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## Review [untitled]

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Sharon Sutherland and David Shugarman in their separate essays critical of dirty hands.

Cruelty and Deception also fails to meet the editors' intent for it to be a more philosophically oriented sequel to Honest Politics. Much of the strength and popularity of the latter book was that it was so persuasively logical, concise and integrated in presentation, yet thorough and in-depth in coverage that it effectively informed the reader. This is not the case with the current edited collection of essays in part because the contributors are content to go diversely in their own separate directions, with their own categorizations, points of emphasis and interpretations. At the same time, by focusing solely on dirty hands, there is no philosophical discussion of other, more common, ethical concerns. An established scholar or graduate student in the field of political thought may find the readings challenging, but the intended audience, especially those who found Honest Politics so rewarding, will be disappointed.

STEWART HYSON Saint John, New Brunswick

## Gramsci and Contemporary Politics: Beyond Pessimism of the Intellect

Anne Showstack Sassoon

New York: Routledge, 2000, pp. 173

Antonio Gramsci's writings on politics—best known from the collection published as *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*—successfully combine theoretical speculation with empirical investigation to produce a compelling analysis of the evolving relations between economics, politics, culture and everyday life in advanced capitalist societies. The fertile, suggestive and open-ended quality of his work has inspired many attempts to use his ideas in thinking through contemporary social and political issues: among the better known include Stuart Hall's analysis of the rise of Thatcherite conservatism in Britain (*The Hard Road to Renewal: Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left* [London: Verso, 1983]), Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's discussion of "post-Marxist" political theory in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (London: Verso, 1985) and Robert Cox's use of hegemony to theorize international political economy in *Production, Power and World Order* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987).

In a series of short essays, Anne Showstack Sassoon draws upon Gramsci in the hopes of stimulating an approach to contemporary political analysis that moves beyond the fatalistic cynicism that, she argues, has come to characterize much centre-left academic work in the last decade. The book is divided into three sections. The first consists of largely exegetical essays that examine Gramsci's ideas on intellectuals and his unique use of political language. In the second section, which constitutes the core of the book, Sassoon presents four pieces that explore gender and citizenship, the role of the welfare state in the evolution of civil society, the British Labour Party's 1994 Commission on Social Justice report and the "new labour" policies of Prime Minister Tony Blair. She concludes with three essays that reflect upon the possibilities for rethinking socialism, the relationship between teachers and parents and the role of personal experience in the production of academic knowledge.

While Gramsci and Contemporary Politics raises some important questions, it generally fails to break new ground either in its interpretation of Gramsci or in the application of his ideas to current political issues. Those looking for a theoretical engagement with Gramsci's work are better advised to return to Sassoon's earlier and much more detailed survey of his political

philosophy in *Gramsci's Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987) and/or the collection of essays she edited in *Approaches to Gramsci* (London: Writers and Readers Publishing Cooperative, 1982). Rather than open up new perspectives on Gramsci's thought, the interpretive essays in the current book do little more than offer brief, straightforward summaries of Gramsci's ideas. The exception is the piece on political language in which Sassoon develops the argument that Gramsci used "ordinary" words to signify both conventional meanings as well as his own ideas. Unfortunately, the brevity of this essay—eight pages—disallows full exploration of the implications of this claim for reading Gramsci's work.

In the second section, the work on civil society and citizenship begins with the criticism that most contemporary scholarship in this area has remained excessively abstract, leading to overly theoretical accounts of these concepts that are not rooted in the specificity of concrete social formations. Gramsci's combination of theory and historical investigation certainly stands as an exemplary corrective to this tendency. Yet Sassoon largely fails to take her own advice on this score as her own writing rarely moves beyond vague prescriptions for how academic work ought to be done differently.

The two essays on Blair and the politics of "New Labour" are perhaps the most disappointing, consisting of little more than a plea for those on the left to give this project more credit for trying to build a "hegemonic politics" around the themes of inclusion and social justice. Relying upon little more than Labour Party rhetoric (as contained in the Social Justice Commission Report and Blair's speeches), she makes the astonishing claim that Blair shares with Gramsci a common goal of social and political transformation by organizing the active consent of the people. At their core, Gramsci's politics are animated by the conviction that the organization of society by capitalism inevitably produces exploitative social relations that not only stifle the autonomous self-development of most people but also inhibit the growth of society as a whole. Blair's pragmatic accommodation with the "realities" of capitalist globalization (and consequent acceptance of the narrowing of the possibilities for democratic self-governance) has little in common with Gramsci's revolutionary aspirations.

The final three pieces are perhaps the most interesting in the collection, discussing in more personal terms the role of intellectuals in the production of academic knowledge. Here, Sassoon takes her cue from Gramsci's famous claim that "[t]he popular element 'feels' but does not always know or understand [and] the intellectual element 'knows' but does not always understand and . . . does not always feel' (28), arguing for the inclusion of both everyday experience and one's own "deepest feelings" (114) in intellectual work. As she notes, such a combination has long informed feminist academic practice and is a promising avenue for making critical academic work of all kinds more "organic."

Ultimately, the biggest shortcoming of *Gramsci and Contemporary Politics* is its general neglect of both economic and cultural processes in its discussion of politics, a rather surprising omission in a work that claims Gramsci as its theoretical inspiration. Rarely do the economic and the cultural appear on their own terms, either as imposing restrictions upon or furnishing resources for political action. With respect to the role of intellectuals, for instance, a contemporary Gramscian perspective must surely address the remarkable success of the culture industry at harnessing organic cultural activity (and its associated intellectuals) to the processes and structures of corporate capitalism. Similarly, explorations of citizenship must take into

account the dramatic foreclosure of politics accompanied by the reconstruction of the citizen as consumer/taxpayer. Above all, the severe limitations imposed upon a progressive politics that confines itself to reforms within capitalism à la Blair cannot be ignored.

The phrase "pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will," borrowed by Gramsci from Romain Rolland, loses its eloquence and power when it is read as tracing a binary, linear progression from the former to the latter. Instead, it signals the necessity of holding these two moments together, for progressive social thought is energized by the very tension that springs from their uneasy union. And it is hard to imagine a more productive or ethical disposition for intellectuals in a world such as our own in which "the old is dying and the new cannot be born" (Gramsci, ed. and trans. by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, Selections from the Prison Notebooks [New York: International, 1972], 275).

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