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Antonio Gramsci: Beyond Marxism and Postmodernism by Renate Holub

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help the reader grasp the originality of Gianni Celati, Andrea De Carlo and Daniele Del Giudice, writers who in different ways have enlarged the narrative perspective created by Calvino into distinctly postmodern variants. Antonio Tabucchi and Roberto Pazzi, writers who have perhaps made the greatest impact on current narrative practices, are competently examined by Anna Laura Lepschy and Philip Cooke respectively. Diego Zancani helps close out the volume with a sensitive assessment of the late Pier Vittorio Tondelli.

It would be of course wrong to assign the authors represented in this volume to a kind of postmodern confraternity, distinguishable from earlier, "modernist" associations by virtue of some thematic dominant. It should also be obvious that the local cultures, with which a number of the authors still identify and which defy any institutionalized collectivization, are themselves enclaves of old world productivity. These worlds reappear in many of the new fictions aesthetically transfigured (think, for example, of the Cefalù of Consolo's *Il sorriso dell'ignoto antico marinaio*) into a historical "moment" existing within an authorial perspective profoundly influenced by consumer society and the economy of international trusts. But unlike the archaic culture in which writers like Pavese and Vittorini sought authenticity and redemption, the old worlds of the new novels offer no means of survival; no Utopian alternative to the perceived horrors of modernity.

If there is anything, beside their common idiom, that unites such diverse writers as those discussed in

his book it is perhaps the depthlessness of their prose; their fictions all seem to register and interrogate the surface of reality. The meaning, essence or utopia, the modern novel was seeking (but never could attain) is perceived as either not being within their grasp or as a distraction that prevents them from focusing on the ambiguities of the here and now. There is also in all of these writers a profound sense of the "variants of human consciousness, the different voices of which the world is made" and, finally, a continual acknowledgement of the institution of literature, within whose boundaries the self is constructed.

The New Italian Novel offers a vast assortment of material for fashioning a typology of the contemporary Italian novel that could be based on the new techniques employed in re-writing older forms of narrative prose. For this reason, the book constitutes an invaluable starting point from which many interesting paths can be taken.

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Antonio Gramsci: Beyond Marxism and Postmodernism

By Renate Holub.

London: Routledge, 1992.

In a letter to Tatiana Schucht, Antonio Gramsci wrote about accomplishing something 'für ewig' (forever) while in prison.¹ Gramsci states:

It is clear that the content of posthumous works has to be taken with great discretion and caution, because it cannot be considered definitive but only as material still being elaborated and still provisional. One should not exclude the possibility that these works, particularly if they have been long in the making... might have been deemed unsatisfactory in whole or in part by the author.³

Of course, this describes Gramsci's own *Prison Notebooks*, as much as Marx's work that he was discussing. Add to this Gramsci's refusal to publish a collection of his journalistic writings which he felt were written for a moment that had passed, and the position of those who write on Gramsci becomes more problematic than being some sort of fulfilment of Gramsci's accomplishment 'für ewig'.

As the number of years increases since his death in 1937, writings on Gramsci become more entrapped by the problem of what the purpose of writing on Gramsci is. Is a book on Gramsci supposed to describe his conception of the world (of pre-World-War II Italy) or is it supposed to make his writings pertinent to us in order to understand, analyze or act in our present world? The former is plagued with the problem of recourse to a 'real' Gramsci that the author can somehow describe better than a multitude of other books on Gramsci. The latter is inevitably at a disadvantage due to the disorganized and fragmentary condition of most of Gramsci's writings. One wonders if there is anything left worth dredging from them. Renate Holub's *Antonio Gramsci: Beyond Marxism and Postmodernism* shows that there is still much to be

gained from Gramsci's writings. Holub manages to avoid the predicaments of writing on Gramsci by pursuing what might seem a trendy perspective of Gramsci as a literary critic. This perspective, as opposed to, in Holub's words, "reinforc[ing] the received image of Gramsci as co-founder of western Marxism, legitimate though it is," (6) will strike some readers as shying away from the political insistence and activism for which Gramsci is most known. But it is precisely this positioning of Gramsci that allows Holub to sidestep many of the debates internal to Gramscian political theory, yet make headway on an interpretation that specifically speaks to how race, multiculturalism, gender and class relate to current issues in a world increasingly shaped by electronic technology. Holub's strategy is not to find new meaning in the content of Gramsci's writings, but rather to focus on his techniques and methodology. She uses the 'still provisional' character and the possibility that Gramsci himself would find these texts 'unsatisfactory' as a launching pad for her own theory which she labels 'differential pragmatics'.

The major drawback of this project is that perhaps she prepares the launching pad too well and does not give enough explanation of what is being launched. 'Differential pragmatics' is a provocative term, the roots of which Holub traces throughout her discussion of Gramsci. But the reader is left at the end of the book without much of a picture of what 'differential pragmatics' is or of how Gramsci theorized 'difference' in relation to 'universal.' It is unclear to

what extent 'differential pragmatics' is a critique of Habermas' 'universal pragmatics' or merely an addition to it, and where exactly it lies within the huge space between Habermas and Lyotard, both of whom she cites repeatedly in the context of 'differential pragmatics.' At the heart of this problem is Holub's failure to grapple with the tensions in Gramsci's texts between 'differentials' and 'universals.'

After an extended introduction in Part I, Part II comprises the bulk of the book both physically and intellectually. It compares differing concepts of cultural production and reception, technology, rationalization, modernism, realism and phenomenology in Gramsci to various early twentieth century theorists, most notably Lukács, the Frankfurt School, Benjamin, Brecht, Bloch, Volosinov, and Merleau-Ponty. Holub makes useful connections between, for example, Horkheimer and Adorno's critique of the 'culture industry' and Gramsci's study of the 'theatre industry' (specifically the 'Chiarelli Firm') in Turin. Holub manages to integrate such unique insights into both the relations between concepts used by these different thinkers and, even more interestingly, Gramsci's writings on Alessandro Manzoni, Luigi Pirandello, and Dante. These elements will become, in Part III, the "minimal contours of a new critical project, and a new critical practice" (23) that is 'differential pragmatics.'

The intriguing method of Holub's work is seen most clearly in her astute comparison of Gramsci and Lukács revolving around Marxist aesthetics. This comparison derives

great strength from a lengthy discussion of both Gramsci's and Lukács' views of Manzoni. Holub describes the political implications and cites the reasons why Lukács favours Manzoni as a realist who accurately depicts specific negative historical events, whereas Gramsci is somewhat critical of Manzoni's portrayal of the subaltern classes. But these positive or negative judgements are not the crucial features of Gramsci's views of Manzoni. For Holub, the important aspect of Gramsci's method — of his 'homological pragmatics' or 'relational pragmatics' — is that he constantly relates Manzoni to other phenomena, texts, objects, 'archaeological sites,' and 'forms of knowledge'. It is highly significant, Holub argues, that he studies Manzoni in the various contexts of "la Questione della lingua" ("The question of [National] language"), intellectual history, political history, relations of dialects to grammar, spoken versus written language, and Manzoni's views on cultures other than his own. This practice, Holub writes, "lends itself to propelling [Gramsci] into the orbit of structuralist or even poststructuralist thought" (52).

The theme of 'relational' or 'differential pragmatics' is also used to integrate Holub's discussion of Gramsci's Dante where she derives a linguistic theory comparable in many aspects to V. N. Volosinov's dialogics. Not only, Holub argues, is Gramsci's linguistic theory on par with Volosinov's in that it relates *langue* and *parole* dialectically as opposed to the Saussurean separation of the two, but Gramsci "advances beyond

Volosinov" because for Gramsci "[l]anguage is situated in specific locations in a geographic space which contributes to its hegemony, a space from which its power disseminates, its prestige radiates, to various degrees and intensities over and above other social classes, spaces and regions" (140). In this manner, Gramsci's linguistic interests were inseparable from his political theory and his philosophy of praxis. This focus on 'differentials' allows Holub to integrate several different and fascinating comparisons of Gramsci to other major twentieth century thinkers. Holub does a brilliant job in succinctly developing many ideas that have often been ignored in Gramscian scholarship and explaining their significance with reference to such influential thinkers as the Frankfurt School, Benjamin and Volosinov. She even makes provocative use of Gramsci's situation in prison through a discussion of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology. And, what is more commendable, Holub continually projects her discussions towards developing a political theory that can be used to deal with race, gender, class and nationality in the context of the high-tech world of the 1990s. These are not just academic exercises for Holub or the reader.

If this focus on developing a new theory of 'differential pragmatics' is what creates the provocative energy of the book, it is also the crux of its most serious problem. The interpretation of Gramsci's focus on 'differentials' is questionable. In much of Gramsci's fragmentary presentation, he is not valorizing difference itself,

as much as he is determining the dynamics of transforming specific subaltern positions, differences from the hegemonic centre (i.e. the proletariat and also the peasantry) into their own counter-hegemony. For example, he states:

Even if one admits that other cultures have had an importance and a significance in the process of 'hierarchical' unification of world civilization (and this should certainly be admitted without question), they have had a universal value only in so far as they have become constituent elements of European culture, which is the only historically and concretely universal culture — in so far, that is, as they have contributed to the process of European thought and been assimilated by it.⁴

Thus, given Holub's opposition between 'differentials' or 'relations' and 'universals', it is far from clear that Gramsci sides with Holub. Of course, this issue is at the centre of many of the debates over Gramsci's political theory, which Holub is attempting to avoid.

This problem is compounded in Part III, where the distinction between 'differential pragmatics' and Habermas' 'universal pragmatics' becomes blurred. In her discussion of four different possible models of 'intellectuality', Holub analyzes the dialogue between Gramsci and Piero Gobetti, a liberal anti-fascist but non-socialist. Holub explains that "[w]hat enables the communicative process between these two theorists is a warrant or a dialect they share, the 'dialect' of enlightenment principles from which to reason and from which to pursue an agenda of freedom for all" (162). Holub is then at pains to

highlight that it is a 'dialect' they share and not a universal language. And moreover, they each speak many other dialects in which they could not communicate. It is precisely because these other dialects exist, which makes their communication politically pragmatic. That Gobetti can converse with many with whom Gramsci cannot, and vice versa, is what, argues Holub, makes their relationship politically useful for both of them. On one hand, this seems to emphasize different points than Habermas' communicative theory. But on the other, there is still a recourse to 'enlightenment principles' — be they with a small 'e' and within 'dialects.'

Holub's bracketing off of Gramsci's political theory and how it has been interpreted is effective for much of the book. She astutely defers to the existing Gramsci literature in a manner that allows her to elucidate some truly original points about Gramsci's writings and his method. Because these analyses are persistently carried out with an eye towards developing a new political theory and practice, they are crucial not only to the specialists of certain areas, but to anyone who is engaged with relationships between politics and culture. But when it comes to explaining what 'differential pragmatics' is, some of the initial questions about how to interpret Gramsci's political theory resurface.

These problems, however, do not diminish the original and important analysis that Holub provides of specific portions of Gramsci's writings that have not been adequately approached. Nor do these problems

reduce her useful comparisons of Gramsci with many other early twentieth century thinkers. Holub's conclusion, "In Lieu of a Conclusion: Gramsci, feminism, Foucault" also provides some promising suggestions for feminism. While, Holub's project of combining an original analysis of Gramsci's writings with a new theory of "differential pragmatics" perhaps detracts from both, the attempt to combine the two is certainly to be welcomed if Gramsci's writings are to have any import for us living in the second half of the twentieth century.

PETER IVES

1. Antonio Gramsci, *Letters from Prison*, ed. & trans. by Lynne Lawner, (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), p. 79.

2. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (London: Lawrence & Wishart 1971), p. 382.

3. Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, p. 384.

4. SPN, p. 416.

Gabriele D'Annunzio: The Dark Flame

By Paolo Valesio.

*English translation by Marilyn Migiel.
New Haven: Yale University
Press, 1992.*

In this book, the transatlantic critic, poet and novelist Paolo Valesio, reexamines the career and seeks to redeem the reputation of Italy's greatest modern writer, Gabriele d'Annunzio (1863-1936). D'Annunzio