



Thinking with Gramsci Today: Gramscian perspectives in ethnographies of Europe

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This special issue is about the anthropological use of the analytical tools Antonio Gramsci's work offers. It is about the connection between implicit and taken-for-granted ideas, claims, power hierarchies, struggles, and implicated moralizations and their effects. We foreground common sense as a key concept in terms of its potential for contemporary ethnography. Common sense allows us to work through and with ethnography towards an understanding of hegemony and history, two other influential Gramscian concepts anthropologists work with and build on. Such an approach allows for a multi-threaded and integrative analysis in the politically and economically charged times we live in, times in which the historical political forces in Europe (where we base the analyses of the articles in the issue) often resemble the “regressive modernization” that Stuart Hall described with a Gramscian vocabulary when analyzing the Thatcher era in the UK and its mix between authoritarian neo-liberalism and conservatism (Hall 1998). Notably, the materialist and ideology-focused understanding of culture that Gramsci's work offers (Crehan 2011) is both sensitive to its complexity, fluidity—indeed, maybe most notably, its paradoxicality. Also, it directs attention to the persistence of power structures in society and how they frame relations, ways of life, and livelihoods. In this “Introduction” section, we lay out our take on a Gramscian analysis of common sense in more detail and discuss its potential for providing nuance and critique.

Why Gramsci now?

In his times, Gramsci wondered about the appeal of fascist ideology and how fascist movements managed to mobilize and ultimately rule with and despite genocidal consequences. Today, ideas and ideologies that seem incomprehensible, dangerous, and

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inhumane legitimize exclusion and inequality and endanger the lives of those made “Others.” Anthropologists turn to Gramscian thinking to understand why and how they nevertheless resonate with and across highly diverse populations in different European countries. Concerns about where our worlds are heading motivate critical analyses of ideologies as sets of ideas offering consistency and explanatory power. This is specifically pertinent in the conjuncture of austerity, welfare retrenchment, gender conservatism, right-wing (migration) politics, and heated debates about the related role(s) and responsibilities of academics as simultaneously privileged and precarized.

A crucial discursive arena for seeing the forces of power at play is common sense—the naturalness by which some matters appear and are presented as factual and given. Austerity, for instance, is a case in point (Alves de Matos and Pusceddu 2021). European states privatized assets and reconfigured social welfare towards activation and selective redistribution. As scholars, we can understand this process as primarily a material one: a method of steering resources away from the larger (and poorer) part of the population and towards tax benefits, corporate subsidies, and other resources beneficial for capital- and asset-owning classes. Yet, an analysis is incomplete without careful attention to the ideological processes of legitimizing, normalizing, or contesting the imagination of these historical forces as inevitable. Some of the pertinent ideological framings of the contemporary conjuncture include, first, that welfare retrenchment is beneficial to human flourishing, as it keeps social transfer recipients from becoming dependent on support. Second, ethno-nationalist attempts to blame migrants or otherwise pictured “Others” for taking away resources from those pictured as the majority in times of neoliberal welfare retrenchment. Third, political appropriations of (forced) migration and migrants as examples of a wide range of common sense claims to figure as efficient ideological tools. These range from the implication that migrants would and should return “home” (which often changes unrecognizably) according to the so-called rotation principle that grounded migration regimes in parts of Europe in the 1960s and early 1970s (e.g., Austria, Switzerland, and Germany); or the common sense assumption that immigration is a threat to the (welfare) state rather than a welcome development in terms of countries’ sustainable future; to the unquestioned claim that there are “safe countries” people can be legitimately deported to.

Such claims and related debates are more than exchanges of opinion or analyses. They take place in historical configurations of actors with unequal power to frame debates and institutionalize their interests. An ethnographic application of Gramscian analyses of how some ideas and opinions become powerful and consequential in the world allows the connection of everyday thinking with a historical, materialist, and relational analysis of the play of power in establishing hegemonic narratives. Our special issue seeks to have an in-depth and nuanced look at the different ways in which this can be done.

The analytic potential for thinking about how specific ideas become pervasive and powerful is where we see Gramscian analyses as especially pertinent to contemporary anthropology. We want to discuss it by singling out three concepts to engage the vast work of Gramsci for an anthropological framework on the political in everyday life: common sense, hegemony, and intellectuals. In these, we find a comprehensive framework to see how ideas are shaped by the play of power that in turn shapes views.

Common sense as implicit and contested consent

A central Gramscian concept debated in contemporary anthropology is that of common sense. Kate Crehan understands Gramsci's common sense through and beyond culture's apparent solidity and naturalness (Crehan 2011, 277). She positions a Gramscian analysis against culturalist approaches that focus on culture as a given, comprehensible only through an inductive study of (implicit and explicit) ideas. In Gramscian analyses, on the other hand, "'culture' is how the realities of class are lived" (Crehan 2011, 277). This Gramscian perspective on class and culture is crucial for understanding the appeal of an anthropological take on the concept of common sense, which neither denies the influence of power nor understands culture as determined by it (Biesel 2021, 8). Instead, anthropologists focus precisely on the interplay between historical blocs of actors, hegemonies, and the commonsensical. The concept of the historical bloc allows one to go beyond the state in thinking about political power (Román-Burgos and Macip-Ríos 2022, 228). Scholars who combine ethnographies with analyses of power posit a critical or historical "realism" instead of a naïve one (Narotzky and Smith 2006). With Gramsci, everyday knowledge appears as "fragmentary, incoherent, and inconsistent heterogeneity" (Crehan 2016, 56), the concrete configuration of which an analyst needs to find out and relate to the question of why specific ideas became part of a given understanding at a given time. The Angst that an analysis of power is reductive, determinist, and subsumes all other scholarly interests to manifestations of power is often unfounded when it comes to the questions raised by anthropologists working on a Gramscian concept of common sense (Patterson 2016). Instead, a Gramscian understanding of common sense allows us to see the ambivalences and nuances of life in a world full of power and politics (Postero and Elinoff 2019, 11).

Kate Crehan writes about Gramsci's "*senso comune*" being an essential term to grasp "all those heterogeneous beliefs people arrive at not through critical reflection, but encounter as already existing, self-evident truths" (Crehan 2016, 7). As anthropologists, we encounter these beliefs in the field daily. They are both what people tell us about when talking about the past, events, or their lives and what we share in ethnographic conversations. Understanding what everyday encounters in the field reveal as elements of "common sense" prompts us to reflect on how these beliefs are influenced (not determined) by a person's position in society (Crehan 2016, 46), the relative success of some groups in claiming their world-views as universal or dominant (Crehan 2016, 56), and as appearing coherent while being "a chaotic aggregate of disparate conceptions" (Crehan 2016, 51). The key to analyzing common sense is understanding it as an ongoing relational and historic process formed from alliances in struggles about meaning (Demi-rovic 2019). An "ethnographic reality" as encountered by anthropologists hence needs a reconstruction of the diverse and partly disparate histories and sources behind common-sense beliefs (informing *hegemony*) and of those involved in (trans)forming them (politicians, media, and, most of all, *intellectuals*).

Hegemony as a process, not a condition

Hegemony is a crucial term of Gramscian thinking. John Gledhill defines it as “a dynamic process of ‘establishment of unstable equilibria’ which is shaped in significant ways by the actions and reactions of the subaltern classes” (Gledhill 2000, 77). Gledhill stresses that “Gramsci argued that *both* ruling and subaltern classes are ‘historical blocs,’ *fragile* coalitions of diverse social forces. Their unity needs to be built by hegemonic *practices*” (Gledhill 2000, 77, emphasis in the original). Gramsci’s analyses of struggles for hegemony are specific to the cases he discusses, e.g., in his “Notes on Italian History” in the *Prison Notebooks* (Hoare and Nowell 1971). He analyses, as William Roseberry interprets, “the failure of the Piedmont bourgeoisie to form a nation-state, their failure to form a bloc that could rule, through force and consent” (Roseberry 1994, 358). This specificity is critical as it problematizes generic readings of hegemony as static cultural domination (Jameson 2020, xi).

Hence, it is crucial to understand hegemony as an ongoing process of alliance formation. Katharina Bodirsky stresses this point and refutes applications of the concept that conceive of “the” hegemony as a pervasive condition (Bodirsky 2021, 68). We find this a critical takeaway from what Gramsci can offer to a reconstructive analysis in anthropology. Kate Crehan calls these “lite” readings of hegemony, which reduce its analytical lens to a question of structure/agency or hegemony/resistance (Crehan 2002, 199f). These lose what is specific about Gramscian analysis, as its concepts are relational, social constructivist, and historically and geographically situated. This conceptual advantage of understanding power and culture as a process, not as a condition, makes Gramscian analyses so attractive to contemporary political and economic anthropology.

For understanding the process of building and maintaining hegemony, two aspects seem particularly important: (1) the function of a historical bloc in production and (2) a certain degree of consent from the subaltern classes (Crehan 2002, 102). The first is frequently downplayed in more culturalist readings of Gramsci, yet is crucial for understanding the structural advantage of groups that control or have preferential access to strategic economic positions and the modes of production (Ciavolella 2018). The second question, on consent, is closely related. Domination is not only or primarily coercion “from above” but includes a certain degree of “consent” from “below”. Consent is more than agreement. As a concept, it combines (a) what Gramsci called the “spontaneous” consent given by the population to the “general direction imposed on social life by the dominant (...) group” (Hoare and Nowell 1971, 12) and (b) the enforcement of discipline when spontaneous consent fails.

The coercion/consent question is not about the subaltern willingly subordinating themselves to a ruling bloc. Instead, they are caught up in a situation in which non-consent may lead to coercion. Therefore, Stephen Reyna cautioned against the utility of the notion of consent, highlighting that consent of populations with their governance is often a “big lie” (Reyna 2003, 210) to be questioned empirically. He further cautions against understanding consent as free will because

“will” is influenced by cultural hegemony. One may consent to something only because one has been made to desire it (Reyna 2003, 211), a fascinating question that tests the boundaries of the distinction between coercion and consent in power by building on and extending the classic Marxist understanding on ideology.

As we read Gramsci, hegemony works through specific combinations of coercion and consent that may invite, sanction, educate, and discipline. At the same time, these power-laden relational practices create a certain common sense (Macip-Ríos and Román-Burgos 2022). The Gramscian notion of hegemony allows us to understand power as a shifting interplay between offers to subalterns to align themselves, the threat of sanctions, and the often de-facto dependence of subalterns on the hegemonic. We chime with those scholars who caution against celebrating resistance as a binary other to hegemony (Theodossopoulos 2014; Ciavolella 2018). Instead, we want to point to the ambivalence, the dilemma, and the complicity involved in everyday life, desires, and aspirations.

In this vein, Marek Mikuš reconstructs a specific constellation of groups successfully establishing hegemonic notions of transparency, competition, and efficiency in their quest for power in Serbia (Mikuš 2018, 267). Another example is the work by Patrícia Alves de Matos and Antonio Maria Pusceddu, who investigate the “making of austerity as common sense” in which austerity “emerges as an acceptable livelihood possibility” (Alves de Matos and Pusceddu 2021, 1). Such analyses base their understanding of hegemony on a similar reading of it as Gledhill’s introduced above: as fragile quests for alliances in a given conjuncture. That focus on changing alliances and the establishment (or failure) of struggles for hegemony also inspired Stuart Hall in his analysis of Thatcherism (Hall 1998). Stuart Hall’s book points to a scholarly interest that many who study hegemony with a Gramscian perspective share: the left’s difficulties and the right’s capacities to hegemonize their worldview (Hall 1998, 162). This question is as timely and vital as it was, as the contributions to the issue show.

The question also brings us to another dimension of Gramscian thinking that we want to foreground with this issue on “common sense”: the role of intellectuals and, by extension, the role of us as anthropologists, analysts, or critics.

Buon senso and the role of intellectuals

Gramsci’s relational and processual framework conceives of taken-for-granted common sense as carrying the seeds of an otherwise coherent and emancipatory politics. This element of common sense (*senso comune*) is good sense¹ (*buon senso*) (Hoare

¹ There are challenges of the English translation as several authors remark. The Italian *senso comune* is far more neutral than the positively connotated common sense in English. Hence Gramsci distinguishes a neutrally signified but rather neophobe and conservative *senso comune* with *buon senso* through the historical praxis of organic intellectuals. The common/good challenge in the English translation led Gavin Smith to use “practical sense” to refer to positive attributes of the English *common sense* (Smith 2014, 148).

and Nowell 1971, 634). In contrast to what Gramsci refers to as traditional intellectuals who maintain hegemony through education, organic intellectuals educate to turn “incoherent common sense into coherent political narratives” (Crehan 2016, 31) by transforming common sense through carving out these elements that, as good sense, bear the potential of radical change.

For Gramsci, the role of an intellectual is not tied exclusively to academics. “Every social group, coming into existence on the original terrain of an essential function in the world of economic production, creates together with itself, organically, one or more strata of intellectuals which give it homogeneity and an awareness of its function not only in the economic but also in the social and political fields” (Gottlieb 1989, 113). Intellectuals are specific kinds of cultural specialists who form everyday consciousness by providing intellectual guidance. Important here is again the relational and processual element in Gramsci’s thinking. Intellectuals are not defined through their activities alone but by their specific roles in fragile hegemonies (Gottlieb 1989, 114). Gramsci, writing as an Italian Marxist about the rise of fascism, the historical praxis of organic intellectuals (Smith 1999, 256) inhabited a confident, progressive hope that, to paraphrase Marx’s famous dictum, classes *in* themselves could be educated to become classes *for* themselves.

The link between *buon senso* and organic intellectuals poses an exciting challenge for anthropologists working with a Gramscian instrumentarium. They can use it to analyze the work of scholars in their fields, that is, people performing the function of intellectuals as working more towards the status quo or more beyond it (e.g., Narotzky and Smith 2006, 172f). The question yet extends to how they understand their role as critics or analysts, that is, how much anthropologists appreciate their work as a contribution to dismantling common sense as part of *historical praxis* (Smith 1989). Gramsci probes us to think about our implications in hegemony. This question is complex, and the history of Gramscian analyses in anthropology provides examples of the challenges of staying true both to nuance and critique.

In his work on magic and folklore in Southern Italy, Ernesto de Martino likened folklore to Gramsci’s concept of common sense as a primarily conservative and fragmented worldview that carries the seed of its transformation (De Martino [1977] 2019). De Martino calls this form of *buon senso* “progressive folklore” (De Martino 1949). Understanding himself as an organic intellectual on a kind of Gramscian fieldwork (Berrocal 2015), De Martino “set out” to document the resistant potential of folklore. Yet, as Michaela Schäuble critically discusses, De Martino and his team of documentary film-makers, photographers, and audio-recording ethnologists did not simply document but also re-enacted the rituals and practices they used to formulate the progressive potential of magical folklore (Schäuble 2015). In that example lies a tension that we want to critically discuss in the collection. As in the other dimensions of Gramsci’s work—hegemony, common sense, and the role of intellectuals—there lies a danger of what Schäuble calls “proletarian exoticism” (Schäuble 2015, 110), a problematic romanticism of resistance that writes its hopes for revolutionary potential into the analysis. Re-enacting rituals in ways that make them appear to have such possibility is a delicate balance for an anthropologist.

Populism, a topic all papers in this collection deal with differently, is a prime contemporary context prompting anthropologists to reflect upon common sense and

“buon senso” ideas and implications, including their own. As recently pointed out by William Mazzarella (2019), it is populism—right-wing populism in particular—which causes anthropologists pronounced discomfort due to the “tension between anthropologists’ effectively populist commitments to the common sense of common people at a time when that common sense can often look ugly” (2019, 45).

There are several aspects of how thinking populism with Gramsci’s common sense can open up a fresh, in-depth look at the practice of ethnographic fieldwork and the role of ethnographers as intellectuals. Firstly, thinking with Gramsci reinforces the ethnographic method of “immersion” in a different or consciously defamiliarized social world (“anthropology at home”) by taking seriously those views and ideological elements one does not share (or even vehemently rejects). By taking those claims seriously, importantly by empathy, not sympathy (Streinzer 2019), the ethnographer can cross hegemonic socio-political and ideological boundaries (Pasieka 2017). Furthermore, as also highlighted by Crehan (2011, 2016), the ethnographic perspective focuses particularly well on the complex and contradictory character of *senso comune* and the various ways (populist) ideologization works in everyday life.

Finally, Gramsci’s work sharpens attentiveness towards the delicate and continuous balancing act between the ethnographer’s quest for a more or less egalitarian exchange (despite different views) on the one hand and power discrepancies on the other—conditions ethnographic fieldwork is constituted by. The ethnographer can make these conditions transparent in self-reflection and continually address questions of existing (hegemonic) and (alternative) *buon senso* societal layouts together with her interlocutors in the field, thereby potentially generating integrative outlines and fragments out of contradicting and incommensurable elements of common sense.

The engaged stance that often comes with the relations formed in fieldwork makes anthropology an exciting context in which to discuss interventions and the tension between description and intervention in which critical anthropology is involved (Spivak 1988, 78). With Gramscian analyses, the role of intellectuals is as fragile and contingent as his other concepts, subject to change and always ambivalent in terms of its function for complicity with hegemony or its attempts to overcome it (Smith 2004, 217). In our collection, we will critically discuss the role of various specialists in the sense of Gramsci’s intellectuals, making their role, and our own as scholars, a matter of analysis.

The articles in the special issue

The articles assembled in this collection result from fellow anthropologists and a philosopher accepting our invitation to think about their recent or still ongoing research through the lens of Gramsci’s common sense. The result of this process, which unfolded as a collaborative endeavor of repeated conversations, are papers that revisit, thicken, but also revise and extend their own research and conceptualizations of common sense. The articles deal with different processes in the present, where common sense implications ground (radical) imaginaries of “Others”, frame access to and usage of (culturalized) space, describe the understanding and practice of and boundaries between politics and activism, and analyze relations to as well as

senses of the state and statelessness. What connects them is a concern for disentangling and unpacking taken-for-granted knowledge and its effects on everyday social practices and the ways in which people act upon society (re)appropriate history.

Annika Lems works with Gramsci in her text to lay out a critical phenomenology of common sense grounded in her ethnography of anti-cosmopolitan ideological currents in rural Alpine regions. She zooms in on everyday meaning-making practices and related employments of history to show how these are based on anti-cosmopolitan common sense ideas. She highlights how employing a Gramscian perspective on common sense with conceptual and empirical caution, and precision, can open up a critical view on the anthropologist's *common sense ideas about common sense* and thus preclude "romanticizing" everyday meaning-making processes.

Agnieszka Pasięka uses her text to develop a multifaceted engagement with Gramsci's thinking in her ethnographic and comparative assessment of radical right-wing activism in Italy and Poland. Apart from showing in which ways a focus on common sense is valuable for a close reading of activists' claims and practices, she explores the blurred boundaries between left-wing and right-wing activism by ethnographically fleshing out modes of appropriation of Gramsci's work. In conclusion, she draws our attention to the theoretical and methodological implications of the underlying affinities of opposed ideologies that a Gramscian lens can uncover. Furthermore, Pasięka argues for radicalizing epistemological, personal, and political self-critical assessments of our own common sense implications as ethnographers.

In his contribution, Daniele Karasz focuses on the (socio-)spatial dimension of common sense and links an anthropological approach to migration in urban contexts with approaches in critical geography. He discusses Lefebvre's concept of spatial production in the light of migration scholarship and reconstructs the workings of the categorization of migrants and non-migrants in Vienna, Austria. Investigating the changing relational positioning of localities, Karasz offers a genealogical perspective on the spatial elements of common sense that help understand moments of "conjunctural rupture" to mark shifts in imaginative geographies of who belongs.

Judith Beyer's contribution tackles how intellectuals in the realm of statelessness understand and use their position to alter hegemonic imaginaries of what states are and what the absence of citizenship means. The problem of statelessness poses challenges to thinking about political belonging, as common sense is so infused by statehood that its absence opens a range of issues. Beyer writes that it is especially in situations where social movements aim to overcome the current state order that the state needs to be factored in materially, but especially as a seemingly natural idea, part of common sense. Beyer relates this common sense to the practitioner-scholar dilemma in her treatment of experts and scholars that she likens to Gramsci's differentiation of *senso comune* ("common sense") and *buon senso* ("good sense").

Matos and Pusceddu use common sense to understand the manufacture of ideologies of care and social reproduction in a conjuncture of intensive welfare state restructurations. They combine a Gramscian perspective with a feminist critique of the naturalization of gendered inequalities and apply it to their material on religious charities in Italy and Portugal. They show how emerging welfare state retrenchments are ideologically legitimized in the practice of voluntary charity work by its imagination as a corollary of gendered domestic work.

The contribution by Thomas Thelios represents a philosophical commentary, which both complements and enriches this collection. His perspective is of particular interest to anthropologists as it is based on his deep engagement with Gramsci's common sense, his close reading of anthropological readings of Gramsci's work, and his philosophical curiosity and fascination with ethnography as a mode of knowledge. By placing and discussing Gramsci within a heuristic taxonomy of common sense theories, he also gives anthropologists valuable clues for employing a Gramscian lens.

The collection closes with an Afterword by Kate Crehan.

Together, the articles of the collection show the breadth and depth of work in ethnographies in and of Europe and how they engage Gramscian perspectives. They show how common sense might be incoherent, but it is rarely arbitrary. Common sense includes consent, complicity, or more or less hidden forms of contestation. The articles furthermore show how crucial an understanding of hegemony in the current conjuncture is for making sense of the ascent and institutionalization of right-wing ideologies. Finally, the authors show the importance of thinking critically about anthropologists as critics. Understood as dialogical and engaged critique, a standpoint that is reflexive to the role of intellectuals in a Gramscian sense is pertinent and needed in these turbulent times.

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