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## Crehan, K. Gramsci's Common Sense: Inequality and its Narratives. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016.

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**Crehan, K. *Gramsci's Common Sense: Inequality and its Narratives*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016.**

In this timely and highly readable book, Kate Crehan looks at the thought of Antonio Gramsci, the renowned 20<sup>th</sup>-century Italian communist and Marxist social theoretician. Drawing on the *Prison Notebooks*—the famed collection of writings Gramsci drafted while incarcerated by Italy's fascist government from 1926 until his death in 1937—Crehan examines their author's oft-referenced but less read ideas about class, ideology, and hegemony. Doing so with an eye toward understanding “inequality and its narratives” today, Crehan's book is more than simple exegesis. The work is divided into two main segments, with Part I's reading of Gramsci's ideas followed by a series of case studies comprising Part II. These cases move across a wide—and, in ways, disparate—range, taking the reader from Adam Smith and eighteenth-century Scotland to the contemporary Tea Party and Occupy movements in the United States.

With Part II thus seeking to effectively ‘apply’ the lessons of what comes before, Part I itself is organized into four chapters. These progress through Gramsci's ideas about subalternity (chapter 1), intellectuals (chapter 2), common sense (chapter 3), and the nature of subaltern knowing (chapter 4). Underlying this organization is the desire to unpack an overarching concern in the *Prison Notebooks* with “[t]he relationship between the fundamental inequalities that shape the realities human beings confront and the ever-shifting flux of lived experience” (xi). As is explained in Crehan's useful preface, the point of entry into this concern is the concept of class, which, as she notes, Marx, himself, offered no single definition for in *Capital*. Without explicitly evoking the distinction between the material and ideal, she explains Gramsci's “multifaceted” version of the concept in terms of the “opinions,” “worldviews,” “narratives,” and “webs of intelligibility” that make it more than simply an objective reality/relation (x, xi). According to the theoretical lexicon that is extracted from the *Prison Notebooks* themselves, it is thus *senso commune*—and the larger “passage from knowledge to opinion” it portends (xi)—that is the centerpiece both of Crehan's presentation of Gramsci's views on class and Part I more generally.

Before arriving specifically at “common sense” in chapter 3, chapter 1 begins with the way the concept of subalternity has been taken up especially by scholars of the Global South over the last thirty years. Here, Crehan structures the discussion of this “central question” (p. 10) within Gramsci's notebooks around two of his leading interpreters in the present. In particular, she highlights the “diametrically opposed positions” of the feminist literary theorist Gayatri Spivak and the political scientist James Scott, author of various works “celebrating the agency of the subordinated” (p. 11). Cutting against the grain of readings that reduce subalternity to a euphemism for the proletariat, Crehan instead highlights the “lack of specificity” (p. 16) with which Gramsci used the concept in order to “[encompass] subordination in all its many forms, including” in its “internalized” variety (p. 17).

Turning to the concept of “Intellectuals,” chapter 2 begins by pointing out that “[f]or Gramsci, the knowledge produced by intellectuals is never the result of some ‘head birth’” of “pure thought springing fully formed from an individual mind as Athena sprang from the head of Zeus” (p. 19). Going on to then canvass the distinction developed in the notebooks between “traditional” and “organic” intellectuals, Crehan emphasizes that Gramsci—like Marx and Engels—saw “ideas and beliefs” as being shaped by “the production and reproduction of real life” (p. 20). In the remainder of the chapter, she then once more turns to Gramsci's more recent reception, focusing especially on Edward Said, whose views on the Italian social theorist's work she departs from in important ways. Maintaining that for Gramsci, “the emergence of new kinds

of intellectuals” was “an essential part of class formation” (p. 34), Crehan discounts Said’s more strict reading of the Gramscian intellectual as being solely devoted to “advanc[ing] human freedom and knowledge” (p. 35). Says Crehan, in Gramsci’s eyes, the intellectual was “like everyone else,” the “product of a particular time and place” (p. 35). Accordingly, he is said to have envisioned the organic intellectual as being linked to the “the lived realities” of particular classes and hence to new “political narratives...capable of becoming a social force with the power to inspire collective action and social transformation” (p. 36). Chapter 2 concludes by turning to Gramsci’s associated ideas about “historical blocs” and the forms of “feeling-passion” from which they commence before further solidifying into “understanding and thence knowledge” (p. 39).

Against the backdrop of what comes before, Chapter 3’s arrival at the key concept of “common sense” is seamless. As elaborated in the *Prison Notebooks*, Crehan explains that for Gramsci, the concept stands for the “accumulation of taken-for-granted ‘knowledge’ to be found in every human community” (p. 43). Starting with a piecemeal history of the phrase outside of its particularized use in the notebooks, Crehan introduces the chapter by touching on contemporary work in the history of ideas, explications of the same-sounding notion of “plain wisdom” in the pages of the *New York Times*, and Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of habitus. For Gramsci more specifically, she goes on to highlight how common sense is neither “confined to the masses” nor regarded in wholly negative terms. He is instead said to have staked a more complicated middle ground by presenting common sense as a “multistranded entwined knot of, on the one hand, clear sightedness (good sense), which is not fooled by the sophistry of spin doctors; but, on the other, blinkered shortsightedness clinging defensively to the comfortable and familiar” (p. 48). Here, Crehan links Gramsci’s mixed assessment of common sense to a larger “antiromanticism” that distinguishes his view from one like Hannah Arendt’s, which sees only a totalizing “deference” in the face of the “popular understandings” it authors (p. 50). Crehan’s reconstruction of Gramsci here is ultimately optimistic insofar as she sees his approach to common sense as allowing for the possibility of both a new culture and an awareness of history, for it “offers us a way of thinking about the texture of everyday life that encompasses its givenness” even as it “acknowledges its contradictions, fluidity, and flexibility” (p. 58).

Before moving to her case studies, Crehan ties together her survey of Gramscian theory in a fourth chapter called “What Subalterns Know.” Likely the least essential of Part I’s contents, it opens with the observation that “[t]he incoherent knowledge inherent in subaltern experience needs to find coherent forms of expression, based on reason, that strike those subalterns as simple common sense” (p. 77). As for the case studies themselves, they commence with the chapter that takes the reader furthest afield from the book’s seeming core. Of course, in one sense, chapter 5’s turn to “Adam Smith” as “A Bourgeois, Organic Intellectual” follows as directly from what comes before as do either chapter 6’s discussion of “The Common Sense of the Tea Party” or chapter 7’s of “Common Sense, Good Sense, and Occupy.” On the other hand, however, it is not simply that chapter 6 and 7 are explicitly connected to one another because they both turn from Gramscian theory to the contemporary United States. Rather, in a book that has been heretofore largely ahistorical, chapter 5 delivers the reader into the middle of a time and place that is far removed from the others the book treats and that the preceding chapters do not necessarily prepare the reader to be led toward.

Its seemingly abrupt appearance notwithstanding, chapter 5 is intended to concretely illustrate “the process by which an emerging class ‘creates together with itself’ its own organic intellectuals” (p. 81). How, at least in principle, it is meant to apply the insights of Part I is thus

apparent enough, with the deference to a historical rather than contemporary example explained on grounds of “structural patterns” revealing themselves only “in hindsight” (p. 81). In substance, the chapter moves from providing background on the social and political context of eighteenth-century Scotland and its version of the enlightenment to Smith’s wider intellectual concerns outside of the *Wealth of Nations*. Crehan then goes on to look at Smith and the rise of economics. The focus here is on his “organicity” as an intellectual and how from the Gramscian perspective, his thought must be approached through reference to the “process of knowledge production rather than...the particular qualities of individual intellectuals” (p. 115). On this front, Crehan’s ultimate conclusion is that the “author of the *Wealth of Nations* was” a “product of” an intellectual environment that was, itself, a “subaltern location.” Focusing in part on Smith’s critical and polemical stance against monopoly, Crehan thus emphasizes that only with time did the “book’s confident vision of ever-expanding opulence, based on commercial freedom...reveal itself” as the source of an organizing vision of the kind Gramsci would see as “essential for any emerging class” (p. 116).

On Part II’s logic, the move from Smith to the Tea Party and Occupy movements is couched in terms of shifting from the concept of the organic intellectual to that of common sense. While as noted earlier, these chapters have more in common with one another than they do with chapter 5, they are both also more tenuously connected to any mission of ‘applying’ the ideas presented in Part I than is Chapter 5. Regardless, Crehan’s discussion here remains illuminating, as she works in a mode that proves more ethnographic than it is anything else. There will thus be much to hold the attention of any reader in her discussions of the United States in the new gilded age of the twenty-first century, and the theme of inequality’s narration and the larger sense—both ‘common’ and ‘good’—that its competing versions emerge from/appeal to continues to animate the backdrop.

If there are criticisms to make about the book, one, of course, has already been suggested above. More explicitly, that criticism is in part, about the possible sense of disconnection the reader may end up feeling as she moves between Parts I and II. In part, however, it may also be about the more troubling possibility that even a text so engaging as Crehan’s may end up reminding the reader of the hiatus that is likely to always exist between social theory—whether as espoused by or through Gramsci or anyone else—and more straightforward ways of intellectually reckoning with the injustices of the social world. (To what extent, in other words, do Crehan’s chapters on the Tea Party and Occupy really require any ‘Gramscian’ perspective/lexicon—rather than the largely journalistic one she, in effect, uses—to understand either what is promising or troubling about them or, for that matter, the underlying conditions of the social world they emerged from?)

The latter admittedly esoteric concern about the ultimate value of our frameworks for humanistic social inquiry aside, more pressing is the book’s failure to address the contemporary world beyond the year 2011 (when the Occupy movement emerged). While the author obviously cannot be faulted for the fact that history will always outstrip the need for publication dates, it remains difficult not to at least wonder what a book published in 2016 on the topics this one treats would say about the great ‘populist’ explosion that was made manifest during that same year across the political and social systems of the Western world. Crehan’s work of course does have the wherewithal to locate Gramsci’s “antiromantic” refusal to see “common sense” in solely praiseworthy terms. Yet even so, elsewhere the discussion often broaches themes of

collective action and social transformation in ways that raise more questions than it will now seem to answer. (Consider, for example, the discounting of Said's more humanist than Marxist reading of Gramsci on the purpose of the organic intellectual and the use of secular reason.) For even if we confine ourselves to the discussion that is now taking place on the progressive to radical end of the political left, the election of Donald Trump in the United States and the British vote to leave the European Union have obviously taken the bloom off any rose that 'the construction of narrative' had become relative to other criteria of epistemic warrant—like 'truth,' 'factuality,' or 'reasoned consensus'—over the last three decades. While this reviewer concurs that caution is in order before opportunistically besmirching or laying all the world's trouble at the feet of 'post-modern relativism' (and its close cousin, 'Western Marxism' or even 'identity politics'), a book like *Gramsci's Common Sense* could have only been enriched by dealing with such concerns in a more head-on manner. Whether in the form of a post-script to possible future editions or, perhaps, in whatever potential sequel, more of its author and Gramsci's incisive thoughts would thus be most welcome.

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