

Peter Mayo, *Hegemony and Education under Neoliberalism. Insights from Gramsci, New York & London: Routledge, 2016*

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In his recent book “Hegemony and education under neoliberalism. Insights from Gramsci” Peter Mayo put together material from his previous papers and studies on Gramsci, choosing those focusing on neoliberalism, hegemony and education, revisiting and elaborating them through the main lenses — those of contemporary relevance in the neoliberal age.

The book offers deep, critical insight into the role of education in the neoliberal context throughout the 10 chapters, focusing on different aspects of Gramsci’s ideas and (mis)use of education by the neoliberal hegemonies in different parts of the world.

In the first, introductory chapter — “Hegemony and Neoliberalism A Gramscian Antidote”; Mayo reminds us of the rise of neoliberalism and the main characteristics of hegemonic globalisation, contrasting it with the globalisation “from below.” He also introduces us to the main facts about the life and work of Gramsci and the main terms and conception he used, especially “hegemony” (choosing the comprehensive conception) and its roots in Marx and Engels’ theory of consciousness. Already in the introductory chapter Mayo, when bringing neoliberalism and hegemony together, quotes Gramsci: “every hegemonic relationship is an educational one.”

Every scholar studying Gramsci or anyone interested in Gramsci’s impact on the way scholars and researchers think about education would benefit from reading the chapter “The ‘Turn to Gramsci’ in the English Language Education Literature. An overview.” It provides a very useful outline of Gramscian themes in the English education literature, such as hegemony, schooling, language, social pedagogy, and, especially, adult education. From among a large corpus of writings about adult education, Mayo points out those deriving inspiration from Gramsci’s life and work, involvement in workers’ education circles, and, as expected, works contributing to the radical debate on adult education and counter-hegemonic practices. There is a broad range of single issues within the works around Gramsci’s ideas on adult education — community development, women, adult political education. There are also works analysing his influence on popular

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education in Brazil and the South in general. Based on many of the authors mentioned in this chapter, Mayo rightly states that “Gramsci is a key point of reference in the literature on education.”

In the third chapter “The Centrality of the State in Neoliberal Times: Gramsci and Beyond,” Mayo starts, as Buttigieg says, to think not only “with Gramsci, but like Gramsci.” Starting with the definition of the traditional, legalistic-structural conception of the state, and the role of education in this context, he moves on to discussing the neoliberal state and easily proves, with the help of Freire, Althusser and others, that the idea of state playing a secondary role in the “present intensification of globalisation... is very much a neoliberal myth.” Illustrating this point through references to the development of several countries in recent history, as well as with examples from modern social media (YouTube, blogs etc.), he leads us masterly to Gramsci’s broad understanding of civil society in both “East” and “West,” where it comprises institutions which can serve as sources of ideological influence and of repression. The state is active in regulating, defining, controlling, evaluating the ideological institutions, education / lifelong learning, industry... The modern state “in its repressive, ideological and commercial forms” remains central to the neoliberal project.

According to Gramsci, education plays a key role in building hegemonic relationships. The fourth chapter “Gramsci: Adult Education and Learning” focuses on the mechanisms enabling and challenging hegemony — those that exist beyond schooling and through the “alternative pathways.” Mayo takes us through a whole range of Gramsci’s ideas about adult education rooted in the latter’s own practice, period of incarceration and revolutionary engagement. Especially relevant for contemporary analysis are his thoughts about the adult educator as an “organic intellectual” (one who should be “politically committed to those one teaches”), his influence on popular education and on social movements in the North especially through his concept of “conjunctural analysis.” Mayo combines numerous examples, biographic facts, quotations and analysis to provide a convincing conclusion — no discussion on radical adult education and education as social action is possible without reference to Gramsci.

In the fifth chapter, “‘In and against the State.’ Gramsci a War of Position and Adult Education,” Mayo provides a case study to illustrate how Gramsci’s ideas can constitute a theoretical framework for analysis of an educational project, although the project is carried out in a specific/modern context and time. Mayo applies to his analysis Gramsci’s ideas about state-sponsored adult education and the function it may have in supporting hegemonic arrangements around work, culture, gender, language, and the experience of the Turin Factory Councils. The case study focuses on the University of Malta’s Workers’ Participation Development Centre (now the centre for Labour Studies - CLS), which is considered as the site of contestation, a space where dominant practices of the University and hegemonic social relationships can be negotiated. This through a centre intended to appeal to the working class (issues raised concern language, pedagogical approach, themes chosen for study). The “war of position” entails one being in and against the system. These are contradictions that Mayo recognises as providing modern challenges to the contemporary “organic intellectual,” to adopt the term used by Gramsci.

In the sixth chapter: “Gramsci on schooling: *Adieu* to a School That Was but Cannot Be Any Longer?” Mayo deals with Gramsci’s most controversial notes — those projecting his conception of the ‘Unitarian School,’ a criticism of the reform introduced by the fascist Minister of Education at that time. Although this writing is perceived by many authors as advocating a conservative educational system, based on what has been referred to as a “Taylorisation of schooling,” revealing sympathies for Fordism, Mayo finds a genuine concern about democratic access to formal education for children from the industrial working class and the peasants class. Lack of access would continue to lead to the social and cultural reproduction of class hierarchy in Italian society. His proposal for the accessible ‘Unitarian School’ is a combination of humanistic education and practical skills. Mayo carries forward arguments showing that the struggle for a broad humanistic education for working class children has a long tradition in educational movements. It is exactly the opposite of ‘instrumental’ education (“vocationalism” today), being thus in accordance with Gramsci’s social vision. Discussing, with reference to numerous authors, Gramsci’s concept of school, Mayo underlines that the ‘old humanistic school’ should be replaced, recognising, following Gramsci’s highlighting of the merits of certain subjects, the need for a serious discussion about the curriculum, especially in its multi-ethnic aspects.

In no other chapter does Gramsci sound as modern as in the seventh: “Gramsci, the Southern Question and the Mediterranean” and in no other chapter is Mayo so personal and engaged as in this one. He dis-

cusses the Mediterranean in the context of hegemonic globalisation and neoliberal practices, which caused massive migrations. He discusses the Mediterranean in the context of the South, conceived in its broader aspects. He briefly but powerfully reveals aspects of the history of the Mediterranean and its complexity, cultural diversity and richness, without romanticising it. He echoes Gramsci when revealing its contradictions and shortcomings, especially the connection between religion, hegemony and power. One cannot think about the Mediterranean without thinking of mass migration in modern times and this is where the connection to hegemonic globalisation lies. Mayo lists various reasons why massive migrations occur but names “the quest for low-cost labour by corporations and other business” as the main one, to which he adds the “legacy of colonialism” explaining it especially in terms of the divide between North Africa and Southern Europe. The Gramscian topics relevant to this context are: regional solidarity, North-South solidarity, misplaced alliances and internal colonialism. As much as it is interesting to read Gramsci’s thoughts, it is even more inspiring to read Mayo’s proposal for an educational strategy for greater solidarity (inspired by Gramsci’s writing on a ‘Southern Question’) that would be one of the answers to this great challenge in the region of Southern Europe. Some elements of this strategy are: “deep understanding of the culture of ‘alterity’,” some “unlearning” process (unlearning mistrust and fear, stereotypes and mystifications, caricatures and exoticisation), “analysing seriously the relationship between main religions in this region,” challenge the usual stereotypical notions concerning immigrants and “fix and static representation” of religions, highlighting the “hybrid nature of cultures” etc.

Both in chapter eight “Antonio Gramsci and Paulo Freire. Connections and Contrasts” and chapter nine “Gramsci’s Impact on Critical Pedagogy” Mayo draws parallels between Gramsci’s ideas and ideas of the authors who adopted a critical approach to education: Freire as the earlier one, and several modern authors who made neoliberalism and its impact on education the target of their criticism. The chapter foregrounding parallels with Freire is based on an earlier book Mayo published on this topic, but it is updated version, re-evaluated and giving fresh comparative insight, following an initial overview of similar studies. He finds plenty of similarities between Freire and Gramsci, most important ones being: for both of them, education is political and educational action can lead to social transformation, whereby the links between party and social movements within the context of a strategy for the social change and where political activism does play an important role. Further on, education is clearly rooted in Marxian thinking and their works are embedded in a Marxian conception of ideology; they both perceive education in its broader context and share the major concept of praxis. There are similarities with respect to teacher-student dynamics, but there are also some contrasts — the role of Church, some curricular issues etc. What’s new about Mayo’s approach is not identifying similarities, but complementarities. Gramsci’s “humanistic education” and Freire’s “critical literacy” provide “insights for an anti-neoliberal pedagogical approach,” concludes Mayo, showing through examples, the modernity of their thoughts in times of neoliberalism.

Gramsci’s “pedagogical philosophy” and “pedagogy of praxis” were key sources of influence for a “movement of educators known as critical pedagogy” — a series of “writers/educators, who engage in a critical approach to education and who underline the political nature of education.” This applies obviously to education in general and to adult learning, especially those of the emancipatory type. Mayo gives a nice overview of Gramsci’s main views that resonate throughout the critical pedagogy literature, with references and a selection of exponents. To mention only some: M.W. Apple, H.A. Giroux, A. Darder, M. Young and J. Muller. Mayo provides not only clear comparisons of their thoughts with Gramsci’s ideas, but also provides short but powerful analysis of critical pedagogy, linking both with the challenges brought by neoliberalism and its approach to education.

In the tenth chapter, the final one, “Some Concluding, Summarising Thoughts” Mayo singles out Gramsci’s main ideas that “can provide valuable insight for those seeking signposts to counter neoliberal thinking.” His unmistakably leftist/socialist approach, his philosophy of praxis that includes cultural and educational activities, challenges to hegemonic relations — these are the foundation of all-pervasive educational strategy; since neoliberalism is all-pervasive, the education has to be the same: the challenge faced is to transform the relationships involved. Further on, Mayo compares the ‘Factory Council theory’ with the modern discourses of lifelong learning and employability, proposing that one learns to ‘engage critically with work’; Gramsci’s conception of educators is broad enough to include those who fall within a modern understanding of education, and his theory of state and civil society gains importance with the rise of neoliberalism. These and other analysed aspects of a Gramscian critical approach “can help undercover

the contradictions that lie at the heart of the neoliberal ideology itself” argues Mayo, reminding us that Gramsci influences not only scholars and academics, but also people working at the grassroots level and within social movements.

In spite of the fact that it consists of single texts and essays, Mayo’s book provides a clear, well structured overview of Gramsci’s ideas that constitute an appropriate lens to analyse the neoliberal state and education in the time of hegemonic globalisation. The book is not intended for beginners with regard to Gramsci’s thought. Despite this, it could be read by them, because of the way Mayo connects Gramsci’s ideas with the modern neoliberal world we live in and can give intellectual pleasure to persons interested in the topic. He makes Gramsci modern and lively, but not in an artificial way — he shows, through carefully chosen examples, how we can read the modern world in a critical way, and reminds us that the main role of education did not change so much — adapt to the world and serve the powerful, or try to change it.

Being an outstanding Gramscian scholar, Mayo is knowledgeable about all the relevant authors in the area, but he is also an engaged intellectual who sees the world deeply and critically, with many revealing details. He also provides us with interpretations that no educator should do without and that all educators should take on board. We might relish more parallels with the authors of transformative learning theory and approaches, especially those dealing with social and collective transformation, but Mayo is clear about the role of social change in Gramsci’s articulation of re-negotiation of hegemonic relationships and role education plays in this regard.

Mayo talks about Gramsci, through Gramsci and with Gramsci, but the reader is never confused about his own position and opinion. The constant dialogue with Gramsci and with exponents of contemporary tendencies never blurs his clear line of thinking and sharp analysis. Energetically and insightfully, he takes us from one to another aspect of Gramsci’s thought, from one to another event in Italian and European history, from one country and region to another, easily connecting and contrasting authors, theories, conceptions, providing thus the foundation for deeper understanding of what is going around the globe in the era of neoliberalism and the roles education plays within it.

This is a must read for all interested in critical education, or educators simply interested in critically reading the world around us.