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## Dizionario gramsciano / Gramsci dictionary: subaltern / Subalterns

### Abstract

The Dizionario gramsciano entry, in the original English “Subaltern / Subalterns”, deals with different subaltern groups and classes, in particular those discussed in the late, monographic Notebook 25 titled “At the Margins of History. (History of the Subaltern Social Groups)”. The concept of a subaltern social group or class encompasses, but goes much wider than, the working class or proletariat. The subaltern groups mentioned by Gramsci go from the classical world in the “West” (ancient Rome in particular), through the Middle Ages to the modern era. A key historiographical and conceptual reference point for him, regarding the struggle – or lack of struggle – for hegemony by the subalterns lay in the movement for unification of the modern Italian State. As early as the first notebook, we read that the most progressive forces of the Risorgimento, embodied in the “Action Party”, were subject to “the initiative of the dominant groups”, represented by the “Moderates”, and as such its leading organs resembled subaltern groups. The history of the subaltern groups is “necessarily fragmented and episodic”, the groups themselves being separate from one another, having various degrees of marginality and of socially subaltern nature, albeit with tendencies towards unification. These tendencies are however “continually broken up through the initiative of the dominant groups”, with any “spontaneous’ movement on their part being countered by a reactionary movement of the right of the dominant classes”. Spontaneity must be integrated with conscious leadership – the task of any political party constructing an alternative hegemony on the side of the subalterns.

[N.b. All footnotes in Buttigieg’s contribution are editorial additions; other editorial additions in the text are given in square brackets, whereas curly brackets are used to indicate the author’s textual abbreviations.]

### Keywords

Subaltern groups, subaltern classes, margins of history, fragmentation, spontaneity

## ***Gramsci Dictionary / Dizionario gramsciano: Subaltern /subalterns***

Joseph A. Buttigieg

Throughout his pre-prison writings, in his letters, and on several occasions in the *Quaderni*, Gramsci uses the words subaltern(s) and subalternity (*subalterno*; *subalterna*; *subalterni*; *subalterne*; and *subalternità*<sup>1</sup>), either in their most obvious sense or in a relatively uncomplicated (though not always conventional) figurative manner. These cases merit attention insofar as they might clarify some important Gramscian concept or amplify our understanding of his way of thinking – as, for example, in Q1§43 (*QdC* p. 37 [PN Vol. 1, p. 133]<sup>2</sup>) where he draws an analogy between certain types of intellectuals and “junior officers in the army” [*ufficiali subalterni nell’esercito*]; they are, however, distinguishable from and not to be conflated with those moments in the *Quaderni* that mark the emergence and gradual elaboration of the basic lineaments of an original theory concerning various aspects of the relations between the dominant classes and subordinated social groups in political as well as in civil society. The essential elements of this theory are laid out, albeit sketchily and unsystematically, in one of the later and shorter *quaderni “speciali”* [“special” notebooks] under the general title *Ai margini della storia. (Storia dei gruppi sociali subalterni)* [“At the Margins of History. (History of the Subaltern Social Groups)”] (Q25§§1-8; *QdC*, pp. 2279-94).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> With the aid of an electronic edition of the *Notebooks*, we now know that the noun “subalternità” occurs however on just one occasion there, as “subalternità intellettuale”.

<sup>2</sup> PN will be used to indicate Joseph Buttigieg’s English translation of the Gerratana “Critical Edition” of 1975 (*QdC* in the text) for the Columbia University Press, New York (Vols. 1, 2 and 3 published in 1992, 1996 and 2007 respectively).

<sup>3</sup> In English, for Q25§1 (*Davide Lazaretti*), see Gramsci *Further Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (trans. D. Boothman, London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1995, pp. 50-55; henceforward in the text *FSPN*) or, for the first draft, in PN, Vol. 2, pp. 18-20 (Q3§12); for Q25§2 (*Methodological criteria*), Q25§4 (*Some General Notes on the Historical Development of the Subaltern Social Groups in the Middle Ages and in Rome* [partial translation]) and Q25§5 (again *Methodological Criteria*), see “International Gramsci Journal” (hereafter *IGJ*), Vol. 1, No. 2, 2010 (collective project by advanced translation students of the University of Bologna) and *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (hereafter in the text *SPN*), trans. Q. Hoare and G. Nowell-Smith, London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1971, pp. 52-4. A brief extract from Q25§2 is also found on pp. 54-5 of *SPN*. In a somewhat abbreviated form, Q25§6 appears as a first draft in Q3§98 and Q3§99, PN, Vol. 2, pp. 95-6, while short parts of Q25§7 appears in this same volume of Buttigieg as first drafts (Q3§69, p. 67; Q3§71, pp. 67-8; and Q3§75, p. 72).

In Q§25 Gramsci reproduces and consolidates, with some amplifications, thirteen notes from Q1 and Q3, all of them composed in 1930, and one note from Q9 written in 1932. It is the only “special” notebook on a topic that does not appear among the “main topics” on the first page of Q1 or the “main essays” and “subject groupings” listed in Q8. Since the last of these three lists was drafted in the spring of 1932, it appears that Gramsci recognized the importance of studying the specific characteristics of subalternity within the political and social order rather late in the course of his work on the *Quaderni*. Several other notes, besides the ones assembled in Q25, are pertinent to Gramsci’s treatment of the “subaltern social groups” (or “classes”, as he calls them in the earlier *Quaderni*),<sup>4</sup> including some that deal with closely related issues such as the detachment of Italian intellectuals from the people, education reform, “common sense”, folklore, and representations of the “humble” in literary works. (See, in particular, the note “Popular Literature. Manzoni and the ‘humble’”, Q14§39, *QdC* p. 1696).<sup>5</sup>

It is futile to search for or attempt to formulate a precise definition of “subaltern” or “subaltern social group (class)” as conceived by Gramsci, since in his view they do not constitute a single, much less a homogeneous, entity – which is precisely why he always refers to them in the plural. The category of “subaltern social groups (classes)” encompasses many other components of society besides the “working class” or “proletariat.” Gramsci does not employ “subaltern(s)” as a substitute or a cipher for “proletariat”, whether to evade the prison censor or for some other reason. It is likely, however, that the change to “groups” in Q25 from “classes” in the original versions of the same notes reflects Gramsci’s increasingly cautious attitude toward the surveillance apparatus in Formia.

A distinguishing characteristic of the subalterns and the subaltern groups is their separatedness one from another (*disgregazione*). Not only are there multiple subaltern social groups or classes “subaltern social groups (or classes)”, but they are also disconnected and quite different from one another: while some of them may have achieved a significant level of organization, others might lack all cohesion,

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<sup>4</sup> In fact not only the earlier ones but right up to the last notebook.

<sup>5</sup> In English, see Gramsci, *Selections from Cultural Writings*, ed. D. Forgacs and G. Nowell-Smith, trans. W. Q. Boelhower, London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1985, p. 294.

and within the groups themselves there exist various degrees of subalternity and marginality. A look at past revolutions, Gramsci points out, would reveal that [there were] “various subaltern classes {...} ranked according to their economic position and homogeneity” (Q3§48, *QdC* p. 332 [PN Vol. 2, p. 52]). The *disgregazione* of the subaltern strata of society was a preoccupation of Gramsci’s since his days as a journalist and party leader. In *Alcuni temi della quistione meridionale* [*Some Aspects of the Southern Question*] he defined the Mezzogiorno as “a great social disintegration” (“*una grande disgregazione sociale*”) with a “great amorphous disintegrated mass of peasants” (Gramsci, *La Costruzione del Partito Comunista*, Torino, Einaudi, 1971, p. 150).<sup>6</sup> Lack of cohesion and organization renders the subalterns politically impotent; “incapable of giving a centralized expression to their aspirations and needs” (*loc. cit.*), their rebellions are doomed to failure. To be sure, the revolutionary actions of the well-organized Factory Councils (*Consigli di fabbrica*) of Turin also resulted in defeat, but Gramsci attributed that defeat to the divisions fomented among the industrial working class by the promoters of corporativist reformism. In the essay on the *Southern Question*, Gramsci does not use the term “subaltern(s)”, but in it he provides a concrete illustration *ante litteram* of his observations in the note on *Methodological Criteria* (originally titled *History of the Dominant Class and History of the Subaltern Classes* [*Storia della classe dominante e storia delle classi subalterne*]) in Q25:

The history of the subaltern social groups is necessarily fragmented and episodic. It is undoubtedly the case that in the historical activity of these groups there is a tendency toward unification albeit in the provisional stages, but this tendency is continually broken up through the initiative of the dominant groups [...] The subaltern groups are always subject to the initiative of the dominant groups, even when they rebel and are in revolt [...] (Q25§2, *QdC* p. 2283).<sup>7</sup>

The outward expression of the subalterns’ discontent with their exploitation, impoverishment, and marginalization often takes the form of spontaneous rebellion. Spontaneity, by itself, is not only

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<sup>6</sup> Gramsci, *Selected Political Writings 1921-1926*, ed. and trans. Q. Hoare, London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1978, p. 454.

<sup>7</sup> In English *IGJ*, Vol. 1, no. 2, April 2010, p. 4, with two adjustments to the wording here included; also in *SPN*, p. 55.

ineffectual but counterproductive. Gramsci explains the negative effects of “so-called ‘spontaneous’ movements” in a note on “Spontaneity and conscious leadership” (not included in Q25):

It is almost always the case that ‘spontaneous’ movement of the subaltern classes is matched by a reactionary movement of the right wing of the dominant class, for concomitant reasons: an economic crisis, for example, produces, on the other hand, discontent among the subaltern classes and spontaneous mass movements and, on the other, conspiracies by reactionary groups, which take advantage of the objective enfeeblement of the government to attempt coups d’État” (Q3§48, *QdC* p. 331 [PN Vol. 2, p. 51]).<sup>8</sup>

This does not mean, though, that the spontaneous feelings of the subaltern classes should be ignored, much less repudiated; rather, Gramsci maintains, spontaneity needs to be harnessed and integrated with conscious leadership (*direzione consapevole*). This is the task of the political party that struggles for hegemony on the side of the subalterns – a party, furthermore, that aims at the unity of theory and practice. Gramsci recalls how “this element of ‘spontaneity’ was not neglected, much less disdained” by the “Turin movement” (i.e. the *Ordine Nuovo* group); to the contrary, it

was *educated*, it was given a direction, it was cleansed of everything extraneous that could contaminate it, in order to unify it by means of modern theory {i.e. Marxism} but in a living, historically effective manner (Q3§48, *QdC* p. 330 [PN Vol. 2, p. 50; *SPN*, p. 198]).

This unity of spontaneity and “conscious leadership”, Gramsci goes on to explain,

is precisely the real political action of the subaltern classes, insofar as it is mass politics and not mere adventure by groups that appeal to the masses (*loc. cit.*).

The core issue for Gramsci – not only in his notes on the subalterns, but also in countless other pages of the *Quaderni*, including many of those devoted to his reflections on philosophy, the modern prince, and the intellectuals – is how to bring an end to subalternity, that is, to the subordination of the majority by a minority.

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<sup>8</sup> There is a slightly different wording in *SPN*, p. 199.

Obviously, this cannot be achieved as long as “the subaltern groups are subject to {...} the initiative of the dominant groups” (Q25§2; [IG], April 2010, p. 4)). The condition of subalternity can only be overcome through the attainment of autonomy and that, according to Gramsci, can only come about through a lengthy process and a complicated struggle. In order to engage in a successful struggle against the existing power structure, it is necessary, first of all, to understand precisely what makes it so resilient and durable. The dominant classes in modern states do not hold on to power solely, or even primarily, because of their hold on the coercive apparatuses of the government. As Gramsci explains in one of the most quoted passages of the *Quaderni*, the modern state is buttressed by “a sturdy succession of fortresses and emplacements” (Q7§16, *QdC* p. 866 [PN Vol. 3, p.169])<sup>9</sup> – i.e. civil society. The governing class does not – and, certainly, it does not want to appear to – have exclusive or absolute control over civil society; if it did, it would not be able to claim that it governs with the freely given consent of the people. What it has instead is a formidable array of institutional and cultural mechanisms that enable it directly and indirectly to disseminate its world-view, inculcate its values, and mold public opinion. Gramsci calls this “the ideological structure of a ruling class (*classe dominante*) {... }”: that is the material organization meant to preserve, defend, and develop the theoretical or ideological ‘front’” (Q3§49; *QdC* p. 332 [PN Vol. 2, p. 52]).

To be effective, then, the struggle against the configuration of power that perpetuates subalternity needs to be directed against this ideological “front” – hence, the proper strategy is not a frontal attack against the seat of power (the toppling of which alone does not result in fundamental change) but a “war of position” on the terrain of civil society. In light of this, Gramsci poses the following question: “What can an innovative class set against the formidable complex of trenches and fortifications of the ruling class?” His answer:

The spirit of cleavage – that is, the progressive acquisition of the consciousness of one’s own historical identity – a spirit of cleavage that must aim to extend itself from the protagonist class to the classes that are its potential allies: all of this requires complex ideological work” (Q3§49; *QdC*, p. 333 [PN Vol. 2, p. 53]).

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<sup>9</sup> SPN’s alternative translation is: “a powerful system of fortresses and earthworks” (p. 238).

The “innovative and protagonist class” to which Gramsci refers in this passage is the organized industrialized working class, itself a subaltern group but one that emerged out of the most advanced structure of capitalist production. As Marx and Engels pointed out in the *Communist Manifesto*, one of the unintended effects of industrial modernization and capitalist competition is to intensify the forging of ties among workers. The best organized workers’ association or party, the one that has achieved the highest degree of autonomy from the dominant social groups is best positioned to assume the leading role in the struggle for hegemony. This, of course, is the kind of party Gramsci undertook to construct, first through his work within the *Ordine Nuovo* group and subsequently as a leading member of the PCd’I. His conviction that the necessary first stage in the struggle against subordination is “the progressive acquisition of the consciousness of one’s own historical identity” motivated much of his political activity. It is a conviction that he articulated forcefully and with great clarity in an article he published in *Il Grido del Popolo* in 1916, when he was only 25 years old. Some of the phrases he employs in the article are almost identical to the ones he uses in the *Quaderni*.

“*Socialism and culture*” merits reading alongside the notes on the subalterns in the *Quaderni* not because it foreshadows the ideas expressed in them but because in some important respects it helps elucidate them. Socialist culture, Gramsci writes in his article,

is the acquisition of one’s own identity; it is the conquest of a higher consciousness (*coscienza*), with the aid of which one succeeds in understanding one’s own historical value, one’s own function in life, one’s own rights and obligations. But none of this can come about through spontaneous evolution {...}” (Gramsci, *Cronache Torinesi* [hereafter *CT*], ed. S. Caprioglio, Torino, Einaudi, 1980, p. 100).<sup>10</sup>

Pursuing a decidedly Vichian interpretation of history, Gramsci goes on to explain how through the gradual growth of a consciousness of its own value, humanity gained its independence

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<sup>10</sup> In Italian also in *Scritti giovanili* (hereafter *SG*), Torino, Einaudi, 1972 (1958<sup>1</sup>) pp. 22-6; cf. in English *Selections from Political Writings 1910-1920* (hereafter *SPW 1910-1920*), ed. Q. Hoare and trans. J. Mathews, London Lawrence and Wishart, 1978, p. 11; the first part of Mathews’ translation is here modified to bring it into line with the wording later used by Gramsci in the *Notebooks*, following Joseph Buttigieg’s translation.



from the laws and social hierarchies imposed by minorities in previous historical periods. Furthermore, this development of consciousness does not come about as an imposition by some law of psychological necessity but as a result of intelligent reflection on the prevailing conditions and on how to transform them advantageously. Gramsci draws an important lesson that can be read as a succinct expression of the political program that gave shape to his life's work: "This means that every revolution has been preceded by an intense labor of criticism, by the diffusion of culture and the spread of ideas amongst masses of men, who are at first resistant, and think only of solving their own immediate economic and political problems for themselves, who have no ties of solidarity with others in the same condition" (CT, p. 101; [SG, p. 24; SPW 1910-1920, p. 12]).

Revolutions do not occur spontaneously, Gramsci never tired of repeating, nor are they the inevitable consequence of immutable economic or other laws. (The many pages in the *Quaderni* devoted to the critique of Bukharin are motivated by the impulse to eliminate the notion that the subalterns will be liberated from their misery by the unstoppable march of history.) Revolutions are consciously prepared and made by humans who, having gained a deep awareness of their value and worked hard at cultural transformation, succeed in organizing fellow humans and infusing them with the same ideas and values so that they can establish a new civilization. In "*Socialism and Culture*", Gramsci illustrates this process by reference to the successful bourgeois revolution – the French Revolution. The Enlightenment brought about a unified consciousness – "a bourgeois spiritual International", Gramsci calls it citing De Sanctis – which prepared the way for the final acquisition of power.

The bayonets of Napoleon's armies found their road already smoothed by an invisible army of books and pamphlets, that had swarmed out of Paris from the first half of the eighteenth century and had prepared both men and institutions for the necessary renewal (CT, p. 102 [SG, p. 25; SPW 1910-1920, p. 12]).

Gramsci's account of the French Revolution is meant to serve as an illustration of the path that the proletarian party needs to follow

– i.e., to give priority to disseminating its own worldview and transforming the way people regard themselves and interpret their world. One indication out of many that Gramsci was still thinking along the same lines when composing the notebooks are his numerous notes on the kind of journalism and publishing initiatives that were needed to enable the party to reach the widest possible readership among the popular classes.

In Q25, Gramsci proposes a study of the “innovative Italian forces that led the national Risorgimento” in order to understand the process by which “innovative forces” that were at first “subaltern groups” succeeded in becoming “leading and dominant groups” (“gruppi dirigenti e dominanti”: Q25§5; *QdC*, p. 2289).<sup>11</sup> Of particular interest to Gramsci are the

phases through which they {the innovatory forces} acquired 1) autonomy vis-à-vis the enemies they had to defeat and 2) support from the groups which actively or passively assisted them; for this entire process was historically necessary before they could unite in the form of a State (*loc. cit.*).

The copious notes that Gramsci composed on the Risorgimento in other parts of the notebooks constitute, in fact, the groundwork for this historiographical project. One of those notes is especially pertinent; it appears very early in the first notebook and is entitled “Political class leadership before and after assuming political power” (*Direzione politica di classe prima e dopo l'andata al governo*) (Q1§44, *QdC* pp. 40-54 [PN Vol. 1, pp. 136-51]) – it is also the starting point of Gramsci’s development of his distinctive concept of hegemony. Why, he asks, were the Moderates in a position to come to power after the Risorgimento and what were the causes of the Action Party’s failure? He arrives at four conclusions in particular that, as one can readily see, constitute the nucleus of his thinking on the cultural-political strategy that his party had to adopt if it were to successfully lead all subaltern social groups in the struggle for hegemony: (a) the Moderates were organically linked to the class they represented and were its intellectual avant-garde; (b) even before they acquired government power, the Moderates had achieved “political hegemony” by establishing themselves as the leaders of the allied

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<sup>11</sup> The 1971 *SPN* translation, p. 53, renders “dirigenti e dominant” as “hegemonic and dominant groups” rather than the exact wording used in the current article.

classes and attracting to them other intellectuals from different strata in the camps of education and administration – they achieved this on the terrain of civil society; (c) the Action Party failed to establish organic links with the social groups it putatively represented and, in fact, “did not found itself specifically upon any historical class” (Q1§44, *QdC*, p. 41 [PN Vol. 1, p. 136]) – nor did it satisfactorily articulate the aspirations of the popular masses and, especially, of the peasantry (*contadini*); (d) far from assuming a position of leadership, the “leading organs {of the Action Party} in the final analysis resolved themselves according to the interests of the Moderates” (*loc. cit.*) – which is another way of saying that the Action Party lacked “the spirit of cleavage” and, in this respect, resembled subaltern groups that are “subject to ... the initiative of the dominant groups.”

The program of research on the history of subaltern classes that Gramsci outlines in Q25 is by no means limited to the study of those groups and classes that emerged out of subalternity and became hegemonic. He is also interested in the history of subaltern struggles from antiquity to the present. History, however, is written from the viewpoint of the victors, which is why the historical archive does not readily yield reliable information on the topic – the history of subaltern social groups, one might say, is a subaltern form of historiography. Hence, Gramsci writes, “Every trace of autonomous initiative on the part of the subaltern groups is therefore of inestimable value for the integral historian” (Q25§2, *QdC*, p. 2284; [SPN, p. 55]). The notebook contains three notes that pertain to this aspect of the history of subaltern groups: one on Davide Lazzaretti; another on the “development of the subaltern social groups in the Middle Ages and in Rome” (Q25§4, *QdC*, pp. 2284-87 [IGJ, no. 2, April 2010, pp. 6-8]) which, among other things, deals with the rise of the popular classes in the medieval communes – on which Gramsci also wrote elsewhere in the *Quaderni*; and a third on utopias and philosophical novels which, in Gramsci’s view, indirectly and unintentionally reflect “the most elementary and profound aspirations of the subaltern, even lowest, social groups, even those of the lowest ranking” (Q25§7, *QdC*, p. 2290). The note on Lazzaretti, which Gramsci places first in this “special” notebook, brings into relief most directly one of Gramsci’s central theses: the dominant culture marginalizes subaltern social groups by

erasing the political and historical significance of their thoughts and actions. At the very beginning of this note, Gramsci alludes to two works on the leader of the Lazzarettist movement – Andrea Verga’s *Davide Lazzairetti e la pazzia sensoria* (*Davide Lazzairetti and Sensorial Madness*) and Cesare Lombroso’s *Pazzi e anormali* (*The Mad and the Abnormal*) – and then makes the following observation:

Such was the cultural habit of the time: instead of studying the origins of a collective event and the reasons why it spread, the reasons why it was collective, the protagonist was singled out and one limited oneself to writing a pathological biography, all too often starting off from motives that had not been confirmed or that could be interpreted differently. For a social élite, the members of subaltern groups always have something of a barbaric or a pathological nature about them (Q25§1; *QdC*, p. 2279 [*FSPN*, p. 50]).

The explanations of the social élite and its intellectuals have a double effect: they conceal the roots and the seriousness of the general social, economic, and political malaise of which the rebellions and uprisings of subaltern groups are an expression, and they consign the subalterns themselves to the periphery of culture and politics by classifying them as bizarre, unbalanced, atypical – mere curiosities. Herein lies one of Gramsci’s most significant insights: one of the greatest difficulties that subaltern social groups face in challenging the prevailing hegemony is finding a way past the barriers that prevent them from being heard.