



Gramsci Project(s)

by [Paddy Johnson](#)



To form an opinion about Thomas Hirschhorn's GRAMSCI MONUMENT, you only have to hear about it. In my first significant conversation about the project, a curator friend lit up as she excitedly told me Hirschhorn would host a daily lecture by philosopher Marcus Steinweg for the residents of Forest Houses, a housing project in the Bronx. Whatever the rest of the work was about, I instantly had concerns. The value of imposing scholarship on a group that would likely have few means of interpreting it seemed limited at best. After all, wouldn't such alienating lectures do more to discourage people from self-education than encourage it?

Even after I visited, that question lingered, but the monument itself, commissioned by DIA, does a good job of bringing diverse communities together. In early May, the President of the Resident Association of Forest Houses, Erik Farmer, approved the public work and residents began construction. A staff member told me that Forest Houses was the only housing project in the city to approve it.

The temporary structure (up through September 15) is basically a taped together community center that resembles a sprawling tree house. It's situated in the courtyard and includes a library, education center, stage, (dry) bar, newspaper room, and radio station, almost all of which were in use when I visited. For art's part, the stairs, couches, and shelves were covered with brown packing tape, a Hirschhorn trademark; he has famously transformed galleries with the material for years. And of course, Hirschhorn's longstanding interest in philosophy and Gramsci show up, taking the form of plaques, quotes on banners, and his frequent collaborator, the philosopher Marcus Steinweg. Even Gramsci's personal affects from prison—a hairbrush and a pair of shoes among them—are given vitrines.

I suspect the sense of ownership that comes with community construction has something to do with the general vibe of the monument; there wasn't a soul who didn't want to chat, whether or not I invited it. "I'm Stan the Man!" one friendly staff member told me, introducing himself as I walked by. He worked the bar, which was a particularly active site for conversation. A bunch of us spent a while talking about where we were from and how cheap the food they were serving was. (Three bucks for a plate of rice and fried fish is a good deal!)

There's probably no good way to say this, but the reason I enjoyed this conversation (and countless others) was simply because I was having it. I've lived across from Lafayette Gardens in Brooklyn for 11 years, and it takes quite a bit to get the white people to talk to the black people. I harbor a reasonable amount of white liberal shame for this, so it was a relief to spend some time in a place where some of that racial tension was

eased, even if the guilt isn't.

This would probably make Antonio Gramsci happy. The philosopher and onetime leader of the Italian Communist Community in the 1920s believed that while hegemony may be impossible to escape, we could foster counter-hegemonies. Anyone can improve his or her quality of life through self-organization and self-education. It's impossible to say if Hirschhorn achieved this, but there was at least more activity on the site than there was before.

Whether that has anything to do with philosophy, though, is questionable. The library was empty, and a worker running a lawn mower nearby the lecture I attended made it difficult to hear Steinweg's already impenetrable talk about criticism. Hirschhorn has to know that these lectures, which take place outside and by nature aren't easily accessible, wouldn't be absorbed well by many in the audience.

Still, as I left the site, I turned back to get a last look at a hand-painted banner hung across a constructed overpass: "Destruction is difficult. It is as difficult as creation." (Antonio Gramsci, Prison Notebooks). I assumed the quote spoke to hegemony and the difficulty it takes to dismantle it, but whatever the case, it seemed unlikely many people would interpret it that way. Mostly I thought of the quote as a reminder that come September 15, the monument will be dismantled, and the conversation will stop.

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