing subalterns' condition, but also in producing historical change, she writes:

The "degree" of subalternity depends [...] on the transformative potential and level of "consciousness" experienced by the subalterns through the diverse

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<sup>3</sup> The LiHH is a movement created in 2013 in Hamburg, by refugees who had escaped war-torn Libya. Their main claims were the right to stay, educate themselves, work and be able to freely move within the European Union.

phases of their life experiences. Political subjectivation involves individual and collective self-awareness, education, emancipation, political consciousness, self-organisation, action, and, in particular, it requires the motivation and ability to act collectively. The struggle for emancipation can be seen as a radical and transformative process, starting from individual awareness and eventually developing into collective political acts of antagonism and autonomy (p. 211).

This is not a mere normative stance, but it is rather part of the realisation that, “[f]or Gramsci, *the only way to achieve social change* was by encouraging and supporting an intellectually autonomous, educated, self-empowered, strong and cohesive working class movement” (p. 215; my emphasis).

The contribution that such insights could have within both Gramscian and Marxist debates should not be underestimated. In fact, whilst we have assisted in recent years to a proliferation of debates that place the emphasis on coercive or economic mechanisms as the ultimate explanatory tool to understand changes and stability within capitalism (see, for example, Bonefeld 2017, Bruff 2014, Harvey 2005 and Streek 2017), the authors seem to point towards a rather different direction. The coercive aspects linked to capitalist development and ruling classes’ dominance are not negated; yet, they are often linked to the relative weakness and fragmentation of popular classes. At various points, the collection seems to emphasise how the use of force is interpreted in Gramsci as something that is rendered possible by hegemony and consent, and thus is always potentially contestable. Crucial in this regard appears Peter Thomas’ contribution to the understanding of subalterns as “unable, *qua* subaltern social groups, to assume the self-directive and directing capacities embodied in the form of the political” (p. 188). As Gramsci argues, “the subaltern classes, by definition, are not unified and cannot unify themselves until they become the ‘state’” (Q25§5, p. 2288; cited in p.188). Thomas is even more explicit as he writes that:

Were there no degrees of subalternity, were civil society a terrain of total domination rather than a continually renewed hegemonic relation of subordination, hegemony, as the emergence of capacities for self-direction and leadership of previously subaltern social groups, would not be a realistic political strategy (p. 190).

Subalternity is thus understood as a deeply dialectical relation, not imposed coercively on the weaker sections of the population, but rather as a key element, that itself sustain ruling classes’ dominance and, in turn, makes it potentially fragile. This implies that the absence of organised revolutionary stances can be seen as the primary reason for capitalist continuity; and one that in turn allows the use of coercive mechanisms to counter fragmented and episodic resistance.

In sum, the authors seem to recognise something that is often underappreciated by contemporary critical scholars, that is that the position of subalternity should not be understood as a mere result of capitalist accumulation and coercive apparatuses; but rather as a pre-requisite that renders these forms of domination possible and therefore deeply

contestable. As I will show in the next section, however, this element – though often stressed – almost never leads to a coherent formulation of Gramsci’s theory of changes and stability within capitalism. This lack of elaboration can also explain why one finds at least as many instances in which the authors seem to contradict the previous insights.

### 3. ‘We good subalterns’: between ‘positive alterity’ and ‘absolute exteriority’?<sup>4</sup>

As we have seen, the Gramsci that comes out at various points in the collection is a thinker that not only emphasises the need to build alternative hegemonic projects in order to seize the state and produce revolutionary stances; but, conversely, understands the lack of such organic projects (in the forms of subalternity, passivity, common sense, etc.) as the central reason that allows capital’s continuity. This approach is of the utmost importance, given the current proliferation of studies within critical theory that tend to emphasise coercive mechanisms as key features that at various levels impede change to emerge.

This novel aspect, however, is counter-balanced by several instances in which the authors appear to slide away from the previous theoretical insights. The passage between common sense and good sense, for example, is understood as crucial in Sućeska’s chapter in order to contest ruling hegemony. In fact, he is extremely precise in identifying the riddle that Gramsci attempts to solve, as he points out that whilst the subalterns’ “unification would be the beginning of the end of their subalternity, they uphold a form of consciousness which is in contradiction with those social facts and, what is perhaps most significant, they appear to do so willingly” (p. 90). Yet, in expressing the reasons that maintain common sense as well as “a dominant mode of thought among the masses” (p. 90), he mentions “the institutions of the hegemonic apparatus + the practices of traditional intellectuals” (p. 92). Sućeska argues that “[t]his is a much more ‘productive’ conception compared to that of ‘false consciousness’, both in the theoretical and the political sense, as it both directs us towards revolutionary potential in the masses, and, at the same time, allows us to understand how such potential is *being repressed*” (p. 92; my emphasis). In pointing out the ways in which social change is always potentially stifled, Sućeska ultimately undermines his own remark on the role played by the passive attitude of the subordinated classes in accepting external forms of consciousness (p. 91).

To put it bluntly, if the hegemonic apparatus and traditional intellectuals are always capable of repressing masses potential, it is not true that the unification of subordinated classes would be “the beginning of the end of their subalternity”. More in general, what appears to be missing is a theory that connects social reproduction with people’s lack of organisation and theoretical coherence. Anne Freeland seems to remark on this point perfectly, as she discusses subaltern studies:

Along with the notion that subaltern studies exaggerates the capacity for autonomy on the part of subaltern groups, there is, and for related reasons,

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<sup>4</sup> Some of the arguments presented in this and the next section have been more thoroughly developed in regards to the wider neo-Gramscian literature in Fifi 2019.

although in reference to its later period, a more common, opposite contention that subaltern studies goes too far in denying subaltern agency. The link between the two tendencies lies in the *separation of subalternity from the hegemonic order*, first as a *positive alterity*, and then as an *absolute exteriority* silenced by its discursive incommensurability and therefore conceivable only in negative terms [...] (p. 201; my emphasis).

This formulation is of crucial value, as it points to the fallacy of thinking subalterns' praxis as fundamentally disjointed from ruling bloc's hegemony. Separating the two processes, as some authors seem to do, leaves us without a theory that can link capitalist development and continuity with its potentially contested nature. The exact note on which Sućeska's chapter rely most heavily (Q11§12) can in fact be used to discredit his approach. Gramsci argues that the 'contrast between thought and action' of a certain social group signifies that the social group in question acts only partially as an organic totality, while often passively follows conceptions that are not its own (Q11§12, p. 1378-9). He also insists that the idea that 'every man is a philosopher' must lead us towards a

second moment, the moment of critique and consciousness, hence to the question: is it preferable to 'think' without having critical consciousness, in a disjointed and occasional manner, thus to "participate" in a conception of the world mechanically "imposed" by the external environment, [...] or is it preferable to elaborate one's own conception of the world consciously and critically and thus, in connection with such working of one's own brain, choose one's own sphere of activity, actively participate to the production of the history of the world, being one's own guide and not passively and supinely accept from the outside the imprint to one's own personality? (Q11§12, pp. 1375-6)

Gramsci here explicitly links uncritical consciousness with the 'imposition' of external ideas and practices. This, in turn, highlights how the development of a critical collective project also equates to a challenge to oppressive structures and to the active participation in the "production of the history of the world". On the contrary, if the passage from common sense to good sense is always potentially impeded by coercion, the critical/uncritical thinking of the subalterns would play little role in determining their emancipation.

The same ambivalence that we find in Sućeska, can also be detected in Robert Jackson's chapter. Discussing what he calls the "mummification of culture" – hence "the embalming process through which cultural formations that are valuable and appropriate when created become fossilised and anachronistic when repeated in new conditions" (p. 313) – Jackson emphasises that this is the result of a double movement. On the one hand, "mummification from above" coinciding with the attempts of the ruling classes to "interrupt any development towards coherence of the traces of autonomous action by the subaltern groups" (p. 313). On the other hand, "mummification from below", which "manifests itself in the 'intellectual laziness' that Gramsci connects with the phenomenon of 'Lorianism', the 'lack of critical spirit' that characterises certain intellectuals who rely on a quasi-scientific sociology" (p. 313). Jackson is very precise in identifying mummification



as reappearing in different forms, but crucially as part of the same phenomenon (pp. 319-331): the conformism associated with Americanism, Taylorism and Fordism, bureaucratic tendencies, Italian cultural developments and the Catholic Church's conservatism, only to name a few. He also gives a very balanced account of how mummification asserts itself historically:

One conditions the other: the 'mental laziness' of Lorianism has been fomented by the dispersion wrought by the dominant groups, while the mummification of culture is able to achieve purchase on the life of the nation for as long as the subaltern groups are unable to develop a more coherent leadership (p. 332).

Elsewhere, however, he seems to treat mummification from above and mummification from below as if they were separate phenomena. This is testified by the fact that Jackson adds that the former "forms a part of the complex puzzle by which the dominant social forces are able to obstruct the healthy development of new historical and political initiatives" (p. 332). Conversely, "de-mummification of culture is a condition for the healthy development of historical initiative, described by Gramsci in terms of a cathartic movement. In this process, the subaltern groups pass from their position as an 'object' in history to become a protagonist, or the authors of a new historical epoch" (p. 333). Framing the issue in these terms, Jackson provides us with no clear theory regarding the ways in which mummification from below (that is passivity, common sense etc.) is connected to the possibility of the ruling classes to reproduce mummified forms from above (e.g. bureaucracy). In fact, to use Freeland terminology, subaltern groups are first seen as 'absolute exteriority' that, even when organised to produce healthy social developments, can always be obstructed by dominant social forces. In the second instance, they are conceptualised as a "positive alterity" that can magically go from having no agency to being the "authors of a new historical epoch".

The way out of this impasse, once again, can be found in Gramsci, and particularly in his understanding of bureaucracy as always dependent on the passivity or lack of cultural elaboration of the base. In fact, he criticises the very dualism that does not recognise the connection between the individual and the socio-political organisms she is part of. In Gramsci's words:

One is brought to think the relations between the individual and the organism as a dualism, and to an external critical attitude of the individual towards the organism (when the attitude is not of a-critical enthusiastic admiration). In any case, a fetishistic relation. The individual waits that the organism acts, even if she does not operate and does not reflect about the fact that, being her attitude very widespread, the organism is necessarily inactive. Furthermore, it is to be recognised that, being widespread a deterministic and mechanistic conception of history (conception that is of common sense and is linked to the passivity of the great popular masses), every individual, seeing that, despite her lack of intervention, something still happens, she is brought to think that in fact above the individuals it exists a phantasmagorical entity, the abstraction of the collective organism, a kind of autonomous divinity, that does not think with

any concrete brain, but still thinks, that does not move with determinate human legs, but still moves, etc. (Q 15§13, p. 1770)

Gramsci does not negate the existence of bureaucracy, he rather negates the possibility that bureaucracy (or mummified organisations, to use Jackson's language) can be kept in place by the ruling bloc, without the cooperation of the subaltern groups. His message seems to be that it is only by seeing the seeds of mummification in the everyday shortcomings of potentially transformative agency, that we can conceptualise the potentiality for resistance and emancipation.

Jackson's chapter provides us with great insights on the relation between people's everyday praxis and capital's continuity. Yet, these are ultimately neutralised by his references to the ways in which the emancipatory struggles are impeded by forms of oppression from above. This ambiguity, which runs through the majority of the collection, I think, also explains the discrepancies between theoretical accounts and empirical applications of Gramsci's thought.

#### **4. A Gramscian moment in IPE?**

As emphasised in the previous section, the relation between the need for the subalterns to seek emancipation and the possibility of the ruling classes to resist them, although certainly present, remains underdeveloped throughout the collection. Perhaps as a consequence of this, applications of Gramsci's thought to international political economy seem at times to contradict the fruitful insights analysed in section 2. For example, Watcharabon Buddhaksa refers to the dialectical relation between the "coercive practices" of the political society and the hegemony present within what Gramsci calls "civil society" (p. 58). Yet, the empirical analysis that he puts forward does not really elaborate on how we should understand such relation. It is, in fact, surprising that the overwhelming reference to coercive mechanisms of the Thai state that we find within the chapter is coupled with the recognition that "the alternative/critical/challenging social forces which have been growing, are still neither mature nor critical enough to contest the traditional mode of thought/conception of the world; they are also not sufficient to construct a whole new democratic historical bloc at this historical stage" (p. 59-60).

The fact that hegemony is always working behind dominance could have also been more coherently integrated in Fusaro's account on the world order. In his conclusion, in fact, he argues that US international hegemony was developed already in the inter-war period "with the qualification that the latter form of hegemony was deficient: while backed by the state *strictu sensu*, hegemony was exercised via private channels rather than public ones and took mainly an economic dimension" (p. 372). In more general terms, he adds: "As a result of the 'endless accumulation of capital' and capital's drive to expand beyond its borders, nation-states are compelled to become hegemonic in order to secure the accumulation and reproduction of 'their' capitals" (p. 373). It is clear that, in contrast with what Fusaro himself argued against Arrighi, the hegemonic process is here seen only as inserted within the process of capital accumulation, in this sense leaving unexplored the

manners in which capitalism can be contested, let alone the relation between capitalist development and its potentially contested nature.

Similar considerations could be applied to Roberto Roccu's chapter. He presents two alternative theories that can explain the politics of neoliberalism in general, and then test their validity in reference to the neoliberalisation process in Egypt. On the one hand, Gramsci's notion of "passive revolution" depends on "a dominant class that fails to be hegemonic and subaltern classes that lack 'the degree of homogeneity, self-awareness and organisation' required for successfully challenging the dominant classes" (p.28). On the other hand, and this is the notion that Roccu believes best fits the Egyptian case (even though an in-depth theorisation is not provided in the chapter), "counterrevolution" (or counter-reformation, in Gramscian terms) represents a "revolution against the revolution" (p. 41). Leaving aside the cogency of such concepts to describe Egyptian recent history, the distinction between "passive revolution" and "counterrevolution", thus conceptualised, is emblematic from the standpoint of Marxist and Gramscian scholarship. In fact, while the former describes a situation, in which oppositional and ruling groups are equally weak, the latter describes a scenario in which they are both strong and organised. This negates the idea that the position of the ruling classes are dialectically related to that of the subaltern ones. In other words, the weakness of potentially opposing forces is not conceptualised as reinforcing the ruling bloc. And, conversely, the increasing organisation and cohesiveness of the subalterns does not necessarily mean a weakening of the ruling classes' potential to respond to them. Connected to this, Roccu seems to imply that in both cases the ruling classes have at their disposal the possibility to "render the subaltern classes 'passive'" (p. 29) or to counter their upheaval. Very telling is the fact that in both Fusaro's and Roccu's chapters – despite the theoretical references to the role of consensus (p.370) and the lack of self-awareness of the subaltern classes (p. 28) – the empirical analyses of the world order and the Egyptian case hardly ever refer to the strengths and weaknesses of subaltern classes and potentially opposing groups.<sup>5</sup>

## 5. On (passive) revolution

As I have highlighted in this review, the collection convincingly puts forward a discussion on Gramsci's revolutionary thought, pointing out how this is mainly concerned with the emancipation of the subaltern groups. In addition, and in a very original manner, the occasional and disorganised consciousness of subordinated classes is often seen as something that can end up producing their passivity and ultimately lead them to defeat. Yet, at least as frequent seems the appeal to arguments that reject such a position, highlighting ruling classes' impositions as the ultimate explanatory tool for capitalist continuity. I have argued that while the former approach could represent a very timely contribution to Gramscian and Marxist debates, the latter leads us towards an ambiguous

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<sup>5</sup> An exception being a very brief remark in Roccu's chapter (p. 37).

theory of socio-historical change that deeply contrasts with Gramsci's own position. One is reminded of the concept of passive revolution, which in Gramsci's words, "presupposes, and indeed postulates as necessary, a vigorous antithesis which can present intransigently all its potentiality for development" (Q15§62, p. 1827).<sup>6</sup> Digging deeper in Gramsci's categories, we could argue that the coerciveness of capital restructuring would not be possible if it was not for the fragmentation (being that cultural or organisational) of potentially revolutionary social groups.

Some of the aspects of the collection that point in the direction of dialectically relating subaltern passivity with ruling classes' dominance, I believe, could thus be further emphasised and perhaps should lead wider scholarship on Marxism to a rethinking of key conceptual and analytical categories. In particular, more empirical attention should be directed towards the specific ways in which the subaltern classes (through their passivity, common sense, etc.) tend to reinforce and make possible ruling class' hegemony. In this sense, Meret's chapter offers the richest insights in the whole volume. She uses a framework borrowed by Gramsci's reflection on the role of the factory councils to understand both the strengths and the weaknesses of the refugee-led group *Lampedusa in Hamburg* (LiHH). Perhaps a good idea would be to extend some of the questions Meret poses in regards to refugees' struggles to wider enquiries concerning subordinated classes: How can the emergence of movements/parties/groups be explained? What are their claims and demands? What are their patterns of subjectivisation, alliance formation, solidarity and community building? How lastly can they be supported and encouraged? (p. 212). This in turn would also provide critical scholars with a better understanding of the relation between the strengths and weaknesses of potentially opposing groups and the ability of the ruling bloc to respond and subjugate the subalterns.<sup>7</sup>

In conclusion, Gramsci's writings dispute the view according to which, as eloquently synthesised by Vandeviver,

[p]ower is seen as nomothetic, unstoppable in the growth of its domination and ultimately irresistible because it exhausts all human activity, dismisses individual human agency, and empties out resistance as well as the production of counter-discursive knowledge (p. 249).

For this reason, Gramsci's *oeuvre* should be explored also, if not mainly, in order to identify those forms of praxis that end up reinforcing capitalist domination and, conversely, those that can produce forms of emancipation for the subalterns. Whilst the collection, as well as the long-term engagement of the authors with Gramsci's thought, provides good insights on the ways to approach such riddle; the need for a more universal theory seems to be as crucial as ever.

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<sup>6</sup> For a more thorough engagement with Gramsci's notion of passive revolution, see Fifi 2019.

<sup>7</sup> Attempts to apply a Gramscian framework to such studies, can be found for example in Cox 2018 and Green 2015.

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