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Abstract

This is a double review in English by Francesca Antonini of the volumes by Angelo Rossi, Gramsci e la crisi europea negli anni Trenta [Gramsci and the European Crisis of the Nineteen Thirties] (Guida, Napoli 2017) and Giuseppe Vacca, Modernità alternative. Il Novecento di Antonio Gramsci [Alternative Modernities. The Twentieth Century of Antonio Gramsci] (Einaudi, Torino 2017)

Keywords

Nineteen thirties, organic crisis, Gramsci, modernity, Soviet Union

Gramsci and the “crisis of modernity”

Francesca Antonini

Two monographs, published in 2017 on the eightieth anniversary of Gramsci’s death, use different perspectives to examine the same question, one that may be summed up by using the concise term “the crisis of modernity”. These are *Gramsci e la crisi europea negli anni Trenta (Gramsci and the European Crisis of the Nineteen-Thirties)* by Angelo Rossi (Napoli: Guida), with a preface by Biagio De Giovanni; and *Modernità alternative. Il Novecento di Antonio Gramsci (Alternative Modernities. The Twentieth Century of Antonio Gramsci)* by Giuseppe Vacca (Torino: Einaudi).

The expression “crisis of modernity” is to be understood as the transformations which in the post-First World War period characterize the Italian and European scenario, the subject of reflection by Gramsci in his *Prison Notebooks*, whose consequences he also felt in the first person as a prisoner in the fascist gaol. The general theoretical framework is the one defined in the prison writings as an “organic crisis” or “crisis of authority”, where these criteria describe the disintegration of the pre-war liberal order (crisis of the institutions therefore, but also crisis of parties and, more in general, of “ideologies”) and the rise of new socio-political formations matched by changes at the cultural level and in the bourgeois capitalist economy.¹

Both authors are long-term Gramsci scholars and both volumes discussed here represent a pit of arrival of a research pathway that dates back a long time. As regards Rossi, the volume presented here is not only the “complement” to his immediately previous book *Gramsci in carcere. L’itinerario dei Quaderni (1929-1933) [Gramsci in Prison. The Itinerary of the Notebooks]* (Napoli: Guida, 2014), but also a

¹ Cf. on this the entry *Crisi* by F. Frosini in Liguori and Voza (2009), pp. 175-9, as well as the entries that follow on immediately *Crisi di autorità* by M. Filippini, pp. 179-80 and *Crisi organica*, by L. La Porta, pp. 180-2.

follow-up, in terms of ideas, of his past work (cf. the 2010 volume *Gramsci da eretico a icona. Storia di un cazzotto nell'occhio*, [Gramsci from Heretic to Icon. History of a Punch in the Eye], again published by Guida; see also the joint publication with Vacca *Gramsci tra Mussolini e Stalin* [Gramsci Between Mussolini and Stalin] (Roma: Fazi, 2007). As compared with the 2014 volume, the recent volume concentrates mainly on the last few years of Gramsci's life (from 1933 onwards) but at the same time provides a general reconstruction of Gramsci's vicissitudes in prison in their entirety, particularly as regards the question of the various attempts, going on in time, to free him.

As is typical in Rossi's work, the structure of the present volume is strongly anchored to the concrete evolution of Gramsci's life, as well as to the political events characterizing the years he spent in detention. These include what was happening both on the national and on the international planes, with special attention paid to the events going on within the Communist Party of Italy and its relations with its imprisoned leader. In this perspective the author makes wide use of a variety of sources, among which there stand out the letters exchanged with his sister-in-law, Tat'jana (Tanja), the real "prism" through which one must begin for reconstructing the whole network of questions (political, personal and intellectual) bound up with Gramsci.

The volume comprises six chapters, to which three conclusions are appended (one of which is a republication of Rossi's 2015 article on the "rescue" of the Notebooks by Tanja and the other two consisting of documents. Chapters I-IV are those of a more "factual" nature. Starting from an analysis of the circumstances surrounding Gramsci's "lightning" transfer" from the prison at Turi di Bari to Civitavecchia, closely connected, in Rossi's view, with the imminent meeting between Mussolini and Maksim Litvinov, the Soviet Union's Commissar for Foreign Affairs, we read a reconstruction of the attempts to free Gramsci and their failures (see Chapter I). In this context, Rossi gives ample space to the "infamous" letter of Grieco of February 1928, as well as to the question of the relations within the Italian Communist Party and between it and the Russian party (underlining the differences in the strategic perspectives in 1932-1933: cf. Chapter II). Another central event that is investigated in depth by Rossi, then, is that of the so-called "Arcangeli report" (cf. Chapter III). Chapter IV is instead,

devoted in the main to the relations between fascist Italy and Soviet Russia, from the non-aggression pact of September 1933 to the above-mentioned Mussolini-Litvinov meeting in December of the same year, which represents a preliminary closing of the circle.

The final two chapters, in which the author deals with Gramsci's time in the prison-approved clinic in Formia and, then, the very last period of his life, combine a narration of a historiographical nature with a broader analysis of the theoretical reflection contained in the *Notebooks*.²

In the fifth chapter, observations on the national-international dimension (p. 126 and *passim*), on the figure of the "legislator" (p. 128) and above all on fascism as "passive revolution" (pp. 130 *et seq.*) are all prominent. It is therefore of interest to note how, beginning with this historico-conceptual analysis, Rossi devotes attention to the ways in which the prison writings were composed, underlining the fact that notes are not merely re-summarized in the so-called "special notebooks" (cf. p. 141: "already the choice of notes of the 'miscellaneous' *Notebooks* to be transcribed into the 'special' *Notebooks* required an intellectual engagement and concentration"). In consequence, the importance of the final phase of "original" production during imprisonment, the one found in the last "miscellaneous Notebooks" (14, 15 and 17), is emphasized.

The sixth and last chapter hinges around the question of the so-called "constituent assembly", in other words the "democratic" alternative to the fascist regime which began to take shape around 1934. To investigate the question, Rossi gives ample space to the history of Italy between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, with special attention paid to the notes on the Risorgimento contained, in their second draft, in Notebook 19, defined by him as the "last and most organic document of Gramsci's political thought" (p. 148). In general, Rossi's reasoning shows up the significant difference between Gramsci's interpretation of the politico-institutional crisis then unfolding and the "line of the Comintern in the 'third period'" (p. 156), underscoring once again the tension between the national and international dimensions,

² Readers are referred to my contribution *Fra "vecchia" e "nuova" politica. Stato, partito e burocrazia negli ultimi quaderni miscellanei* to the collective volume edited by G. Francioni and F. Giasi, *Un nuovo Gramsci*, pp. 365-88.

and, within the former, between Gramsci's vision and that of "his" party (but can one still really speak in these terms?). Last, of great interest are the observations on Nazism (pp. 160 et seq). Rossi here argues that several notes of the final phase of Gramsci's reflections should be read in the light of contemporary German events and above all in that of the rise to power of Hitler.³ In conclusion Rossi therefore asks himself the reason why Gramsci abandoned work on his *Notebooks*, hypothesizing that, on top of the well-known question of his health, there were also other reasons, linked as much to the "juridical position of the prisoner vis-à-vis the regime (p. 167), as to the further new transformations of the political panorama (pp. 169-170).

Giuseppe Vacca's volume is like that of Rossi in its interlocking of historiographical and conceptual dimensions, albeit in inverse proportions – in this case it is more the theoretical reflection that evokes the historical context, and then more occasionally, anchors itself to the example provided by single events. On the other hand, a precise analysis of the events marking Gramsci's imprisonment had already been proposed by the author in his *Vita e pensieri di Antonio Gramsci. 1926-1937 (Life and Thoughts of Antonio Gramsci. 1926-1937)* published in 2012 by Einaudi (Turin), as well as in previous publications (most of all one may recall the joint work with Angelo Rossi of 2007).⁴

The book comprises an introduction and four chapters, each dealing with a key concept of Gramsci's thought. As is illustrated in a brief preface, the various research investigations were developed individually and then brought together in volume form to provide the key to an overall interpretation (cf. pp. VII-XIII).

In the *Introduction* (pp. 3-19) which precedes the real chapters as such, starting from a discussion of Alessandro Carlucci's

³ On this subject, cf. G. Francioni, «La liquidazione di Leone Davidovi». *Per una nuova datazione del Quaderno 14*, in *Un nuovo Gramsci*, cit., pp. 341-64 and S. Overy, *Gramsci and the German Crisis, 1929-34. A Historical Interpretation of the Prison Notebooks*, PhD Thesis, York 2001 (a printed – posthumous version – is in the course of publication).

⁴ Vacca's publications are both wide-ranging and various; for an exhaustive list, readers are referred to the *Bibliografia gramsciana online* [URL: <http://bg.fondazionegramsci.org/bibliogramsci/bibliografia>].

monograph of 2013,⁵ the author reconstructs in broad outline the picture of contemporary Gramsci studies in Italy, singling out a number of authors (with their respective publications) who have contributed significantly to advancing recent research; among these attention is drawn to the names of Gianni Francioni, Aldo Natoli, Leonardo Rapone, Francesca Izzo, Giuseppe Cospito and Fabio Frosini. These bibliographical references are moreover functional to the succinct but exhaustive reconstruction of events relating to the birth of the *Edizione nazionale degli scritti di Antonio Gramsci* (*National Edition of Antonio Gramsci's Writings*), a series of volumes in the course of publication, on whose philological and textual acquisitions the works mentioned are to a great extent based.⁶

The first, and longest, chapter in the book (the outcome, like the second chapter, of a cycle of university lectures) is devoted to the macro-question of hegemony ('The Concept of Hegemony', pp. 21-93). Here the author adopts a "diachronic" model of analysis which is then applied in other chapters and heralds the reconstruction of the evolution of the category from its first appearance up to the notes in the Prison Notebooks, drawing out even indirectly the "continuity" between the pre-prison and the prison writings. With their starting point the experiences that influenced the political vision of the young Gramsci, from the First World War to the Russian Revolution, Vacca brings into focus the lines along which, before and after his imprisonment, Gramsci articulated the concept, placing particular emphasis on the national-international nexus, from a perspective that is as much "critical" as it is "constructive".

The second chapter is devoted to the category of "passive revolution" (*Che cos'è la "rivoluzione passiva"*, pp. 95-149 [entitled *The Nature of "Passive Revolution"* in the forthcoming English translation]). Passive revolution is defined as the "historiographical complement of the concept of hegemony" (p. IX). For this too the author looks for the premises in the pre-prison reflections, and in particular in the investigation into the nature of the Italian Risorgimento, right from the start a central point of reference for Gramsci's theoretical-

5 A. Carlucci (2013). A review of Carlucci's volume by Vacca (utilized here) was published in «Il mestiere di storico», 2014 (2), p. 206 (DOI:10.15463/rec.1189741320).

6 Lastly, cf. the recent monographic number of this review (*Readings and Applications of Gramsci/The National Edition of Gramsci's Writings*, «International Gramsci Journal», 2018, 2, 4 [URL: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/gramsci/vol2/iss4/>]).

strategic elaboration. In this context, if the study of the Mussolini regime occupies a central position, the discussions of “other” experiences (antithetical to one another such as America and the USSR) are highly significant. These are experiences that share with fascism the (more or less successful) attempt to reoccupy the political space left vacant by the post-World War I crisis – hence the title of the volume *Modernità alternative (Alternative Modernities)*.

Chapter III (*Dal materialismo storico alla filosofia della prassi. Fondamenti di una teoria processuale del soggetto [From Historical Materialism to the Philosophy of Praxis. Foundations for a Processual Theory of the Subject]*, pp. 151-185) is perhaps the most philosophical of the chapters and centres around, precisely, the category of the “philosophy of praxis”. Vacca’s aim here is to describe Gramsci’s particular conception of historical materialism beginning with the question of the “subject”, understood as much in a philosophical-theoretical sense as in a politico-strategic one. In this case too, the diachronic path allows us to bring together moments of Gramsci’s political activity before the arrest and then his successive reflections, comprising here his “return” to Marx and the stance he adopted vis-à-vis the dogmatic positions that socialism was assuming in the Soviet Union.

It is around Gramsci’s conception of democracy that the fourth chapter unfolds (*Egemonia e democrazia [Hegemony and Democracy]*, pp. 190-228). Here in certain ways the perspective is opposite to the one adopted in the previous chapter: the overriding criterion is represented by the “crisis of the subject” following on World War Two and by the readings, in the light of this crisis, that scholars have given of Gramsci’s thought.⁷ On the basis of this crisis of politics (understood above all as “ideology”), Vacca returns to Gramsci’s analysis of the picture of the 1920s and 1930s and to the totalitarian dynamics that characterize this picture. At the same time, space is however given to the “democratic alternatives” and the strategies that can be put into operation to defuse this drift. Amongst these are to be numbered the formula of the “constituent assembly”, and above all, the renewal of the political party from the inside, transforming it into what Gramsci termed the “modern Prince”.

⁷ See also, *mutatis mutandis*, Giuseppe Vacca (ed.) (2015) precisely on this question.

Summing up, one can say that the volume of Rossi and that of Vacca integrate each other very well, examining different but complementary aspects of the complex Italian and international scenario of the post-World War I period. In Rossi's adoption of a more "external" approach, and in Vacca's adoption of amore "internal" one (without sliding into a unilateral approach) these two works highlight not only the elements that bind Gramsci to a tradition of thought and previous political action, but also the "fracture lines" that define his distance from them. In the case of Gramsci this distance is as much a physical one as an intellectual one, due to his particular condition as a prisoner. The picture that emerges is therefore as complex as it is tragic, to the extent that the complexity and the tragic nature of the situation belong not only to the figure of Gramsci but to the historical circumstances through which he himself was living.

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