

BOOK REVIEW



Review of *Gramsci and the Political Subject: Subalternity, Autonomy, Hegemony* by Massimo Modonesi

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ABSTRACT

This review examines Massimo Modonesi's *Gramsci and the Political Subject: Subalternity, Autonomy, Hegemony* which, published in Italian in 2023, offers a compelling interpretation of the complex and protracted formation of collective will in struggle from Antonio Gramsci's viewpoint. This work provides an alternative framework for understanding social conflict that challenges the methodological individualism dominating studies of collective action. It stands as a valuable theoretical reference for political sociology and the sociology of social movements, grounded in the enduring vitality of Marxist thought. With a four-chapter structure, the book traces the historical evolution of Gramsci's central concepts—subalternity, autonomy, and hegemony. By weaving these notions together, Modonesi advances a critical theory that illuminates the stages in the process of class subjectivation through struggle. The book's central thesis is that Gramsci must be read as a theorist of political subjectivation to Marxist revolution, returning to the centrality of the subjective dimension in his philosophy of praxis. For Modonesi, Gramsci is a thinker of class conflict who shows a possible Marxist path to change the world.

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Gramsci y el sujeto político. Subalternidad, autonomía, hegemonía (Gramsci and the Political Subject: Subalternity, Autonomy, Hegemony), by Massimo Modonesi, Mexico City, Akal, 2023, 192 pp., €18, ISBN-13: 978-6078898190.

Introduction

Massimo Modonesi's *Gramsci y el sujeto político. Subalternidad, autonomía, hegemonía* (Gramsci and the Political Subject: Subalternity, Autonomy, Hegemony) (2023), recently published in Mexico, represents one of the most systematic and theoretically ambitious efforts in recent years to recast Antonio Gramsci's political thought around the question of political subjectivity. Unlike much of the contemporary international reception of Gramsci's work—shaped by cultural studies, post-Marxist discourse theory, or liberal political theory—Modonesi aims to revisit Gramsci's original preoccupation with the formation, consolidation, and expansion of a collective political will, a process which is inseparable from organization, strategy, and antagonism.

Three categories are presented in the book, recurrent but never fully systematized in Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* ([1929–1935] 2011), and serve as the backbone of his theory of political subjectivation: subalternity, autonomy, and hegemony. Rather than treating these concepts as separate analytical tools, Modonesi reconstructs them as moments of a dialectical dynamic—a triadic grammar of political becoming. The book thereby offers not only a reinterpretation of Gramsci but a broader theoretical model for analysing collective action in contemporary societies.

Modonesi's book stands in open contrast to postmodern approaches that have sidelined reflection on the making of the political subject, without forgetting that Gramsci translated Lenin's idea of the Bolshevik party into the Italian context. For Modonesi, rethinking radical transformation and the overthrow of neoliberalism in the twenty-first century—essentially, reconsidering revolution at a time when revolution itself has fallen out of thought—requires a renewed engagement with Gramsci's conception of the political subject. With precise and dynamic prose, this work masterfully weaves a philological reading of Gramsci's texts with a creative reworking of his concepts, offering a powerful reflection on the contemporary processes of formation, organization, and struggle of the subaltern classes. Without sacrificing textual rigour, Modonesi moves beyond purely exegetical debates, overcoming the fixation on reconstructing Gramsci's authorial intent to offer a productive reinterpretation of his concepts, one that reengages with key questions in Marxist theory. It is important to stress that this is not just another book on Gramsci. Fortunately, it avoids the tedious philological debates that fail to think of Gramsci politically, trapped as they are in the self-referential logic of academia. Philology matters only when it advances political, sociological, and philosophical reflection; it cannot be an end in itself—especially when addressing Gramsci, who was not only a philosopher, sociologist, and historian, but also the founder of the Italian Communist Party.

Modonesi's book offers a compelling interpretation of the complex and protracted formation of collective will in struggle, providing an alternative framework for understanding social conflict that challenges the methodological individualism which dominates studies of collective action. It stands as a valuable theoretical reference for political sociology and the sociology of social movements, grounded in the enduring vitality of Marxist thought. With a four-chapter structure, the book traces the historical evolution of its central concepts—subalternity, autonomy, and hegemony. By weaving these notions together, Modonesi advances a critical theory that illuminates the stages in the process of class subjectivation through struggle. The book's central thesis is that we must learn to read Gramsci as a theorist of political subjectivation, returning to the centrality of the subjective dimension in his philosophy of praxis. For Modonesi, Gramsci is a thinker of class conflict who shows a possible path to revolution.

Overview of the Key Arguments of the Book

In his introduction, Modonesi frames the volume as the culmination of more than a decade of research on political subjectivity within Marxist and Gramscian traditions (Modonesi 2023, 14–16). What distinguishes the work is its methodological self-awareness. Modonesi explicitly rejects the idea of academic neutrality. Instead, he embraces a

Gramscian ethic of engagement, a form of research grounded in what he terms “a rigor that is intellectual yet politically committed” (15).

This methodological decision is essential, for it echoes Gramsci’s own view that theory is never exterior to political struggle; it is always embedded in social relations and tied to specific historical projects. In choosing to centre on political subjectivation—rather than discourse, culture, or the state—Modonesi situates himself within a long lineage of Marxist scholarship concerned with the emergence of collective actors and the practical conditions under which they become transformative. More importantly, Modonesi argues that many contemporary appropriations of Gramsci have diluted or obscured the question of political agency. Structuralist readings have tended to treat classes as objective entities; culturalist readings emphasize meanings and identities; post-structuralist appropriations reduce politics to discursive articulation. Modonesi dismisses these approaches and insists that they have marginalised a central Gramscian concern: the ways in which subaltern groups acquire the capacity to act politically. The book thus aims to reconstruct Gramsci’s conceptual architecture in order to reassert the strategic, organizational, and antagonistic dimensions of political subjectivation.

A significant early section of the book reconstructs the complex genealogy of Gramsci’s interpreters with regard to the question of the political subject. Modonesi carefully contrasts two broad intellectual lineages. On the one hand, he revisits the Italian communist tradition, in which figures such as Togliatti, Badaloni, Luporini, Gerratana, and Vacca consistently placed the political subject—above all the working class and the party—at the centre of their analyses. Their readings, although often marked by doctrinal constraints, were grounded in the conviction that Gramsci’s prison writings fundamentally addressed the formation of a revolutionary collective actor. They stressed the pedagogical and organizational role of the party, the active production of class unity, and the strategic labour required to transform a dispersed social group into a cohesive political force.

On the other hand, Modonesi examines the very different trajectory that the studies of Gramsci’s work have followed in the Anglo-American world through cultural studies, subaltern studies, and post-Marxist discourse theory. In these contexts, Gramsci has been reinterpreted primarily as a theorist of culture, identity, discursive articulation, and civil society. This shift has undeniably broadened Gramsci’s influence, enabling his concepts to travel across disciplines and analytic frameworks. Yet, as Modonesi argues, it also contributes to a gradual displacement of political subjectivation from the centre of Gramscian debates. Attention to cultural processes, while fruitful, often overshadows questions of organization, material interests, and strategic leadership—dimensions that Gramsci himself considered indispensable for understanding the institutional exercise of power achieved once that leadership has been consolidated. Although the latter interpretation has dominated much of the secondary literature, Modonesi contends that Gramsci’s most original insights concern the former—those processes through which political actors attempt to extend their influence across the social terrain before assuming formal authority.

The expansion of autonomy into hegemony occurs when an emergent political subject begins to widen its reach, forging alliances with other subaltern groups and articulating diverse demands within a shared political project. Through this process, ideological leadership is established, and a broader national-popular bloc slowly takes shape. This

dynamic reflects Gramsci's insistence that revolutionary transformation requires both a moment of rupture—embodied in the creation of an autonomous project—and a moment of aggregation, through which that project becomes capable of organizing and directing wider social forces. Central to this development is the concept of the national-popular, which marks the point at which a political project transcends narrow, corporatist interests and begins to speak to the collective aspirations of a society as a whole. Modonesi is careful to stress that this national-popular dimension is not synonymous with nationalism. Rather, it is an expression of universality: the moment when a class-based project becomes a societal project, capable of giving ideological and organizational coherence to disparate social energies.

Yet hegemony is never a smooth or linear process. Modonesi highlights the contradictions that accompany any attempt to expand political influence. Hegemonic projects may face pressures to moderate their demands, to adapt to or be co-opted by state institutions, to compromise with sectors that do not share their antagonistic orientation, or to bureaucratize internal leadership structures. These tensions reveal the delicate balance between maintaining the integrity of autonomous capacity and building the broad consensus necessary for hegemonic projection. As Modonesi suggests, this balance is inherently unstable, and its instability is part of what makes hegemony a contested and continually renegotiated process rather than a final stage of political development.

Among the most innovative contributions of Modonesi's book is his reinterpretation of passive revolution “from the perspective of the subaltern classes” (Modonesi 2023, 168). While the concept has traditionally been understood as a macro-interpretive framework for modernity, a mechanism of conservative reform, or a strategy through which dominant classes orchestrate transformation from above, Modonesi invites the reader to shift the analytical vantage point. For him, passive revolution cannot be grasped solely as an elite process. It must be examined in relation to the limitations and vulnerabilities of subaltern autonomy, particularly in the ways it interrupts, disarticulates, or diverts processes of political subjectivation.

From this perspective, passive revolution appears as a form of blocked autonomy. It operates by co-opting emergent leaderships, neutralizing popular demands, integrating subaltern groups without granting them real power, and ultimately preventing the consolidation of independent organizational capacities. Modonesi describes passive revolution as “the other face” of failed subjectivation, a mechanism that protects dominant interests precisely by impeding the formation of an autonomous collective actor capable of projecting itself hegemonically (Modonesi 2023, 169).

Yet Modonesi is careful not to reduce passive revolution to a simple instrument of domination. Instead, he highlights its dialectical nature, showing how it blends elements of progress and regression, reform and neutralization. This ambivalence allows him to reinterpret historical phenomena not as pure victories or defeats but as contradictory terrains where limited gains coexist with renewed forms of subaltern containment.

Beyond Scholarly Contributions: Key Strengths

First, in his discussion of subalternity, Modonesi insists that the term must be read as an adjective rather than a noun. Subalternity, for Gramsci, designates a condition of oppression rooted in the material structures and legitimizing systems that sustain domination

over the working classes. This perspective marks his originality and clear distance from subaltern studies or theorists like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. While acknowledging their role in reviving interest in Gramsci, Modonesi argues that they often detach the concept of subalternity from the broader Marxist logic of Gramsci's thought. For Modonesi, Gramsci is above all a thinker of emancipation— theorizing the *overcoming* of subalternity rather than its mere description. Through organization and struggle, the subaltern classes can attain autonomy and emerge as transformative political subjects, capable of overturning capitalist history. Subalternity, then, is not a static state but a latent force—like a seed beneath the snow—awaiting the right conditions to blossom into collective struggle and political renewal. Without denying the persistence of subaltern traits even among those who rebel—traits that reveal the contradictory consciousness of subjects in struggle—Modonesi's conceptualization frames subalternity as a continuum between two poles: acceptance and contestation of the established order. This continuum shifts with the changing balance of power between opposing classes, moving between submission to the dominant forces and the formation of subaltern autonomy.

Second, Modonesi stands out as the first Gramscian scholar to rekindle attention to the concept of autonomy in Gramsci's thought. His rediscovery of this notion diverges both from autonomist political traditions—though often in dialogue with them—and from thinkers who shaped Western Marxism, such as Antonio Negri or John Holloway. For Modonesi, autonomy signifies the oppressed classes' capacity for political self-organization and for developing their own worldview in opposition to that of the ruling classes. This process of subjectivation is complex and marked by contradictions: traces of subalternity endure, yet what ultimately emerges is the power to “stand upright,” to no longer kneel before authority. Modonesi's interpretation finds a vivid literary parallel in José Saramago's (2012) *Raised from the Ground (Levantado do chão)*,¹ which recounts the story of a poor Portuguese peasant family enduring hardship under latifundium (large, landed estate capitalism) and the Salazarist dictatorship. Spanning the period from the early twentieth century to the Carnation Revolution, the novel's title metaphorically encapsulates the protagonists' political awakening—their gradual rise from subjugation to autonomy through collective struggle and growing consciousness. Modonesi meticulously traces and recovers the notion of autonomy from Gramsci's council-period writings. Therefore, contrary to interpretations that minimize its later significance, he demonstrates the concept's enduring presence in the *Prison Notebooks* (Gramsci [1929–1935] 2011), highlighting its central role in identifying the organizational and ideological conditions that allow subaltern groups to break free from subordination and contest the hegemony of society. The author shows the continuity of Gramsci's reflections on autonomy, tracing them from his early writings to the more mature elaborations developed during his imprisonment under fascism. The concept of autonomy captures two key dimensions. First, it denotes the creation of spaces for and by subaltern groups, even under oppressive conditions, allowing the formation of organizations that can challenge power. Second, it manifests in the pursuit of a fully autonomous society, governed by its members and free from class domination, a realization Gramsci identifies as the ultimate expression of workers' political hegemony.

¹ This connection with Saramago's novel is my own interpretation and does not appear in Modonesi's book.

Third, Modonesi aims to move beyond understanding hegemony merely as the dominance of ruling classes. He reconceives it as integral to the political subjectivation of subaltern groups, showing how hegemony shapes the conditions for forming a lasting collective will which is capable of challenging capitalist power. In this sense, he frames hegemony not only as domination but also as the terrain for building counter-hegemony—the organized power of the oppressed against the oppressors. The book thus encourages a shift away from “hegemonistic” readings of Gramsci, such as those typical of structuralism or post-Marxism (such as Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe), which emphasize hegemony alone as a top-down logic of domination. Modonesi highlights the subjective and antagonistic dimensions of hegemony: how the contestation of powers produces new political actors and transforms the dynamics of society. Central to this perspective is the formation of struggling subjects, reflecting Gramsci’s project of providing a political framework for oppressed classes and their path toward collective autonomy. Viewed through the lens of subaltern struggle, hegemony acquires a dual dimension. It signifies, first, the process of expansion of the working-class subject through alliances with other oppressed groups (horizontal dimension), and second, the internal self-constitution of the class mediated by its autonomy (vertical dimension). Modonesi thus offers a framework for reinterpreting and rebuilding political alliances amid the fragmentation of the contemporary working class. Gramsci’s relevance, in this light, lies in his capacity to inspire the recomposition of exploited subjects and their recognition as a potential ruling force, capable of imagining a post-capitalist (and socialist) order. In contrast to today’s technocratic and depoliticized models of governance, Modonesi—following Gramsci—envisions a politics that unites scattered and often conflicting realities, fostering autonomy, collective consciousness, and the capacity to act. Hegemony, freed from scholastic rigidity and scholastic Marxism, emerges here as the practical realization of Marx’s idea of proletarian democracy.

Therefore, the book’s first three chapters trace the conceptual evolution of the triad *subalternity–autonomy–hegemony*. The final chapter turns to Gramsci’s notion of *passive revolution*, explaining how ruling classes deploy processes of demobilization and desubjectivation to neutralize subaltern struggles. Modonesi offers an original reinterpretation of this concept, framing it as the capacity to obstruct emancipation itself. Throughout, the work portrays the formation of political subjectivity as dynamic and conflictual rather than linear or complete. The three stages of the emancipatory process—from subordination to revolutionary agency—are marked by tension, contradiction, and uneven progress. Subalternity can persist within revolt or revolution; autonomy is fragile and must be continually renewed; and even hegemony, once achieved, can prove temporary. The central question remains: How can these fragile openings become the foundation for a lasting alternative?

Modonesi underscores the central role of *autonomy* as the mediating link between subalternity and hegemony. Political thought confined to subalternity—however rich in local acts of resistance or group solidarity—remains trapped in dependence and cannot advance toward emancipation. In my view, this limitation can be seen in James C. Scott’s (1990) anthropological notion of “infrapolitics”—the subtle, often invisible forms of resistance that escape state control—and in Ernst F. Schumacher’s ([1973] 1999) celebration of the “small is beautiful” paradigm. The same problem extends to poststructuralist approaches that frame politics through “molecular” or “rhizomatic”

metaphors, as well as to deconstructionist perspectives, which remain trapped in critique without advancing a constructive alternative. This is subalternity without autonomy.

Conversely, political thought that absolutizes hegemony as its only goal loses the grounding of autonomy and quickly drifts toward electoral opportunism or militant isolation. History offers numerous examples of revolutionary movements undone either by their absorption into electoral politics or by the self-referential logic of the production of violence itself. Modonesi places his criticism of Laclau and Mouffe's interpretation of Gramsci in this field, or for example the decline of political parties like "Podemos" in Spain.

Fourth, with Modonesi's volume, it becomes possible to envision the foundations of a *neo-Marxist* current for twenty-first-century political sociology and social movement studies. His work outlines a conceptual framework that distinguishes between subaltern, autonomous, and hegemonic moments in the formation of collective subjectivities and actions. Through this lens, the dynamics of struggle and mobilization can be analysed not as linear progressions of class consciousness, but as complex, conflictual processes against the grain and marked by contradictions, advances, and regressions in the working class's path from subalternity to hegemony. Modonesi's contribution thus invites a rethinking of the Marxist concept of class struggle—beginning with Gramsci—by emphasizing the ways in which collective action produces political subjectivation. This book also deserves prompt translation into English, as it provides a powerful Marxist counterpoint to mainstream Western political science, which continues to rely on supposedly "neutral" analytical categories. In recent years in academic literature on social movements (Neveu 2004), an approach characteristic of empirical political science has increasingly been adopted, treating social subjects as "players" within a neutral "arena" of individualistic interests, often overlooking the social stratification of power (Jasper 2010, 2020). James M. Jasper and Jan Willem Duyvendak's *Players and Arenas* (2015) is a prominent example of critique against the use of categories such as "player" and "arena," while recovering concepts more deeply rooted in the "social question" through a revised application of Gramsci's thought, drawing on the neo-Gramscian approach of Modonesi's book. Unlike the postmodern approaches that treat human action as neutral, within this perspective, the social sciences of conflict are revitalized, developing a political and social theory across macro and micro frameworks: from subalternity to hegemony, passing through the autonomous constitution of the antagonistic subject. Modonesi's focus is on class, race, gender inequalities, reinvigorating sociological discussions on political doctrines driving Gramscian interpretation of collective action.

Finally, Modonesi's interpretation of Gramsci critically engages with radical subalternist and autonomist theories that often reject any organized, collective, or institutional articulation of political agency. At the same time, Modonesi is equally critical of top-down perspectives that attempt to construct political subjects from above—approaches that fail to empower the oppressed or resolve the political question with only the construction of leadership and production of political communication. With Gramsci, Modonesi clarifies the dynamics of revolutionary subject formation, revitalizing Marxist theory to confront the challenges of the twenty-first century. His reading of Gramsci avoids essentialist distortions and instead provides conceptual tools for understanding the complexity of contemporary politics. In this framework, hegemony without

autonomy inevitably slides into opportunism and the pale reformism of centre-left parties that still call themselves “socialist,” as well as the stagnation of minor radical parties whose survival depends on alliances with the political centre. Likewise, subalternity without autonomy is condemned to defeat and marginalization—an outcome that characterizes certain micro experiences of everyday resistance which, though admirable, remain confined to their narrow circles due to an excessively closed identity and mistrust of a broader coordination of social struggle.

Conclusion

Modonesi’s *Gramsci and the Political Subject* stands as one of the most ambitious and conceptually rigorous attempts in contemporary Marxist scholarship to rethink political subjectivation through a Gramscian lens. By reconstructing the triad of subalternity, autonomy, and hegemony, and by reinterpreting passive revolution from the standpoint of the oppressed, Modonesi offers a theoretical architecture capable of confronting the political dilemmas of the twenty-first century. What emerges from his analysis is not a closed system but an open, dialectical framework that situates the making of political subjects within historical processes marked by uneven development, contradiction, and struggle.

A central merit of the book lies in its refusal to idealize the formation of political actors. Instead of romanticizing spontaneity or celebrating plurality for its own sake, Modonesi insists that political subjectivation is always fragile, contested, and vulnerable to reversal. This attention to fragility is especially important today, when many movements oscillate between explosive moments of collective empowerment and rapid cycles of demobilization. By foregrounding autonomy as the indispensable hinge between subalternity and hegemony, Modonesi reminds us that no emancipatory project can succeed without sustained organizational practices, ideological clarity, and antagonistic positioning.

The book also offers a powerful critique of dominant trends in social movement research and political sociology, exposing the limitations of approaches that reduce collective action to strategic interactions among neutral “players.” In contrast, Modonesi places class, domination, and social conflict back at the core of analysis, recovering a sense of historical depth that has been largely lost in mainstream political science. His work thus serves as an invitation to re-politicize the study of collective action, restoring attention to power asymmetries, organizational labour, and the *longue durée* of political formation.

What ultimately gives Modonesi’s contribution its force is its double orientation: it is both a rigorous reconstruction of Gramsci’s conceptual universe and a creative intervention into contemporary debates. By reading Gramsci not as a philosopher of consent but as a theorist of struggle, Modonesi provides tools to think beyond the paralyzing alternatives that dominate current theory—the romanticization of micro-resistance on one side, and the technocratic fetishization of governance on the other. His work reaffirms the centrality of collective will, organization, and antagonism at a time when political imagination is constrained by neoliberal fatalism.

In this sense, *Gramsci and the Political Subject* is more than a book about Gramsci: it is a contribution to a new Marxist political sociology capable of diagnosing the crises of our

era and envisioning the conditions under which subaltern groups may once again rise, organize, and assert themselves as historical protagonists.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on Contributor

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