
Iain Chambers, ed., *Esercizi di potere. Gramsci, Said e il postcoloniale* (Roma: Meltemi, 2006), 140 pp.

Reviewed by **Fiorenzo Iuliano**

The essays collected in this volume are an attempt at tracing an interaction between Antonio Gramsci's and Edward Said's thought, trying to relate the different issues addressed by both of them to themes characterizing our present time. As Iain Chambers declares in the preface, the book aims at challenging the tradition of historicism and at questioning its limits; the effort to reconfigure a new perception of history, based on the opposition between hegemonic and subaltern agents operating in the field of politics and culture, corresponds to the need for a radical disputing of our certainties, be they political, cultural or merely disciplinary. Gramsci's theory of subalternity meets the recent problems raised by postcolonial and cultural studies, and finds an interesting concretion in the folds of marginal and peripheral discourses, capable of disclosing an intricate net of relationships among texts, narratives, voices and bodies belonging to the southern part of the present world.

Radically questioning the traditional and established Marxist perspective, grounded on a rigid division between economic structure and socio-cultural superstructure, the book witnesses the definition of a layered texture of emerging subject-positions, capable of cutting across the lines that mark the divide between the realm of politics and its alleged aesthetic counterpart. The distinction between northern and southern Italy, pointed at by Gramsci in his analysis of the condition of southern farmhands, acquires a double and interesting significance: on the one hand, its significance is broadened up to enclose the southern part of the globalized world, thanks to the contributions of postcolonial studies and their closest forerunners (like Franz Fanon); on the other, the contributors remarkably stress their own subject and political position, their role as scholars working in the south of Italy and addressing the disciplinary fields they are engaged in from a partial, and often marginalized and decentralized, perspective.

The Gramsci-Said dialogue is given a multifaceted substantiation in this interesting respect: reflecting on subalternity leads us to reconsider the epistemic frames on which our vision of world and history depends, and to replace the role played by an omniscient "global agent" with a "planetary subject with his/her naked and exposed life, who cannot find a home in the available maps" (13).

The essays included in the volume cannot be read without bearing this contextual frame in mind; they constitute a heterogeneous but at the same time coherent constellation of themes and references, which reread the questions of subaltern and counter-hegemonic agencies in an articulate spectrum. Literature plays a fundamental role in this discussion: the opening essay by Lidia Curti insists on the importance of writing, a militant gesture that has represented, for both Gramsci and Said, an act of political resistance, besides being an indispensable means for theorization and criticism. The passionate words with which Curti starts her essay (which I would prefer not to translate into English) “scrivere, ostinatamente scrivere contro le difficoltà della solitudine, della prigionia, della cattiva salute, di un corpo diverso da quello degli altri...” (18), introduce us to a critical and responsible understanding of the problems and the themes that characterize the whole book. And, if literature is central to the essay by Marta Cariello, which creates an evocative net of intersections between migrancy, writing and corporeality, in her reading of the novel *In the Eye of the Sun* by the Egyptian writer Ahdad Soueif, music, too, has great importance in Gramsci’s and Said’s speculation on culture and political subaltern positions. Serena Guarracino invites us to reconsider the ‘elaborations’ on the theme of popular culture and its relationship with the dynamics of power and history in the light of a critical (and musical) entwining of voices, a gesture that reshapes the very means of critical analysis through its problematic and uncanny intersection with music. Silvana Carotenuto and Marie-Hélène Laforest, in turn, stress the role played by the autobiographical work of memory that, in Said’s case, means a complex and radical rethinking of his own family and personal position as an Arab, a Christian and, especially, as a migrant – as the title of Laforest’s essay, “Sempre di passaggio” (Always in transit), with its reference to Said’s autobiography *Out of Place*, recalls. Carotenuto’s reading of three texts, by Toni Morrison, Edward Said (the Freud Museum lecture *Freud and the Non-European*) and Virginia Woolf, interweaves the different voices interpellated in a complex play of mutual references, from the Freudian implicit self positioning as a non-European, to the critique of Africanism as displayed in the pages of Morrison’s *Playing in the Dark*, to the question of female agency, which, already stressed by Lidia Curti in a section of her essay devoted to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in this case is related to Virginia Woolf’s *Three Guineas*.

Marina De Chiara reflects on the uncomfortable position occupied by both Gramsci and Said in their respective intellectual contexts: the request for a ‘new culture’, based on a principle of ethical responsibility that creates the opportunity for a problematic and often misunderstood (or, in a certain sense, ‘over-understood’, epitomized and reduced to misleading stereotypes) Other to find his/her own voice, put forward by Gramsci, is connected with the emergence of diasporic voices in the field of cultural

and academic debate. De Chiara reminds us of the names of Derrida, Žižek, Kristeva, Bhabha, Spivak, and the profound interconnection existing between their condition as migrants and the weight and complexity of their theoretical and philosophical speculation.

The question of humanism is of the utmost importance, as Giorgio Baratta's and Pasquale Voza's essays stress: humanism means, in the Gramscian sense, the rise of a democratic and international space for dialogue, which does not overlook conflicts and contradictions, but strives to restore a common, shared and secular field of debate and dialectical confrontation. On his part, Voza connects the issue of the primacy of politics to the questions of violence and the new redefinition of democracy and power. Violence represents the dangerous but, to some extent, inevitable limit, which the transformations undergone by politics and democracy in the age of late capitalism seem destined to reach; in this respect, the active role of a political and democratic agency is hinted at as the aptest reconfiguration of the Gramscian thematization of 'hegemony' in the dramatic context of present international conflicts. Domenico Jervolino traces an interesting comparison between the thought of Said and Paul Ricoeur, investigating the notions of 'ontology' and 'epistemology' and arguing for the impossible purity of culture and its complete independence from the mechanisms of historical configuration: this trait, proper to Ricoeur's reflection and its hermeneutical insight, becomes crucial to the Saidian (and Gramscian) understanding of cultural processes, in what Jervolino strikingly defines as the "necessary and irreducible interweaving of *logos* and *praxis*" (65).

Lea Durante and Sandra Ponzanesi address the question of 'cosmopolitanism': as Durante underscores, Gramsci thought of cosmopolitanism as a risk represented by the replication of existing power structures disguised in a quasi-metaphysical 'a-topic' dimension; on the other hand, Sandra Ponzanesi argues that the generic claims of cosmopolitanism, which betray their complicity with power apparatuses, must be reconceived according to the trajectories traced by the "traveling theories" she refers to (this is also the title of a 1982 Said essay), and to the configuration of a nomadic reshaping of subjectivity, capable of disrupting the epistemic framing of the world and its traditional center-periphery structure.

At the end of the volume, the report of a moving personal experience: the beautiful pages written by Sara Marinelli, "Dentro i covili del verme", deal with the condition of jail and imprisonment, as experienced by Antonio Gramsci, and as observed by the author in her teaching activity in a penitentiary in Naples. This unsettling familiarity represents the first step toward a tense and dramatic journey that Marinelli traces among different places and nations: Secondigliano and its present, degraded reality, the South of the world and its subaltern voices, the imaginary map represented

by Naples and Baku, Azerbaigian, as evoked by the names of Neapolitan streets, and, in the background, a disquieting and poetical voice that, along the trajectories opened up by Gramsci and Said, tries to reconfigure our location and (political) position in the present time.