José Martí and Antonio Gramsci: 
The World as a Radical Geography

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Abstract: This paper lays the ground for a novel discussion on the encounter between José Martí and Antonio Gramsci. It argues that Martí and Gramsci can be profitably and innovatively read together when interrogating the profound “spatial articulations” that animate their political vision. The discussion principally focuses on Martí’s concept of Our America and Gramsci’s Southern Question. Methodologically, the article deploys a “diachronic tactic” that mobilises a broad body of literature that emerged long after Martí’s and Gramsci’s lives, particularly considering contributions within Radical Geography and Postcolonial Studies.

Resumen: Este trabajo sienta las bases para una discusión novedosa sobre el encuentro entre José Martí y Antonio Gramsci. Sostiene que Martí y Gramsci pueden leerse conjuntamente de forma provechosa e innovadora al interrogar las profundas “articulaciones espaciales” que animan sus visiones políticas. La discusión se centra principalmente en el concepto de Nuestra América de Martí y en la Cuestión Meridional de Gramsci. Metodológicamente, el artículo despliega una “táctica diacrónica” que moviliza un amplio corpus de literatura que surgió mucho después de las vidas de Martí y Gramsci, considerando particularmente las contribuciones dentro de la Geografía Radical y de los Estudios Postcoloniales.

Keywords: Antonio Gramsci, José Martí, radical geography, postcolonial studies, Latin America, critical geography

Introduction

At first glance, José Martí’s and Antonio Gramsci’s lives are not strictly contemporary. Their existence overlapped for only four years: Gramsci was born in 1891 and Martí died in 1895. Most significantly, their lives matured in extremely distant contexts such as colonial Cuba and post-unification Italy, seeking also diverse political objectives like the independence from Spain (Martí) and the anti-fascist struggle—within a Marxist perspective (Gramsci). From this angle, the only element they seem to have in common is a devoted political commitment to their cause, which brought them to a premature end of their life. These are probably the reasons why their lives and works have never systematically been placed one next to the other in search of similarities, connections, and consonances. This paper aims to break this silence and lay the ground for a novel discussion on the encounter between these two major intellectual and political figures. The paper argues that Martí and Gramsci can start being profitably and innovatively read together when interrogating the profound “spatial articulations” that animate their work.
The paper investigates three areas of thought that are at the core of the authors’ analysis, all of which are characterised by a spatial articulation of politics. First, it uncovers the geographical insights embedded in foundational notions such as Gramsci’s *Southern Question* and Martí’s *Our America*. Second, it debates Gramsci’s and Martí’s reflections on race, particularly focusing on its relations with the Gramscian concept of subaltern and considering its spatial manifestations. Third, and relatedly, the paper examines how the two authors assigned political centrality to culture, illuminating the related socio-spatial aspects. The dialogue between Martí and Gramsci is here particularly understood in relation to the recent discussions concerning the spatialisation of knowledge production. Over the past few years, there have been several attempts to open up the discipline of geography to different approaches and perspectives that had been ignored or neglected by the Western/Euro-North American geographical canons. Scholars have unveiled the presence of “other geographical traditions” (Ferretti 2019), attempting to think from *elsewhere* (e.g. Craggs and Neate 2020; McFarlane 2021; Oswin 2020), and proposing “pluriversal dialogues” for the future of the discipline (Ferretti and Barrera de la Torre 2023). Within this wave of critique, the concept of subaltern has been frequently used to underline the subordinate or oppressed socio-spatial location of systems of geographical thought and practice (Armston-Sheret 2023; Jazeel and Legg 2019). In relation to that, this paper enacts a double movement. On the one hand, it elaborates a reading of Martí that, probably for the first time, sheds light on the solid and generative geographical components of his work, connecting the Cuban with the scholarship engaged with critical approaches to geography and in so doing contributing to decentring the traditional spaces of knowledge production. On the other hand, by delving into a comparison between the two authors, the paper reiterates the importance of highlighting the pronounced “Southern” dimension of Gramsci (Harootunian 2020; Nairn 1982; Young 2012), that is, a thinker who speaks about (and to) the specific socio-spatial configurations of power from which his work unfolded—in this case, the Southern/peripheral conditions characterising Sardinia after the unification of Italy—suggesting that his work should be read as a reflection that arose *simultaneously* within and beyond the West. Thus, the discussion actively engages with contemporary efforts to scrutinise the manifold making of geographical knowledge by specifically problematising and destabilising the locations of its production. The paper argues that, instead of following the temptation of applying a Gramscian lens to Martí’s work, it is this reflection on the geographies of knowledge production that makes it possible to start a productive connection between two allegedly distant and diverse figures like José Martí and Antonio Gramsci.

Methodologically, the paper deploys a “diachronic tactic” that mobilises a body of literature that emerged *long after* Martí’s and Gramsci’s lives. That is, it highlights those works that, especially within the Anglophone context, have contributed to critically rethinking geography over the past few decades. The paper specifically refers to two broad and interconnected streams of research. First, it considers the scholarship of Radical Geography, which exerted a thorough critique of geography as a “scientific” discipline and uncovered its imperial
foundations, therefore dismantling the alleged universality of Western geographical knowledge (Gregory 1994; Harvey 2001; Kobayashi 2003; Livingstone 1992; Massey 2005; Mignolo 2005); in particular, it makes use of works that have recently been in close connection with Gramsci’s spatial concepts and analyses (Ekers et al. 2013; Hart 2002, 2018; Jessop 2005; Loftus 2019). Second, the paper engages with Postcolonial Studies—a piece of scholarship in many aspects close to Radical Geography but not restricted to its theoretical and disciplinary borders. Here, an essential reference is that of Edward Said who, very much inspired by Gramscian insights, advanced a groundbreaking examination of the Eurocentric stances laying at the basis of geographical images such as that of the “Orient” (Said 1978, 1993). Within the context of Postcolonial Studies, this delves into the heterogeneous group of authors associated with Subaltern Studies, who used the Gramscian concept of “subaltern” for historical purposes (Guha 1983, 1997; Guha and Spivak 1988; Spivak 1988), and with Cultural Studies, who influenced by Gramscian concepts investigated the socio-political dynamics of power by exploring their cultural configurations (Barker 2003; Hall 1980, 1986, 2002; Saldivar 1991; Young 2012). I contend that this diachronic tactic can profitably illuminate the consonances and radical symmetries that broadly define Martí’s and Gramsci’s political thought.

**Geographical (In)sights**

Martí’s and Gramsci’s oeuvres comprise a vast and complex fragmentation of concepts, ideas, and texts whose systematisation has always presented a complex and onerous task for scholars. Such a fragmentation is the result of the extremely precarious conditions in which they lived and which, nonetheless, did not prevent them from incessantly formulating and disseminating their thought throughout their brief existence, and well beyond. While the debate about this fascinating yet unfinished task of systematisation is beyond the scope of this paper, the discussion will start by focusing on two major notions that are at the heart of their work: Martí’s “Our America” (Nuestra América) and Gramsci’s “Southern Question”.

Arguably, José Martí is not adequately known in the non-Hispanic world. Born in Havana in 1853, he was an extraordinary poet, politician, and journalist of his time. He invested all his energies to achieve Cuban independence from Spain, the island being, along with Puerto Rico, one of the last Spanish colonies in the Americas at the end of the 19th century. His active participation in the independence movement led him to exile at the age of 18; he spent some years in Spain first (1871–1874), then he moved across several Latin American countries (1875–1880) and, except for some brief interruptions to prepare and take part in the independence wars, he settled in New York for the last 15 years of his life (1880–1895). Martí did not outlive his mission. The Spanish army killed him on the Cuban battlefield in 1895, at the very beginning of a war he had organised (“The Necessary War” / La Guerra Necesaria, 1895–1898). While the essay Our America was published only in 1891, its long genealogy can be traced through his eventful biography. In particular, the multiple travels and stays across the American
regions made him realise the existence of two Americas (Rodríguez 2007): one stretching above Mexico and defined by a new socio-economic model that, not least, included imperialist ambitions; the other extending from Mexico to the south of the region and consisting in a less clear—in socio-political terms—territorial fragmentation that would soon face the imperial threat posed by the northern neighbour. He named the latter “Our America”.

It is during the stay in New York—which can be seen as a period of political and intellectual maturity—that Martí gradually began to view the United States as a powerful and aggressive imperial machine; residing in its socio-political and economic epicentre made him eventually formulate the famous testamentary words on the eve of his death: “I have lived in the monster and I know its entrails” (Martí 2007b:253). Yet, the revelation of Our America (Fernández Retamar 2006:117–131) involved a more articulated process that can be divided into several phases. Pedro Pablo Rodríguez divides this path into three significative stages that span across his long Latin American exile: while the period in Mexico (1875–1877) “represented the encounter with the reality of the [Latin American] continent”, the stay in Guatemala (1877–1878) offered “the revelation of the socio-historical identity of the region” and, finally, the brief stay in Venezuela (1881) made clear the “necessity of social transformations in order to gain the continental fulfilment” (Rodríguez 2007:134–135). Finally, Rodríguez notes that the years in New York would eventually uncover the “tragical dimension” of Our America, resulting from the realisation of the United States’ imperial ambitions (ibid.). For Martí, Our America was the only possibility of defence, that is, a historical necessity.

However, the project of Our America was not only a matter of mere political cohesion, but it also entailed something more complicated and ambitious at the same time; it was the deployment of a broader socio-political and cultural plan that could be able to “articulate identity formations that cross ethnic as well as national dividing lines” (Belnap and Fernández 1998b:15). In forging Our America, Martí explicitly builds on Simón Bolívar’s Latin Americanist project. During his brief stay in Venezuela in 1881, in a letter written to his friend Fausto Teodoro de Aldrey, he firmly declared: “I am the son of America: to her I owe myself. And of that America whose revelation, agitation, and urgent foundation I dedicate myself, this is the cradle” (Martí 2011a:268). As noted by Fernández Retamar, the “this” in the quote precisely refers to Venezuela (Fernández Retamar 2006:122), Bolívar’s birthplace and hence the birthplace of Latin America’s unifying project. In another letter written in Guatemala in 1877, Martí described Our America as an “unknown giant” inspired by “Bolívar’s soul” and expressed concerns about regional conflicts and rivalries, wondering how Latin Americans could “resist the lovely voices that proclaim American unity” and concluding by declaring that his priority is “to study” America’s “strengths and reveal them” (Martí 2011b:111–112). However, the explicit reference here is to what he considered as the “American America” (quoted in Estrade 2000:658), in contrast to the “European America” (quoted in Fernández Retamar 2006:19), that is, the United States. These words make it clear that his understanding of Latin America is dynamic and in constant (re)definition. Rather than naturalising the region’s geographical characters and features, he conceives it as a space that is at stake and needs to be
studied and revealed, therefore consisting in a geography that is far from being given. This brief outline of Martí’s thought should already suggest some connections with Gramsci’s Southern Question.

Some Aspects of the Southern Question, an essay written in 1926, is a text where Gramsci examines the profound asymmetries between North and South Italy. Gramsci points out that Northern intellectuals perpetuate the North’s dominant position over the South by deploying stereotypical and distorted images of the South in a way in which post-unification Italy’s socio-political and economic asymmetries are justified and naturalised. Gramsci sharply observed that “the South [of Italy] can be defined as a great social disintegration”, specifying that “the Southern peasants are in perpetual ferment, but as a mass they are incapable of giving a centralised expression to their aspirations and needs” (Gramsci 1978:454). Peter Mayo noted that this is a fundamental text for comprehending Gramscian analysis, as it constitutes a sort of introduction to his Prison Notebooks, which are fully permeated by the insights contained in this essay (Mayo 2009:209–210). Robert Young further emphasised that “the gigantic and difficult task of the Prison Notebooks was essentially designed to solve the problem with which Gramsci was preoccupied in the Southern Question: how to produce a new form of cultural hegemony that would bring together the workers of the North with the peasants of the South in a socialist political formation” (Young 2012:24). Thus, it is worth noting that Gramsci’s spatial thinking is not an element limited to the pre-prison writings, but it actually crosses and defines his whole theoretical production. He famously claimed in the Notebooks:

The “poverty” of the South was “historically” inexplicable to the Northern popular masses: they did not understand that unity had not been created on a basis of equality, but as a hegemony of the North over the South in a city–country territorial relation; in other words, that the North was a “parasite” which enriched itself at the expense of the South, that industrial development was dependent on the impoverishment of Southern agriculture. Instead they thought that if the South made no progress after being freed from the obstacles that Bourbon rule had placed in the way of modern development, this meant that the causes of the poverty were not external but internal. (Gramsci 1992a:143–144)

The territorial conceptualisation and analysis of the Sardinian intellectual have, I argue, remarkable resonances with Martí’s effort to theorise Our America starting from its very spatial articulations. Precisely, they both conceive the spaces they examine in relation to others, the “Norths”, which, instead of uncritically representing successful models to follow, are interpreted as a set of hierarchical relations resulting from sophisticated combinations of social, political, and, not least, cultural factors that are spatially articulated. Both Martí and Gramsci are reluctant to think of development as a linear process and, accordingly, share a common refusal to naturalise “underdevelopment”, proposing in its place an idea of politics that is the result of specific socio-historical conditions—and related social struggles—in each region. Moreover, there is a crucial biographical similarity; while Martí moved from the “peripheral” Cuba to New York, the “core” of the United States, Gramsci left a largely rural and socio-economically “remote” place such as
Sardinia at the age of 20 to live in Turin, one of the most important industrial centres in a country that was still fundamentally rural. From those urban centralities, they both reformulated their ideas. Considering their lived experience, and far from applying any kind of determinist approach, Martí and Gramsci engaged with spatio-historical interpretations of politics that are defined by an inevitably temporary and dynamic nature; namely, geographies—sub-national areas, regions, and continents—that are constantly at stake. This aspect inevitably connects with the literature on critical geography, which has precisely theorised such a socio-historical dimension of space (Harvey 2001; Lefebvre 1991; Massey 2005; for a close reading of Gramsci and Lefebvre, see Kipfer 2008).

However, these considerations, as well as the whole work of tracing similarities and connections between the two authors, need to be understood within the remarkable differences that distance them. And this is an important point to take into consideration within what, at first glance, might appear as a surprising and nebulous comparison. Above all, it is worth stressing that Martí was never Marxist. He labelled socialism as a solution “born from European evils” and therefore “unable to heal in the Amazon jungle” (Martí 2011h:160), somehow implicitly recognising the limits of Marxist thought in colonial and early postcolonial environments at that time (e.g. Fernández Retamar 2006:80–104), an issue that, some decades later, Gramsci’s innovative version of Marxism would significantly help address. In any case, Martí’s thought and his (dream of) Republic were certainly classless and he did not endorse the project of subverting society in the way European Marxism did. In that respect, as far as Latin America is concerned, an essential figure that could be understood as a bridge between the “European evils” and the “Amazon jungle” is the Peruvian José Carlos Mariátegui (1894–1930), who renovated Marxist theory in a way that could respond to the postcolonial structure of Peru, addressing questions regarding the national socio-spatial asymmetries, primarily focusing on the marginal (and racialised) condition of the Indigenous population. Not by chance, many works, and from different perspectives, have indeed explored the interesting connections between Mariátegui and Gramsci, especially considering their innovative and spatial formulations of Marxism (e.g. Fernández-Díaz 1991; Mignolo 2013; Portantiero 1991). Nonetheless, Marxism is clearly a substantial difference that separates the work of Gramsci and Martí—and my argument here is certainly not that of considering Gramsci as a sort of soft-cultural theorist, thus neglecting the openly Marxist and revolutionary foundations of his thought. What is, however, worth noting within their oeuvre is the obstinate search for a radical socio-spatial and political renovation that could eventually shake off the architecture of conservative societies and free the oppressed, exploited, and marginalised subjects upon which those societies were structured. After all, Martí showed genuine respect and admiration for Marx when, in an article written in La Nación after the German philosopher’s death, he solemnly affirmed: “Karl Marx is dead. He deserves to be honoured for declaring himself on the side of the weak ... Karl Marx studied the methods of setting the world on new foundations, and wakened those who were asleep, and showed them how to cast down the broken props” (Martí 2007d:47–48). If, instead of considering the adhesion to Marxist ideas (but still marking their crucial
importance for the intellectual and political context), we explore the connections with related but more “postcolonial” questions regarding race and subalternity in the two authors—as will be done later in the article—the proximity between Martí and Gramsci will become significantly more evident.

As to Gramsci’s reception in the Anglophone world, his work has inspired a substantial body of critical scholarship since the *Prison Notebooks’* translation in the 1970s (see Buttigieg 2018) to the extent that, in the mid-1990s, the Italian Giorgio Baratta began to observe a particular and progressive interest around the “deep geographic sense” recurring in the Sardinian’s reflections, asking whether “we should go beyond this [interest] and wondering—as scholars have recently started to do—whether Gramsci’s thought is actually a very modern appropriation of ‘spatial’ and ‘territorial’ questions that permeate society and unsettle the world” (Baratta 1995:14). Baratta’s insight was certainly generated by Edward Said’s decisive engagement with Gramsci’s North/South relations (Said 1978, 1993) which made the Sardinian an essential source of inspiration for Postcolonial Studies. However, Baratta’s consideration somehow foresaw the profound influence that Gramsci would have on the Anglophone world of Radical Geography in the following years, when a significant number of scholars started to be attracted by the spatial aspects of his work (Doucette 2020; Ekers et al. 2013; Hart 2002, 2018; Jessop 2005; Loftus 2019; Nadi and Kipfer 2018; for a detailed overview, see Camp 2022). Stefan Kipfer well-summarised Gramsci’s geographical approach by stating that “Gramsci’s historicism is spatial: his geographically nuanced analysis of social relations and political projects emerged out of the same method that yielded his historically differentiated insights” (Kipfer 2013:83); as a result, “space and geography were far more than a passive backdrop for intellectual reflection for Gramsci” (Kipfer 2013:85). Rather similar words could be said about Martí as we delve into the operation of Our America. Far from being a passive backdrop, Our America is a space in constant motion and construction, and whose actual realisation needs a substantial and multifaced action. While reflecting on Gramsci’s work, Adam David Morton noted that the concept of passive revolution “reflects the actual geographical and historical conditioning of the state as a social relation within an interstates system”, a social relation that is “directly related to the spatial conditioning of the fractured process of state formation in Italy”; in particular, he noted, Gramsci did not use passive revolution as “a simply spatial metaphor but [it] was, more concretely, an emergent spatialisation strategy that structured and shaped state power in Italy” (Morton 2013:48–49, emphasis added). And not only Italy. Gramsci adopted the idea of passive revolution also to question the transformations taking place in the United States, reflections that are gathered under the famous label “Americanism and Fordism” in the *Notebooks*. In those insightful notes, the Sardinian interrogates the nature of the new configuration of capitalism in North America—in terms of aspects such as capital accumulation, composition of labour, and knowledge production—proposing the socio-historical reasons why such a kind of transformation had not taken off in the “old” Europe (and even less in places like India and China), places that were still imbued with parasitic and unproductive sectors of population within its dominant classes (Gramsci 1992d). Here again, such a socio-historical reading was nurtured...
by an evident geographical method (Jessop 2005; Morton 2013). In contrast, Martí, within his long (and fragmented) engagement with the analysis and critique of the United States, elaborated a specifically territorial understanding of the Northern American country as a political and economic actor whose interests were aggressively projected toward its South. Even though his initial views of New York were mixed between the enthusiasm about the whirling dynamicity of modern life and the increasing preoccupations about the social polarisation and inequality that that model exacerbated (see Rodríguez 2007:196–204), Martí put progressively forward a series of socio-political and cultural reflections that culminated in the anti-imperialist project of Our America.

As well as in Gramsci’s geographical eyes, Our America was everything but a spatial metaphor for Martí. It was a political mission whose articulation was determined precisely starting from the specific socio-spatial and historical configurations of the Americas, and openly marked by revolutionary intentions; in that sense, his urgent call for a revelation, agitation, and urgent foundation of Our America takes an unambiguously spatial and concrete form. Despite the diverse socio-political projects Gramsci and Martí struggled for, they promoted far-reaching transformations by scrutinising the specificities of spatial relations that concerned much more than the “mere” political dimension. By delving into a rigorous analysis of complex combinations of socio-spatial, historical, and cultural factors, they elaborated a political strategy that could be able to unsettle and radically renew the world they lived in.

Race and Subalternity
Martí considered Cuban independence as a first mandatory step toward the forthcoming task of founding Our America, being simultaneously a moment of defence and construction. Such a task should have involved not only a military action against the old and declining Spanish power, but also a much broader and articulated socio-cultural strategy. In the letter written on the eve of his death, Martí declared that his only duty was “preventing the United States from spreading through the Antilles as Cuba gains its independence, and from overpowering with that additional strength our lands of America. All I have done so far, and all I will do, is for this purpose” (Martí 2007b:253). However, to do so, the construction of a broad socio-cultural identity was needed. Building on Bolívar’s unifying mission, Martí clarified that “the struggle is not between civilisation and barbarity, but between false erudition and Nature” (Martí 2007a:123). He did not reproduce the (post)colonial scheme that promotes a linear vision of history in which the Euro-American society represents an “advanced” example to uncritically follow (e.g. Chakrabarty 2000). And this did not occur despite, but also because of, his long stay in the United States. Moreover, he rejected any sort of environmental determinism, that is, a view that was gaining rapid popularity among Euro-American scientists, intellectuals, and politicians at that time (Horsman 1981). On the contrary, Martí mobilised the idea of “false erudition” precisely to disarticulate and demystify such a unidirectional and racialised view of progress, opening up a space for contestation at scientific-cultural and political levels.
During a period in which racial discourses were rapidly conquering a scientific dimension frequently nurtured by social and environmental Darwinism, Martí simply stated that “there can be no racial animosity, because there are no races” (Martí 2007a:129). This sentence was written just three years after the end of slavery in Cuba, which occurred in 1888. Remarkably, to contrast scientific racism and biologist discourses, Martí takes back the very concept of “nature” and frees it from any structural relation with social inequality. In so doing, equality (but not within a class discourse, as we mentioned) was for Martí the leading force in building the new republic, and this made him frequently labelled as one of the first radical democrats in Latin America (Abel and Torrents 2015; Estrade 2000).

In an article written in 1893, he reiterated the pivotal importance of equality by arguing that “men have no special rights simply because they belong to one race or another. When you say ‘men’, you have already imbued them with all their rights” (Martí 2007c:173), specifying that “there will never be a racial war [in Cuba]. The Republic cannot go backward” (Martí 2007c:174). In particular, Martí’s project relied on the concept of mestizaje (that is, racial mixing), which he deployed as a crucial unifying element, making an open call for “our half-breed America” (Martí 2007a:124, in the original version “Nuestra América mestiza” [Martí 2011i:19]; see Fernández Retamar 1989), therefore aiming to disintegrate not only the racial hierarchisation of the Spanish/European colonial order but also the emerging United States imperialism and its associated ideology of whiteness (Saldívar 1991). For this reason, Fernández Retamar contended that Martí can certainly be considered “the first thorough anti-imperialist” in Latin America (Fernández Retamar 2006:201). However, the question of mestizaje represents a contradictory aspect in Latin America’s postcolonial history, a situation in which, in general terms, the reiteration of racial ideas “made it possible paradoxically for mestizos and mulattoes to identify themselves with white elites as against Indian or black majorities—to accept theories that justified white domination over ‘colored’ populations” (Graham 1990b:1). Mestizaje and Indígenismo have been the ideas around which several Latin American countries shaped the making of the new nation-state, both in cases of anticolonial struggles, such as in the case of Martí, and in postcolonial periods, such as during and in the aftermath of the Mexican Revolution (in regard to the latter, see Vegliò 2023). While the nature of these operations considerably changed depending on the specific case (for significant discussions and a number of examples, see Appelbaum et al. 2003a; Graham 1990a), scholars noted that often their promoters “were fundamentally concerned with preparing Indians for citizenship by integrating, educating, and modernising them” (Appelbaum et al. 2003b:8). In the case of Martí, there are nonetheless several elements, some of which will be added shortly, that make his project of mestizaje to substantially be defined as an aim at a radically inclusive, anti-elitist, and raceless national project (e.g. see Ferrer 1998; Pita 1998); a project that, considering also the international context marked by the apogee of socio-environmental Darwinist theories, was articulated through a revolutionary dream of emancipation.

Race is a key element in Gramsci’s Southern Question. While explaining the problematic situation of South Italy in the Notebooks, Gramsci noted that from a...
Northern perspective, the South’s chronic hardship was politically and economically incomprehensible, and “there remained but one explanation: the organic incapacity of the people, their barbarity, their biological inferiority. These already widespread opinions ... were firmly established and even theorised by positivist sociologists (Niceforo, Ferri, Orano, etc.), thus acquiring the validity of ‘scientific truths’ at a time of scientific superstition. Hence there was a North–South polemic about race and about the superiority and inferiority of North and South [of Italy]” (Gramsci 1992a:144). This is a crucial element in Gramsci’s political analysis, where he identifies the deployment of racial(ising) discourses as a formidable strategy to underpin uneven socio-economic geographies. Once again, as a sort of lucid anticipation, Gramsci moved toward the denaturalisation of geographical discourse by shedding light on the political presuppositions that generate certain kinds of (racialised) spatial determinism, strongly reminiscent of the work of scholars who denounced the imperial articulations underlying Western geographical knowledge (Jazeel 2017; Kobayashi 2003; Livingstone 1992; Mignolo 2005).

Hence, Gramsci’s understanding of North/South relations makes him not only an author speaking about anticolonialism (see Young 2012:27–31) but also, and perhaps more importantly, a considerable figure explaining the reconfiguration of colonial relationships in post-independence periods. This latter trait inspired several scholars in Postcolonial Studies (see Srivastava and Bhattacharya 2012), Said being one of his first and most original readers in this sense (Said 1978, 1993). In the Notebooks, Gramsci declares that “there is need to spell out what historical function their biological conception of ‘barbarism’ applied to Southerners (rather, to filthy Southerners) has had in the politics of Italy’s ruling class” (Gramsci 1992b:181). As Stuart Hall noted—highlighting here the great influence that Gramsci had on the formation of Cultural Studies as well as, consequently, the importance of the latter for the international spread of his work (see Vacca 2012:12)—Gramsci was precisely illuminating “new dimensions of power and politics, new areas of antagonism and struggle—the ethical, the cultural, the moral” (Hall 1986:18–19), and the question of race, although not fully conceptualised in his work, was clearly imbricated with these fundamental aspects. The discourse of civilisation and barbarism is structurally marked by a racialising action, and therefore is inherently colonial (Dussel 1995). Another vital component in Gramsci’s work is the notion of subaltern groups that he theorises in the Notebooks. In Notebook 25, titled “On the Margins of History (The History of the Subaltern Social Groups)”, Gramsci proposes a conceptual move that extends the Marxian concept of class in favor of a more blurred and wider definition. The notion of Subaltern Groups specifically refers to a variety of dominated social sectors in need of a political alliance to end the domination; Gramsci indicates the Southern peasantry and the Northern industrial working class as iconic and imperative examples in the Italian context (for an overview of the use of the concept, within and “beyond” Gramsci, see Liguori 2015; also Buttigieg 1999, 2009; Green 2002; Modenesi 2014; Thomas 2018). One of the most significant and original uses of this notion is that of Subaltern Studies, a group of scholars that challenged the official history of India starting by evaluating the central role of the peasantry, whose action and relevance had systematically been obscured in
mainstream historical accounts (e.g. Guha 1983, 1997; Guha and Spivak 1988). The experience of Subaltern Studies also illuminates the broader question of Gramsci’s successful reception in non-Western contexts, which has comprised a heterogeneous array of studies and interpretations (for an overview, see Dainotto and Jameson 2020; Kanoussi et al. 2011; Manduchi et al. 2017; Vacca and Schirru 2007). The extremely fertile influence that the Sardinian intellectual had within anti-colonial and postcolonial contexts makes it possible to think that, as Young underlined, “in a certain sense Gramsci came from outside ‘the West’” (Young 2012:18). And it is certainly from that outside, along with the multiple tensions that the concept embodies, that Martí operated. We will get back to this fundamental point later. It is worth recalling here another connection between Gramsci and Mariátegui, insofar as much of Gramsci’s North/South conceptualisation “was explicitly mirrored” in Mariátegui, “whose subalterns became the Indigenous native masses in a Peruvian state clearly divided by manufacturing and agrarian regions in a complex configuration consisting of Inca communalism, Spanish feudalism, and modern industrial capitalism” (Harootunian 2020:149, emphasis added). However, when looking at the use of Subaltern Studies in Latin America, there have been a few significant but ephemeral experiences. The most relevant case is that of the Latin American Subaltern Studies Group, which in the 1990s, with respect to the Anglophone diffusion, culminated with an edited book that cemented some of its most important contributions (Rodríguez 2001). Rather interestingly, within that collection, and in a group that was mostly made of literary critics, the “subaltern” aspects of Mariátegui’s work are discussed only in one essay, while the name of Martí does not appear at all. That is to say that, perhaps surprisingly, no strong connection has been created between the Cuban intellectual and Subaltern Studies. But let’s delve further into Martí’s political thought.

For Martí, the only possible political project in Cuba was a Republic “with everyone, and for everyone’s good” (Martí 2011d:279). As Paul Estrade stressed, Martí’s fight against caudillismo signified not only a battle against authoritarianism but also an attack against the national oligarchy that traditionally supported the colonial domination: crucially, it was a matter of dismantling the servile relations that largely defined the Cuban and Latin American space at that time (Estrade 2000:551). In this sense, Martí’s operation can be seen as an attempt to unify Cuban subaltern groups to create a new republic and, as in many anticolonial struggles, this also took a nationalist form. Nonetheless, what particularly makes Martí’s thinking resonate with Gramsci’s is how the political project was conceptualised. Martí’s inclusive and anti-racist notion of Republic—something not to be underestimated in a colony—aimed to actively include the vast, impoverished, and marginalised social sectors, something similar to Gramsci’s great social disintegration characterising the South of Italy. As the Cuban stated in a famous verse, “With the poor of the earth, I want to cast my lot” (Martí 2011c:57) and, given his overall socio-political vision, it should not be a stretch to associate his idea of poor with that of subaltern. However, what adds tangible definition to his political subject is the mentioned concept of mestizaje, which allowed him to simultaneously expand and solidify the participation in the anticolonial war as well as create the glue for the new Republic. Despite the
political differences outlined above (and, again, without neglecting Gramsci’s fully Marxist dimension), a somehow similar dissatisfaction with the idea of class can be ascribed to both Gramsci and Martí. After all, as Coronil pointed out while discussing the history of Postcolonial and Subaltern Studies in Latin America, Postcolonial Studies have normally been defined by “the critical application of Marxism to a broad spectrum of practices of social and cultural domination not reducible to the category of ‘class’” (Coronil 2004:224). And in addition to the reasons mentioned above, this has happened also because Gramsci has frequently been a source of inspiration for that scholarship.

Moreover, over the past few years, the whole genealogy of Subaltern Studies has been revisited by considering their early studies on Gramsci that, at that time, could count only on the partial English translation of the Notebooks. As stressed by Liguori, as a result of the Subaltern Studies’ diffusion of the concept, the subaltern, after passing through “the Anglo-American universities”, “experienced something of a change of direction that led it increasingly away from its specifically Gramscian usage and conceptual context” (Liguori 2015:119). This element has generated a critique of Subaltern Studies’ use of Gramsci, where scholars have uncovered the tensions and contradictions between the Gramscian toolkit and its partial and even misleading interpretations (e.g. Green 2002, 2011). The issue also took shape within Subaltern Studies’ internal discussions such as, for instance, in Spivak’s famous critique of the actual possibility of making subalterns’ voices and representations visible (Spivak 1988), relying herself on a specific understanding of Gramsci’s words (Green 2002:15–19). In that respect, Peter Thomas observed that, when reading the full version of Gramsci’s texts, the subaltern is not characterised by “an experience of exclusion”; in contrast, it is depicted as “integrally and actively ‘included’ or integrated into the hegemonic relations” (Thomas 2018:863). For Thomas, “rather than their exclusion or inclusion”, such as in the mentioned case of Spivak’s critique, “it is more analytically useful to speak of the ‘constitution’ of subaltern social groups. Subalternity in this sense is a function of the process of material constitution of the modern state itself” (Thomas 2018:864). Hence, instead of thinking of a constitutive impossibility and “inability” of self-representation, it is a matter of studying the formation, relationships, and socio-cultural expressions of the dominated subjects, and thus, we could add, creating the possibilities to make them speak in a consistent and politically efficacious way. That is, to make such a social fragmentation a coherent revolutionary subject: under this light, the works of Gramsci and Martí seem to further resonate with each other.

For Gramsci and Martí, the active inclusion of highly fragmented and dispersed social sectors was a constitutive aspect in their radical project of political renovation, and for both such a project should originate a new model of state. A model that, for both thinkers, has often been defined as that of the ethical state: an ethic that, somewhat similarly in both cases, results from the radical action of emancipation and inclusion of subaltern groups, that is to say, an ethic that is the direct product of politics (e.g. for Gramsci, see Chino 2022; for Martí, see Mañac 2007). In practical terms, they both organised such an ambitious mission using two interconnected sets of tools. On the one hand, they envisioned and founded a
political machine that could support and achieve their objectives. To reunite the vast subaltern fragmentation, they saw as necessary the construction of a modern political party: Martí founded the Cuban Revolutionary Party in 1892; Gramsci was a central figure in creating the Italian Communist Party in 1921 (what he conceived to be the famous “Modern Prince”, to which Notebook 13 is dedicated). Moreover, they both integrated the party with the creation of a newspaper: Martí founded Patria (“Fatherland”) in 1892, and Gramsci L’Unità in 1924 (“The Unity”; a name that stressed the objective, such as indicated in the Southern Question, to unify the industrial working class with the peasantry). On the other hand, and perhaps most significantly, in order to provide the subaltern groups with the actual foundations for the realisation of a historical and consistent political subject, they advanced a multitude of views and strategies that involve the comprehensive field of culture.

The Space of Culture
The socio-spatial (and inherently political) conceptualisation of culture is one of the terrains on which Martí’s and Gramsci’s works are probably in the most vivid connection. As for Gramsci, a decisive interpretation in that sense is that by Said, who saw Gramsci’s work as “an essentially geographical, territorial apprehension of human history and society” (Said 2003:464) in which “all ideas, all texts, all writings are embedded in actual geographical situations that make them possible, and that in turn make them extend institutionally and temporally” (Said 2003:466). This specific understanding of Gramsci allowed Said to chart how the Orient was constructed as an inferiorised and racialised geographical concept that was produced through a vast repertory of Western-European cultural objects serving imperial ambitions (Said 1978, 1993). Said’s work exquisitely expressed Gramsci’s ideas about how culture and history can be read in a distinct socio-spatial light, exposing the “very powerful geographical sense” defining the Sardinian’s thought (Said 2003:458).

Within the broad sphere of culture, the North/South and city/countryside relations are essential socio-spatial references for Gramsci, as these relations “can be studied in different cultural forms” (Gramsci 1992a:130). For instance, he conceived literature as one of the biggest problems of contemporary Italy. The central question lay in the fact that Italy lacked a national-popular literature capable of representing the actual socio-material relations, tensions, and contradictions with a newborn state that was trapped within a slow and problematic process of nation formation. Within these observations lies Gramsci’s critique of Alessandro Manzoni’s The Betrothed, a mainstream novel for the promotion of the post-unification national identity. Gramsci argues that while at first glance the novel seems to be generous towards common people, the characters are in fact presented in a falsely benevolent and compassionate way, as if lacking a complex psychology and therefore substantially inferior. Manzoni saw common people through the “facetious ‘compassion’” (Gramsci 1992b:196) of “Catholic paternalism” (Gramsci 1992b:239); in the novel, “common people do not have an ‘inner life’, they lack a deep moral disposition, they are ‘animals’”, (Gramsci
1992b:196), and this meant a considerable distance from the popular reality during Manzoni’s time. In other words, despite the primary importance given to the novel as a pillar of Italian national identity, Manzoni’s “attitude toward the people is aristocratic, not ‘national-popular’” (Gramsci 1992b:197). As a result, Manzoni’s work does nothing but reproduce those stereotypical images that naturalise the profound socio-political discrepancies within Italy’s social fabric; in this case, manifested through a combination of spatial (city/countryside) and class (aristocracy-bourgeoisie-dominant groups and common people-subaltern groups) articulations. Kipfer and Hart underscored that “Gramsci’s spatial historicist method is deeply attentive to the multiple spatially and historically concrete ways in which class, gender, sexuality, and ‘race’ are articulated” (Kipfer and Hart 2013:330, emphasis in original), and this is also visible when reading Gramsci’s critique of Manzoni.

On the other hand, a prolific writer such as Martí was also deeply preoccupied with the interactions between literature and society. His literary work consists of an extensive poetic production, countless journal and newspaper articles, personal memories, four pieces for theatre, a novel, and an unfinished collection of tales for children (La Edad de Oro ["The Golden Age"]). As Fernández Retamar observed, “since very early [in his life], Martí knows that literary realities must be seen in close relation to specific historical realities” (Fernández Retamar 2006:329); like Gramsci, Martí understood literature as a fundamental dimension for a real and actual socio-political renovation. He observed: “our times’ literature is ineffective because it is not the expression of our times ... It is necessary to bring new blood to literature” (Martí 2011e:282). Martí’s formidable literary production, analyses, and reflections—which without doubt made him one of the major Spanish-speaking writers of his epoch—and one of the fathers of modernism (for some studies of Martí’s literature, see Ballester 2007; Belnap and Fernández 1998a; Fabelo Corzo 2004)—reflected his concern about finding a literature that could efficaciously embody the ambitious project of Our America. He stated: “there are no letters that are expression until there is the essence to express in them. Nor there will be Hispano-American literature until there is the essence to express in them. Nor there will be Hispano-American literature until there is the essence to express in them” (Martí 2011f:164, emphasis added).

The whole of Martí’s literary activity can be thought of as a relentless effort at socio-political renovation (Belnap and Fernández 1998a; Saldivar 1991; Toledo Sande 2007). As Saldivar aptly highlighted, through the idea of Our America Martí “provided a base for a national Latin American literature capable of incorporating both the Spanish and First American experiences in the New World” (Saldivar 1991:6). For instance, “The Golden Age” (La Edad de Oro) was responding to this gigantic project too, in this case articulated within the sphere of children’s education. Bolívar is not by chance one of the protagonists of the three opening
tales, each embracing themes related to Our America. As Estrade underlined, “The Golden Age already responded, after all, to the preoccupation to shape the new man of the ‘American America’” (Estrade 2000:658). Nonetheless, the reno-

vation of education should have embraced the totality of its institutions, including the academic ones. Here Martí delineates, in a more specific way, what kind of knowledge universities should provide, and his claim sheds light on the deep spatial contradictions that are the legacy of European colonialism. Being concerned with issues regarding the spatialisation of knowledge, Martí states in Our America that the “European university must bow to the American university. The history of America, from the Incas to the present, must be taught in clear detail and to the letter, even if the archons of Greece are overlooked. Our Greece must take priority over the Greek which is not ours” (Martí 2007a:124). The Cuban seems to be one of the early precursors of the critical scholarship engaging with an epistemo-

logical critique of the “geopolitics of knowledge” which emerged from the con-

quest of the Americas (Castro-Gómez 2005:239) and which assigned to “Latin” America a systematically inferior position (Dussel 1995; Mignolo 2005; Quijano 2000). As a result, Martí’s move can be understood as another elaboration of subaltern geography (Jazeel and Legg 2019) and perhaps also subaltern geopolitics (Sharp 2011). It was precisely by building such a socio-historical identity that would allow the region to achieve its (geo)political mission. In Martí’s words, “who says to educate, already says to want” (Martí 2011g:252). Such a perspec-

tive certainly takes us to Gramsci, when in the Notebooks he specifies that “every relationship of ‘hegemony’ is necessarily an educational relationship and occurs not only within a nation, between the various forces of which the nation is composed, but in the international and world-wide field, between complexes of national and continental civilisations” (Gramsci 1992c:350). This latter sentence is probably able to condense best the spatial articulations that defined the making of the two authors’ thought.

Conclusion

While exploring Martí’s and Gramsci’s works, there is the frequent sensation that a substantial part of Gramsci’s theory could successfully be used to analyse Martí (and examine, for instance, Martí’s projects about subaltern geography, hegemony, national-popular, etc.). While this fact is undeniably able to suggest some interest-
ing similarities between the two authors, this article has not followed this approach. Instead, the article has deployed what has been called a diachronic tac-
tic, namely the use of studies that have been produced several decades following Martí’s and Gramsci’s lives and that, frequently using Gramsci as a source of inspiration, generated a radical wave of critique that hit the discipline of geography over the past few decades. Reading these authors in the backlight of studies that emerged within the broad umbrellas of Radical Geography and Postcolonial Studies allowed us to individuate the spatial articulations that underpinned their politi-
cal thinking, as a crucial way to start a dialogue between the two authors, also considering the world(s) within which, and against which, they acted. This latter element signified a close engagement with current debates that examine aspects
concerning the spatialisation of geographical knowledge (e.g. Ferretti 2019; McFarlane 2021; Oswin 2020). Such an effort, and I hope the resulting contribution, has been twofold.

On the one hand, it has opened up a geographical reading of Martí. Although the Cuban’s works were not framed within a geographical discourse, it is possible to detect a sequence of elements—such as the concept of Our America and his ideas about subalterns, race, and culture—that are strongly determined by spatial components. Within such an operation, it is imperative to reflect on the location of such knowledge production. For instance, Fernández Retamar tirelessly insisted on claiming that Martí should be understood and studied as a figure of the “Third World” (Fernández Retamar 2006:13–79); that is, he “does not concur ... with the way to be ‘Westerners’ at his time. In fact, he is not one of them ... Martí belongs, by chance or by conscious acceptance, to another world” (Fernández Retamar 2006:37, emphasis in original). And, we could add, it is exactly that combination between chance and conscious acceptance that makes Martí’s work (and also Gramsci’s, we could say) be categorised as “Southern”. As for Gramsci, and this is the second aspect of this contribution, the article has intended to problematise and somewhat destabilise the location in which his work was forged. As Tom Nairn famously emphasised, the Sardinian intellectual was “a product of the West’s most remote periphery, and of conditions which, half a century later, it became fashionable to call ‘Third World’. No comparable Western intellectual came from such a background” (Nairn 1982:161). Rather similarly, some years later, Young noted that Gramsci “in a sense ... did come from a ‘Third World’ country” (Young 2012:17) and that fact rendered him an “intellectual from the peripheries, and in every sense ‘Southern’” (Young 2012:18). Of course, this does not mean either pushing Gramsci to a different landscape and somehow deviating from the most “traditional” interpretations of his thought or applying any sort of determinist approach to knowledge production. On the contrary, it is about liberating the multiple forces embedded in the Sardinian powerful conceptual toolkit by carefully considering, and rethinking, the complex socio-spatial and political terrain from which his work unfolded. When thinking of Martí and Gramsci together, it is precisely that common belonging to similar conditions of alterity that, despite the specific theoretical and political differences, sheds light on the remarkable resemblances crossing their works.

Finally, placing the figures of Martí and Gramsci one next to the other implies an extensive work that crisscrosses their multiform and fragmented writings. While this article has relied on a geographical perspective in exploring such a comparative operation, it also seeks to create the space for an even broader and multidimensional dialogue between the two authors in the future. After all, Gramsci well-summarised such a spatio-historical attitude when, speaking of historical grammar, he noted that “the linguistic fact, like any other historical fact, cannot have strictly defined national boundaries, but that history is always ‘world history’ and that particular histories exist only within the frame of world history” (Gramsci 1985:181). And it is this very attitude—sounding so familiar to many “posthumous” postcolonial analyses—that has animated the reflection in this article.
Endnotes
1 To my knowledge, one of the very few exceptions is the conference “José Martí, Antonio Gramsci e la cultura universale” (“José Martí, Antonio Gramsci and the universal culture”) that was held at Istituto Italiano per gli Studi Filosofici in Naples in 2009; the event, however, does not seem to have left significant traces. Moreover, a couple of years later, I wrote a brief article in Italian where I sketched out a possible comparison between the two figures (Vegliò 2011).
2 This well-known letter, which so well summarises Marti’s political and intellectual mission on the day before being killed on the battlefield in the Cuban area of Dos Ríos, was directed to his beloved Mexican friend Manuel Mercado (1838–1909).
3 In addition to this, Rodríguez notes that “it was in the Guatemalan texts where he [Martí] adopted several times the term Our America and where he clearly established the differences between it [Our America] and the north of the continent” (Rodríguez 2007:136).
4 Instead of “half-breed America”, a more appropriate translation would probably be “mixed-breed America”.
5 As Fernando Coronil noted, “while centred on literary studies, Subaltern Studies has been considered a major source of postcolonial historiography in Latin America” (Coronil 2004:231).
6 Manzoni’s novel is set in Milan during the early 17th century. It was published for the first time in 1842, 19 years before the unification of Italy. However, one of the bigger concerns underlying the writing of the novel, which caused quite different versions subsequent to the 1842 one, was the linguistic unification of the country.
7 To give just one example, the famous Argentinian intellectual and politician Domingo Faustino Sarmiento (1811–1888) declared in 1887 (when Marti was just 34 years old) that “in Spanish there is nothing that could be similar to Martí’s roaring” (quoted in Fabelo Corzo 2004:110).

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