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Published on H-Environment (June, 2024)

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In June 2022, ExxonMobil published its plans for “decommissioning” some of the nineteen off-shore oil and gas platforms it has constructed and maintained in the Bass Strait, the sea channel that lies between mainland Australia and the island of Tasmania. “As the operator of some of Australia’s most mature oil and gas fields,” the plans state, ExxonMobil “continue[s] to focus on safely shutting-down facilities as they reach the end of their productive life.”[1] In energy-sector parlance, “maturity” describes a condition of diminished productivity that heralds a field’s “economic limit.”[2] But for ExxonMobil, a metaphors of the life cycle also helps nurture a wider sense of the supposed “benefits” of extractive infrastructure. “The platform jackets that have been in place for several decades,” reads the decommissioning report, “provides [sic] opportunities for marine ecosystems to develop which otherwise wouldn’t exist.”

Having stewarded its Bass Strait “assets” from youth to old age, ExxonMobil finds itself not just unharmful but also favorable to the ocean: a developer of novel ecosystems, an installer of life in the void.[3]

The document’s cynicism is glaring. Less obvious, perhaps, is its expression of a specific—and specifically oceanic—historical confluence of imperialism and capitalism. For help characterizing this confluence we have *Gramsci at Sea*, the interdisciplinary geographer Sharad Chari’s short, rigorous, and above all generous new book. “The extractivism of state and capital,” writes Chari, “is shaped by colonial histories that configure postcolonial realities, one way or the other.” If this has been true with regard to—for instance—fishing and mining, it pertains as well to “extraction through the tech-mediated digital ocean,” which for all its pretensions to novelty “is not free of the imperial past” (p. 37). What makes *Gramsci at Sea* so useful, and so timely, is the care it brings to the question of how imperio-capitalism gives rise to distinctive shapes and configurations across, and below, the waterline. Pushing critique “beyond terracentrism,” Chari works toward and with the sea’s particular waves, currents, and accumulations (p. 44). So doing, he offers us not only an urgent reminder of the value of critical theory for ocean studies but also a vital vocabulary for describing history’s submerged forms.

Foremost among Chari’s many and various interlocutors is of course Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937), the Sardinian Communist, parliamentarian, and—under Benito Mussolini—political prisoner whose posthumously published *Prison Notebooks (Quaderni del carcere, 1948-51)* registered a subtle sense of entanglement between political economy and culture. The *Prison Notebooks* “help us,” in Chari’s account, “link the cri-
tique of capitalism and revolution with insurgent cultural forms in the hope of galvanizing collective political will” (p. xii). Gramsci was arrested by the Fascists in 1926. When his carceral writings explicitly address the sea, they engage what Chari calls a “specific interwar ocean” located at the historical intersection of British and American maritime hegemonies (p. 5). But if Chari is attentive to the *Prison Notebooks*’ overt sea subjects, he is at least as concerned with their wider, and deeper, marine character: with Gramsci “as a thinker of particular oceanic conjunctures but also as a thinker whose method is ‘oceanic’” (p. xii). This interpenetrative oceanity—this “also”—is what *Gramsci at Sea* sets out to delineate and refresh in view of the crises that afflict our oceanic planet today.

To accomplish this, Chari first describes a “submerged oceanic moment in Gramsci’s thought,” a moment that inflects our understanding of not only the thinker himself but also the challenges he has posed to conventional Marxisms. Chapter 1, “Gramsci and the Sea,” brings to the surface an important discrepancy between the “stratigraphic” and “terracentric aims and metaphors of the Marxist tradition” and the *Prison Notebooks*’ preference for a terraqueous sensibility attuned to spatiotemporal multiplicity (p. 2). Here Chari turns to the poet, historian, and theorist Kamau Brathwaite, whose “tidalectic” conception of relation and history has been a crucial heuristic for reckoning—in the curator and critic Stefanie Hessler’s words—“oceanic worldviews that do not succumb to borders or yearn for certainty in static and established epistemological and ontological positions.”[4] We might observe a Gramscian tidalectics at work, for example, in the *Prison Notebooks*’ sensitivity to not only what gets supplanted by but also what *persists through* waves of historical change, such as the apparent replacement of British by American maritime-imperial hegemony. Moreover, we might see such a tidalectics operating in what Chari characterizes as Gramsci’s distinctive “attention to how struggles and their intertwined concept-work accumulate, erasing and conserving elements on new shores” (p. 39).

This complex interplay of erasure, conservation, and accumulation is crucial for comprehending how “the past shapes the present in nonlinear and nonteleological ways” (p. 25). Chapter 2, “The Oceanic Question,” pays special heed to the *Prison Notebooks*’ theory of “passive revolution,” which denotes a “process”—to quote Gramsci’s editor, David Forgacs—“whereby a social group comes to power without rupturing the social fabric ... but rather by adapting to it and gradually modifying it.”[5] Chari employs passive revolution, brilliantly, to interpret the so-called blue economy as really a dressing-up of capital “in blue-green environmental garb,” a “political, economic, and ideological reshaping of the vast majority of our planet ... into a frontier for corporate plunder in the name of the planet and its denizens” (p. 23). Thus, for instance, the protocols of seabed mining in general and of the International Seabed Authority in particular: that ostensible regulator is really “a handmaiden,” writes Chari, “to deepened exploitation” (p. 22). And this applies, no less, to the rhetorical and imaginative conjuring performed by ExxonMobil in the Bass Strait, where the literal clinging of oceanic life to oil and gas infrastructures is figured as testifying to the real ecological virtue of extractive industry.

Chari is training our attention on a series of “objects”—the blue economy, seabed mining, and so forth—not so much to corroborate their power as to reveal their contingent, heterogeneous, and substantially incoherent characters. They are “conjunctures,” in Gramscian terminology, which render structural conditions and *contradictions* momentarily visible and—what is most important—contestable. If this might appear to be moving us in the direction of a neat hierarchy of (trifling) surface phenomenon and (weighty) substrate, the reality is more complicated, and more satisfying. It is exactly at the level of the conjuncture, wrote
Gramsci, “that the forces of opposition organize.”[6] By taking critique “below the waterline,” Chari animates volumes of relation: between substructure and superstructure, to be sure, but also between past and present, struggle and hegemony, and so on (p. 44). “Just One Last Watery Ghost-Dance?” is the title of his third chapter, which goes deep to problematize the dyadic—and essentially terracentric—metaphorics of Karl Marx’s famous personification of capital and land (terre). Extrapolating from the work of the anthropologist and historian Fernando Coronil, Chari alerts us to the widespread hazard of “a background terracentrism, a land-sea binarism not unlike West-rest or Self-other,” as well as to the “waves of imperial power” that have exploited and reproduced such dualisms (pp. 44-45).

A volumetric sense of historical and sociopolitical relation affords Chari insights into the operations of hegemony, certainly, but no less to the “submerged legacies of popular struggle that might surface at various opportune moments” (p. 17). A fourth and final chapter, “The Storm,” asks how the marine works of a diverse crew of Black artists and critics—including the electronic music duo Drexciya, the painter and collagist Ellen Gallagher, the filmmaker John Akomfrah, and the scholar Katherine McKittrick—apprehend and configure unanticipated possibilities for worlds of oceanic difference. Theirs are historical projects, but not in a narrowly back-gazing or reconstructive sense. They dive, instead, for the presences that persist through processes of change that both cancel and retain—both corrode and preserve—what has gone before. The Gramscian word for this is (something like) “sublation,” which pertains not only to “the realm of the ideological” but also to “embodied, material, [and] spatial” forms—and which suggests that “the strike,” ‘abolition,’ ‘the international,’ and the anti-ecocidal” are not bygone ideologies but “imperatives” that “are still with us” (pp. 69, 72).

These rich, strange currents of continuance are, as Gramsci at Sea convincingly shows, exceptionally well suited to thinking relation oceanically. The foregoing paragraphs have only hinted at the scope and liveliness of the conversation Chari orchestrates among critical ocean studies, (agrarian and other) Marxist political economy, Black studies, marine geography, and more. One of the things that conversation represents is the vitality, and the necessity, of exchanges among, for example, the “blue” environmental humanities and critical theory, fields of thought and practice that have often appeared incongruous and have occasionally been construed as antithetical.[7] As we reckon more deeply and more thoroughly with the histories that give oceanic objects form—and with the waters that are always reforming them in turn—it is our good fortune to be equipped with this text. The rhythms of its thought will reverberate ongoingly.

Notes


[7]. For instance, a 2004 essay featuring an early instance of Marcus Rediker’s ongoingly influential coinage “terracentric” also features a brief but pointed polemic against “the so-called ‘linguistic turn.’” See Rediker, “Toward a People’s History of the Sea,” in *Maritime Empires: British Imperial Maritime Trade in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. David Killingray, Margarett Lincoln, and Nigel Rigby (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2004), 199.

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**Citation:** Killian Colm Quigley. Review of Chari, Sharad, *Gramsci at Sea*. H-Environment, H-Net Reviews. June, 2024.

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