

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

Massimo Modonesi, *Subalternity, Antagonism, Autonomy: Constructing the Political Subject* (translated by Adriana V. Rendón Garrido and Philip Roberts), London: Pluto Press, 2013. ISBN: 9780745334066 (cloth); ISBN: 9780745334059 (paper)

In this new text published in Pluto Press' "[Reading Gramsci](#)" series, Massimo Modonesi seeks to explore the theoretical genesis of three core concepts that make up the title of the book—namely, subalternity, antagonism and autonomy—and the problems that the usage of these pose for Marxist debates. The concepts in question are explicitly linked to the process of political subjectivation (or subject formation) in terms of the experiences of subordination, insubordination and emancipation. Each concept is also linked to a key author associated with its development. Antonio Gramsci's writings are therefore explored in relation to subalternity; Antonio Negri's in regards to antagonism; and those of Cornelius Castoriadis in connection with autonomy. Scholars of each respective thinker are likely to find merit in various individual chapters of the book as it traces in detail the development of their intellectual trajectories.

Importantly, the main concepts are not simply explored in the abstract, but rather are linked to concrete periods of history, including: the defeat of the Factory Council movement and the rise of Fascism in Italy inspiring Gramsci's thoughts on subalternity; the emergence of "workerism" and various forms of mobilization that rocked Italy in the 1960s and 1970s that influenced Negri; and finally the experience of the French student uprisings in 1968 and subsequent debates about autogestion for Castoriadis. The book makes a useful contribution therefore to critical geography in that it demonstrates the place-based nature of revolutionary theory and praxis. In other words, it combines "lived experience" with conceptual development (Lefebvre 1976: 20). We therefore get a keen sense of how each concept serves as a form of "militant particularism", forged out of the experiences of one particular time and place but subsequently generalised to wider locales (Harvey 1996: 32).

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The book has clear importance as the above-named concepts are frequently invoked within radical theorising about social change. However, as this text serves to highlight, this may be done without due attention being paid to the actual meaning behind the terms, or without exploring the potential contradictions involved. Perhaps the best example from the book comes in the form of the critique of the Subaltern Studies Group (SSG) in India. Here, key authors such as Ranajit Guha and Partha Chatterjee (among others) sought to recover history “from below” in contrast to the elite history “from above” associated with colonialism and, later, nationalism. In order to do this they invoke the notion of subalternity. However, as Modonesi demonstrates, the problem with this analysis is that it often leads to an association of subaltern history with a fully autonomous sphere of action, rather than seeing within the very notion of subalternity a relational character to the dominant exercise of power (hegemony). The SSG slip easily therefore into a view of social change that elides the wider field of force. This is not to argue that the exercise of hegemonic power determines all forms of action; rather, according to Modonesi, it requires us to understand how the specific resources of subaltern actors acquire meaning, or how certain ideas and practices become vital resources for struggle and self-determination. The SSG in his view are guilty of proposing an autonomous project without mediation. They confuse the experience of subordination with the experience of that already forged in conflict (antagonism, the second concept investigated), leading to a form of history that is dualistic rather than dialectical. This last point is in fact a recurring theme of the book, and a key argument that Modonesi seeks to advance; namely, that the concepts of subalternity, antagonism and autonomy cannot be treated simply as separable categories but, rather, have to be considered as part of a conceptual triad in the subjective experience of revolutionary transformation.

The specific basis for making this claim is the context of political and social struggles in Latin America over the last decade, including, for instance, the Zapatista rebellion in Mexico and the experience of Argentina after the 2001 crisis. What is a slight shame is that

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the theoretical import from the book, in terms of the conceptual triad, is never really applied to the Latin American context in detail. The afterword of the book does look at a separate concept—that of passive revolution—and unpacks the meaning of the concept before utilising it to understand the current role that progressive governments in the region are playing, in terms of actually demobilising social movements (see also, for an analysis of passive revolution in Bolivia, Hesketh and Morton 2014). However, this is not really linked to the previous substantive chapters of the text. It is a pity that the diligent theoretical insights found in the main concepts of the book could not have been synthesised and applied more rigorously to current forms of contestation which are making the region one of the most interesting laboratories for social change in the world right now. The caveat here is that the author claims that the book is intended to be part of a larger body of intellectual activity and that the findings from it will be applied to concrete investigations in the future. Modonesi has of course promoted a fine-tuned understanding of social movements in Latin America via his role as Director of [*Observatorio Social de America Latina*](#) (OSAL). Nevertheless, without providing this sort of analysis here, the book feels a little incomplete or, rather, like a ground-clearing exercise. A focus on present-day struggles would have really helped to complement what at the moment is largely a historical study. This does not take away from the scholarly exploration of the various concepts and writers associated with them, which is rigorous, detailed and insightful, but it does leave the reader looking more towards the past than the future.

Although the book is of interest to wider debates within critical geography for the place-based history of resistance and ideological formation, it should be noted that the purpose of the book is to contribute to specifically Marxist debates. There is of course nothing wrong with such an ambition, and the manner in which this is done here is highly detailed. However, those looking for wider intellectual engagement with post-structuralism, post-modernism or indeed broadly anarchistic ideas are likely to find the text wanting, as

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these traditions are rarely engaged with in any detail (in spite of their contribution to these concepts). In stressing the dominance of the current form of order and the relational power of its structure, there are those who would see this book as falling into the type of capitalocentrism critiqued by J.K. Gibson-Graham (2006a, 2006b). Indeed, I would see this text as a crucial point of engagement with such debates, probing to what degree the types of post-capitalist politics stressed in the latter's work are a form of voluntarism detached from materialism.

The language that the book is written in does not make this a text for the casual reader, as it's not the most accessible and at times feels somewhat like wading through treacle (notably the chapter on Negri). Nevertheless, the patient reader will find their persistence rewarded with a book that is detailed and nuanced in its argument. It provides a persuasive restatement of Marxist views on structure and agency, combined with an original argument about the need for a conceptual triad of subalternity, antagonism and autonomy linked to the subjective process of revolutionary change, experienced as subordination, insubordination and emancipation. I eagerly await the concrete investigation of Latin American political transformations where the insights of this book will be further developed.

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