Gramsci Lives!

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**ABSTRACT**

Antonio Gramsci’s writings provide a valuable conceptual and political sensibility for critical approaches to nature. In this editorial introduction to a theme issue on Gramscian Political Ecologies we establish the broad contours to such an approach, stressing Gramsci’s integral Marxism and commitment to a transformative politics relevant to the contemporary moment. Subsequently, we provide an introduction to existing political ecological research inspired by Gramsci’s wide-ranging writings. In order to stimulate future research, we question Gramsci’s reflections on ‘nature’ in order to examine the embryonic possibilities and limitations therein. Gramsci, we suggest, provides stimulating commentary on the differentiated unity of nature and society: in part, this anticipates recent arguments on this subject. Similarly, we reflect on how Gramsci’s conceptualization of hegemony relates to core issues within political ecology. Given the centrality of ‘environmental issues’ in the contemporary moment, it is necessary to consider how social groups enrol natures and environments (both material and symbolic) in their struggles for hegemony. We conclude the editorial by introducing the articles included in the theme issue.

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1. Introduction

The papers assembled for this special issue on Gramscian Political Ecologies are motivated by two common convictions: first, that struggles over nature and the environment are fundamental to contemporary political prospects; and second, that concepts and categories drawn from the work of Antonio Gramsci can be incredibly valuable resources in understanding these struggles and what they might achieve. But with even the Hoover Institution throwing Gramsci’s name around these days (e.g. Fonte, 2001), and “hegemony” a staple of orthodox international relations literature, the adjective “Gramscian” cannot on its own situate the substance of the contributions contained herein. This introduction thus outlines, albeit briefly, some relevant background to the principal geographic questions that motivate the collection: Gramsci, nature, and hegemony.

Doing justice to Gramsci himself is among the more daunting of these introductory responsibilities. Part of the difficulty is that, if Michel Foucault is correct, of all social theorists, Gramsci is among the most cited but least read [quoted in Buttigieg (1991, p. xix)]. Many human geographers know his name today, and many of those know he formulated a theory of “hegemony”, even if they have not read it themselves. But far fewer, it seems, have engaged with his thought directly. The details of Gramsci’s life certainly explain his renown: a brilliant Marxist thinker and journalist, a militant communist and co-founder of the Italian Communist Party (PCI), he was jailed by Mussolini’s fascists in 1926, at the age of 35, and died in prison eleven years later. All the more remarkable, the legacy of those terrible years is a collection of notebooks he wrote while imprisoned, containing thousands of entries on a whole host of topics, from Italian history to Marxian theory to folklore. These notes, which include everything from extended essays to sardonic one-liners, are perhaps the principal reason Gramsci’s name, and his ideas, have always carried enormous weight in Italy, and have had an increasingly important influence in other parts of the world.

Yet the very diversity of his subject matter—popular theatre, science, economic development, idealism, religion, revolution—the enormous range of his thought, and the conditions under which he worked, have meant that at times it appears as if Gramsci’s ideas can do anything for anybody. Indeed, what Gramsci “really” thought, and the work his legacy can do, has long been a subject of heated disagreement inside the PCI itself. So the question of “which Gramsci” is not an idle one. This is not to say that there is a correct way to read Gramsci (there is not), or that all the papers included here read him in the same way (they do not). It is to say, rather, that any social science that goes by the modifier Gramscian is engaged in a conversation with a complex, at times fragmented, and ultimately open set of texts. The exegetical battles will never be resolved.
There are, however, some broad sensibilities that most Gramscian analyses share, which would surely include the following. First, like Gramsci's own studies (and Marx's), they are explicitly political: they focus on the current conjuncture, teasing apart the historically and geographically specific work of power, the forms that power takes, and the terrain of constraint and opportunity it helps determine. Second, and implicit in the first, the goal of such work is never merely research (whether critical or otherwise) that seeks to explain the world. Gramsci's attitude to research was bolder: he hoped to develop a "critical" analysis that would both make sense of and help change the situation under the microscope. His project was explicitly a transformative one and his engagement with radical politics mirrored this commitment. Third, most studies inspired by Gramsci do not prioritize the "economic", the "cultural" or the "political" moments of the conjuncture, but understand these moments as irreducibly intertwined. The work of power is never confined to bounded "spheres" of social life, none of which stand or fall in isolation. Indeed, the fact that power is at the root of "political ecology" or the "political" moments of the conjuncture, but understand these moments as irreducibly intertwined. The work of power is never confined to bounded "spheres" of social life, none of which stand or fall in isolation. Indeed, the fact that power is at the root of "political ecology" or the "political" moments of the conjuncture, but understand these moments as irreducibly intertwined. The work of power is never confined to bounded "spheres" of social life, none of which stand or fall in isolation. Indeed, the fact that power is at the root of "political ecology" or the "political" moments of the conjuncture, but understand these moments as irreducibly intertwined. The work of power is never confined to bounded "spheres" of social life, none of which stand or fall in isolation. Indeed, the fact that power is at the root of "political ecology" or the "political" moments of the conjuncture, but understand these moments as irreducibly intertwined. The work of power is never confined to bounded "spheres" of social life, none of which stand or fall in isolation. Indeed, the fact that power is at the root of "political ecology" or the "political" moments of the conjuncture, but understand these moments as irreducibly intertwined. The work of power is never confined to bounded "spheres" of social life, none of which stand or fall in isolation. Indeed, the fact that power is at the root of "political ecology" or the "political" moments of the conjuncture, but understand these moments as irreducibly intertwined. The work of power is never confined to bounded "spheres" of social life, none of which stand or fall in isolation. Indeed, the fact that power is at the root of "political ecology" or the "political" moments of the conjuncture, but understand these moments as irreducibly intertwined. The work of power is never confined to bounded "spheres" of social life, none of which stand or fall in isolation. Indeed, the fact that power is at the root of "political ecology" or the "political" moments of the conjuncture, but understand these moments as irreducibly intertwined. The work of power is never confined to bounded "spheres" of social life, none of which stand or fall in isolation. Indeed, the fact that power is at the root of "political ecology" or the "political" moments of the conjuncture, but understand these moments as irreducible...
3. Hegemony and nature

The legacy of Gramsci’s social-political thought is indexed by the countless evocations of hegemony by social scientists and political theorists of every stripe. At a very basic — but important — level, hegemony gives us a convenient vocabulary for understanding why people consent to, and participate in, relationships that are fundamentally unjust. Hegemony is a powerful conceptual vehicle for understanding how capitalism survives despite its contradictions. This is one of the questions that animated Gramsci’s work and spurred his scattered comments on hegemony. For Gramsci, hegemony refers to the ability of a ruling bloc to exercise leadership and control over subordinated social groups through “bringing about not only a union of economic and political aims, but also intellectual moral unity, posing all the questions around which struggles rage not on a corporate but a ‘universal plane’” (Gramsci, 1971, p. 182). It should be added that universalizing the interests of a particular social group necessarily involves reproducing a series of social relations concerning class and capital, gender, race and nationalism. Hegemony thus concerns both the legitimacy of a social group’s position of power and the diffusion and adoption of a set of ideologies and social relationships.

There is something ironic to the fact that Gramsci is so widely cited as the theorist of hegemony. In the Prison Notebooks, hegemony is never used as a title to a note or as a rubric for organizing various reflections (Buttigieg, 2007). However, Gramsci’s reflections on the state, civil-society, ideology, philosophy and popular culture collectively contribute to his understanding of hegemony and illustrate the wide social terrain through which hegemonic projects are enacted. The mass-appeal of the idea of hegemony would appear to lie in its ready application to a wide-range of social phenomenon. However, the ubiquitous use of hegemony can occlude two important dimensions of Gramsci’s initial understanding of the term. First, hegemony is meaningless outside of a consideration of the lived practices through which it is enacted. Analysing and participating in — or against — a hegemonic project necessary entails getting to grips with ideologies and their imbrication in “lived, habitual social practice — which must then presumably encompass the unconscious, in-articulate dimensions of social experience as well as the workings of frontal institutions” (Eagleton, 1991, p. 115). Hegemony is something concrete rather than abstract, lived rather than imposed. Second, hegemony is not a singular project even if hegemonic projects consist of attempts to achieve some type of universalism, universality in a manner in which a wide-range of popular, philosophical, economic, and cultural phenomenon are articulated together in a hegemonic project illuminates the multiple axes through which hegemonic struggles are waged (Gramsci, 1971, pp. 400–402; see also Hall, 1996).

If hegemony involves concrete lived relations and is always multifaceted, what does this mean for the relationship between hegemonic projects and the question of nature? To start with, social groups that aspire to hegemony increasingly have to demonstrate their ability to pose solutions to a variety of issues related to nature and the environment. Neither contemporary hegemonic blocs nor aspiring hegemonic actors — from neoliberal capitalist democracies, China’s authoritarian capitalists, to the Landless Peasant Movement at work in Brazil — can afford to ignore the problematic of nature in their political projects. The range of political projects that try to grapple with the question of nature signal how the terrain on which hegemonic struggles are waged has been recast. In the realm of virtually all political futures presently imaginable, nature now stands as a protagonist; it provides the term by
which, by any measure, the question of what is to be done is now framed.

However, questions of the environment and nature are inextricably connected to a host of other social relations such as class, gender, race and nationalism. Examples of the multifaceted character of struggles over the environment are almost too numerous to mention: the ‘greening’ of capitalism (Caprotti, 2009), the enrollment of water as an actor in authoritarian political projects (Swyngedouw, 2007), or wetland development as key to the coherence of a national-colonial narrative (Yeh, 2009). The point simply is that both movements supporting existing hegemonic blocs and aspiring hegemons can never settle on this or that discreet part of the environment, but rather must tackle the ‘bundle’ of social relations articulated in what is known to be ‘nature’. As nature is materially and ideologically enrolled and produced in hegemonic projects this occurs in both the domain of the extraordinary and that of everyday life and work. Again, for Gramsci the environment becomes the educator. Hegemonic struggles concerning nature revolve around how people make sense of their relationship with the environment and thereby participate and modify the “ensemble of relations” they live within.

It is crucial to remember that the ideologies and practices through which people actively enter into relation with ‘nature’ are radically open to historical change. Gramsci (1977, p. 96) encouraged factory workers to establish a new “shop-floor way of life” which would provide the basis for broad social change. In the current historical moment, a progressive hegemonic struggle seeking to resolve questions around nature and the environment needs to transform an ecological way of life at the level of life and work. Changing the everyday ensemble of relations that straddle the ‘social’ and ‘ecological’ domains represents the humble beginnings of an alternative hegemonic politics of the environment, yet, as ever, Gramsci presses us to consider how any environmental politics must take seriously the multiple fronts on which hegemonic struggles are waged.

4. Summary of papers

In a variety of different ways, the papers in this collection take up these disparate themes. Focussing on the territorial zoning policies of the Columbian state, Asher and Ojeda demonstrate the ways in which nature – understood as a socio-natural assemblage – is enrolled in processes of state formation. Ordenamiento Territorial is central to the re-working of relations with nature and stabilising a fragile hegemony in Columbia. For Lofts, this relational way of thinking suggests a reconsideration of the way in which everyday environments are terrains over which hegemony is both consolidated and contested. Thus, reworking everyday socio-natural relations can serve as a starting point for a radically democratic, transformative politics. He demonstrates this through artistic interventions in London that transform everyday urban environments into laboratories for radical experimentation.

Picking up on relatively under-researched aspects of Gramsci’s writings, the paper by Wainwright and Mercer looks instead to the arguments mobilised within the scientific community over transgenic maize in Mexico. They seek to show how Gramsci, while refusing to reduce science to ideology, is nevertheless concerned with the porous boundaries between science and politics. Gramsci demonstrates this porosity is constitutive of both science and politics, and in the essential role of science in forging a new conception of the world. Mann’s paper considers what light an engagement with Gramsci might shed on political ecology’s inconsistent relation with its Marxist roots. Focusing on the problem of what it means to do ‘materialist’ political ecology today, he argues that a renewed commitment to historical materialism, as Gramsci conceived of it, can make a crucial contribution to political ecology’s understanding of hegemony, history, and environmental change. In doing so, he demonstrates that a Gramscian political ecology has a more varied armoury of resources for tackling key political ecological questions than many have realised to date.

The papers by Karriem and Ekers pick up on Gramsci’s (1971, p. 448) reflection that “human history should also be conceived as the history of nature” in order to examine how different struggles for hegemony occur in conjunction with the production of nature. Karriem examines the Brazilian Landless Movement (MST) through a Gramscian lens that foregrounds the spatial and political ecological practices of the movement. He emphasizes the ways in which the MST struggles from below to re-structure political ecological and scalar relations. He traces the rise of the MST starting with the influential role of liberation theology then moving on to the process of national territorialization and the pursuit of ‘global ambition’. For Karriem, the social-political aspirations of the MST are achieved by contesting the neoliberalization of nature and establishing alternative social relations that empower subaltern social groups. The paper by Ekers shares this interest in how hegemony is built through the material-ideological transformation of nature. Ekers examines depression-era British Columbia, specifically the efforts of the federal and provincial states to establish a broad-based socionatural hegemony. Building on Stuart Hall’s reflections on the multiple axes of hegemony, Ekers focuses on relations of class, gender and ecology as three parts of the state’s hegemonic struggle. He explicates this by tracing the crisis of unemployment and masculinities in Vancouver and the subsequent enrollment of unemployed men into relief camps. He argues that through relief work the state attempted to jointly remake the class and gender identity of the unemployed at the same time that it was re-charting the direction of the forest industry towards sustained-yield forestry. Taken together, they demonstrate how a Gramscian sensibility might reanimate some of the core concerns within political ecology and how this, in turn, might be taken forward as a struggle to remake our world through fundamentally more just socio-ecological relationships.

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References


