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Abstract

This is the Abstract of the English-language review by Sebastián Gómez of the book by Gianni Fresu Antonio Gramsci. A Political Biography published by Palgrave Macmillan (Springer Group), 2022.

Keywords

Gianni Fresu; Gramsci; Intellectual Biography; Prison Writings; Pre-Prison Writings.

Antonio Gramsci between (international / national) social struggles and intellectual contexts

Sebastián Gómez

After its first publication in Italy (Fresu 2019) and then in Brazil (Fresu 2020), Gianni Fresu's *Antonio Gramsci, an Intellectual Biography* has now been published in English in (Fresu 2022). In the context of the Marx and Marx studies renaissance, Palgrave Macmillan has promoted new research in the series Marx, Engels and Marxism. In this series, Fresu reflects upon one of the most important and original Marxists of the twentieth century, Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937). His book brings together the results of a long investigation of the life and thought of Gramsci that started in 2005 with *Il diavolo nell'ampolla: Antonio Gramsci, gli intellettuali e il partito*. Since then, Fresu has continued his work in Italy as a researcher in political philosophy at the University of Cagliari, but also in Brazil where he is a professor of political philosophy at the Federal University of Uberlandia. With a wide knowledge of old and new worldwide studies of Gramsci, Fresu links two dimensions in his study of Gramsci: his life and his thought.

In the first, and still classical, biography of Gramsci, Giuseppe Fiori (1966) said his main proposal was to add 'legs and body' to the 'head' (i.e. the great intellectual and political leader). During the last few decades, the bibliography on Gramsci has become abundant throughout the world and shed light on different features and themes of Gramsci's thought. In this framework, new biographical studies, especially in Italy, have found original documents bringing to light problems and controversies about Gramsci's life. Among other contributions, in 2017 Angelo D'Orsi published *Gramsci. Una nuova biografia* that not only corrected some of Fiori's statements (for example, regarding the reasons for Gramsci's father's imprisonment) but also highlighted important debates in Gramsci's trajectory. In addition, in Gramsci's studies in the Anglophone world, new research about the life of the leader of the Italian Communist Party has appeared that also opens up an introduction

to his complex thought. For example, over the last few years, the Bloomsbury press has published George Hoare and Nathan Sperber's *An Introduction to Antonio Gramsci. His Life, Thought and Legacy* (2015; original French edition Hoare and Sperber 2013), and then Andrew Pearmain's *Antonio Gramsci: a Biography* (2020). The publisher of Fresu's volume, Palgrave Macmillan, has also promoted books such as *Antonio Gramsci* (2015) by Mark McNally that shows the contemporary relevance of Gramscian political thought.

In dialogue with these new approaches, Fresu allows Gramsci's Anglophone readers to understand the intellectual context of Gramsci's life. The book has three parts: The Young Revolutionary, The Political Leader and The Theoretician. Nevertheless, in the first chapter, Fresu states an important methodological premise: it is a mistake to draw a strong division in Gramsci's thought between the reflections before and after 1926 (when Gramsci was arrested by fascism) because his intellectual work was always closely linked to political conflicts. For this reason, the author considers Gramsci's thought as 'an uninterrupted discourse'. Obviously, there were differences between those moments: until 1926, Gramsci had to respond to immediate political demands, and in prison his *Notebooks* (written *für ewig*) adopted greater analytical freedom. However, Gramsci was, first of all, a political being and, then, his thought was always related to social struggles.

Among other contributions, Fresu draws attention to one intellectual context that has usually been overlooked: the island of Sardinia. The author has a great historical knowledge of the island. In 2011, he published *La prima bardana. Modernizzazione e conflitto nella Sardegna dell'ottocento*, where he analysed social banditry, the political conflicts and the contradictory process of transformation in Sardinia during the nineteenth century. Based on this knowledge, he stresses the importance of the island in Gramsci's human biography and intellectual development. It is impossible to understand key concepts or themes, such as subaltern groups, peasants, the relationship between the city and the countryside or 'the Southern question' without considering his childhood and youth in one of the most backward regions in Italy. Moreover, Cagliari, the capital of the region and where Gramsci arrived in 1908 to study at the *Lycée*, allowed him to make the first contact with socialism, with manifestations of mass politics, with the most influential national

journals ('L'Unità', 'Il Marzocco', 'La Lupa', 'La Voce') and with the ideas of intellectuals that Gramsci deal with throughout his life, namely Benedetto Croce and Karl Marx. It was also the place where Gramsci started one of his passions – journalism.

The Sardinian background was central in another turning point in Gramsci's life, i.e. Turin. In 1911, he arrived in the city with a scholarship to study Modern Philology at the Faculty of Philosophy and Letters, which Palmiro Togliatti remembered as 'a great school'. The atmosphere was so different from that of Sardinia, since Turin was the most advanced city of industrial expansion and the first to experience the Taylorist model of production in Italy. In debate with other studies, Fresu rejects the notion that Gramsci was influenced by positivist perspectives during his first years in Turin through joining the Italian Socialist Party (probably in 1913). It was precisely the young Gramsci's initial contact with idealism in Sardinia that was decisive for the debate established with the many shortcomings in the narrow philosophical conceptions of the theorists of the Second International. Instead of accepting the great historical laws of economic evolution that assured the arrival of socialism, Gramsci spotlighted the importance of the will in social struggles. In those years, Turin was enthused with an anti-positivist atmosphere. Learning and fighting in this atmosphere, Gramsci read not only the new Italian idealists (fundamentally, Benedetto Croce and Giovanni Gentile) but also authors from complex and international currents, including pragmatism, in figures like Giovanni Papini, Giuseppe Prezzolini, Giovanni Vailati or Mario Calderoni (Italy), Henri Bergson and Georges Sorel (France) or Williams James and C. S. Peirce (United States). In addition, Gramsci was reached by the intellectual and futurist vanguards that used journals as a tool to organize and fight in the political-cultural field. In this way, Gramsci's journalistic activity in socialist newspapers and reviews such as 'L'Avanti!', 'Il Grido del Popolo', 'La città futura' and then 'L'Ordine nuovo' responded to the networks of reviews in Turin. Journalism was a fundamental trench in the battle of ideas.

It is well known that the first Gramsci's approach to Marxism was from the idealist perspective. However, Fresu underlines an authentic watershed during Gramsci's Turin days that paved the way to his new understanding of Marxism, that is Antonio Labriola

and his approach to Marxism as a 'philosophy of praxis'. In the Italian landscape, this perspective (which would become central in Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*) sought to grasp Marxism as an independent theory, against any combination with positivism or with neo-Kantianism (such as was proposed in official socialist Marxism). Although the small success that Labriola had stemmed from his marginal position in relation to the two Marxist currents of that time (Kautsky's orthodoxy and Bernstein's revisionism), the Italian philosopher was practically the only point of reference within Italian Marxism for the young generation of 'L'Ordine Nuovo' and particularly for Gramsci. At the same time, as Fresu highlights, his readings on Marxism were closely linked with the effervescence resulting from the Russian revolution of 1917 that had various impacts on social struggle in Italy. In the framework of the dramatic economic crisis, as a consequence of the First World War (1914-1918), the masses found real hope in the October Revolution. As in other countries, class struggle became fierce in Italy and this was true in particular in the Turin of the 'red biennium' days (1919-1920), where the council democracy in the factories imitated the models of soviets in Russia. However, the PSI was politically incapable of leading the factory council fight and hindered the development of alliance between working class and peasant movement; in a reformist way, its main activity was reduced to guaranteeing parliamentary democracy. As an end to the revolutionary hope, there opened up a reactionary landscape.

One of the most useful contributions of Fresu's book lies in his description of the national and international contexts of socialist and communist debates that marked Gramsci's life. In the PSI, Fresu points to different political tendencies that in 1921 founded a revolutionary party which seceded from the Socialist Party and adhered to the III (Communist) International, or CI, created under Lenin's leadership in 1919, that is to say the Italian Communist party or PCd'I. During political participation first in the Socialist Party and then in the PCd'I, the followers of Bordiga and of 'L'Ordine nuovo' (among them Gramsci) and the left-wing maximalists encouraged debates about main issues which were in Gramsci thought: the relationship between party, trade unions and councils; the means of education of the masses; the construction of a new socialist State.

It is of great interest that Fresu takes into account Amadeo Bordiga as a key figure for understanding the trajectory of Gramsci's political position. Usually, the widespread mistake is to consider the Sardinian as the great founder of the new party created in January of 1921 in Livorno. This approach results from an instrumental representation of the facts and leads to an underestimation of the centrality of Bordiga and left-wing communism in the foundation of the PCd'I and its first few years. In the context of insufficient historical studies regarding Bordiga, Fresu's book is highly important through its stress on his ideological conception that could be identified in the constant interaction between 'economic determinism' and 'revolutionary faith', meaning a conception of subjective intervention strongly linked to the *iron laws* of economic transformation process. Already in the PSI, the Neapolitan militant had an (ultra-)leftist position and denied even a tactical role to participation in bourgeois institutions. He considered the council movement as counter-revolutionary, pertaining to the trade unions' traditions of reformism and corporatism. He also understood the party as an organ outside the working class capable of seeing the fundamental economic contradiction that would lead, at right time, to the sparks of the revolution. This political perspective established not only a hierarchical relationship between the top (the main cadres) and the rest of the party (other cadres as executors of directives from the Executive) but also between the party and the masses. In the middle of the political debate in the PCd'I between Bordiga and Angelo Tasca, who assumed the leadership of the right-wing minority, Fresu underlines the fact that Gramsci remained undecided. Among other reasons, the Sardinian leader considered it impossible to conduct a political battle against Bordiga without tearing the party apart and favouring the right: hence his acceptance of Bordiga's leadership.

In an interesting articulation between national and international communist debates, Fresu underscores the importance of the Communist International in the explosion of contradictions within the Italian party. In particular, the author finds a starting point in the new tactic called the formula of the 'united front' that was developed during the Third (22 June and 12 July 1921) and the Fourth Congresses (30 November and 5 December 1922) of the

International. In the framework of the difficulties of the young Soviet State, the dramatic failure of revolutionary attempts in Europe, the beginning of a new backward phase in the movement and the reactionary offensive of the fascist upsurge, Lenin indicated an original tactic. The united front formula suggested an initiative whereby the Communists joined with all workers, even those belonging to other groups and parties (fundamentally, socialists), in a common struggle to defend the basic interests of the working class against the bourgeois reactionary. Participating in the Fourth congress, Gramsci assumed this complex formula and adopted an important position against the left wing majority and the right wing minority in the PCd'I. The Third International made several criticisms of the policies of Italian communism that, under Bordiga's leadership, expressed an 'exasperated leftism'. The Neapolitan rejected the CI's political positions due to his tactic focused only on the Russian situation and believed that the revolution could be expanded around Europe. Bordiga opened a profound political conflict with the International and began to lose influence in the PCd'I. Instead of the Neapolitan, Lenin and the International promoted Gramsci's leadership. At the same time, there was a surge in fascist reaction in Italy: leaders and militants were arrested (including Bordiga in February 1923). After a long fight against the left and right wing, Gramsci assumed the role of General Secretary of the PCd'I after the Como Conference in May 1924.

Fresu polemicizes with studies over the last few decades that seek to purge Gramsci's work of any link with Lenin's theoretical and political legacy. In this way, the author emphasizes the Russian revolutionary influence on different moments and dimensions of Gramsci thought: council democracy, the political battle on two fronts (against opportunism and against sectarianism) and the conception of the party. The author also stresses Lenin's influence on a main theme in the last few decades in Gramsci's studies, namely translatability. In this way, he draws a parallel between the Russian revolutionary's reflections about political translatability in different national languages and Gramsci's theory of translatability in the *Prison Notebooks*. Further, Fresu realizes that the tactic of the 'united front' was fundamental to hegemony, one of Gramsci's key categories. Reflecting upon the defeat and difficulties of the revolutionary processes in the West, Gramsci proposed a complex

politics of hegemony to win over the majority of the subaltern classes. In this way, Lenin's influence was not only in the *Prison Notebooks* but also in decisive pre-prison writings such as *The Lyon Theses* (1926) where Gramsci refuted any simplistic equivalence between democratic framework and fascism, such as Bordiga maintained. As Lenin paid attention to the particular features of the national scene, the Sardinian assumed fascism as a complex phenomenon, whose deeper causes should be sought in the many contradictions inherent in the history of Italy and not only in the 'psychosis' that preceded and followed the first war. But Fresu does not draw attention only to the international debts in Gramsci's thought. He also focuses on the relevance of the Italian theoretical framework, drawing, for example, a parallel between the Sardinian and Italian authors such as Piero Gobetti in the analysis of fascism. To sum up, Fresu's book outlines the international and national intellectual atmosphere that is a hallmark of Gramsci's biography. This kind of approach is of great importance for reflecting upon Gramsci, in the sense of a communist militant who was an intellectual rooted in his country, but also committed to international problems and debates.

One may state that in his volume Fresu has outlined an intellectual biography concerned with theoretical and political problems that are still open in Marxism. In other words, his study is not only a serious academic approach aiming at a complex introduction to Gramsci's life and thought but also promotes a reflection upon contemporary political issues. Throughout his life, Gramsci confronted political dilemmas or controversial subjects such as communism and democracy, the risk of corporatism in the subaltern classes, intellectual transformism, the rise of a reactionary regime, the relation between intellectual and manual work, democratic or bureaucratic centralism, the relationship between leaders and masses. As the book shows, the political legacy of Gramsci is not a rigid scheme. Rather, it is an open, dialectical and complex thought developed in close connection with social struggles and intellectual (national and international) atmospheres. In this way, Gramsci's thought is still relevant for confronting our political dilemmas. We well know that these dilemmas are not the same as in Gramsci's days. But, as Fresu clarifies, the Sardinian's concepts continue to be a point of reference to deal with our political controversies.

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