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Review of Emilio Zucchetti & Anna Maria Cimino (eds.): *Antonio Gramsci and the Ancient World*

London/New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2021 (= Routledge Monographs in Classical Studies), xiv + 387 pp., ISBN: 978-0-36-719314-0, £ 96.00 (hb.).

As the latest addition to the Routledge Monographs in Classical Studies series, *Antonio Gramsci and the Ancient World,* edited by Zucchetti and Cimino, gathers a miscellany of fourteen essays by scholars who share an interest in exploring possible links between the Italian thinker's works and Classical Studies. The volume presents the proceedings of a conference held in Newcastle in December 2017 and sponsored by the School of History, Classics, and Archaeology of Newcastle University and by the Institute of Classical Studies.

This publication joins the renewed international interest in the figure of Antonio Gramsci (Ales, 22. 01. 1891–Roma, 27. 04. 1937). Indeed, the philosophical and ideological value of his *opus* has been the motivation behind the numerous initiatives towards new philological analyses and translations of his prison works, both in Italy and abroad. One may single out the (unfortunately, for now partial) English translation of the *Prison Notebooks* by the late Joseph Buttigieg (Hamrun, 20. 05. 1947–South Bend, 27. 01. 2019),[1] or the

1 Gramsci – Buttigieg – Callari (2011).

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publication of a new Italian Einaudi edition of the *Lettere dal carcere* edited by Francesco Giasi[2] and of a study by Michele Ciliberto on the *Notebooks,*[3] both issued in 2020. Moreover, classicists and ancient historians specifically have started to examine the connection between Gramsci's writings and the ancient world: Erminio Fonzo's volume of 2019[4] is emblematic of this cultural climate, as well as the initiatives of the Gramsci Research Network, an international research group founded in London in 2018 by (among others) the editors of the volume that is of the subject of this review.

The book opens with an introduction by one of the editors, Emilio Zucchetti, which focuses on the reception of Gramsci's thought in the field of Classical Studies, outlining the different phases during which scholars of various disciplines worldwide have acknowledged and re-used his theories since the first edition of his prison works in the 1940s–50s. Naturally, special emphasis is given to the attention that classicists have been paying to Gramsci, especially during the last few decades, pointing out how in particular the Gramscian categories of hegemony and ideology lie at the core of a very productive new strand of research that applies them to the analysis and the understanding of social and political relations in the ancient world.

The present collection of essays joins the debate, presenting a variety of approaches that can be easily summarised as two main paths of analysis, which we may identify respectively as a historiographical and an applicational approach.

On the one hand, we have scholars whose perspective primarily focuses on tracing and reconstructing Gramsci's own understanding and reception of the ancient world by following the hints (scattered around his whole production) of what his readings and use of both the ancient sources and the modern academic historiography may have been. Although they all start from the same methodological outlook, each essay concentrates on a different aspect of the ancient world addressed by Gramscian works, either directly or indirectly. Phillip Sidney Horky (ch.3), for example, focuses specifically on Gramsci's approach to ancient philosophy: taking into consideration the scanty passages of the *Prison Notebooks* on the topic and updating Benedetto Fontana's overstated interpretation of the relationship between Gramscian concepts and ancient philosophical theories, he rightly underlines how the few notes reflect Gramsci's attitude towards the study of previous philosophy in a historical way and must therefore be read as a reflection of Gramsci's philosophical-ideo-

2 Gramsci – Giasi (2020).

3 Ciliberto (2020).

4 Fonzo (2019).

logical commitment ultimately oriented towards the contemporary world.

From a strictly historiographic perspective, Massimiliano di Fazio's essay reconstructs the academic *querelle* between Ducati, Trombetti, and Pareti about the Etruscan language (ch.5), which Gramsci (educated as a linguist himself from his university years) joins from jail via his notes. In the Italian political framework of the 30s, in fact, this debate was not a neutral one; as the author appropriately stresses (while thoroughly reconstructing the personal, academic, and even political links that connected the main protagonists of the *querelle*), it was a matter of primary importance for fascist academia to use the study of the origins of the Etruscan language to reinforce the propagandistic leitmotifs about the ancient world that were already part of the regime's rhetoric. The theme of the fascist misuse of the ancient Italic (and, more specifically, Roman) past for political-ideological propaganda is central also in Michele Bellomo's analysis (ch.7), which focuses on the study of the Gramscian attitude towards Roman imperialism and on the fascist regime's justifications of its own colonialist aggressions. As the author emphasises, the refusal to embrace this kind of rhetoric is noticeable already in Gramsci's juvenile writings on the theme and until the prison reflections about modern imperialism, a strong refusal to legitimise Italy's modern colonial ambitions by way of a role as the natural heir of the Roman empire, and an emphasis on the cosmopolitanism of ancient Rome.

Two further chapters in the volume examine Gramsci's writings about themes connected to the late Roman republic. The first is Mattia Balbo's study of the Gramscian portrayal of the Gracchi (ch.8), which appears to be very different from mainstream contemporary academic perspective. The chapter revolves around two main topics addressed in the *Notebooks:* the Gracchi's attempt to reform the institutions from their plebeian state within the Roman state, and the problem of cosmopolitanism, which, according to Gramsci, became Rome's distinctive characteristic from Caesar onwards, thus disavowing the fascist interpretation of modern Italy as the direct descendant of Rome and its natural heir. In the second, Federico Santangelo focuses again on the issue of Caesar's cosmopolitanism and the notion of Caesarism as it is presented in Gramsci's political-philosophical theorisation (ch.9): the author tries to systematise Gramsci's theory on Caesarism on the basis of an analysis of the reception of a range of heroic personalities such as Napoleon I, Napoleon II, Bismarck, and Caesar himself, and detecting a pattern of political behaviour that could be found also in modern Italian cultural and political practice (which was, of course, of primary interest for Gramsci). By doing so, he looks carefully at his readings and knowledge of mod-

ern academic historiography on the late Roman republic.

Dario Nappo's paper completes the historiographic group (ch.13) by focusing on Gramsci's vision and understanding of late antiquity: after an overview of the concept itself as well as its controversial aspects in contemporary academia, the author analyses Gramsci's view of the notions of crisis, continuity, and discontinuity between the classical and the late antique period; in terms of Gramsci's characterisation of economic structures, Nappo paints a fascinating image of Gramsci as a methodological forerunner of the *École des Annales* and even of Braudel's *longue durée*.[5]

Representing the contrasting second path of analysis, the remaining contributions explore the possible applications of Gramsci's political, social, and cultural concepts to the study of classical antiquity in its broad sense, addressing chronologically widely differing phenomena from archaic Greece to, again, late antiquity. This is the case, for example, with Laura Swift's paper about the possibility to read early Greek poetry (e.g. Homer, Hesiod, and Archilochus) as a means to develop a common sense in archaic Greek communities and thus to create a shared set of values supporting the current hegemony (ch.1), or of Mirko Canevaro's essay about the role of the masses in the construction of an upside-down hegemony in democratic Athens (ch.2), where the ruling class identifies to a considerable extent with the lower classes. Both chapters start from an analysis of ancient sources (either literary or epigraphic) in order to test the application of Gramscian ideas to archaic and classical Greek communities. A similar approach to the ancient texts is also followed by Kostas Vlassopoulos in his study on ancient slavery (ch. 4). The author uses Artemidorus' *Oneirocritica* as a case-study to re-interpret the agency of slaves in ancient societies: at least to the knowledge of the reviewer, this is the first scholarly attempt to study ancient slavery specifically through Gramsci's cultural hegemony, with the mediation of Genovese's concept of "paternalism,"[6] towards a new understanding of the agency and identities of slaves through a "bottom-up history" approach.

The chapter by Emma Nicholson on the figure of Polybius also focuses on the concept of hegemony (ch.6), as well as on the Gramscian theoretical categories of intellectual and passive revolution, which are here applied to the conceptualisation of the rise of Roman authority in Greece during the 2nd century BCE, a period of great upheaval when Greek élites came to terms and negotiated with a new configuration of power. In this context, Polybius' his-

5 Braudel (1958).

6 E.g. in Genovese (1974) and (2011).

torical account may be understood as the work of a subaltern intellectual who transforms from a representative of the previous political élite into an organic agent for the new dominant group, trying to convey the shift from Roman dominance to hegemony through his role as a historian.

Three chapters focus specifically on the principate. Christopher Smith's essay on the Augustan political and cultural revolution once more applies the conceptual category of hegemony (and the subsequent interplay of the two antinomic forces of coercion and consent that the establishment of a new order created) to the period of the shift from the republic to the principate (ch.10), with insights relating to contemporary historiography on the topic that analyses the same issue from a similar point of view. The chapter is followed by Elena Giusti's analysis of the concept of Caesarism (ch.11): this concept, which may have its origin in the Machiavellian image of the prince as centaur with its balance between persuasion and violence, may in the author's view be applied to the construction of the myth of Julius Caesar in Augustan and post-Augustan ideology, in particular in Lucan's *Bellum Ciuile;* the creation of this type of ideology and of its contradictions and antinomies is also read here through Arendt's theory of totalitarianism.[7] Finally, Jeremy Paterson engages directly with the analytical application of the concept of hegemony to the Roman principate as a whole (ch.12). Interpreting the crisis of the Roman republic as a Gramscian breakdown of consensus, he evaluates the creation of a new dynamic orthodoxy as a new hegemony established by both coercion (as a response to resistance) and a new form of consent to the new ideologies of the power. By way of an analysis of the writings of Tacitus and Luke, Paterson argues that these authors, rather than being some sort of outsiders with a political and religious purpose respectively, actively reinforced the prevailing hegemonic narrative.

The final chapter (ch.14) by Cristiano Viglietti sums up the contemporary debate on the ancient economy through a Gramscian lens, linking the old primitivism-vs-modernism *querelle* and its developments both with Finley's studies[8] and, more recently, with the NIE line of research to what he identifies as the new cultural and economic hegemonies in the 20th- and 21st-century academia, trying to explain how the concept of hegemony works here and how political and cultural shifts have influenced this debate.

The volume concludes with three brief afterthoughts by the editors, Anna Maria Cimino and Emilio Zucchetti,

7 Arendt (2004).

8 Especially Finley (1973) and (1981).

and by Alberto Esu. These consider insights and avenues for further Gramscian research in the field of Classics, with specific attention to different literary, political, philosophical, and historical perspectives and to potential case-studies that could be approached through Gramscian lenses.

Both paths of analysis (the historiographical and the applicational one) may become valuable tools for further developments within this specific strand of research. While the first approach may be regarded as a more traditional, hence safer, method, the other (despite its suggestive and thought-provoking reinterpretation of both Gramscian theories and classical studies) appears almost hazardous in its application of concepts specifically crafted for contemporary phenomena to the ancient world: the risk of overinterpretation and, in some cases, even of circular thought is a constant, and some of the volume's contributors acknowledge this. When we approach Gramsci's works, in fact, we need constant awareness of the idiosyncratic nature of the prison writings, which includes both the circumstances of their formulation and composition and the author's political-ideological aims and goals. His Historical Materialism and his Philosophy of Praxis are indeed deeply rooted in the contemporary political struggle: while we cannot and do not want to deny the width of Gramsci's cultural interests (ranging from History, to Linguistics, to Literature), we should be mindful of the fact that Gramsci's ultimate purposes were political ones. When he wrote from his incarceration, during the dark times of the fascist regime, his comrades, his Party, and the broader anti-fascist scene were his main interlocutors; even when he draws parallels and creates similes with ancient history, his own epoch is the central framework of his analysis. For this reason, the editors may have been well advised to include among the contributors contemporary historians, philosophers, or even political theorists: the different approaches might have complemented an academic discussion that will undoubtedly continue and that will hopefully attract specialists of other disciplines and of related research fields to create an even more enriched (and enriching) exchange.

In conclusion, the volume presents a very wide range of perspectives, views, and methods on the topic, making it difficult at first, for a non-specialised reader, to detect and follow a common thread that joins the different contributions: however, this lack of cohesion can be easily explained and excused by the fact we are dealing with the proceedings of a workshop which brought together classical scholars of manifold theoretical standpoints and aspects of the ancient world who explored possible interchanges of their own work with Gramsci's theorisations. At the same time, the range of contributions is a clear indication of the great wealth of

approaches and interpretations that the subject solicits within an international scholarly community. By collecting specimens of this extreme *varietas* of outlooks and stances, the volume shows much potential to foster further fertile debate on the topic.

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