



Book Review

Using Gramsci: A New Approach. Michele Filippini, trans. Jatrnick J. Barr.

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Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* has become a very important inspiration for twentieth-century Marxist political thinkers around the world. His work is also attracting considerable interest in the twenty-first century. Reading Gramsci, however, "is no easy task" (xi). He engages in various complex debates of his time that are now vague to many readers. Michele Filippini, a researcher in the Department of Political and Social Sciences at the University of Bologna and coordinator of the digital library Gramsciproject.org, has come up with "a new approach" on the *Prison Notebooks* touching on some major concepts previously given little attention by Gramscian scholars.

Filippini includes chapters on Ideology, the Individual, Collective Organism, Society, Crisis, and Temporality. By extending Gramsci's concept beyond a Marxist perspective, Filippini's book provides expert guides to key features and themes in Gramsci's writing in combination with the pressing political, social and cultural struggles of our time. The first chapter deals with Gramsci's thoughts about "ideology". For Filippini, Gramsci conceives of ideology as an organic part of a social totality while maintaining the flexibility of the concept (5). Filippini's Gramsci analyzes



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various levels of ideology, such as common sense, folklore, religion, philosophy, and science, arranging them based on their scale of internal consistency where common sense and philosophy are at the extreme of such a scale. In this chapter, Filippini discusses Gramsci's conception of ideology including historicity of ideology, the complexity of ideology, the truth/falsity of ideology, and the conceptual constellation of ideology which includes hegemony. With regard to the historicity of the concept of ideology, Filippini asserts that Gramsci was well aware of the transformation the concept has undergone due to historical-political process triggered by the French Revolution (6). Filippini argues that unlike Bukharin, who sees ideology narrowly from economic determinism perspective, Gramsci links ideology to wider social relations (8). In Filippini's view, Gramsci senses the interdependence between ideology and society similar to the relation the skin has with the skeleton in the human organism.

The author asserts that Gramsci equates ideology to "a complex form of social order" in his analysis of the complexity of ideology (9). In his discussion about the truth and falsity of ideology, Filippini mainly touches on the work of Ferruccio Rossi-Lindi who categorizes the various meanings of ideology into its negative meaning ("critical-false consciousness") and positive descriptive meaning ("a vision of the world"). In Marxism, says Filippini, such distinction could be digested to the difference between "The Marx of German Ideology" (whereby ideology inverts real relations) and "the Lenin of What is to be done?". Filippini situates Gramsci between these two understandings as he shares Marx's conception of ideology as "mystifying reality" and Lenin's conception of labeling "truth as not absolute," but rather the result of political struggle (15-16). Filippini also discusses Gramsci's conceptual assemblage of ideology including hegemony, which possesses a degree of consent and coercion (18). He also discusses the relation between "common sense", "folklore" and "philosophy" by asserting that folklore has a negative (reactionary value) while "common sense" has a progressive element in Gramsci's writings (20). Finally, the author explains science being integral part of ideology for its objectivity (22).

Filippini starts the second chapter, "The individual," stating that Gramsci identifies ideological forms as the outcome of the relations among individuals within the society (24). Stepping from this, Filippini asserts that Gramsci has a different understanding of the "Individual" compared to other Marxist scholars of his generation as he conceives the structure of the individual dependent on the individual's social relationships. Gramsci's conception of the individual as "mass-man"/"collective-man" was shaped in the 1920s with the Soviet and Fascist construction of "a new man" which was different from the previous liberal order (25). For Gramsci, continues Filippini, the individual obtains his own personality when the individual element is combined with the social element. Filippini claims that Gramsci's focus on social characteristics/determinant of individuality was largely influenced by the work of Emile Durkheim, *The Division of Labour in Society* (1893). According to him, they both see a "new type of man" as the product of his

individual and social element. Filippini also points that Goerge Sorel's conception of "man as a social worker" (32) and his analysis on the relationship between the individual and the environment also influenced Gramsci's views of the "Individual".

In this chapter, Filippini also discusses the "theory of personality and molecular transformation," returning to Gramsci's conception of ideology as an environment or a domain in which both the "personality" and the "individuality" of the individual is formed (37). Filippini says that Gramsci's entire theory of "personality" is based on the formation of a new man which Gramsci calls "molecular transformation" (40). Filippini asserts that Gramsci connects this transformation with "passive revolution". In concluding the chapter, Filippini underlines that individuals can only bring "radical change" in a society if and only if they hold hands with those who want the same change.

The third chapter, "Collective Organism", focuses on Gramsci's concern about parties, trade unions, cultural associations and other intermediate bodies in the modern state. Here, Filippini discusses Gramsci's concept of "collective organism" from the perspective of a new relationship that has developed between state and civil society during the age of mass politics in the early twentieth century. Filippini states that Gramsci re-examined the separation between the State (the public/political sphere) and civil society (the private/economic sphere). According to him, Gramsci sees the State as a blend of the coercive element (political society) and consent element (civil society) (46). Filippini then looks at Gramsci's conception of Society as the powerful interface between individuals/groups and the state, thus a landscape where hegemony is reproduced. Filippini also gives some remarks on the similarities of Max Weber's "passive democratization" and Gramsci's "passive Revolution". According to him, what interests both was the passivity of the masses that make history. Both writers use the term "passivity" to describe the process of political transformation, but Weber sees the political man and Gramsci see the party as capable of dealing with the transformation (52). According to Filippini, Gramsci tips the political party as the only body that could enable the subaltern classes to get organized and fight against the capitalist system (52). Filippini also says that Gramsci shares some of Machiavelli's thought in *The Prince*. In concluding the chapter, Filippini asserts that the task of the Prince for Machiavelli and Gramsci intrinsically remains the same, embodying the political demand of the people (63). However, the modern prince cannot be a real person, but an organism (political party) (64).

In chapter four, "Society", Filippini discusses "Organicism" of society by providing a detailed analysis of Gramsci's differentiation of "Organic Intellectuals" and "Traditional Intellectuals," where the former is connected to a social group on the rise, the proletariat, and the latter to a social group in decline, ruling class (67). The author further analyzes the dual function of intellectuals as engaged in the reproduction of social norms (68). Filippini maintains that Gramsci sees revolution as unthinkable without seizing the function of traditional intellectuals as well as the mediating role

of “Organic Intellectuals” (71). To attain power, the existing links between traditional intellectuals and the dominant group need to be broken in advance (69). Filippini also discusses notions such as “coercion” and “conformism” in relation to Gramsci’s explanation of the form of integration within society (73). He sees coercion in Gramsci’s writings as a violent mechanism accompanying the State action (73) and “conformism” as an element that constitutes a means by which possibilities of freedom ought to be imagined (76). Finally, Filippini discusses Gramsci’s conception of “sociological operators” which shows Gramsci’s interest in the political value of social relations, thus repositioning the political within a social context (84).

In chapter five, Filippini discusses the concept of “Crisis”, understood as a “process” rather than a “definitive event” (88). While “crisis” is often seen as an irreversible character and an event triggered by specific circumstances, according to Filippini Gramsci does not see Crisis as a closing point at which the capitalist system comes to an end. Rather, he perceives the development of the capitalist system as a “continual crisis” (89). Filippini observes that for Gramsci the crisis is always a crisis of an “authority” or “hegemony” but not of “a capitalist social order” (90). Filippini further discussed Gramsci’s multiple meanings of Crisis where he sees crisis beyond simplistic definitions and presents it as a “complex process” (90), which is ever-present in its “latent or explicit form” (92). Lastly, Filippini discusses “Crisis and Organization” where he analyzes Gramsci’s understanding of the importance of permanently organized and long prepared force in times of organic crisis so as to impose itself in a crisis (100).

In chapter six, “Temporality”, Filippini discusses the structure of time in Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks*. Here, he explains about the duality of Gramscian time and connects it with the theory of personality (the individual), common sense and language (collective organism), and the distinction between East and West (society). With regard to the dual character of time, plural temporality and singular temporality, Filippini asserts that Gramsci sees the former as a “temporality that is always struggling to prevail” and the latter as a “temporality represented by the hegemonic force” (106). Here, Filippini identifies the problematic in Gramsci’s notebooks when he analyzes the connection between temporality of duration and the diverse relationship between the State and Civil Societies in the East and West. For Filippini, Gramsci’s distinction between the East and West is focused on the changes displayed in Western society, including Fascism and Americanism (112-113). Filippini also uses the concept of passive revolution to analyze the temporal nature of duration (114). According to him, Gramsci believes passive revolution represents the bourgeois model of the “historical management” of development and changes in the aftermath of the French Revolution.

In his brief conclusion, Filippini notes that the complexity of the *Prison Notebooks* subjected Gramsci’s work to various interpretations by different scholars. He also addresses the drawbacks of Gramsci’s notebooks, giving particular attention to his confinement and lack of access to

reading materials. Furthermore, the author asserts that Gramsci does not coin a new word out of anything but uses terms previously formulated by others and shifts their meaning (122). Filippini also warns scholars to have “interpretive accuracy” while dealing with Gramsci’s notebooks (123). He claims that most of the theoretical themes discussed by Gramsci have a direct influence on contemporary social and political studies due to the similarities of “epochal changes” between the late nineteenth and early twentieth century and the current era.

Filippini’s focus on elements of Gramsci’s notebooks that had not received previous attention makes his work a valuable addition to Gramscian thought in the twenty-first century.