
Reviewed by Kristin Mock, University of Arizona

While Antonio Gramsci has long been an iconic voice in rhetoric and Composition Studies, this international collection of essays, compiled by Peter Mayo at the University of Malta, aims to reintroduce Gramsci’s educational thought and practice into twenty-first century Western academic landscapes. With contributors spanning the Americas, Europe, and the South Pacific, the international scope of these essays is impressive, stimulating innovative applications, ideas, and theories for the contemporary classroom and theorist. Strategically adding to the repertoire of writings about Gramsci and emancipatory education, Mayo’s collection brings such contemporary topics as global English, feminism, adult education, social work, and modern educational philosophy into active dialogue with Gramsci’s writings on hegemony, pedagogy, and social practice. Because of the diversity of topics included, Mayo offers a space for a “rich compendium of writing on Gramsci’s relevance to education thought” and a place for scholars to revisit the pedagogic implications of this influential philosopher (3). Educational theory and notions of hegemonic practice—ideas central to Gramsci’s work—create the overarching framework and serve as the connective tissue for the eight pieces of scholarship included in this collection.

In the first chapter, “A Brief Commentary on the Hegelian-Marxist Origins of Gramsci’s Philosophy of Praxis,” Deb J. Hill challenges enduring notions of education as a liberating force for the masses and asserts that education should allow students to become agents of transformative social change. By calling on Hegel’s historical-social view of the subject—in which power is dialectically constituted—and Marx’s later theory that the “self” is comprised of various social components (including education), Hill claims that “Gramsci’s relentless advocacy for self-education was simultaneously an urging to free minds from the existing capitalist mode of thought” and should continue to dislodge students from their own tendencies to fetishize themselves (6). Hill’s piece, which may pose difficulties for those unfamiliar with Gramsci’s work, does an excellent job setting up the context for a wider discussion of Gramsci’s influence of various disciplines and also provides an extensive bibliography.

Mayo continues the conversation in the following chapter with a more expanded discussion on the relevance of Gramsci’s social theories. His contribution, “Antonio Gramsci and his Relevance to the Education of Adults,” focuses on the ways in which Gramsci added to Marx’s ‘base-superstructure’ metaphor by examining the contested notion that education is intricately tied to the alteration of class consciousness and social awareness. In terms of pedagogy, Mayo revisits the Italian Factory Council Movement’s ideologies and makes the connection that “different sites of social practice can be
transformed into sites of adult learning” and that the “subaltern classes” must understand the contextual political nature of their labor situations and be able to critically analyze them from a more distanced perspective (26). Additionally, Mayo explores Gramsci’s influence in the areas of pedagogy and language-learning, reminding readers that Gramsci was concerned with “mitigating hierarchical relations between those who ‘educate’ and ‘direct’ and those who learn,” mastering the dominant language to avoid being relegated to the periphery of political life, and pursuing “multi-ethnic solidarity in an age of globalization” (29, 34). In terms of composition studies, Mayo’s essay brings to light the contemporary struggle that adult education and literacy programs face in promoting counter-hegemonic action and is extremely relevant to community literacy practitioners.

Chapters 3 and 4, by John D. Holst and Thomas Clayton, establish a foundation for reading Gramsci’s work in modern contexts. Holst’s article, “The Revolutionary Party in Gramsci’s Pre-Prison Educational and Political Theory and Practice,” discusses Gramsci’s membership in the Italian Socialist Party, his imprisonment, and the role of education within the revolutionary party. Toward the end of the chapter, Holst develops Gramsci’s pre-prison theory in terms of modern practice, claiming that as scholars and teachers we continue working toward a “dialogical, pedagogical, and directive way with the real needs of those most negatively impacted by unfolding socio-political changes” (54-55). Similarly, Clayton, in his piece “Introducing Giovanni Gentile, the ‘Philosopher of Fascism,’” brings Gentile’s contributions, along with Gramsci’s, to the forefront of modern educational debate. Because Gentile, Mussolini’s first Minister of Public Instruction, remains a contested political figure, Clayton’s piece reminds scholars to always place historical figures within context to avoid misusing or misappropriating them.

Peter Ives revisits Mayo’s emphasis on adult education in chapter 5, “Global English, Hegemony, and Education: Lessons from Gramsci,” and discusses the contemporary politics surrounding the threat of “global English” on other communities and language groups. Framing the debate around Gramsci’s approach to language education, Ives claims that English as “an impediment to counter-hegemonic struggle” is untrue, especially in terms of Gramsci’s acknowledgment that learning a dominant culture’s language can be liberating for the subaltern classes (94). While Gramsci did promote the argument that the State should dictate language planning for its masses, Ives warns readers to remember that much of Gramsci’s writings were in opposition to the Fascist Education Act of 1923, and his work must be analyzed accordingly (85). In arguing that language imposition can and does both liberate and marginalize, Ives effectively problematizes the ideological foundations for implementing a national language on non-dominant groups, and his theory holds true for teachers of language both inside and outside the academy.

In chapter 6, Margaret Ledwith turns the focus to feminism, interrogating the ways in which Gramsci’s teachings can be—and are—applied to
feminist pedagogy and teaching. Starting with a narrative about her own experience witnessing social inequalities in the classroom, Ledwith provides an excellent gateway for discussing and addressing these issues in practical, pedagogical ways. She suggests, for example, that Gramsci’s “insightful analysis of hegemony, and the subtle nature of consent, offered feminists a conceptual lead on the personal as political” and that we can clearly trace Gramsci’s influence to feminism’s emphasis on cultural identity and difference (101). By tracing the developments of feminist studies over the last forty years, Ledwith skillfully connects Gramsci’s teachings with the development of critical consciousness by emphasizing the value of combating powerful hegemonic forces at both the community and academic levels.

Chapter 7, “Towards a Political Theory of Social Work and Education” by Uwe Hirschfeld, explores and redefines the role of social workers and the politicization of their work within the confines of Gramsci’s hegemony theory. As Hirschfeld states, there is clearly a potential for social work to become “a critical radically democratic social practice,” and yet, many workers in the field have not accepted their role as being equal to those with whom they work, subconsciously creating a superiority complex (114). To transform the industry, he claims, the field must reorient its ideological assumptions; namely, that attempting to “normalize” and “assimilate” seemingly disenfranchised groups is, in fact, securing their marginalization in “mainstream” society and refusing them entrance into the labor market (117). In order for social work to become the foundation for socio-political action, Hirschfeld concludes that social workers must ponder both their personal role and the place of transformative education in their practice, adopt a critical pedagogical stance in their cases, and ensure that their agencies are clean, organized spaces that do not scream “impoverished” but rather promote well-being and security (119).

Concluding the collection, Rosemary Dore Soares’ essay, “Gramscian Thought and Brazilian Education,” provides a nice complement to Hirschfeld’s work, looking at the possibilities for socialist projects in Brazil’s public education system and the implications for educational reform in terms of how various Brazilian scholars have read and appropriated Gramsci’s work. Though Brazil’s education system has been nothing less than tumultuous since the 1920s, Soares does an excellent job historicizing the country’s political reforms in terms of education and providing a context for which to read the current debate. By exploring Gramsci’s interest in the Communists’ concept of the “unitary school,” an institution that combines intellectual and industrial work, Soares shows how Gramsci brought renewed interest in public education beginning in the 1980s (140). Today, as Brazil continues to propose new educational models, Gramsci’s ideas clearly remain relevant and indispensable.

While this collection is certainly useful for those already engaged in transformative education, scholars in education, rhetoric and composition, English studies, international policy, and social work would find this work
particularly insightful to their practice. While clearly targeted to those involved in researching cross-cultural educational thought and practice, it is indeed accessible to a wide range of disciplines and would perhaps be an excellent theoretical resource, in addition to texts that are mostly concerned with classroom dynamics. Instructors and professors in rhetoric and composition who are concerned with the politics of language in the classroom and the difficulties posed by requiring Standard Written English will also find this collection useful for theorizing their teaching practice and understanding diversity in their classrooms. Additionally, researchers, scholars, and teachers interested in promoting social justice and engaging in critical pedagogical practice would also find these applications to Gramsci’s seminal text both relevant and timely, especially in regards to understanding the complex relationship between language, education, and policy in contested political spaces.

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