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## Book Review Solidarity without Borders: Gramscian perspectives on migration and civil society alliances, edited by Óscar García Agustín and Martin Bak Jørgensen

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## Book Review

***Solidarity without Borders: Gramscian perspectives on migration and civil society alliances*, edited by Óscar García Agustín and Martin Bak Jørgensen  
 London: Pluto Press, 2016. 244 pp. Paperback £18.04, (ISBN 9780 7453 3631 2)**

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In recent years, migration has emerged as one of the most politically charged issues in global society. From the Bangladeshi government's harsh treatment of thousands of Rohingya families fleeing the Burmese army's genocidal campaign against them in late summer of 2017, to the Trump administration's decision sustained attack on the new "sanctuary movement" and attempts to further militarize the southern border of the United States, news headlines and social media around the world are filled with images of repression against migrants, alongside impassioned calls for solidarity. Despite its ubiquity, the coverage of these events tends to remain rather superficial, making *Solidarity without Borders* a timely work that succeeds in unpacking some of the underlying issues related to migration and the festering crisis of global capitalism, and hopefully contributing to the development of a more powerful response from the left.

As is the case with Djordje Tomic's essay on the securitization of the Western Balkans in this issue, the recent arrival of millions of refugees to the European Union serves as the launching point for this edited volume. However, the contributors understand "migrant" in a very broad sense, and an analysis of the participation of Alevi and Kurdish residents of marginalized urban neighborhoods in Istanbul's Gezi Park protests of 2013—often considered to be a middle-class uprising—sits comfortably alongside an essay on "Lampedusa in Hamburg," a self-organized collective composed of migrants who eventually found their way to that German city in the aftermath of NATO's destruction of Libya in 2011. Drawing on the writings of the late Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, the authors explore the possibility for solidarity and joint action between migrants, other marginalized populations and civil society as a whole, while remaining wary of what Peter Mayo calls "misplaced alliances." In the words of Susi Meret and Elisabetta Della Corte—and in the true spirit of Gramsci's famous pessimism of the intellect and optimism of the will—this does not entail "entertain[ing] any illusion about an imminent migrant-led revolutionary momentum knocking at our doors." The point is rather "to observe antagonistic forces at play in society: where and how transformative efforts arise, develop, and often also fail in the permanent struggle for economic, social and political hegemony." (204)

### **Political struggles and alliance formation**

The most obvious example of misplaced alliances is the rise of right-wing neo-fascist movements that seek to tap into the legitimate frustrations of those formerly privileged strata of the working class currently suffering downward mobility in the face of neoliberal capitalist globalization by incorporating them into anti-migrant nationalistic hegemonic blocs. Yet to consider the "white working class" as a homogeneous and essentially racist bloc is fundamentally problematic. As David Featherstone points out in his essay, this reductionist view not only misrepresents the heterogeneous nature of past struggles and erases the history of "working-class multiculturalism," it creates significant barriers to the construction of broad-based solidarity across the various segments of today's

highly stratified—and increasingly globalized—working class.

We might push his argument further and note how an anti-racist discourse that counters the overtly racist far right with a vigorous denunciation of xenophobia and white supremacy, but remains silent on capitalism and the particular class fractions that propagate and benefit the most from the perpetuation of racist ideology and social structures, is quite compatible with the rhetoric espoused by the more enlightened liberal wing of the capitalist class. Insofar as the latter seeks to manage more adeptly the contradictions of a racist social order, but nonetheless to keep its overarching structures fundamentally intact, there is the possibility that grassroots activists genuinely seeking justice for migrants may ultimately be led into a misplaced appliance if they continue to ignore the class-based dimensions of racialized conflict, and allow the multicultural liberal elite to assume leadership of the struggle.

Indeed, Meret and Della Corte’s analysis of the contradictory role played by the St Pauli Church in Hamburg, which opened its doors to seventy or eighty migrants in June 2013, provides another example of the limitations of liberal values in the fight for migrant justice. While the Church mobilized many members of its community to support the struggles of Lampedusa in Hamburg, the former generally operated within a humanitarian framework that proved to be incompatible with a politicization of the plight of migrants and a direct confrontation with the state. For this reason, Ursula Apitzch’s optimistic assessment of the potential for the establishment of an “alternative moral hegemony” and a “liberal-progressive concept of human rights within the juridical sphere of Europe” (38) seems a bit naive, insofar as it concomitantly assumes that such a harmonious relationship can actually be achieved without directly challenging the prevailing capitalist social relations. Yet as the editors Óscar García Agustín and Martin Bak Jørgensen stress in their chapter on “social dumping” and free movement in Denmark, it is rare for even left-wing parties and unions to publicly talk about the inherent contradictions between labor and capital. It follows that the struggle to maintain said Scandinavian country’s formerly strong welfare state is often expressed in nationalistic and anti-immigrant terms, as a defense of the *national* state and *national* labor conditions.

The relationship between migrants and organized labor in Ireland has been quite different. The short-term growth associated with the radical neoliberalization of Ireland’s economy in the 1990s alongside the opening up of the Eastern European labor market led to the island—a former colony of Britain that has long been a country of net outmigration—becoming what Mary Hyland and Ronaldo Munck call a “social laboratory” for the study of migration. Facing a decline in union density and bargaining coverage in the early twenty-first century, much of organized labor consciously shifted away from prior corporatist arrangements towards more social-movement based organizing. This has included actively organizing immigrant workers and launching explicitly Anti-Racist Workplace campaigns. While far from perfect, organized labor’s response has played a large role in stemming the tide of a possible xenophobic reaction to increased migration, even though it was not able to defeat the “racist referendum” of 2004, which removed automatic birthright citizenship to children born in Ireland.

Laurence Cox delves deeper into the disintegration of the corporatist relationship between organized labor and the state during the “Dev’s Ireland” era, locating it within a broader hegemonic alliance in which national capital, large agribusiness and the church succeeded in incorporating small farmers, small business, organized labor and women as subordinated partners. With the rise of neoliberalism, national capital and small business have become subordinate to Irish-based global

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101, boulevard Raspail, 75006 Paris – France Tel: +33(0)1 47 20 00 94 – Fax: +33 (0)1 47 20 81 89 Website: [www.ags.edu](http://www.ags.edu) (Please cite this paper as the following: David Feldman (2017). Book Review: Solidarity without Borders: Gramscian perspectives on migration and civil society alliances. *The Journal of International Relations, Peace and Development Studies*. Volume 3. Available from: Link TBD)

capital, clerical power has given way to a “modernizing” liberal alliance, and conflict between labor and capital in general has assumed the form of a so-called “partnership.” With the state gradually turning to attacking even this “partnership,” Cox argues that there is the *potential* for an incipient but broad social alliance bringing together the working-class left, poorer rural interests and culturally radical movements to actually mount a serious challenge to the current power structure.

In refusing to treat the state and the capitalist class as monoliths, and critically analyzing the detrimental effects of the co-option and institutionalization of the more radical movements from the 1960s to the 1990s, Cox offers a particularly strong application of Gramscian theory. His analysis of the disintegration of the hegemonic bloc in Ireland is emblematic of recent structural changes occurring on a more global scale, as attested by the anti-austerity movement in Greece, the uprisings in many of the Arab-dominant countries of the Middle East, the Indignados in Spain, the Occupy movement in North America and elsewhere, #YoSoy132 in Mexico, the aforementioned Gezi Park protests in Turkey, and the more recent Nuit Debout and massive protests against the “Loi Travail et son monde” in France. Clearly, the always-tenuous global neoliberal hegemonic bloc, previously analyzed from a Gramscian perspective by Robinson (2005), has all-but-disappeared in the decade since the global crisis of 2008.

### **Gramsci, global capitalism, and the specter of Marx**

Unfortunately, Cox’s Gramscianism is not exactly representative of the volume as a whole, which often operates from within a certain postcolonial and cultural studies interpretation of Gramsci that has an ambivalent—if sometimes hostile—relationship with the dialectical Marxist method that so thoroughly guided Gramsci’s own thinking. The most egregious example of this can be found in Miguel Mellino’s routine denunciation of Marx’s belief that capitalist modernity contains a universalizing impulse as Eurocentric. Marx did in fact point out the inherently expansionary character of capital, and show that it alone operated through the reduction of various forms of concrete labor to human labor in the abstract. However, in doing so he was demolishing the prevailing view of bourgeois political economists who uncritically assumed capitalist social relations to be unproblematic, transhistorical, and eternal. In apparently conflating universalization of value and homogenization of culture, open-ended “totality” and unidirectional “totalization,” and “historical materialism” and “historicism,” Mellino’s critique of an undialectical “Marxist” straw person comes off as both superfluous and somewhat willfully misguided, particularly in view of the publication in recent years of works by Marxist scholars such as Vivek Chibber (2013) and Kevin B. Anderson (2016), who methodically unpack the differences between the above concepts and highlight Marx’s own unequivocal and quite emphatic rejection of any attempts to use his writings as the basis for a formulation of a teleological and unilinear theory of capitalist development.

Although Mellino is the only contributor to put forward an explicitly postcolonial reading of Gramsci, most seem to operate under the assumption that the latter was the sole Marxist of his time to consider questions of culture, language, and subalternity when thinking through the possibilities for constructing hegemony, unaware that as a representative of the Italian Communist Party in the Communist International, Gramsci was in fact deeply influenced by the wide-ranging debates on these questions taking place in the early days of the Russian Revolution (Brandist 2015). The timidity of the authors to engage directly with Marxist theory unfortunately results in several disjointed chapters in which far too much attention is devoted to analyzing the minutiae of Gramsci’s views on otherwise obscure particular political figures from the 1920s, culminating in perfunctory and unsatisfying analyses of the current conjuncture. On the other hand, the prominent place that many reserve for the

unfinished essay “On the Southern Question” is welcome, since Gramsci's call for an alliance between peasants and the industrial proletariat in Italy—once again echoing the Bolshevik position regarding Russia—continues to remain a vital reference point. However, sharper editing could have made the multiple references to this key essay less repetitive, and some dialogue amongst contributors would have been welcome.

Updating Gramsci's analysis for the present conjuncture also demands clear definitions of key concepts such as the working class, but these are sometimes lacking. For example, at certain points the editors essentially reduce the working class to the classical “industrial proletariat,” and argue that we must give space to other political subjectivities such as migrants, the unemployed and the indebted. Elsewhere, however, they seem to recognize that the working class—particularly when understood in the Marxist sense of referring to all human beings who lack ownership of the means of production—is internally fractured, and that the concept does in fact encompass all of the above social groups. A similar ambivalence is on display when Mellino defines contemporary global capitalism as postcolonial capitalism as a means of highlighting the importance of ongoing primitive accumulation in the Global South. The irony is that in turning away from discourse and towards political economy, Mellino ultimately latches on to the most explicit manifestation of the expansionary, universalizing nature of capital.

### **Migration and primitive accumulation**

It is certainly a positive development to see postcolonial scholars embrace the study of political economy, but we must not forget that the study of ongoing primitive accumulation in areas not yet fully incorporated within the capitalist system, and the articulation between capitalist and non-capitalist modes of production, has been a subject of fierce debate in Marxist circles since the publication of Rosa Luxemburg's (2015) *Accumulation of Capital* over a century ago. How might we build off of this rich body of historical and theoretical analysis in order to better understand the relationship between land dispossession through primitive accumulation and migration today?

Meret and Della Corte offer an initial response to some of these questions when they state that “[c]ontemporary migration flows are unique mainly in the sense that they are triggered by an accelerating process of globalization and capitalist accumulation that has reached the limits of the world market,” and suggest that “migration flows are signs of the capitalist system's weakness and fragility.” (218) As Mike Davis (2006) hammers home in *Planet of Slums*, new rounds of primitive accumulation are occurring in a context in which the capitalist system no longer generates nearly enough formal employment to absorb the millions upon millions that it violently uproots from the land coveted by capital. With this in mind, the fact that the Burmese leader and Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi—until quite recently hailed by the global corporate elite as her country's last great hope for “democracy”—has essentially condoned the “ethnic cleansing” of the Rohingya should push us to move beyond simplistic and mystifying identitarian-based explanations for such cruel campaigns, and ask whether the land grab might be related to the recent moves towards a liberalization of the Burmese economy.

Davis' frightening analysis is also notable for his refusal to approach this type of forced migration from a Eurocentric perspective since, as “surplus humanity” from the standpoint of global capital, the vast majority of these migrants settle in sprawling urban slums in the Global South that more closely resemble Victorian Dublin than Manchester. It is disappointing that in a book that features contributions by scholars seeking to “decolonize” Western Marxism and demystify the



contemporary “migrant crisis,” not a single author makes reference to the fact that non-European countries have experienced far higher levels of migration in recent years, and that Syrian refugees now comprise roughly a quarter of the population of tiny Lebanon.

It would nonetheless be a mistake to assume that global capital has no use for contemporary migrants, aside from their convenient role as scapegoats for crises and raw materials for the military-prison-industrial complex. Immigration policy in the US, the European Union and the rest of the Global North cannot be understood exclusively through the lens of exclusion. Although global capital has an interest in relegating ever-growing surplus populations to less developed regions, it also seeks to assert tighter control over a cheapened and flexibilized—but not always docile—migrant and immigrant workforce in the North. (Euskirchen, Leuhn and Ray 2007; Feldman 2017) German-based capital’s desire for the precarious but highly-skilled labor power of formerly middle-class refugees fleeing the violent upheavals and political crises related to the radical restructuring of the global capitalist system goes a long way towards explaining that country’s relatively “welcoming” response to the nearly million refugees who arrived in 2015. (Cyran 2017) This is not to downplay the active engagement of a full ten percent of the broader German population in support networks, but the eventual triumph of a more repressive state policy ought to push us to interrogate the limits of solidarity based exclusively on liberal humanitarian values.

Rather than Stuart Hall’s later writings on Gramsci, race, and ethnicity—a strong influence on many of the authors here—a more appropriate reference point from the field of cultural studies would be the magisterial final chapter of 1978’s *Policing the Crisis*. Hall et al’s analysis of the crisis of the postwar Fordist regime of capital accumulation and the concomitant rendering of large swaths of Black immigrant workers superfluous, the various forms of racial and class consciousness engendered by these processes, and their overall relation to working-class political struggle, addresses the pressing issues in no uncertain terms. (Hall et al, 2013) Despite its flaws, *Solidarity without Borders* also makes a vital contribution in demonstrating the danger of misplaced alliances and reaffirming that migrants are—and must—remain at the forefront of struggles for a more just world. What Hall and his cultural studies colleagues’ reading of Gramsci teaches us is that the type of solidarity between migrant and non-migrant workers must ultimately push them to confront their common enemy of global capital as conscious members of a heterogeneous but single global working class.

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