
Review

Gramsci's common sense: Inequality and its narratives

Kate Crehan

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Of the many books on Antonio Gramsci, Kate Crehan's *Gramsci's Common Sense* stands out because she offers insights into three of Gramsci's key concepts and uses them in three case studies, including the Tea Party movement and Occupy Wall Street (OWS). Unlike works that focus specifically on applying Gramsci, Crehan offers pithy, succinct readings of Gramsci's concepts of subalternity, intellectuals, and common sense. Crehan draws on the themes in her earlier *Gramsci, Culture and Anthropology* (Crehan, 2002) but does more to reveal their contemporary political relevance, without her previous focus on anthropology. The rise of Donald Trump may seem to have overtaken any academic analysis carried out just a little while ago. But Crehan's insights, especially into the Tea Party movement, are to some extent borne out by the way it has morphed into Trumpism.

Part I of this book deals with the concepts of subalternity, intellectuals, and common sense, with an underlying emphasis on Gramsci's concern with epistemology that convincingly frames her readings of each concept. There is an interesting, if only implicit, interplay between these concepts and the case studies in Part II. The most direct link is between Chapter 2 on intellectuals and Chapter 5, which is a case study of Adam Smith as an organic intellectual of the rising bourgeois class. Crehan's analysis of Smith is also concerned with how his ideas – developed on the margins and thus, to a degree, subaltern – became 'common sense' by the nineteenth century and remain so even today. It provides an important case study, given his continued influence on 'common sense' understandings of the market central to her two other cases. However, Crehan repeats an odd unexamined contention that 'it is only with the benefit of hindsight that we can definitively identify an emerging class's organic intellectuals' (p. xiii, see also p. 81). As I will discuss below, this seems to be one severe limitation of her analysis of OWS in Chapter 7, namely, her unwillingness to address the formation of organic intellectuals there, whereas in Chapter 6, she does examine the individuals who perform the intellectual leadership function of the Tea Party.



While Crehan relies on English language sources of Gramsci's writings and secondary literature, she makes excellent use of them. She challenges others' uses of the concepts and highlights the shortcomings of possible misinterpretations. For example, she is critical of Edward Said's conception of the intellectual as an independent figure aiming at universality. Pulling no punches, Crehan argues convincingly that 'The reason Said gets Gramsci so wrong is bound up with his commitment to the notion of the intellectual as an autonomous, independent individual, and his failure to recognize [Gramsci's] notebooks' radical rejection of this model' (p. 24). Using Said, and in a more subtle gesture, Eric Hobsbawm's puzzlement concerning Gramsci's distinction between organic and traditional intellectuals (p. 23), Crehan does an excellent job showing that Gramsci's organic intellectual is crucially connected to his understanding of knowledge production and his oft-quoted discussion that begins: 'The popular element "feels" but does not always know or understand; the intellectual element "knows" but does not always understand and in particular does not always feel...' (quoted on p. 37). While many interpretations of Gramsci make this point, Crehan drives it home much more effectively: 'Organic intellectuals are not a particular kind of intellectual. They are the form in which the knowledge generated out of the lived experience of a social group with potential to become hegemonic achieves coherence and authority' (pp. 29–30).

Similarly, Crehan positions her reading of Gramsci's 'subaltern' by critiquing James Scott's celebration of the agency of the subordinated and Gayatri Spivak's invocation of Gramsci's subalternity that enacts 'a particular kind of muting' that renders them speechless (pp. 12–14). Crehan draws on Joseph Buttigieg, Peter Thomas, and Marcus Green to render a summary of Gramsci's subalternity that is always collective, very much focused on the internalized, psychological effects of subalternity, but also directed toward overcoming its very conditions, and this is where its production of organic intellectuals is so crucial. As she summarizes, 'Subalterns, we might say, can speak, but if they are to speak in politically effective ways, they need to develop their own organic intellectuals: intellectuals who transform their new implicit knowledge into an explicit philosophy and culture that includes a new common sense' (p. 77).

Chapter 3 on 'common sense' begins with the usual issues of translation, that the Italian *senso comune* is more literally the sense that is common, without the English positive connotations of 'common sense' as reasonable, sensible and undeniably true. Crehan explains that she will use this 'mistranslation' both to draw attention to the hidden baggage of the concept and suggest an alternative way of thinking for Anglophones (p. 44). Of course, most translators have made the same decision as Crehan, but very few use it explicitly to provide a historical account of 'common sense' going back to Aristotle and up through the type of seemingly spontaneous judgements of what constitutes pornography in the famous 1964 US Supreme Court case on the matter (p. 45).



Chapters 6 and 7 demonstrate key points from the first part of the book, specifically that ‘common sense’ ideas, whether they be a faith in the unfettered market or racist blaming of immigrants, do not come from nowhere. In the case of the Tea Party, Crehan shows how old ‘common sense’ ideas were resurrected and rearticulated. She discusses the relationships between the ‘grassroots’ populist element of the Tea Party and the corporate and right-wing elite. Chapter 6 does a very good job describing the various ‘intellectuals’ of the Tea Party, from the Koch brothers to Paul Ryan. She provides a succinct history of the anti-taxation ‘common sense’ from early in the 20th century. Ultimately, Crehan employs Gramsci’s concept of the historical bloc (not discussed in Part I) that holds together the diverse forces of the Tea Party. Crehan is explicit in drawing from, among other scholars, the work of Skocpol and Williams (2012), but she is less clear about what a Gramscian approach adds to these analyses. She does seem to provide a theoretical framework to resist the temptation of seeing the populist ‘grassroots’ support for the Tea Party as either ‘inauthentic’, or as being duped or illegitimately manipulated. She does this in reference to the above noted distinction of Gramsci’s between ‘feeling’ and ‘knowing’, both of which are required for ‘understanding’.

But Crehan does not focus on the contradictions in this movement. She favorably cites Formisano’s ‘cautions against focusing too much on the differences between Tea Party supporters and other Americans’, but on the following page emphasizes just such a difference between the ‘common sense’ of Tea Partiers from ‘many mainstream voters’ who were shocked by the leaked comments of Mitt Romney (pp. 136–137). This could lead one to question the power of ‘common sense’ (either Gramsci’s conception or Crehan’s rendition) to effectively map out the differing social strata and for whom ‘common sense’ is common. Many of the dynamics she finds in the Tea Party are, not surprisingly, those that account for Trump’s success. But at least in terms of the presidency, a missing element here is the geography of Trump’s support: e.g., Michigan, Pennsylvania, Ohio, and the rural/urban split. Especially given the recent interest in Gramsci as a ‘spatial thinker’ (Jessop, 2006; Ekers et al., 2013), this would seem to be an obvious oversight of Crehan’s. This absence also seems apparent in Crehan’s analysis of OWS.

In her final case study, Crehan emphasizes how difficult it is to change ‘common sense’ from the subaltern perspective. Crehan sees in OWS the beginnings of a new ‘common sense’, one based on the ‘feeling’ that the massive growth of inequality is indeed a real problem, and it is experienced even if ‘in flashes’ of an embryonic worldview. Crehan notes the lack of organization and leadership of OWS, but does not dwell on it as so many other Left-wing discussions have. She notes that ‘It was a long way from an organized, effective movement with the kind of disciplined leadership Gramsci saw as crucial for any sustained change’ (p. 153). And unfortunately she does not draw on any of the research on the relationship between Gramsci and anarchism (e.g., Levy, 1999) but moves on after noting that the anarchist movement exists ‘to educate’ the other parties. From this perspective, it



feels as if her point is to admire the difficult work in changing ‘common sense’ that in one section she describes as a ‘war of position’ without grappling with all the debates stemming from OWS concerning political organization. In other words, while Crehan uses common sense to appreciate the accomplishments of OWS, she does less to point a direction forward. Especially compared to her analysis of the Tea Party, there is surprisingly little focus on OWS as a site of the formation of organic intellectuals, which as noted earlier, she sees as only possible in hindsight. Yet her reading of Gramsci maintains that this is actually a necessary and crucial element for any real change. For these reasons, Crehan is more successful at illuminating Gramsci’s specific concepts of common sense, intellectuals and subalternity than analyzing her cases, which would require a larger set of Gramscian armature. Nevertheless, as a very readable and timely book, it has much to offer.

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