

Book Review: An Introduction to Antonio Gramsci: His Life, Thought and Legacy by George Hoare and Nathan Sperber

In An Introduction to Antonio Gramsci: His Life, Thought and Legacy, George Hoare and Nathan Sperber contest the proliferation of various interpretations of his thought, instead arguing for a unified and consistent Gramsci. As the authors directly connect Gramsci's life with his scholarly output, this introductory book has value to those newly encountering Gramsci's thought as well as experts already familiar with his theoretical importance, writes **Sonia J. Wieser**.

***An Introduction to Antonio Gramsci: His Life, Thought and Legacy*. George Hoare and Nathan Sperber. Bloomsbury. 2015.**

When thinking of international relations, cultural studies, political theory, literary theory and postcolonial studies, no way leads around the Italian militant and political thinker Antonio Gramsci. Born in 1891 in an impoverished Sardinia, not many signs pointed to the direction that Gramsci's life would take, becoming a highly influential Marxist thinker who was made the head of the Italian Communist Party in the 1920s before being arrested and condemned to twenty years' imprisonment by Benito Mussolini's fascist regime. During his time in jail and before his death in 1937, Gramsci wrote his magnum opus, *The Prison Notebooks*, a collection of reflections on history, culture, politics, philosophy and revolution. Due to the highly influential character of his writing, many 'Gramscis' have been produced, particularly in the English- and Italian-speaking academic communities. Or, as George Hoare and Nathan Sperber put it: 'There is a Gramsci used by the Right and one claimed by the Left' (1).

If Gramsci is so important for contemporary political thought, yet interpretations of his work so fragmented, how can we read Gramsci today? Disagreeing with the notion of several split, diverse Gramscis, Hoare and Sperber argue for a unified and consistent Gramsci. Instead of dwelling on the precise meaning of Gramscian concepts, they instead invite the reader to 'think through' Gramsci, meaning to use his thought to make sense of the historical situation one finds oneself in today. With this challenge to think through Gramsci in a 'dialectical, flexible, open-minded and generative [manner], attempting to open new avenues rather than discover new dead ends' (2), the authors pay tribute to Gramsci's own way of thinking – as he writes in a letter in 1930, he has 'to engage in a dialogue, be dialectical, to arrive at some intellectual stimulation' (12).

Although this is not an easy undertaking, the neat structure of the book helps the authors in achieving just that goal. Acknowledging that Gramsci's thought and legacy cannot be understood without taking a close look at his biography, the authors begin the book with an overview of his life. They manage to strike a great balance between keeping it simple whilst still weaving in important details about Gramsci's life and interests, such as his work as a journalist for *L'Ordine Nuovo*. Connecting the real-life experiences of Gramsci with his thought, his writings become inextricably linked to his biography.

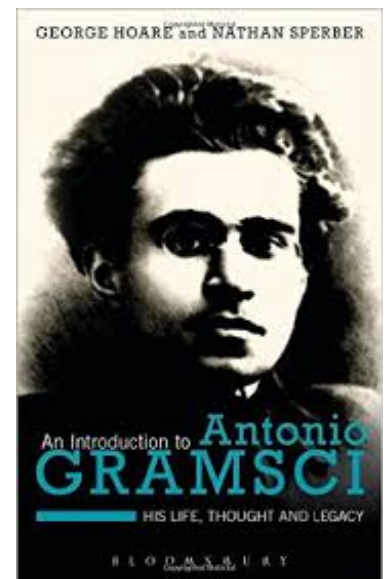




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The authors proceed to discuss Gramsci's thought itself in Part Two, starting off with a discussion of his views on culture and politics. They offer a particularly impressive discussion of Gramsci's conception of intellectuals and his differentiation between 'organic intellectuals' and 'traditional intellectuals'. This analysis furthers the goal of the book in offering a way of thinking through Gramsci by showing how, by considering and debating about issues such as political struggles, the intellectual acts as a catalyst for the historical process.

Hoare and Sperber dedicate the last two chapters on Gramsci's thought to his philosophy and, most importantly, the concept of hegemony. Whilst one could argue that in his overall thought, Gramsci's views on hegemony deserve a more prominent place than 'just' being on equal footing with culture, politics and philosophy, the authors convincingly argue that 'Gramsci's concept of hegemony not only relies on, but deepens and furthers his other major theoretical', and 'thus, it is only after having encountered the other key concepts in Gramsci's thought that a reader [...] is fully able to understand the way in which hegemony is applicable to all the other topics that Gramsci reflects on in his prison writings' (117). Taking this argument as a starting point for their reflections, the authors manage to reconstruct Gramsci's understanding of hegemony in all its wealth and depth, thus paying tribute to the important place it holds in his legacy.

Having contended that 'the concept of hegemony forms the basis of Gramsci's account of history and political strategy, and that this is important to understand his other key concepts in relation to hegemony', the authors then move on to Part Three, which is the most surprising element of the book: an application of Gramsci's thought to political theory and political economy. What is truly remarkable about the authors' case studies on 'Left/Right' and 'neo-liberalism' is that they again manage to write a detailed account of the case studies, whilst at the same time keeping them timeless, true to Gramsci's own mode of thinking. They propose a five-part methodology 'usable by anyone who might wish to investigate common sense' (169). This methodology consists of an initial starting concept (such as Left/Right) that is used to make sense of the world; an exploration of its complex and multifaceted history; and the exhibition of its formal structure as well as its conception of the world. Finally, any element of the 'common sense' of politics acts as a story about politics, which can then ultimately be 'subjected to critique through a process of interpretation that involves relating it to class struggle' (169).

The authors finish the book by exploring Gramsci's legacy, discussing his influence on authors such as Michel

Foucault and Edward Said, thus further highlighting the importance of Gramsci's thinking to the social sciences. In conclusion, it can be said that Hoare and Sperber have written a fantastic book that will appeal to both experts of Gramsci and those newly interested in him alike. To new readers, it offers a short but precise summary of his life, thought and legacy, including a guide to further reading at the very end of the book. To those already familiar with Gramsci's work, the book not only offers a well-written account of his life and thought to refer to in future work, but more importantly, two challenging chapters presenting a new way of applying Gramsci's approach to contemporary issues. Hence, the book offers a great basis for anyone who wants to engage with Gramsci's concepts and methods as tools to make sense of the world surrounding them.

Sonia J. Wieser is an MSc International Relations Graduate from the LSE and currently works at an Innovation Consultancy in London. She is particularly interested in the interplay of new technologies and innovation with the broader society, is passionate about gender equality and has a sweet spot for post-communist states.

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.

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