

Book Review: Gramsci's Common Sense: Inequality and its Narratives by Kate Crehan

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1/4/2017

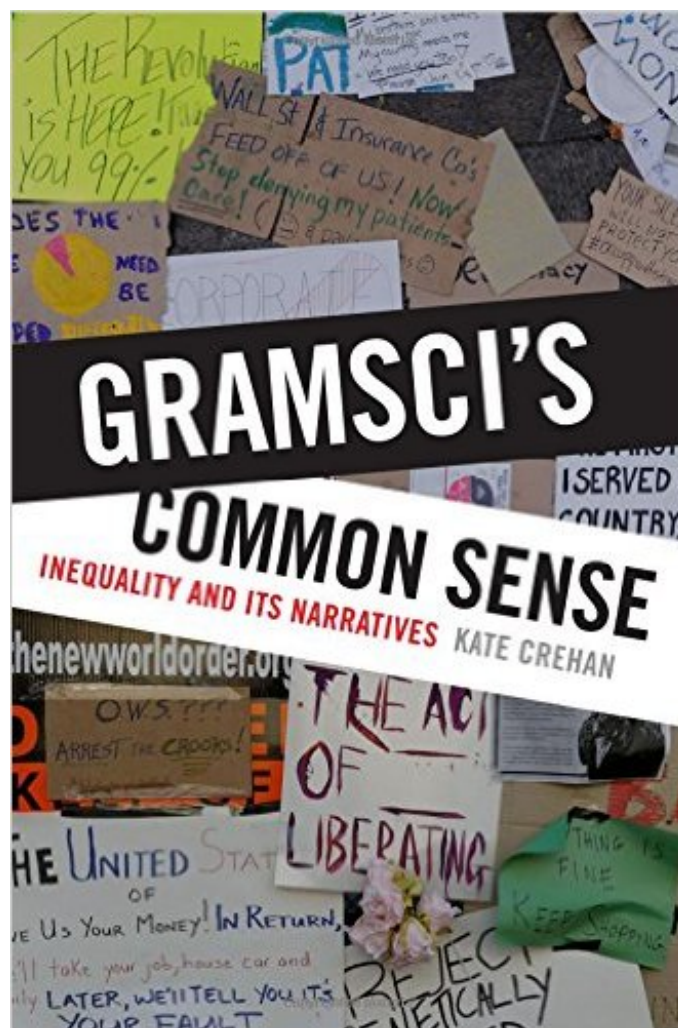
In Gramsci's Common Sense: Inequality and its Narratives, Kate Crehan examines a number of core concepts in the work of theorist Antonio Gramsci – including common sense, the subaltern and the intellectual – that can help give precise insight into the emergence and persistence of social inequalities. Drawing on such case studies as the Tea Party and Occupy Wall Street movements, this is a timely and profound account that has much to contribute to understandings of political change, writes **Marcos González Hernando**.

***Gramsci's Common Sense: Inequality and its Narratives*. Kate Crehan. Duke University Press. 2016.**

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Amongst twentieth-century Marxist social theorists, Antonio Gramsci is perhaps the most important neither to have held a permanent academic post nor to have founded a 'school'. An intellectually imposing man with a minute and frail figure, his imprisonment under Benito Mussolini, during which he wrote his famed notebooks, is one of the most memorable milestones of twentieth-century political thought. Under the most inauspicious circumstances, Gramsci produced an oeuvre that, while fragmentary, has greatly influenced the fields of political science, international relations, cultural studies and postcolonial theory amongst many others. Yet, while his concepts are widely known and employed, they are generally understood unsystematically and remain relatively marginal in the fields of sociology and anthropology.

Addressing this neglect is the aim of *Gramsci's Common Sense: Inequality and its Narratives* by [Kate Crehan](#), Professor of Cultural Anthropology at City University New York (CUNY). It comes to challenge many common readings of this thinker, particularly concerning his thoughts on intellectuals and on processes of cultural and political change. Crehan has [previously written](#) on the applicability of Gramsci's concepts to her discipline of anthropology and to the study of culture more generally. *Gramsci's Common Sense* is another attempt to recast his ideas and render them applicable to the study of politics and to understanding how commonly held beliefs become so.



Discounting the introduction and conclusion, the volume is structured into two sections, each comprising three chapters. The first covers some of Gramsci's core concepts – namely common sense, subalterns and intellectuals – which, taken together, allow a more precise grasp of how inequalities come about through his implicit theory on the

production of social knowledge. Indeed, one of the book's main features is its close reading of Gramsci's sociology of knowledge, which explains Crehan's criticism of previous deployments of Gramscian ideas. Two instances of this are worth mentioning here.



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The first example concerns his usage of 'common sense'. Unlike its English counterpart, the Italian *senso comune* lacks positive connotations of reasonableness and even-mindedness. *Senso comune* simply means the disparate set of ideas and beliefs that are held commonly, yet vaguely, within a certain community. It is the result of institutions and producers of knowledge which, often in a sedimentary manner, promote a particular vision of the world. These ideas are, for Gramsci, affected by institutions and hierarchies that expound 'good sense' – a relatively coherent set of ideas about the world that can be disseminated ever more widely. Here, Gramsci is thinking especially of churches and political parties, and his 'philosophy of praxis' is but another example of 'good sense'. Hence, whether *senso comune* is 'commonsensical' is beside the point – what is important is its quality of being *common*, which more often than not entails vagueness. This leads Crehan to be critical of the idea that democracies ought to be animated by a seemingly natural common sense, which she detects in Hannah Arendt's writings. Quite the contrary, the very role of politics is to determine what becomes part of the *senso comune*, bereft of any 'common sense' to which one could return.

The second instance is her critique of romantic conceptions of intellectuals, exemplified by Edward Saïd's reading of Gramsci. Against the idea that intellectuals should be autonomous – and hence that 'organic intellectuals' are basically hacks – Crehan understands Gramsci to be saying that intellectuals are necessarily embedded in social relationships through which knowledge is produced. All may think, but 'not all [...] have in society the function of intellectuals' (27). Intellectuals are simply a subset tasked to reproduce a particular organisation of knowledge, which in time percolates into a *senso comune*. For Gramsci, the intellectual's 'organic' character is linked to their social position rather than to self-interest or 'bad faith'. His advocacy for cadres of organic intellectuals of the proletariat should thus be understood as an attempt to articulate a 'good sense' for the subaltern. Hence why Crehan reminds us that for Gramsci, incoherence is always negative – indeed, intellectual and political incoherence are commonly associated with subordinate positions.

The second section of Crehan's book exemplifies these ideas through three case studies of intellectuals and social

movements centred on inequality. The first of these covers the conditions under which Adam Smith in hindsight became the foremost organic intellectual of an ascending bourgeoisie, laying out the ideas of an emerging social class and its associated social order. The other two are more contemporary, both reflecting political dynamics that followed the 2008 financial crisis. The second chapter studies the rise of the Tea Party in the USA, while the third examines the travails of the Occupy Wall Street movement. While Crehan claims the former is an attempt to render 'commonsensical' a particular narrative of political crisis through media networks and intellectuals funded by corporate interests, the latter is an as-yet-unfinished attempt to articulate a good sense to challenge global financial capitalism.

Following Gramsci, one of Crehan's central points in the empirical analysis of political movements is the importance of coherence. All of these examples are attempts to conquer the incoherent and vague through the formation of a coherent body of knowledge, and her analysis excels in highlighting these dynamics. However, there is one fundamental methodological issue this book does not solve. Towards the beginning of the book, Crehan claims Gramsci cannot but think in agonistic terms, citing him: 'I don't like to cast stones into the darkness; I want to feel a concrete interlocutor or adversary' (7). An anthropology that thinks through oppositions goes against the grain of much of the history of the discipline, weary as it is of accusations of ethnocentrism. Without claiming that a Gramscian anthropology is impossible, this reviewer would have liked to read more on the matter.

Nevertheless, this point does not subtract from the fact that Crehan has produced a felicitous and profound intervention that could inform our understanding of both intellectual and political change. In 2016, as a new *sensu comune* begins to develop in an age of 'post-truth' politics, Gramsci's ideas are more timely than ever.

Marcos González Hernando is Affiliated Researcher at the University of Cambridge and Visiting Lecturer at City, University of London. He is interested in the sociology of time, knowledge and intellectuals, and particularly in what concerns intellectual change and the modes of public engagement of organisations. His recently finished doctoral dissertation, supervised by Dr Patrick Baert, focused on the institutional and intellectual transformation of British think-tanks in the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis. He is also an editor at ballotage.cl. [Read more by Marcos González Hernando.](#)

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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