

International Gramsci Journal

Volume 3

Issue 1 *Joseph A. Buttigieg / Subaltern groups and hegemony / Gramsci outside Italy and his critiques of political economy and philosophy / Reviews*

Article 14

2018

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Recommended Citation

Chino, Takahiro, On Guido Liguori's Gramsci's Pathways, *International Gramsci Journal*, 3(1), 2018, 104-116.

Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/gramsci/vol3/iss1/14>

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On Guido Liguori's Gramsci's Pathways

Abstract

This is a review by Takahiro Chino of Guido Liguori's Gramsci's Pathways, Chicago, Haymarket Books, 2015.

Keywords

Gramsci, extended State, common sense, methodology

Paving a New Way to Read Gramsci

Takahiro Chino

1. *Introduction*

Gramsci's Pathways by Guido Liguori, a leading Gramsci scholar, who has edited books and published numerous important monographs, articles and chapters in books, is a pleasing addition to the literature on Gramsci. It is a translation of his *Sentieri gramsciani*, with the Preface to the English Edition and two new chapters, Chapters Four and Fourteen, that did not appear in the original version in Italian. In total it has fourteen chapters, half of them being dedicated to the rigorous philological hermeneutic reading of Gramsci. The other half is where he relates Gramsci to those who influenced Gramsci and who are influenced by Gramsci. It provides us not only with a landscape of Gramsci's theoretical developments in the *Prison Notebooks*, but also shows how Gramsci learnt from his forerunners in elaborating them and how they have been appropriated by later thinkers. As such, the examinations by the prominent scholar in this book range from well-known ideas of Gramsci such as the state, civil society, and party to the intellectual history of Gramscian ideas such as hegemony, pragmatism, and ideology.

As this short review of such an absorbing book cannot do justice to all aspects of it, I will limit myself and deliberately focus on some chapters that exemplify the hermeneutic analysis of Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*. For Liguori's hermeneutic method contains important suggestions for the long-discussed question of how we can read the *Prison Notebooks*, which I believe the readers of Gramsci cannot avoid asking. In my view, the key terms in Liguori's analysis are the "extended state" and "common sense". While the extended state involves many of Gramsci's core ideas such as state, civil society, party, movements and hegemony, common sense is closely related to ideology, conception of the world, good sense, and conformism. As these two key concepts seem to anchor Liguori's thoughtful discussions about Gramsci, I will look at Liguori's analysis of them respectively. In the final section, I will make a few remarks on how to further develop Liguori's proposed approach of going back to Gramsci's texts.

Before starting the body of my review, I need to mention one more aspect: its methodological closeness with the monumental work *Dizionario gramsciano 1926-1937* of 2009, edited by Liguori and Pasquale Voza.¹ As written in the Preface to *Gramsci's Pathways*, Liguori's motives for editing the *Dizionario* seem closely connected to those of writing *Pathways*. When starting seminars for the *Dizionario* in 2001, according to him,

[w]e started out from the conviction that it is today possible to read Gramsci as a great contemporary author – not a politically neutral one, but neither one who can immediately be compressed into present-day political debates. Hence the belief that now we need to “go back to the texts”, to “his” texts, after years and years of interpretations that had built up a long and sometimes fruitful – but now useless – “battle of ideas” on top of them (p. IX).

As this principle seems to straddle both the *Dizionario* and *Pathways*, it would be helpful for us to quickly summarize the two following important characteristics of the *Dizionario* in order to grasp the shared principle. First, the *Dizionario* instantiates how Gramsci defined and used his ideas throughout the *Notebooks*, providing us with a landscape of how Gramsci himself employs a contested idea, such as hegemony. This enables us to narrow down the possible intended meanings of his ideas, while avoiding excessively extending meanings beyond Gramsci's writings. Second, the *Dizionario* illustrates how Gramsci's ideas are not mechanically distinct, but organically interrelated to one another. It helps us understand how throughout the years the web of his ideas, such as the relationship between state and civil society, were developed in the *Notebooks*.

As I will examine below, we can observe that *Gramsci's Pathways* shares these two characteristics with the *Dizionario* and provides a deeper analysis of the *Notebooks* through Liguori's hermeneutic approach.

2. *The Extended State*

The first uniqueness I deliberately picked up from *Gramsci's Pathways* is found in Chapter 2. It resides in its focus on the “extended State” as a key phrase in understanding Gramsci's complex, and “organic”, relationship between the State and the economy, and

¹Liguori and Voza 2009.

between the State and civil society. It is well known that Gramsci complained about the common understanding of the State as a mere organ of violence.² According to Liguori, Gramsci refined the concept of the State to encompass two characteristic traits of early-twentieth-century States.

The first “extension” of the State can be seen in the new relationship between the State and economy. This is intriguing as it is relatively little discussed in comparison with the second extension. States originally separated politics from economics, yet a new relationship between the two terrains emerged in his time. As observed in the cases of Italy, Soviet Russia, and the United States after the crisis of 1929, the State had started to intervene in the economy. Gramsci analyzed that the State had to assume the important role of guaranteeing savings and organizing production, which previously the bourgeoisie controlled according to its private initiative, after observing the Great Crash of 1929 and the market’s failure regarding self-regulation.³

However, Liguori quickly adds, Gramsci did not jettison the Marxist assumption of the State as the expression of the economic situation. Gramsci’s civil society is commonly understood as a part of the superstructure, together with political society (the State as violence), and a site for producing people’s consent to the existing governance. Yet, it should be noted, as Liguori emphasizes, that – albeit rarely – Gramsci argued that civil society and the economy could be closely connected with the State, acting as the bond:

between economic structure and the State with its legislation and coercion stands civil society [...]; the State is the instrument of the adequation of civil society to the economic structure.⁴

As Liguori points out, however, Gramsci did not endorse, on the one hand, Fascist corporativism due to its plutocratic character and

² Q15§10, p. 1765; *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (hereafter *SPN*), p. 244. Following convention, quotations from the *Quaderni del carcere* (*Prison Notebooks*) are shown by notebook number (Q), passage number (§) and page number. Where English translations are available from *Gramsci's Pathways* and direct quotations are required, I make use of them. Where neither, I quote from English translations of the *Prison Notebooks*.

³ Q22§14, pp. 2175-8; *SPN*, pp. 313-6.

⁴ Q10II§15, p. 1253. The quoted translation is from Liguori (2015, p. 7); [cf. *Further Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 1995 {hereafter *FSPN*}, p. 167, esp. “the State is the instrument for bringing civil society into line with the economic structure”- editorial note].

the finance capital behind it, or New Deal policies as they preserve the class character and exploitation of capitalism (p. 6). Hence, State intervention in the economy does not mean the State's takeover of the economic base. The thrust of Gramsci's argument, according to Liguori, is that "it is certain that the state as such does not produce but is the expression of the economic situation".⁵ While Liguori admits that the theoretical importance of Gramsci lies in his articulations of the superstructural elements, he stresses that Gramsci's arguments firmly rested on the Marxist assumption of the determining role of the economic base. This emphasis by Liguori urges us to pay particular (and further) attention to Gramsci's economic theory at large.

The second extension of the State regards the relationship between political society and civil society. As I noted earlier, Gramsci complained about the common view of the State in a narrow sense as violence, as political society in his term. Rather, modern States, in which democracy holds sway, exercise their governance by obtaining people's consent to its existing form. It is important for the governing to make people believe that their needs are somewhat reflected in the policies of the government. Such consent is produced in civil society, via private institutions such as the media and the church that influence people's opinions and views of the world in their daily life. Given this, Gramsci stressed the importance of civil society for modern states: "[...] over its historical development belongs to private forces, to civil society – which is 'State' too, indeed is the State itself".⁶ He thus redefined the state in the very relationship between coercion deriving from political society and consent from civil society.

Gramsci portrayed modern States characterized by the relationship between the two as the "integral State". In comprehending Gramsci's arguments about the relationship, Liguori aptly focuses on that term. As Liguori points out, Q6§10 reads "after the French Revolution the bourgeoisie 'could present itself as an integral «State», with all the sufficient intellectual and moral forces needed to organize a complete and perfect society".⁷ Also, in Q6§155, "In politics the error occurs as a result of an inaccurate understanding

⁵ Q10II§41vi, p. 1310; Liguori (2015, p. 3); [FSPN, p. 427].

⁶ Q26§6, p. 2302; SPN, p. 261.

⁷ Q6§10, p. 691. The quoted translation is from Liguori (2015, p. 16); [cf. the slightly different wording in SPN, p. 271 and in Gramsci 2007, p. 9].

of what the State (in its integral meaning: dictatorship + hegemony) really is?”⁸ As seen in these parentheses, Gramsci called contemporary States that unify coercion and consent (i.e., political society and civil society) the “integral State”.

I agree with Liguori in stressing the importance of Gramsci’s extension of the concept of the State, which has been not fully explored. It was Buci-Glucksmann’s monumental work *Gramsci and the State* of 1975 (translated into Italian in 1976 and into English in 1980) that first provided a theoretical analysis of Gramsci’s idea of the integral State.⁹ Her book is still influential in the Anglophone context. In my view, Liguori and Buci-Glucksmann have offered significantly different views of it in terms of the controversial issue of the role of the economic base in Gramsci. This is related to what Liguori calls the first extension that Gramsci’s extended State provided.

Before looking at their differences, let us begin by examining what they agree on as the characteristics of the extended State. In a word, they generally agree on what Liguori calls the second extension (p. 8). They agree that Gramsci revised and updated the concept of the State to account for the growing tendency of governance relying on the people’s consent. In other words, they agree that Gramsci’s extended State is based on his methodological arrangement, as an ideal type, to divide political society, or the State as violence, from civil society, the site of people’s consent. The extended State thus appears as a remedy to the existing, yet outdated and narrow, understanding of the State that exclusively possesses coercive forces. In this sense, they also agree that Gramsci anticipated the emergence of “regulated society” at the end of the growing impact of consent on governance, when the elements of coercion become obsolete and thus disappear.

What they might disagree can be found in their differing understandings of how Gramsci incorporated the role of the economy in this revised view of the State. Crucially, their difference here centres on their views about whether in Gramsci’s Marxism the superstructure is dependent on the economy or not. Liguori emphasizes how the extended State embodied Gramsci’s Marxist conviction that the economy is the ultimate foundation of the superstructure,

⁸ Q6§155, pp. 810-11. The quoted translation is from Liguori (2015, p. 17); [see *SPN*, p. 239 or Gramsci 2007, p. 117].

⁹ Buci-Glucksmann (1980).

including both political and civil societies. According to him, the extended State exhibits Gramsci's view that the State is the expression of the economy, namely the State broadens its functions by intervening the economy rather than maintaining *laissez-faire*, especially after the Great Depression of 1929. To address this topic, let us look at two arguments propounded by Liguori. First, he points out that in the *Notebooks* there are cases where civil society signifies economic society, apart from its major meaning as a site of private institutions and thus of consent. A prime example of this is a passage that I quoted earlier:

[b]etween the economic structure and the State with its legislation and coercion stands civil society [...] the State is the instrument of the adequation of civil society to the economic structure.¹⁰

Liguori's quotation ends here, but an important argument could be found right after this:

but the state has to "want" to do that, i.e., the representatives of the change that has already come about in the economic structure have to be in control of the State.¹¹

Another example demonstrates how the State has to act in order to prevent another depression in the "Keynesian" phase of the capitalist economy. It does so by rationalizing production, by guaranteeing savings, and by making up for industrial losses and deficits (p. 5).¹² Gramsci's State here works to alter the contents of civil society so that it fits with a new type of economy. It is thus natural to interpret that Gramsci emphasized the relationship between the economy and the State as being closer than that between the superstructural elements, the State and civil society. By this argument Liguori underpins his view that, within the Marxist scheme Gramsci upheld, the State cooperates in the emergence of a new economic structure, being neither dependent on the economic conditions nor led under the consent produced in civil society.

¹⁰ Q10II§15: 1253. The quoted translation is from Liguori (2015, p. 7); [cf. *FSPN*, p. 167].

¹¹ Q10II§15: 1253-4; [cf. *FSPN*, *loc. cit.*].

¹² See Q9§8, p. 1101 [first draft or "A text"]; and Q22§14 [second draft or "C text"], p. 2176 [*SPN*, pp. 313-6, esp. p. 315].

On the contrary, Buci-Glucksmann offers a view that Gramsci's extended State does not intervene in the economy as much as Liguori assumes. It should be noted that she agrees with Liguori about the elements of consent in the "extended" State. Yet, she seems not to understand State intervention in the economy as a major characteristic of Gramsci's extended State, as Liguori does. Chapters 3 and 14 of her book emphasize that Gramsci's extended State is a refined Leninist idea that prepares for the withering away of the State by reinforcing the function of consent, namely, of autonomous governance by the people themselves. In this sense, she limits her discussion within the framework that Gramsci developed in a famous argument: the extended State is established by both coercion and consent, yet the elements of coercion gradually disappear, as those of consent become predominant.¹³

Hence, Liguori and Buci-Glucksmann do not illustrate Gramsci's extended State in entirely the same way: Liguori's focus on the relationship between the State and the economy is missing in Buci-Glucksmann's version. It would be beneficial for readers if Liguori could further clarify how his and Buci-Glucksmann's understandings differ, and what would be the wider implication of focusing on the connection between the State and the economy as a characteristic of the extended State, in particular in relation to the withering-away thesis that Buci-Glucksmann emphasizes.

3. *Common Sense*

Common sense is another important and extensively discussed idea of Gramsci's. Chapter 6 of *Pathways* challenges a major understanding of it. This interpretation appreciates people's common sense as a reflection of truth against the established philosophy of intellectuals, who claims to exclusively possess truth. In this view, Gramsci's common sense is understood in a positive way, advocating the alteration of power relations underlying the existing relationship between the philosophy of intellectuals and the common sense of the masses.

Given this positive understanding of common sense, Liguori begins by unpacking how Gramsci used the terms of "common sense" and "good sense", respectively. According to him, Gramsci's common sense falls into the following three meanings. First,

¹³ Q6§88, p. 763-4, *SPN*, pp. 262-3 [cf. Gramsci 2007, p. 75]; Buci-Glucksmann (1980, p. 282).

Liguori emphasizes that Gramsci generally used the term common sense in a negative way (pp. 90-3; p. 106; p. 111). Second, Gramsci employed it in a descriptive way as a synonym of “culture” or “conception of the world” (p. 88). And third, Gramsci also referred to it as a synonym for good sense in a neutral or positive way (p. 103; p. 109). Liguori then goes on to look at three meanings that Gramsci gave to good sense. The first meaning is a synonym for the third meaning of common sense (p. 103; p. 109). Second, it signifies “culture” or the “conception of the world”, as does the second meaning of common sense (p. 110). The third meaning differentiates good sense from common sense, denoting a better understanding of the world than the common sense that confusingly entails the residues of past philosophies and religions (p. 107).

Liguori’s summary is intriguing in that it underscores the negative meaning of common sense, and that, at the same time, it sheds light on good sense as a better understanding of the world (pp. 108-9). It seems, however, that Liguori might not have fully explained the relationship between common sense (which is generally negative) and good sense (which is generally positive). From my perspective, in Gramsci, it seems not contradictory to look at the generally negative connotation of common sense, and still observe possible elements of good sense in it. They could be compatible. The point is, just as Aristotle did not abandon people’s opinions as nonsense, but rather considered that they may contain some truth, Gramsci also did not jettison common sense, but regarded common sense as an unsorted view that includes a real understanding of the world. Gramsci argued that good sense is the people’s equivalent to philosophy as an ordered perception of the world, while common sense itself cannot be so.

Philosophy is intellectual order, which neither religion nor common sense can be. [...] Moreover common sense is a collective noun, like religion: there is not just one common sense, for that too is a product of history and a part of the historical process. Philosophy is criticism and the superseding of religion and “common sense”. *In this sense it coincides with “good” as opposed to “common” sense.*¹⁴

Liguori quotes this passage (p. 104), but omits the important sentence that I have emphasized above where Gramsci contrasts good

¹⁴ Q11§12, p. 1378; *SPN*, pp. 325-6, emphasis by TC.

sense as people's organized understanding of the world with common sense and religion as their disorganized perception.

Therefore, Gramsci argued that appreciating good sense as "intellectual order" does not contradict comprehending common sense itself in a negative way. It could be more helpful for readers if Liguori discussed rather more closely how his general argument that Gramsci's common sense at large has a negative connotation is consistent with his interpretation of Gramsci's appreciation of good sense. All in all, however, Liguori's stress on the negative connotation of common sense works as a strong corrective to the existing literature that has read it in a more positive way.

4. *Further Methodological Inquiry Required?*

Before concluding this short piece, I would like to provide a tiny reflection on Liguori's proposed method to "go back to Gramsci's texts", which I agree with as a doubtlessly welcome trend. As *Gramsci's Pathways* exemplifies, this approach is a helpful way to disentangle still-cryptic texts of the *Prison Notebooks* by revealing the chronological and logical development of Gramsci's thought throughout his years of writing in prison. Observing the textual development from the A texts to C texts, for instance, tells us how he revised his original notes, and how he elaborated the ensemble of his thought, which cannot be reduced a simple textual reading of some keywords. In this sense, this approach helps us better reconstruct what Gramsci was thinking throughout his writing of the entire *Notebooks*. Along with *Gramsci's Pathways*, important recent literature has more or less shared this approach, such as *Le parole di Gramsci*, edited by Fabio Frosini and Liguori; and *Il ritmo del pensiero*, by Giuseppe Cospito, to note only two.¹⁵

However, I think we are only halfway to the goal of "going back to Gramsci's texts". *Gramsci's Pathways* demonstrates how to do so, yet it does not fully provide us with a proper and solid methodology that materializes this proposal. A philological approach itself, mostly developed by Italian scholars, does not necessarily tell us how ought we to read Gramsci. It is still possible to collect passages from Gramsci to say what we are programmed to say. As this issue of how to read thinkers' texts has been one of the most discussed problems in the history of ideas, we might be able to identify from

¹⁵ Frosini and Liguori (2004); Cospito (2011) [in English Cospito 2016].

such discussion of this problem in general some possible candidates who could help us develop our reading of Gramsci. Here I would like to limit myself to introducing ideas proposed by Leo Strauss and Quentin Skinner, and how they would help us in further promoting Liguori's project of going back to Gramsci's texts.

First, let me explore Strauss's approach that focuses on "literary character" of texts. Leo Strauss was a Jewish political philosopher born in Germany, and is well known for his career as a professor at the University of Chicago. In his *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, he points out that great books have their own "literary character", depending on the difference in the way in which they may be read, something that readers must understand before interpreting them.¹⁶ Looking at Gramsci's *Notebooks* from this perspective, we can see they have their own literary character, which is distinct, for example, from Croce's books, which he continued to revise throughout his lifetime. We may be able to point out two literary characters proper to Gramsci's *Notebooks*. First, the *Prison Notebooks*, as implied in Liguori's approach, are left as a collection of his notes, unedited after the author's death, even though they have since received different levels of editing. Second, stemming from the first, they have a "private" character: Gramsci never considered publishing them as they are.¹⁷ As they are written as Gramsci's private notebooks, they often lack the contexts that would enable us to grasp in what sense Gramsci referred to his ideas. When we write something publicly, we more or less try to translate what we think into a publicly acceptable forms and languages, in order to reach a wider audience. Through this process, written texts go beyond the shared beliefs, languages, and customs of close friends and colleagues. However, the *Prison Notebooks* are considerably lacking in such a process of translation, due to his death and also to the political situation in which, elucidating what he wrote in his notebooks, would put his family in Russia under danger of persecution.

Of course, the *Notebooks* have a surprising degree of logical coherence in terms of their selected topics and his arguments, despite the literary characters of being unedited and private.

¹⁶ Strauss (1988), p. 30.

¹⁷ See, Gramsci's project of writing an *Anti-Croce* based on his notes from Notebook 10 (Q10I§11, *QdC* p. 1234 [*FSPN*, pp. 354-6]; Q8, *QdC* p. 935 [*PN* Vol. 3, p. 231]).

However, seeking logical coherence alone cannot be a satisfactory criterion for reading them, as we can draw it convincingly from the *Notebooks* in various ways, depending on how we are programmed to read Gramsci – even by attributing to him views that he might not hold. If my analysis of these two literary characteristics of the *Prison Notebooks* is appropriate, then what would be a relevant way to accommodate them in order to better interpret Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*? My suggestion is a method proposed by Quentin Skinner, a British intellectual historian, as Skinner's approach limits the possible ways in which they can be read, by rejecting logically possible yet contextually impossible readings.

Let me examine here how Skinner's approach is useful in reading Gramsci. Skinner emphasizes the importance of seeking what the thinker's "intention *in doing* something" was,¹⁸ for they might have failed to do what they originally intended to do. In the case of Gramsci's *Notebooks*, as I noted earlier, he did not intend to publish them in the form we have them now. We tend to look into the *Notebooks* retrospectively, more or less presupposing that his original intentions are included in his achievements. Yet, as Skinner claims, we cannot derive Gramsci's intentions from his achievements. Let me look at an example from Gramsci's first plan of the *Notebooks*, expressed in a letter to Tat'jana Schucht, on 19 March 1927. Typically, his famous phrase to "do something *für ewig*" in the *Notebooks* has often been interpreted as his announcement of launching the project of establishing a monumental achievement. Yet, the four topics he juxtaposed in the letter are more down-to-earth. For instance, his interest in linguistics – nothing "could be more 'disinterested' and '*für ewig*' than that"¹⁹ – suggests that he intended to examine how the Italian language took part in constructing the ruling class's hegemony, although he could not explore this topic thoroughly. By looking at his plan in the letter as well as later plans in Notebooks 1 and 8, we can discount the strong reading of the phrase *für ewig* as a plan to seek something eternal or true.

On the contrary, by focusing on his intention to choose those "interrelated" themes, we can see that he wished to pursue the topic of Italian intellectuals – the topic he developed in his last pre-prison

¹⁸ Skinner (1988), p. 65.

¹⁹ Gramsci (1965), p. 58; Gramsci (1994a), pp. 83-4.

article, *Alcuni temi della questione meridionale*²⁰ – and that of the masses, a part of which was discussed in the “Notes” as its main topic about the Italian peasantry.²¹ As Liguori suggests (p. 23; p. 91), Gramsci’s proposed way of reading Marx could be applicable to the research of Gramsci himself:

It is necessary, first of all, to reconstruct the process of intellectual development of the thinker in question in order to identify those elements which were to become stable and ‘permanent.’ [...] Research for the *Leitmotif*, for the rhythm of thought as it develops, should be more important than that for single causal affirmations and isolated aphorisms.²²

To sum up, Strauss urges us to explore texts according to their literary characters, which are those of being unedited and private in the case of the *Prison Notebooks*. In dealing with these problems, Skinner’s approach urges us to reconstruct the author’s motive in writing them, by analyzing the discourse in which Gramsci was situated and the terms and ideas which were available for him when writing the *Notebooks*. I think these two ways would be also beneficial for Gramsci scholars if we try to “go back to Gramsci’s texts” following Liguori. *Gramsci’s Pathways* provides English-language readers with the prime example of this fruitful approach in Italian scholarship. All in all, as along with other books from the *Historical Materialism* series, this is a welcome addition to the new generation of Gramsci literature.

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²⁰ [Some Aspects of the Southern Question, in Gramsci (1978), pp. 441-62.]

²¹ Gramsci (1996), p. 158; Gramsci 1994b, p. 316.

²² Q16§2, pp. 1841-2; SPN, p. 382-4. Translation amended by TC.

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