

On ‘Heroic Fury’ and questions of method in Antonio Gramsci

Elizabeth Humphrys (University of Technology Sydney) and

Ihab Shalbak (University of Sydney)

In note Q16 §2 Antonio Gramsci introduces us to truth seeking as *eroico furore* (heroic fury), an active striving not simply to attain a particular form of knowledge but to form a conception of the world. *Eroico furore*, for Gramsci, is about the development of a sensibility and the forming of personality. As Gramsci puts it, ‘any new theory studied with “heroic fury” [*eroico furore*] (that is, studied not out of mere external curiosity but for reasons of deep interest) for a certain period, especially if one is young, attracts the student of its own accord and takes possession of his whole personality’ (Gramsci 1971: 383; Q 16, §2). For Gramsci, this deeply rooted drive in one’s own biography sustains intellectual undertaking ‘until such a time as a critical equilibrium is created and one learns to study deeply but without succumbing to the fascination of the system and the author under study’ (ibid). *Eroico furore*, then, denotes a dialectical movement, a scholarly journey and a transformation, that yields an individuated and unique beginning. This beginning, as a point of departure, incorporates the particular and the immediate while aspiring to rise beyond them in its striving to form its own adequate conception of the world. Defying established authorities and existing systems of thought is an intrinsic feature of this form of endeavour.

The papers in this special issue are products of an intellectual conversation on the contribution of Antonio Gramsci to critical thought and method that largely evolved out of close readings of Gramsci’s notes. This conversation culminated in a workshop at the University of Sydney on 29 May 2015 titled *On ‘Heroic Fury’ and questions of method in Antonio Gramsci*. In the workshop, Gramsci’s *eroico furore* served as a *leitmotif* that brought together established and emerging researchers to discuss the relevance of Gramsci to their own intellectual concerns and research programs.

Gramsci derives the *eroico furore* notion from the Italian Dominican friar, philosopher and cosmological theorist Giordano Bruno (1548-1600) who extended the conceptual reach

THESIS ELEVEN

of the Copernican model. Bruno, a martyr of science for some, challenged the established authority of the Church, spent seven years in jail and was, ultimately, burned at the stake. The notion *eroico furore* encapsulates the affinity between the two prisoners, and links Gramsci and Bruno as militant thinkers who sought to extend our conception of the world. Gramsci's invocation of Bruno's notion is a reminder that critical knowledge is not about learning rules and deferring to authorities; rather it is about forming a transgressive intellectual attitude. This attitude is not content with repeating the explanations of established orthodoxies; rather it exerts itself to account for the complexity and contingency of social realities. What is really at stake here is not the coherence of positive social laws that aspire to provide universal explanations valid across time and space, but, instead, the integrity of practice and the adequacy of theory to the task at hand.

It is important to note that Gramsci was not merely focusing on the intellectual and individual characteristics of knowledge production. Rather, in his notes, Gramsci rested Bruno's notion of heroic fury on Marx's (1852) famous thesis eleven: 'Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past'. In this framework, Gramsci's adaptation of Bruno allows for an understanding of forms of knowledge as evidence of historical conditions. In short, Gramsci's heroic fury situates intellectual striving in history. As such, intellectual interventions are products and producers of historical social relations of struggle over determining meanings and values in any given society.

Gramsci's distinctive attentiveness to the irreducibly human dimension of historical realities opened space for groundbreaking inquiries. For example, the late Edward Said relies on Gramsci in his masterpiece *Orientalism* to discuss the productive relationship between his personal interest and his scholarly work. Said (2003: 25) cites Gramsci's contention that '[t]he starting-point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is, and is "knowing thyself" as a product of the historical processes to date, which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory'. Therefore, Said following Gramsci, suggests that it is 'imperative at the outset to compile such an inventory'. Said declares that his 'study of Orientalism has been an attempt to inventory

THESIS ELEVEN

the traces upon me, the Oriental subject, of the culture whose domination has been so powerful a factor in the life of all Orientals' (2003: 25). Gramsci's contention and Said's adaptation of it both represent an iteration of heroic fury as a historical dialectic process of overcoming the legacy of subjugation.

For emerging researchers, Said's *Orientalism* is an exemplar of what Gramsci's philosophy of praxis can contribute as a possible alternative, corrective or even complement to current critical methodological approaches. The current 'Gramscian Moment', as Peter Thomas coins it, is contemporaneous with the prevalence of two such approaches in the humanities and social sciences, namely, Thomas Kuhn's 'paradigm shift' and Michel Foucault's power/knowledge theories. The three research outlooks have in common a concern regarding the ways according to which particular regimes of knowledge secure consent and domination. Kuhn stresses the role of social conventions and traces how individual investigators relate to them, focusing on the internal relations and conventions that shape individual choices. Foucault's focus, on the other hand, is on the external socio-political forces that animate the very subjectivity of knowledge producers and consumers. Notably, both are largely interested in micro-processes and spaces. This contrasts with the approach of Gramsci, for whom the boundaries between the macro and the micro are part of existing social relations, and represent a formalisation of historical relations of struggle. A Gramscian approach, as an alternative and corrective, would take into account micro processes and spaces while situating them in a broader historical struggle between social forces over hegemony and domination. As Gramsci succinctly puts it 'Critical understanding of self takes place therefore through a struggle of political "hegemonies"' (SPN: 333, Q11§12). Therefore, compared to other existing frameworks, the Gramscian approach is distinctive in its contribution to our understanding of micro events and processes while raising itself beyond the limits of their particularity and immediacy.

In the special issue, questions of method—of Gramsci's and ours—and the translatability of Gramsci's conceptions are central. Gramsci's work and conceptions were developed in a close study of diverse sites and moments, in particular the *Risorgimento* in Italy. The specificity of his heroic fury raises how his work might inform analysis of other moments and locations, and the translatability of his work. As Adam Morton (2007) identifies, how

THESIS ELEVEN

Gramsci's ideas developed within a specific historical context must be discerned before considering ongoing relevance. Quoting and contesting Randall Germain and Michael Kenny, Morton (2007: 16) noted that there is a 'need to historicise Gramsci and display "greater sensitivity to the general problems of meaning and understanding in the history of ideas" as well as pay "far greater attention to the problems of meaning and interpretation"'. The open-ended form of the *Notebooks*—their circular and progressive structure and incomplete form—simultaneously limits and opens up the process of translatability. Buttigieg (2011: x) notes that 'only by doing violence to the text of the *Prison Notebooks* could one conceal their fragmentariness and reconstruct them into a conventional, more or less unified format'. In response to this fragmentary nature, Thomas (2009b: 117–118) urges that the more productive approach is not to 'search for origins or telos' but rather simply 'to admit the obvious: history happened the way it did'. He suggests we should examine the *Prison Notebooks* in the manner Gramsci (1971: 384; Q16 §2) suggested we read others—in a search 'for the Leitmotiv, for the rhythm of the thought as it develops' and that this 'should be more important than ... single casual affirmations and isolated aphorisms'. Further, as Boothman (2007: 116) highlights, translation is not always a question of uncomplicated integration, but more often of reinterpretation on new terrain as language can be flexible, where the process of translation demonstrates:

... how discourses may be rendered 'open', renewed and updated by means of a critique and modification of the concepts used in other discourses, not always or often, by their simple unmodified incorporation into one's own (Boothman 2007: 136–137).

The authors' travels with Gramsci at the workshop, and in this special issue, seek to translate and converse with Gramsci. They transverse multiple temporal and spatial locations in order to retrieve the potentials Gramsci's work offers against a general background of domesticating, taming and institutionalising of radical thought. Therefore, the special issue offers not only an examination of Gramsci and questions of method, but also brings into sharper focus the ways in which Gramsci offers a conceptual lens for understanding the dynamics of the contemporary period.

THESIS ELEVEN

Andreas Bieler and Adam David Morton work with Gramsci's theorisation of capitalist state formation, to draw out the internal relationship between the structuring condition of uneven and combined development and the class agency of passive revolution. Bieler and Morton employ Gramsci's understanding of the spatio-temporal dynamics of passive revolution to tease out the entangled links between the state and subaltern class practices as they are played out in the transformation in social property relations. For them Gramsci's insights are indispensable to our consideration of capitalist modernity and its expansive tendencies.

Elizabeth Humphrys employs Gramsci's meditation on the state-civil society relationship to argue that Gramsci's theorisation of the 'integral state' can help us understand the contemporary breakdown of political rule as expressed in the phenomenon known as 'anti-politics.' For Humphrys, the conception of the integral state offers a reconciliation of the seeming incongruities between Marx and Gramsci regarding the nature of the state-civil society relationship in modern capitalist societies. The integral state idea not only articulates the dialectical unity of the state and civil society, but also provides us with a framework for understanding the nature of the current unravelling of political rule.

Ihab Shalbak traces the appropriation of Gramsci in the United Kingdom since the early 1970s. His paper is concerned with the deployment and the transformation of Gramsci's notion of hegemony and the purpose it served during the fight against Thatcherism. He argues that, in its travel from Rome to London, the notion yielded what he calls 'hegemony thinking': a distinctive style of thinking that pays attention to the strategic side of Gramsci's thought, at the expense of his nuanced historical analysis of the conditions under which subaltern social forces could transform themselves into hegemonic political power. The sole focus on the strategic side entrapped hegemony thinking in the conceptual universe of the Thatcher era, which resulted in it extending the life of this universe rather than changing it.

Philip Roberts traces the profound influence that Gramsci's writing had in Brazil. Roberts' paper aims to show the creative translation of Gramsci's concepts in novel situations and to evaluate the viability of travelling with Gramsci's method. Roberts shows how Gramscian analysis has been put to practical use in Brazil. The passive

THESIS ELEVEN

revolution notion provided Brazilian radicals with a framework to understand the peculiar development of capitalism in their own country. Roberts shows how Gramscian themes animated the discussion that shaped both the actions of the Brazilian Communist Party and the later formation of the Workers Party.

Finally, Peter Thomas considers Gramsci's most fundamental and abiding heroic fury in Machiavelli and argues that Gramsci's reading of *The Prince* leads to significant developments in the *Prison Notebooks*. Not simply the redevelopment of Machiavelli's Prince, or the innovation of a new constituted category, Thomas argues that the modern Prince is the refoundation of Gramsci's entire endeavours after 1932. Importantly for those considering the question of political action in present time, he argues the modern Prince should be understood not merely as institutional apparatus, but as a totalising process of civilisation alteration and regrounding. Like Stephen Gill (2000) in his article on the Battle in Seattle and the Global Justice Movement, Thomas offers us a new Prince which emerges from the movement or moment. This moves us away from understanding the modern Prince as an organisational form—as an already present or previously familiar political party—and allows us to see it as a process of creative investigation and experiment, 'as the historically concrete realisation of the practice of living philology'.

The workshop that gave rise to this special issue was one moment in a period of heroic fury where Gramsci's concepts, their contemporary relevance, and their (in)adequacies, are being considered by a new generation of scholars. Across the humanities this is a rich period of continuing international scholarship on the thought and practice of Gramsci—as indicative of the diversity of (re)considerations of Gramsci in recent years, see Hesketh (2017), Modonesi (2013), Coutinho (2013), Short (2007), Beasley-Murray (2010) Morton (2007) and Thomas (2009) amongst others. The writers in this special edition are, in different ways, part of a wider effort to inventory the various traces of the current Gramscian moment. In the process, they extend our understanding of the current global political conjuncture. They demonstrate how Gramsci offers us an approach that takes into consideration the various social properties of actors and the social forces engaged in the production, circulation and authorisation of knowledge. Gramsci's approach enables the authors to illuminate how historical systems come into being as secular and worldly

THESIS ELEVEN

events— helping them account for variables that determine the individuation of social actors, and the singularity of this historical moment.

References

- Beasley-Murray J (2010) *Posthegemony: Political Theory and Latin America*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Boothman D (2007) Critique and Semantic Modification in Gramsci's Approach to Paradigmatic Translation. *Italian Culture* 24(1): 115–43.
- Buttigieg JA (2011) Introduction. In: *Prison Notebooks (Vol 1)*. Edited by Joseph A Buttigieg. Translated by Joseph A Buttigieg and Antonio Callari. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Coutinho CN (2013) *Gramsci's Political Thought*. Translated by Pedro Sette-Câmara. Chicago: Haymarket Books.
- Gill S(2000) Toward a Postmodern Prince? The Battle in Seattle as a Moment in the New Politics of Globalisation. *Millenium - Journal of International Studies* 29(1): 131–40.
- Gramsci A (1971) *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. Hoare Q and Nowell Smith G (ed. And trans.), London: Lawrence and Wishart.
- Hesketh C (2017) *Spaces of Capital / Spaces of Resistance: Mexico in the Global Economy*. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press.
- Marx K (1852) *18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. Marxists Internet Archive, www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/18th-brumaire/ch01.htm (accessed 18 December 2017).
- Modonesi M (2013) *Subalternity, Antagonism, Autonomy: Constructing the Political Subject*. London: Pluto Press.
- Morton AD (2007) *Unravelling Gramsci: Hegemony and Passive Revolution in the Global Political Economy*. London: Pluto Press.
- Said E (2003) *Orientalism*. London: Penguin Books.
- Short N (2007) *The International Politics of Post-Conflict Reconstruction in Guatemala*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

THESIS ELEVEN

Thomas P (2009) *The Gramscian Moment*. Historical Materialism Book Series. Leiden: Brill.