Beyond subject-making: Conflicting humanisms, class analysis, and the “dark side” of Gramscian political ecology

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Abstract
This article examines conflicting conceptualizations of the human subject in political ecology and geography: Foucauldian views of “subject-making” and Gramscian views of “the person”. While Foucauldian work holds that the more complete exertion of power, the more coherent subject-making, Gramscian historical–geographical perspectives counter that, the more complete exertion of power, the more incoherent persons and their class-based collectivities. Outlining incongruities between these approaches, I argue that the “dark side” of Gramscian political ecology—with its emphasis on incoherence and fracture—allows geographers new nuance in understanding the human subject, although not without challenges to the actual writing of such scholarship.

Keywords
political ecology, subjectivity, power, Foucault, Gramsci, class analysis

I Introduction
In his recent progress report on the field of political ecology, Alex Loftus (2020) engages with prevalent conceptualizations of subjectivity and their relationships to authoritarian populisms, laying out a spectrum of approaches ranging from Foucauldian takes on “subjects,” via post-human cyborgs to Gramscian views of “persons”. As a prominent practitioner of Gramscian approaches to political ecology (see, e.g., Loftus, 2015) and human geography (Loftus, 2019), Loftus unsurprisingly emphasizes Gramscian “persons,” concluding that “political ecologists might challenge crude invocations of the people while learning from the lived contradictions of political ecological persons in praxis and shaping a political ecology that is truly popular” (Loftus, 2020: 987). Building upon Loftus’ overview, I seek in this article to scrutinize more narrowly a specific key fault line in what I call the competing humanisms at work in political ecology: the conceptual notion of “subject-making”. Central to a significant and growing part of political ecological scholarship inspired by Foucault, the conceptualization of the “making” or “production” of subjectivities—their...
subjectivation—within struggles over socio-environmental change has nevertheless received surprisingly little critical attention in its own right. In attending to this issue, I aim to tease out what I take to be conceptually problematic aspects of this Foucauldian stream of political ecology. Subsequently, I explore how specific Gramscian interpretations may enable novel insights, drawing on critical geographers’ recent efforts at uncovering Gramsci’s “spatial sensibility” with its consideration of the “articulated relationships between space, nature, politics, and social difference” (Ekers and Loftus 2013a: 17). Foucauldian conceptualizations of subject-making tend to stress how the exertion of power among institutions and actors in contexts of socio-environmental change results in (relatively) coherent formations of new, altered, or transformed and, generally speaking compliant (to power) subjects. Gramscian conceptualizations, meanwhile, stress that historically geographically specific socio-environmental constellations of power result in the fracturing and corroding of “persons” and their potential for collective emancipatory action, where incoherence marks the outcome of power under hegemony. Expressed slightly schematically: In Foucauldian subject-making, the more comprehensive or successful exertion of power, the more coherent subject-making. In Gramscian views, the more comprehensive or successful exertion of power, the more incoherent persons and collectivities. These incongruities, as I will demonstrate, have important analytical and political ramifications.

There are longstanding and often-times strongly divergent attempts at relating Foucault and Gramsci (or Foucault and Marxism more broadly), ranging from Poulantzas’ (1978) critical yet sustained engagement with Foucault, through Sanbonmatu’s (2004) anti-Foucauldian rejection, or Day’s (2005) anti-Gramscian rejection, to Jessop’s (2005) synthesizing state theory, and onward to recent attempts at “reassessment” (Kreps, 2016). Yet as far as political ecology goes, the dominating tendency is one of allowing for complementarity or “dialogue” (Ekers and Loftus, 2008) between Foucauldian and Gramscian approaches. Given this emphasis in the field, there remains scope for elaborating upon important tensions. In doing so, I seek to mobilize insights from Gramscian geographies for strengthening a distinctly class-analytical political ecology (see, e.g., Huber, 2017).

For these purposes, the Foucauldian notion of subject-making can be juxtaposed with a relatively under-acknowledged “dark side” of Gramscian political ecology, with its elaborations of the incoherence and fracturing of “persons” under conditions of hegemony—conditions that a Gramscian “spatial sensibility” would stress as being irreducibly historical and geographical. This perspective on the “dark side” of Gramscian thought flows, to a significant degree, from philosopher Peter D. Thomas (2009) path breaking book The Gramscian Moment: Philosophy, Hegemony and Marxism. In an intriguing passage, Thomas (2009: 394) characterizes Gramsci’s reading of Marx as a “theoretical anti-humanism avant la lettre” as he makes a provocative turn on Althusser’s critique of Gramsci’s “absolute” humanism. While Foucault’s “death-of-the-subject” anti-humanism is well established, although considered slightly passé, this reading of Gramsci can be conceived of as surprisingly different from prevalent portrayals in geographical scholarship. Here, Gramsci’s “absolute” or “Marxist humanism” reads as centered on agency, experience, consciousness, and culture, akin to that of E. P. Thompson or Raymond Williams (see, e.g., Gregory, 1981). At a moment where competing anti- and post-humanisms abound—yet intertwined with reinvigorated interest in the potential for radical “new humanisms” of Franz Fanon (Kipfer, 2011), Cornel West (Fuchs, 2021), and Sylvia Wynter (McKittrick, 2015), among others—this reinterpretation may prove relevant to political ecologists and critical geographers of different stripes grappling with the human subject.

In this somewhat revisionist reading that I am proposing, Foucauldian and Gramscian conceptualizations share a fundamental opposition to notions of autonomous human subjects. Yet the roots of the two “anti-humanisms” are profoundly distinct, and so are their fruits, as I will show by reviewing their respective political ecological and geographical literatures. To unravel these fault lines, I start by revisiting prominent streams of political ecological scholarship drawing on Foucault, with specific
attention to the ways notions of “subject-making” have been articulated. Thereafter, I turn to the Gramscian tradition, its class-analytical foundation, and its “dark side”. Lastly, I conclude by discussing some of the implications of the insights offered for the actual writing of Gramscian geographies and political ecologies.

II Foucauldian political ecologies of subject-making

That the question of subject-making or subjectivation was central to Foucault himself is beyond doubt. Such centrality comes to the fore in Foucault’s self-proclaimed focus on “the different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects,” leading him to asserting that “it is not power but the subject which is the general theme of my research” (Foucault, 1982: 777–778). That “the subject” in question here is a produced—subjectified—one is clear. “In fact”, Foucault writes, “it is already one of the prime effects of power that certain bodies, certain gestures, certain discourses, certain desires, come to be identified and constituted as individuals” (Foucault, 1980: 98). Political ecology, as is widely recognized, has been strongly influenced by Foucault since the early 1990s with an emphasis on governmentality, power/knowledge, biopower, biopolitics, technologies of the self, etc. As Cavanagh clarifies, political ecologies of biopower and biopolitics have significant overlaps with those of governmentality, although a tendency has been that “the concept of biopower is framed primarily as a means of shaping the values and subjectivities of various human populations, rather than as a means of bridging the concerns of effectively governing human and nonhuman forms of life” (Cavanagh, 2018: 408). Concerning subject-making specifically, it is fair to say that the most sustained efforts in political ecology have been subsumed under the rubric of governmentality in the sphere of socio-environmental change. However, more recently, a parallel interest has brought Foucauldian conceptualizations of subject-making explicitly into discussions of socio-environmental conflict. I discuss these bodies of literature in turn.

I Environmentalities

Paul Robbins’ introductory book in political ecology presents five “theses” that have been defining to the evolution of the field as such. One of these, “Environmental Subjects and Identities,” is centrally concerned with how “(i)nstitutionalized and power-laden environmental management regimes have led to the emergence of new kinds of people, with their emerging self-deﬁnitions, understandings of the world, and ecological ideologies and behaviors” (Robbins, 2020: 207, emphasis removed). Drawing on varied theoretical inﬂuences, scholarship within this “thesis”—as is the case more broadly in political ecology—has been closely inﬂuenced by Foucault’s work on “governmentality”. Summarizing the governmentality aspect of Foucauldian power theory (without going much deeper into the workings of subject-making speciﬁcally), Svarstad et al. (2018: 356) write that “[g]overnmentality can be seen as ways in which governments administer citizens to act in accordance with government priorities”. More detailed, Hart writes: “The concept of governmentality calls for precise diagnoses of the rationalities of rule; the forms of knowledge and expertise they construct; and the speciﬁc and contingent assemblages of practices, materials, agents and techniques through which these rationalities operate to produce governable subjects” (Hart, 2004: 12). Political ecologists have, over the last couple of decades, translated this interest into new terms such as “environmentality” in the work of Agrawal (2005), and also partially overlapping terms such as “green governmentality” (Dressler, 2014; Rutherford, 2017), “eco-governmentality” (Valdeiva, 2015), and, recently, “green panopticon” and “environmental governmentality” (Fletcher and Cortes-Vazquez, 2020).

What does Robbins’ stated “emergence of new kinds of people” entail? In what follows, I unpack some central characteristics of this Foucauldian lens on subjectivity, otherwise frequently left implicit. Yet I hope that in doing so, I manage to avoid making the error that Gramsci warned of as “importuning the texts” by which he meant “when out of zealous attachment to a thesis, one makes texts say more than they really do” (Gramsci, 2007: 141).
The single most influential account of Foucauldian subject-making in political ecology is Arun Agrawal’s book *Environmentality: Technologies of Government and the Making of Subjects* (Agrawal, 2005). An oft-rehearsed classic in the field, I do nevertheless think it is pertinent to outline key aspects of Agrawal’s notion of subject-making. Empirically, Agrawal’s book is an exploration of changing forms of forest administration in Kumaon, Western India. The book combines field and archival research to build an understanding of changes over a period of 150 years in which attempts at governing the region’s forests were accompanied by forms of opposition among local residents and subsequent alterations in governmental techniques aimed at overcoming such opposition. “Environmentality” hinges on the interactions of specific “knowledges, politics, institutions and subjectivities” (Agrawal, 2005: 226). Out of these interactions between governmental agencies and actors and local residents emerge new forms of “environmental subjects” aligned with—subjected to—governmental forest protection efforts. In other words, Agrawal’s analytic rests on a relatively linear causality of governmental-power-to-subject-making dynamics. What he views as “the ultimate success and effectiveness” (Agrawal, 2005: 17) of technologies of rule depends significantly on this causal link. In distinction to Gramscian analytics, as I will return to below, this articulation arguably downplays the multiple determinations embedded within historical–geographical conjunctures. Furthermore, Agrawal’s analytic comes with an articulated aversion to class analysis: “Reading the politics of subject formation off the social categories of gender, class, occupation, and caste serves at best to ignore how power works to create the subjects who fill these categories,” he writes (Agrawal, 2005: 9). Again, unlike the Gramscian approach, it is also important to note that Agrawal affords class the “mere” status of a “social category”. Agrawal furthermore stresses that the new environmental subjects should be seen as produced by governmental power rather than “reacting” to it, allowing for the distinctly anti-humanist analytical maneuver of avoiding “prior conceptions about sovereign autonomous subjects that are impossible to identify in Kuamon and possibly elsewhere” (Agrawal, 2005: 12).

While Agrawal portrays subject-making as relatively linear although also varied (in accordance with “subject positions”), and relatively complete in its effectual internalization among human subjects, political ecologists have recently brought analysis in new directions. Building upon Foucault’s (2008) later articulations, subject-making through environmentality can be more thoroughly pluralized, as Fletcher’s (2017) model of four modes of environmentalities in contemporary processes of environmental politics shows, only two of which are seen as dependent on people’s internalization of various rules of conduct. Spawning a recent literature that scrutinizes variegations in multiple environmentalities (see Fletcher and Cortes-Vazquez, 2020), Fletcher’s intervention nuances the notion of subject-making while showing its reliance on notions of human “interiority”.

As a recent contribution to this stream of work points out, “limited attention so far has been paid to environmental subjectivities – in other words, how multiple governmentalities are experienced by those who are governed” (Choi, 2020: 77; see also Fletcher, 2017). This resonates with Agrawal’s own retrospective assessment of his book, as recounted by Robbins (2020: 210), holding that it “did not pay sufficient attention to the lives of people beyond what was necessary to make the argument in the book”. This lack of sustained attention to broader experience or the historical–geographical specificities of “lived contradictions” in Loftus’ (2020) term, among the allegedly “new” subjects indicates a limitation, I suggest, that is reflective of the underlying Foucauldian anti-humanism. Choi (2020) goes on to argue that political ecologists have tended to interpret observed discrepancies between people’s actual behavior and governmental prescriptions as the “failure” of environmentalities, an analytic that might be better replaced with space for thinking of the possibility of multiple environmental subjectivities that can take surprising shapes. While this nuances the relation between power and subject-making—which is not necessarily unilinear and might depart from what is planned, intended, or willed on the part of agents and agencies of power—the basic postulate of “the emergence of new kinds of people” still holds, although these “new kinds of people” may come in
multiple shapes. Similar points have been noted in studies that look at “counter-conduct,” in the Foucauldian term, unfolding within the matrix of governmentality or environmentality (see Foucault 2009). Moving from a relative neglect of subjectivity in studies of situated resistance to environmental governance, Asiyaubi et al. (2019: 129) argue in a recent contribution that looks empirically at REDD+ in Nigeria, that “(b)eyond the common focus on a linear transformation of subjectivities into some settled form, we emphasize the spatiotemporal dynamics of subject positions, what one might call the vicissitudes of environmentality”.

2 Subjectivities-in-conflict

In parallel with these conceptualizations in environmentality research, political ecologists have recently shown increased interest in the intertwinenment of human subjectivities with socio-environmental conflict, such as the conflictual incursion of extractive industries or conservation programs. Recent publications dealing with socio-environmental conflict and extraction make frequent mention, couched predominantly in Foucauldian terms, to overlapping concepts of “subject-making” (Frederiksen and Himley, 2020; González-Hidalgo and Zografos, 2020; Raycraft, 2020), “subject formation” (Valdivia, 2008), “subjectivation” (Gonzalez-Hidalgo and Zografos, 2017; Gonzalez-Hidalgo, 2020) and “subjectification” (Leonardi, 2013), with the additional outlier drawing on Althusserian notions of “interpellation” (Margulies, 2018). This emerging interest in what we can call the making of subjectivities-in-conflict brings the depths of human emotionality, affect, and consciousness into the political ecology of socio-environmental conflict, which has arguably been predominantly concerned with “interests,” “justice,” and “distribution” (González-Hidalgo, 2020; Gonzales-Hidalgo and Zografos, 2017). González-Hidalgo and Zografos (2020: 2) outline “the relationship between environmental conflict, power and emotion,” arguing for a multidimensional poststructuralist approach combining Foucauldian notions of power with feminist political ecology (see also Sultana, 2020), setting out to study “how power constitutes processes of ‘subject-making’ and ‘political subjectivation’, that is, the ways in which people accept, internalize or resist norms that dictate certain ways of speaking, acting and ‘being’ in relation to others, resources, and places in the context of environmental conflicts” (González-Hidalgo and Zografos, 2020: 3). This research interest is not restricted to an individual focus, but can, as Gonzalez-Hidalgo (2020) argues, be applied to studying collectives and their mobilization in resource conflicts and around the defense of the commons in terms such as “emotional environmentalism”. In this approach, then, “subjectivation or subject-making” is seen as the political process of forming (or constructing) individual and collective subjectivities. By political, we mean processes in which diverse mechanisms of power and authority (e.g. agenda-setting, governmentality, violence, etc.) and how responses to those mechanisms operate” (Gonzales-Hidalgo and Zografos, 2017: 62). As regards “responses,” the authors stress the imperfect nature of disciplinary mechanisms, oftentimes resulting in conflict as locals resist but only after going through processes of “political de-subjectivation” and “re-subjectivation” where emotional aspects of subjectivities such as anger and sorrow emerge as potentially enabling of collective mobilization in response to extractive capitalism (ibid.). Similarly, Leonardi (2013) discusses the “constitutive ambivalence” of simultaneously being molded into normalizing specific forms of rule while also resisting power, struggling for “autonomous subjectification” (Leonardi, 2013: 29).

The interest in the formation of new or altered human subjects is also evident in recent work that focuses on conflictual geographies at the frontiers of extractive industries. Indeed, the concept of frontiers implies “rupture” (Rasmussen and Lund, 2018). Frederiksen and Himley (2020) discuss the “herefore undereexplored processes of subject formation at the extractive frontier, and in particular to how industry expansion rests on the creation of certain kinds of subjects” (Frederiksen and Himley, 2020: 51). It is worth quoting from this paper at some length, as it provides an explicit articulation of subject-making analytics:
we outline an argument for thinking through these tactics as governmental technologies and rationalities that change socio-political possibilities and produce new subjectivities. In particular, we identify three interrelated ways that firms and their allies transform subjectivities: (1) by reworking forms of exclusion and inclusion in ways that serve the interests of firms, (2) by reshaping lifeworlds in areas targeted for investment, and (3) by transforming state–society–market relations, with firms assuming state-like functions and subjecting them to capitalist logics. We do not imply the production of a singular subjectivity in extractive regions or that companies simply impose their will on quiescent populations [...] We are also keenly aware that subject formation at the extractive frontier occurs in relation to multiple contextual factors like existing social divisions (racial, ethnic, gendered, generational, etc.,) and within histories of previous encounters with resource economies [...] Nonetheless, we suggest that socio-political life in these areas often becomes dominated by the extractive enterprise to the extent that “extractive subjects” come into being (Frederiksen and Himley, 2020: 58–59).

So, while the authors explicitly guard against notions of the “production of a singular subjectivity” (see also Grant and Le Billon, 2019), there is nevertheless a sense in which such “production” seems to follow a linear sequence. This is a process from the centers of power (firms, allies, dominant actors within extraction) to local populations, even if this includes not only overt strategies and actions by the extractive actors but also unintentional effects of their presence. While moving from governmental technologies of nature conservation to geographies of extractive conflict, what comes across is not unlike Agrawal’s account above, namely, a view of power as relatively successful or complete. Or more succinctly: The more successfully and completely power works, the more coherently discernible new subjects are produced.

III The eternal return of class analysis
What I have been seeking to demonstrate is that prevalent conceptualizations of subject-making in political ecology embody a form of Foucauldian anti-humanism where subjects “free” of power, apart from power’s molding effects, do not seem to exist (see Dews, 1984). As Dews argues in a classic critique of Foucauldian analytics, “resistance” may seem to turn into an amorphous, uncoordinated term that is weakened by a theoretical-political “hostility to any form of conscious formulation of aims and strategic calculation” (Dews, 1984: 90). Class struggle thus appears largely a moot point—also frequently relegated to a subservient position in the political ecological literature studies, as we have seen—leading another commentator to hold that “Foucault is unable to offer much in the way of a counter-hegemonic strategy” (Joseph, 2004: 154). The lacking concern for class analysis in Foucauldian analytics has been well-rehearsed elsewhere, critically perceived as related to his overall post-structural anti-humanist “death of the subject” analytic and its dismissal of social structures (e.g., Joseph, 2004). Yet I think this is worth a reminder, as the anti-class-analytical stance in Foucauldian approaches also impinges on the dominating tendency to look for “dialogue” between Foucault and Gramsci in political ecology.

Ekers and Loftus (2008: 699) argue that Foucauldian and Gramscian approaches should not be considered “opposing camps” and, instead, hold that there is value in looking for “generative tensions” (ibid.: 702). They identify resonances in areas such as between, on the one hand, Gramscian hegemony working through the “integral state” and, on the other hand, Foucault’s governmentality as a “dispersed rule” (Ekers and Loftus, 2008: 703) internalizing within individuals. Foucault’s dispersed rule is tied to his relational concept of power and subjectivation, while Gramsci’s hegemony is tied to the way ideology is sedimented in “common sense,” as I will return to below. What is downplayed in such an argument for complementarity, I would suggest, is that Gramsci’s integral state in fact differs strongly from dispersed rule akin to Foucault’s power. Instead, the integral state is fundamentally an historical–geographical specific class project, as aptly phrased by Thomas in that “Gramsci’s notion of an integral state emphasises its fundamental partiality, as the solidified, articulated structure of the rule of one particular class” (Thomas, 2009: 180).
Inviting methodologies for tracing the geographies of specific class projects—with their distinct actors, strategies, discourses, acts, and histories—what the Gramscian approach offers and demands of us is, I would emphasize, worth distinguishing more clearly from the Foucauldian alternative.

Placing hegemony thus firmly and centrally within the framework of class analysis, we should of course be wary of over-extended or reductive potentials. In a book review, Ekers argues that Thomas’ book is “silent on issues of gender, ‘race’, sexuality and colonialism and the social movements pursuing these issues” (Ekers, 2012). Furthering a Gramscian conceptualization of class for political ecology, Ekers (2015: 547) suggests we “move away from treating class as structural and stable social position and a movement towards identifying the particular and immanent determinations that constitute class in relationship to the appropriation of resources and the making of natures”. The mention of “immanent determinations” points to the distinct Gramscian “spatial sensibility” that Ekers and Loftus (2013a) argue critical geographers ought to explore further, foregrounding “the articulated relationships between space, nature, politics, and social difference” (Ekers and Loftus 2013a: 17). Foucauldian subject-making, as I have sought to demonstrate in the previous section, in contrast seems lacking in conceptual vocabulary for traversing immanent determinations, leading scholars down a path of (relative) linearity as opposed to the complex geographies that may emerge from the Gramscian perspective.

Striving toward a commensurate class analysis, insights from Gramscian geographies thus invite us to pay sustained attention to multiple determinations within historical–geographical conjunctures. There is indeed a longstanding tradition of Gramscian class analysis that does incorporate intersecting forms of oppression and variegated forms of social difference, as in Stuart Hall’s (1980) classic formulations of how capitalism feeds upon the fracturing of labor along axes of differences such as “race,” gender, or ethnicity. This non-reductionist line of class analysis, with its interest in the key “articulated relationships” central to Gramsci’s geographical thought, as phrased by Ekers and Loftus above, has been furthered recently in Shah et al.’s (2018) ethnographic work among historically and spatially marginalized low-caste and indigenous groups in India. The concept of “conjugated oppression” is used “to express how multiple axes of oppression […] are constitutive of and shape class relations, inseparable from each other in capitalist accumulation” (Shah et al., 2018: 24). Heading these pertinent points, I suggest we lean on historical–geographical materialist class analysis stressing the relations of production (see Huber, 2017) as well as reproduction (see Barca, 2020) within capitalism, succinctly summarized by Bernstein (2010: 115) in that “Class relations are universal but not exclusive determinations of social practices in capitalism”.

Ekers and Loftus proceed to highlight that Foucault and Gramsci operate with differing views of “the social”: “Gramsci’s dialectical approach suggests an understanding of the social that is internally related and determining, which means various economic, political, and cultural relations come to affect one another whilst congealing as a differentiated whole” (Ekers and Loftus, 2008: 707), whereas Foucault’s notion of the social is more discontinuous and fragmented. While Ekers and Loftus nevertheless seem willing to see Foucault’s approach as fundamentally relational, thus resonating with Gramsci, I suggest that the hesitance to differentiated wholes in Foucault is an underlying problem in terms of conceptualizing subject-making. Specifically, it makes for an analysis that can move more rapidly toward coherence, with fewer determinations to traverse. Within Gramsci’s differentiated whole, it is also worth emphasizing, hegemony is manifested spatially in lived experience or as “concrete lived relations,” as Ekers et al. (2009: 289) point out in another contribution to geographical engagement with Gramsci. Hegemony, as I will move on to show, is thus embedded in the spatially and historically differentiated lived contradictions of “persons,” their common sense, and incoherence under the effects of power.

**IV Assessing Gramscian “anti-humanism”: persons, common sense, incoherence**

Recent years have seen something of a mini-resurgence of Gramscian approaches to political
ecology (see overview in Loftus, 2015) and to key geographical concerns for space, nature, and politics (see especially the collection in Ekers et al., 2013). This interest includes relating Gramsci’s “spatial sensibility” to Smith’s production of nature thesis (Ekers and Loftus, 2013b), as well as to Hart’s “postcolonial Marxism” (Ekers et al., 2020). There is a small body of literature scrutinizing Gramsci’s notion of “the person” (*la persona*), which I draw upon in what follows—a body of literature that deserves more attention outside of specifically Gramsci-interested scholarship.  

While this work offers openings to explicating how Gramscian conceptualizations differ from the Foucauldian reviewed above, there is little explicit engagement with such conceptualizations. Despite the stimulating insights into Gramscian “persons,” I find that there is something of a reticence in bringing out the implications of what I consider the “dark side” of Gramscian historical/geographical thought in this regard. My aim in this section is to take a few initial steps in such direction. To do so, I start by elaborating the rather provocative statement of Gramsci’s “anti-humanism.”

Philosopher Peter D. Thomas’ book *The Gramscian Moment* (2009) has been inspirational to recent Gramscian geographies (see repeated references and discussions in Ekers et al., 2013). I suggest that this discussion can be pushed further by reconsidering Thomas’ suggestion, as quoted in the introduction above and as derived from Thomas’ engagement with the (in)famous Gramsci-Althusser debate, that Gramsci’s reading of Marx can be viewed as a “theoretical anti-humanism *avant la lettre*”. In elaborating this claim, Thomas pays sustained attention to Gramsci’s understanding of “the person,” recognized as flowing from Gramsci’s reading of *Theses on Feuerbach*, in which Marx wrote that “the human essence is no abstraction in a single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of social relations” (Marx, 1974: 323). This perspective, Thomas argues, allows us to question the very notion of a “subject”—a term, he points out, which “appears only fifteen times in over 2,000 pages” (Thomas, 2009: 396) of Gramsci’s corpus of writings. “Throughout the *Prison Notebooks*,” write Ekers and Loftus (2013b: 245) as they build upon the same point, “there is no discussion of the ‘subject’ per se. Instead Gramsci’s concern is with the constitutive relations that contribute to a making of “the person”. While Thomas (2009) stresses Gramsci’s historicism concerning these constitutive relations, recent critical geographical engagement with Gramsci emphasizes this as an irreducibly spatial historicism (Ekers et al., 2013; see also Jessop, 2005).

Discussing Gramsci’s idea of “the person,” Loftus (2015: 94) focuses on how Gramsci’s “absolute humanism points to a set of principles that are avowedly anti-essentialist and recognize nature as a co-producer of the ‘person’”. Emphasizing, as does quite a portion of the political ecological writings on this topic, the co-constitution of persons, non-human nature, and history, Ekers and Loftus (2013b) explore this process in geographies of labor. Pointing to the mutual inflection of multiple forms of social difference and oppression, we find a helpful opening to Gramscian class-analytics that, as in the tradition of Hall (1980) invoked above, is non-reductive.

Interest in combining Gramsci’s ideas of *la persona* with social difference and geographies of intersectional political struggles is also found in Kipfer and Hart’s (2013) discussion of Gramsci’s humanism. Their analysis seems to diverge, at least partly, from Thomas’ claims of an anti-humanist stance, arguing that Gramsci’s famous “absolute humanism” amounts to a “dialectical, new humanist perspective,” which breaks with remnants of a “falsely universal humanism” as well as “with the structur-alist conception of the subject as an effect of knowledge/power or interpellation” (Kipfer and Hart, 2013: 330).

Yet Kipfer and Hart also offer reflections that speak to my concerns by holding that Gramsci’s perspective on “the person” is an element of his broader work of “translation as a subject-modifying practice” in the terrain of “common sense” as a socio-natural ensemble (Kipfer and Hart, 2013: 331). As such, in Kipfer and Hart’s assessment, Gramscian perspectives can be extended beyond their “Euro-centric” limitations through engagement with “new humanisms,” such as Fanon’s, Lefebvre’s or Bannerji’s, to more deeply recognize the multiple determinations of oppression and domination along intersecting lines of “race,” coloniality, gender,
sexuality, etc. Through this move “with and beyond Gramsci,” as Kipfer and Hart put it, we may be able to contribute analytically to emergent geographies of new political struggles in the contemporary post-colonial world in “spaces beyond the Euro-American context” (Ekers and Loftus, 2013a: 18). And simultaneously, in line with Gramsci’s partisan position, we may contribute politically “to a search for nuanced political strategies, including the difficult project of building a new socialist culture” (Kipfer and Hart, 2013: 337).

Yet recognition of the “dark side” of Gramscian thought complicates things. Taking the analysis of la persona further, Thomas goes on to present an argument for the inextricable workings of class struggle within the constitutions of persons—and, consequently, the corroding effects of power:

He [Gramsci] emphasizes the various social roles played by any particular individual, in an ensemble of social roles, as related but distinct “persons”. Central to these reflections is the notion of “molecular” transformations of what could be described as the “composite body” of a person, modifying the composition or relations of force that constitute it (Thomas, 2009: 398).

“The personality,” Gramsci (1971: 324) writes, “is strangely composite”. This compositeness, Thomas argues as he elaborates upon the latent theoretical anti-humanism at work, means that the person is “an ensemble of historical relations of class struggle”:

These social relations, rather than “human relations” founded upon an interiority-becoming-intersubjectivity, are instead conceived externally, as a Kampfplatz of competing hegemonies or relations of leadership that are ultimately determined by the “necessity” imposed by the economic organization of a social formation (Thomas, 2009: 394, emphasis in original).

The person is thus incoherent and—key to my overall argument—this incoherence is an outcome of historical–geographical specific conjunctures with their sedimented power relations and multiply constituted class relations. Under capitalist hegemony, time-space itself is fractured, carrying with it an “infinity of traces” (Gramsci, 1971: 324) of historical process. “Above all,” Thomas (2009: 285) writes, “the non-contemporaneity of the present in Gramsci is a function and symptomatic index of the struggle between classes”. An important aspect of this argument is the notion of “molecular transformations” tied to the key insights on incoherence and the fracturing non-contemporaneity of the present. “The experience of subaltern classes,” Thomas (2009: 373) writes, “is one of a continual molecular transformation, of disaggregations that decrease the capacity to act of both the individual and the class to which they belong”. Drawing on the emphasis among critical geographers on Gramsci’s distinctly spatial historicism, I would suggest that Thomas still downplays the spatial to a certain degree. “Molecular transformations” and “disaggregations” are jointly and irreducibly playing out across historical and geographical determinations, as in the already mentioned “articulated relationships between space, nature, politics, and social difference” in Gramscian thought (Ekers and Loftus 2013a: 17). Molecular transformations, Thomas argues, play out in the fractured and fracturing terrain of “common sense” (senso commune). The strangely composite person comes to have certain “conceptions of the world” that manifest in praxis in what Gramsci called “common sense” in forms that are “fragmentary, incoherent and inconsequential” (Gramsci, 1971: 419). Inconsequential to counter-hegemonic political mobilization, that is. Taking Ekers’ lead toward addressing limitations in Thomas’ reading of Gramsci, I suggest more attention could be given to how such disaggregations are shaped by the forms of “conjugated oppression” that a non-reductive Gramscian class analysis opens for exploring. As in Hall’s (1980) approach, the fracturing of “persons” under capitalism unfolds in and through axes of conjugated oppression—both in the sphere of production and reproduction.

The anthropologist Kate Crehan’s (2002, 2016) ethnographic approach to class in relation to “common sense” undermines possible claims of economic or structural reductionism. As Crehan writes, “one of the basic threads which runs through all of Gramsci’s writings; the opposition between coherent and incoherent conceptions of the world, and an insistence that any potentially counter-hegemonic ones must be coherent” (Crehan, 2002:
113). Indeed, as Thomas also argues, the very concept of “coherence” in Gramsci has been underexplored, and comprises a key aspect of the philosophy of praxis. Common sense, writes Crehan, “provides a heterogeneous bundle of assumed certainties that structure the basic landscapes within individuals are socialized and chart their individual life courses” (Crehan, 2016: 43). In regard to subordinated groups, populations, and individuals, common sense is “in part a product of their subordinate and dominated position” (Crehan, 2002: 116). Putting this perspective to work on contexts of land dispossession and neoliberal capitalist expansion, Jakobsen and Nielsen (2020), for example, argue that subordinated classes’ aspirations embedded in common sense may have “compounding” effects on broader hegemonic processes, further disaggregating capacities for oppositional action. While this is a fractured and fracturing terrain under conditions of antagonistic class struggle (which is to say: under capitalism generally), Crehan also points to Gramsci’s dialectical emphasis on “good sense,” which he famously discussed as a “healthy nucleus” within common sense (Gramsci, 1971: 328), something the philosophy of praxis seeks to reshape into coherence. The philosophy of praxis, as Gramsci puts it, thus amounts to

a theory which, by coinciding and identifying itself with the decisive elements of the practice itself, can accelerate the historical process that is going on, rendering practice more homogeneous, more coherent, more efficient in all its elements, and thus, in other words, developing its potential to the maximum: or alternatively, given a certain theoretical position one can organize the practical element which is essential for the theory to be realized (Gramsci, 1971: 365)

These aspects of Gramscian thought have been taken up by geographers like Hart (2013), with emphasis on the role of language in the composition of relations of force constituting persons; noting that it is precisely through language—and political struggle and praxis over meanings—that the reshaping of common sense into more coherent forms (good sense) may happen. Wainwright (2013), meanwhile, discusses how the philosophy of praxis understands the formation of coherence in “conceptions of the world,” which are both individual and collective. “Language and translation,” Hart (2013: 303) writes as she recognizes the imprint of Gramsci’s philological training and outlook for his overall trajectory, “were also central to the philosophy of praxis – the practices and processes of rendering coherent fragmentary ‘common sense’, enabling new forms of critical practice”. The concern for language points toward everyday geographies, which Loftus (2013: 193) elaborates upon by arguing that “it is from everyday acts of producing nature that the fragmented shards of a new conception of the world might emerge”. This is an area where Gramsci’s political ecology speaks to insufficiencies in Foucauldian conceptualizations of subject-making and the potential for emancipatory praxis. As Geoff Mann points out in regard to the role of governmentality in political ecology, it “begs the question of the social-historical (i.e. political) ground upon which its discursive constitution operates” calling for “simultaneous analysis of the historical-geographical specifics of the common sense grounds upon which domination is legitimated” (Mann, 2009: 340). This points to Gramsci’s concern with locating ideology and its legitimation in the lived contradictions of persons by way of common sense. As a guideline for historically-geographically specific research into how hegemony—or the various pernicious outcomes of socio-environmental injustice that political ecologists habitually explore—is actually lived, it points, I would argue, to a greater potential for nuanced geographical accounts of human subjects than what the Foucauldian “subject-making” lens offers. Moreover, these reflections point, as Mann goes on to argue, to how Gramsci’s praxis, including in the factory councils seeking “a shift of workers’ perspective, a slow reconceptualization of extant power relations in light of a new morality”, was underpinned by Gramsci’s concern that “theorization, like all political discourse, must not only be logically compelling, it must be ethically compelling as well” (Mann, 2009: 341). While Mann does not move further in this direction, I believe this is an area where the exploration of Gramscian “persons” may open for emancipatory alternatives. Through the incessant work of organic
intellectuals (with whose work Gramsci of course insisted that the philosophy of praxis should be aligned) in factory councils or elsewhere—such as in socio-environmental movements against extraction, or other forms of struggle along multiple axes of difference and conjugated oppression—the incoherence of common sense may be recalibrated, new moralities and reconceptualization may emerge. The “dark side” of Gramscian thought with its stress on incoherence, fracture, and disaggregation is never one-sided, never without hope.

V Conclusion

Drawing on Loftus’ (2020) recent survey of political ecological conceptualizations of human subjects, I have argued for a reinterpretation of key conceptual fault lines in the literature between Foucauldian and Gramscian approaches. While largely left implicit in existing scholarship, I have argued for taking a hard look at the predominant Foucauldian notions of “subject-making” to tease out some problematic implications. Reviewing key work pertaining to environmentalities and subjectivities-in-conflict, I have sought to bring out some of the implicit aspects of the conceptual notion of “subject-making”. In sum, I have argued, Foucauldian conceptualizations tend to stress the formation of relatively coherent, discernible “new” subjects in contexts of socio-environmental power, conflict, and change. This emphasis on the (relatively) coherent outcomes of power, domination, and oppression, I have then moved on to argue, can be placed in an uncomfortable tension with Gramscian political ecology and the distinct “spatial sensibility” at work in Gramsci’s thought that critical geographers recently have shown increasing interest in exploring. Drawing on a materialist and non-reductive class analysis that analyzes axes of social difference across both production and reproduction, Gramscian thought on human subjects emphasizes the incoherence and fracturing of “persons,” their “common sense,” and their disaggregations under the impact of multiple antagonisms under hegemonic conditions. The “molecular transformations” that are thereby generated do not in fact amount to anything approximating discernible “new” subjects but instead amalgamations of non-simultaneous historical and geographical processes. These workings of power upon individuals, I have argued, comprise a “dark side” of Gramscian thought that political ecologists and critical geographers can benefit from engaging more deeply with and, moreover, throw new light on Gramsci’s (anti-)humanism.

Yet, all of this poses the question: what sort of “benefit” would such engagement imply? These dark ruminations around incoherence-making may undoubtedly come across not only as pessimistic but troubling to political emancipation. Nevertheless, as I have argued, Gramsci’s philosophy of praxis is always already embroiled in the search for new “conceptions of the world” of greater coherence, drawing upon “good sense” that can be mustered and strengthened for the political mobilization of oppressed and subordinated classes. In that sense, the benefit that might accrue is an altogether more nuanced, dialectical spatio-temporal analytical lens for understanding the formation of human subjects and their praxis under conditions of power, inequality, and hegemony. At the same time, another abiding concern lingers. How, exactly, would the actual writing of such political ecologies, or critical geographies of human subjects, look and “feel”? I believe there is “something”—yet to be properly illuminated—about the theoretical outlook that I have presented which troubles writing: troubles the generation of analytical narratives through which to convey struggles over socio-natural relations. What my account of the prevalence of incoherence and dialectical possibilities for coherence shares with the broad contours of recent political ecological and geographical engagements with Gramscian “persons” is their relatively abstract, theoretically driven character. That is, these ruminations in the recent literature do not contain much empirical exploration of the empirical implications of “lived contradictions” of persons—although the theoretical perspective offered clearly points to the crucial importance of doing so.

While there are examples of more empirically oriented work that pushes in the same direction (see, e.g., Ekers, 2009; Loftus, 2012), I suggest there are certain aspects of the “dark side” of Gramscian political ecology—its probing insistence on fracture, incoherence, molecular transformations, disaggregations, etc.—that pose particular challenges, dilemmas, to the writing of accounts of lived experience.
These issues call for further examination and, even more importantly, experimentation with the craft and narration of political ecological and geographical texts. How do we elaborate critical methodologies and pedagogies for describing the corroding, fracturing, and disaggregating effects of historical–geographically sedimented socio-environmental power relations under capitalism upon the lived contradictions of actual “persons”? How do we, dialectically, attempt to explicate kernels of “good sense” within the incoherence surrounding struggles over nature? For all their dilemmas, these unresolved questions may guide our way as we take Gramsci’s lead toward exploring new vistas for the forging of critical geographies of the human subject.

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Notes

1. Despite such genealogies, a recent intervention still holds: “To this day, there have been only a few analyses of the links between Marx and Foucault” (Keucheyan, 2016).

2. Among numerous possible examples, witness the ease with which Robbins collapses governmentality and hegemony in his acclaimed textbook (Robbins, 2020: 209) or the similar operations at work in the seminal book Global Political Ecology (Peet et al., 2010).

3. To say that Foucault’s anti-humanism is broadly recognized does not, of course, rule out the fact that there is a certain co-existing tradition of authors seeking to problematize and nuance our understandings of Foucault’s “anti-humanism” (see Paden, 1987) or the prevalent “anti-subjective hypothesis” in readings of Foucault (see Allen, 2000).

4. This reading of Gramsci in geography is not altogether dissimilar to the prevalent one in anthropology, focused on “hegemony lite” fixated on ideology, as outlined by Crehan (2002), or as a form of “soft Gramscianism” across the social sciences and humanities (Thomas, 2009: 11–12).

5. This is not to say that the political ecology of environmental conflict has not dealt with underlying thought structures, which is witnessed, for example, in the work on environmental conflicts as “ontological” (Blaser, 2013).

6. A similarly Foucauldian/poststructuralist perspective on the relations between power, violence, and subjectivity in the context of environmental conflict has recently also been suggested applied to the field of environmental economics (Andreucci and Kallis, 2017).

7. Given the centrality of Foucault’s concepts to broad streams of social theory, it goes without saying that these critical views are questioned and disputed as well (see, e.g., Heller, 1996).

8. As always, we may have reason to be wary of inferring that Foucault’s own work was devoid of such interest, something Nancy Franser, for example, noted long ago in that, although there is a general thrust toward locating power as a “complex, shifting field of relations where everyone is an element,” nonetheless “Foucault seems at times to link bio-power with class domination and to implicitly accept (at least elements of) the Marxian economic interpretation thereof” (Fraser, 1981: 283).

9. This, furthermore, links to Bernstein’s (2014: 1037) complementary assessment of a “common Foucauldian syndrome, in which forms of ‘governmentality’ generated by different historical experiences of capitalism are treated as detached from it”.

10. It is not easy, for example, to find clear evidence that these Gramscian interventions have had much influence on Foucauldian political ecology to date.

11. While the spatial aspects of Gramsci’s thinking have been noticed for quite a while, Ekers and Loftus (2013: 26) introduce the collected volume entitled Gramsci: Space, Nature, Politics by noting that the volume
breaks new ground as it “repositions him (Gramsci) as a historical-geographical materialist avant la lettre”.  
12. This also points to Gramsci as a theorist of rebellion (see Glassman, 2013) and its underpinnings in the lived contradictions of the person.

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