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Introduction to Three Lycée Essays by Gramsci

Abstract

This article introduces the three newly discovered essays written by Gramsci while still at the Dettori high school in Cagliari and goes into why they have only recently come to light, to then be published in 2022 in the Italian newspaper "Il fatto quotidiano". The essays turned up in the family papers of a Communist Party parliamentarian from Milan, Francesco Scotti, a Spanish Civil War veteran and after that a partisan leader (in the French Maquis and then in Italy) among whose friends in Milan were people associated with Gramscian activities, among them Carlo Gramsci, the younger brother of Antonio. It seems likely that Scotti was given these essays by someone in this group to hand them over to the PCI in Rome, probably to Togliatti, but neglected to do this and so they remained forgotten for years. The essays themselves can with certainty be dated to Gramsci's last year at the high school since the signature of the professore is Vittorio Amedeo Arullani, who had replaced Raffa Garzia as Gramsci's Italian teacher. The essay subjects assigned were quotations from the sixteenth century writer Giovanni Della Casa's treatise *Il Galateo* (in recent English versions *The Rules of Polite Behavior*) and two of Italy's most important poets, Giacomo Leopardi and Giosuè Carducci. For all these essays by Gramsci, Arullani gave positive judgments and very high grades. One sees a student very open to the contemporary currents of thought, whose essays prefigure themes that later come explicitly to the fore both in his journalistic work and in the *Prison Notebooks* (artistic currents and aesthetics, Americanism, the "mummification" of culture, the figure of Stenterello, Kant's "beheading" of God, Jesuitism and so on).

Keywords

The Young Gramsci: High School Essays; Gramsci's Early Interests ; Later Gramscian Themes.

Introduction to Three Lycée Essays by Gramsci

Maria Luisa Righi

1. Introduction: the New Essays.

In June 2022 I received a phone call from the author and journalist Gad Lerner. Keeping things a little vague, he told me that a friend of his, among her grandfather's papers, had come up with three old lycée essays bearing, at the end of each, the signature "Antonio Gramsci". A check revealed that the volume *Scritti [Writings] 1910-1916* of the *National Edition of Gramsci's Writings* (Gramsci 2019a) contained four essays written at the *liceo* (lycée or "high school"); and Lerner asked me whether the ones found were authentic and, if so, whether they were in that volume. Given that the Gramsci Foundation possessed the originals of the four published essays (and not reproductions or transcriptions), straight away I understood that we were dealing with new texts.

Even at a first glance, the signatures immediately came over as authentic: as well as being signed, the essays were entirely similar to the published ones, conserved in the Antonio Gramsci Archive (AAG).¹ The assessment by the professor,² Vittorio Amedeo Arullani, also allowed us to locate them with certainty in Gramsci's last year at the lycée, namely October 1920-June 1911.

Having established the authenticity, the new texts were curated by Gad Lerner and published in the daily newspaper "Il Fatto Quotidiano" on 24, 25 and 26 June 2022.

¹ The four published essays *Libertà mal costume non sposa, / Per sozzure non mette mai piè/* (Giovanni Berchet, dated 21 November 1910); *Sostanza e forma, Salve, o serena de l'Ilisso in riva, / o intera e dritta ai lidi almi del Tebro, / anima umana!..* (G. Carducci in *Oppressi e oppressori?* – were published in Gramsci (2019a), pp. 813-826 together with the only one that had been published before, namely *Oppressi e oppressori* in Gramsci (1964), pp. 13-15. The manuscripts may be consulted on access to the analytic inventory of the Archivio Antonio Gramsci on the site of the Fondazione Gramsci: 1 Carte [papers] personali (personal papers), 1, 1891-1926, Documentazione personale, Documentazione scolastica (1901-1911): <http://archivi.fondazionegramsci.org/gramsci-web/inventari/struttura/gramscixDamsHist010>.

² [From high school upwards, a teacher is called and addressed as 'Professore' – trans. note]

2. *Vittorio Amedeo Arullani*

The new professor, who in October 1910 had assumed the post of Raffa Garzia to teach Italian at the Dettori Lycée in Cagliari, was a scholar who a year later would become *libero docente* at the University of Padua. He was born in the province of Asti (Piedmont), graduated with Arturo Graf in Turin, had numerous publications to his name, and was also author of several edited volumes of poetry and of studies in the history of literature, in particular of eighteenth-century authors;³ he contributed to a number of the best literary reviews, including “Natura ed Arte”, “Fanfulla della Domenica”, “Gazzetta del popolo della domenica”, “Vita internazionale”, and was a member of literary and scholastic associations. He held progressive and liberal ideas (on several occasions he dealt with the vision of woman in literature)⁴ and from 1899 was a full-time teacher in Cagliari. He profited from his time in Sardinia to write a number of essays on Sardinian authors. A short time after having obtained the post in Padua, Arullani died in Florence in January 1912.⁵

3. *The Young Gramsci's School Career and Style*

When Gramsci wrote these essays, he was twenty years old. Nino (as he was called at home) had started school late. For health reasons he had begun elementary school at seven in October 1898 at Sorgono. His father, head of the local Land and Territory Registry Office had been arrested a few months earlier because of sums missing on the accounts, to be then sentenced and to leave prison only in January 1904, leaving the family in conditions of poverty. The family moved to Ghilarza, the home village of Giuseppina Marcias, who faced up to the “dreadful storm” to “save seven children”, as Gramsci was to write of his mother in the letter to his sister, Grazietta, of 31 October 1932: Gramsci 2020: 871; in English 1994a, 2: 223). Even little Nino was asked to contribute to the family income and in June 1903 had to interrupt his studies: “as a child I was against the rich, because I couldn’t go on and study, I who had got top marks in every single subject at primary school,

³ See for example his *Lirica e lirici nel Settecento* (1893); *Victor Hugo lirico* (1906); *L’opera di Vittorio Alfieri e la sua importanza laica: nazionale e civile* (1907).

⁴ V. A. Arullani (1890, 1902a, 1902b).

⁵ *Vittorio Amedeo Arullani* in *Annuario delle Reale Università degli Studi di Padova per l’anno accademico 1911-12*, Padova, Tipografia Giov. Battista Randi, 1912, pp. 317-8.

while the son of the butcher, the village chemist, the clothier went with no problem. That instinct extended to include all the rich who were oppressing the peasantry in Sardinia and I thought then that we had to fight for national independence for the region: ‘Into the sea with the mainlanders!’” (letter to his wife Jul’ka, 6 March 1924 in Gramsci 1992: 271; in English 2014: 247). He worked ten hours a day “including Sunday morning, and I managed to move ledgers that weighed more than I did and many nights I would cry silently because my whole body ached” (letter to his sister-in-law Tat’jana [Tanja] 3 October 1932: in Gramsci 2020: 856; in English 1994a, 2: 215). Only in October 1905 could he begin his studies again, in a “quite run-down” middle school (*ginnasio*) at Santu Lussurgiu (letter to Tan’ja of 26 December 1927, in Gramsci 2020: 190; in English 1994a, 1: 163). In October 1908 he registered at the Dettori Lycée in Cagliari. He lived in a furnished room with his brother Gennaro, accountant for an ice works, and treasurer of the *Camera del lavoro* [“Chamber of Labour”, roughly equivalent to the British “Trades Council” – trans. note]. He skipped meals and went to school in the threadbare clothing of which he was ashamed, but did not give up subscribing to various reviews, among them “Il Marzocco”, “La Voce”, Gaetano Salvemini’s “L’Unità”;⁶ he was a passionate theatre-goer, seeing all types of play. As he would later confess to his mother, in his youth he was “apparently calm and collected”, but in reality he was ‘intimately impassioned and full of great aspirations, furthermore disinterested, since [he was] never ambitious’ (9 September 1929 in Gramsci 2020, p. 405; not in Gramsci 1994a).

Evidence of what he was reading is also provided by what remains of the bibliographic reference cards on which he listed books by authors which he probably owned and articles from reviews to which he subscribed or had access to. From the internal ordering of some of the cards we may assume that he had compiled them between January 1911, when still at the lycée, and the summer of 1912, when he had returned to Ghilarza to spend the summer there after his first year at university. While there are serious gaps in the index file (entire blocks of his readings are missing), it offers an idea of his many-sided interests. Literary subjects predominate, but

⁶ Cf. the items on view the recent exhibition in Cesena, listed in its catalogue published as Gramsci 2019b. [Exhibition afterwards on view at the Italian Cultural Institute in London].

various other subject matters are present, from music to geographical explorations, from poetry to theatre, from history to the visual arts.

Echoes of these intense readings are also to be seen in the school essays, where one finds statements deriving from the writings of Benedetto Croce, Giuseppe Prezzolini, or Giuseppe Antonio Borgese and facts and questions are quoted that are not directly connected with the school curriculum, such as the Boxer Revolt in China or the people's housing programme then underway in Britain. Neologisms make their appearance, too, duly indicated by his professor, such as the term "virtuisti", introduced by Gramsci in the essay *Libertà mal costume non sposa*,⁷ the word, only later to come into use, may be said with certainty to come from the article *Il mito virtuista* by Aldo Sorani, published in Paolo Orano's review "La Lupa", in which there is a discussion of Vilfredo Pareto's book *Le mythe vituiste et la littérature immorale*, then about to come out in France.⁸ Probably not of Gramsci's coinage was also the phrase "americanarsi dell'Europa" – used in the essay *Non si dee l'uomo contentare*, and which has struck many commentator as almost an anticipation of *Americanismo e fordismo*⁹ – has been traced back to a couple of earlier newspaper articles,¹⁰ but neither is a plausible source for Gramsci.

Five essays contain as their main subject fragments of verses (Giovanni Berchet, Giosuè Carducci, Giovanni Della Casa, Giacomo Leopardi and Henrik Ibsen) and two of them a couple of opposites ("Sostanza e forma", and "Oppressi e oppressori"). Arullani appreciated his compositions for their "rare originality", irony, "frankness together with clarity", their "wholesome and conscious maturity" and "noteworthy thought and form". In one

⁷ From *Le fantasie III* by the poet, and later representative of the 'historic right' in the sub-Alpine Parliament, Giovanni Berchet (1783-1851).

⁸ This number of 'La Lupa' (Vol. 1(6), 20 November 1910) is in the private collection of the Gramsci-Paulesu family in Ghilarza. Gramsci used it later in the article *La divina favella* (Avanti!, 27 June 1916, 'Cronache torinesi', in the 'Sotto la mole' series, now in Gramsci, 2019a, pp. 494-5), when however the term had entered common currency after Pareto's book had been translated into Italian under the title *Il mito virtuista e la letteratura immorale*.

⁹ G. Lerner, "In quelle righe è 'nata' la critica all'egemonia USA e al fordismo": "Il fatto quotidiano", 24 June 2022. Cf. for example, M. Ghezzi, "I temi di Gramsci diventano una pièce con Lerner e Truzzi", "Corriere della sera", 16 October 2023.

¹⁰ A correspondence from Berlin in the "Corriere della sera" of 24-25 July 1896: *La guerra al latino*; and a correspondence from Bern, *Le ingenuità di un congresso*, "Il giornale di Udine", 28 July 1902.

case, that of *Substance and form* (see above) Arullani seems to leave behind his *ex cathedra* judgment in order to address his student directly: “Culture and thought are exercised subjectively: but not all the difficulties of the subject matter are overcome. As much as he may deny it, Borgese follows Croce too often. And he certainly follows him in the thought and judgment which you rightly censure. I would not speak of superficial versification in Manzoni: be mindful that this depends on your school of thought”.

In his final assessment Arullani gave his student Antonio Gramsci the grade of 9/10 for his written work and 8 in the oral which, together with 9 in Greek culture and 8 in all the other subjects, allowed him to obtain the school leaving certificate without having to take the final examination.

In these school essays, as was underlined by Togliatti, who had been able to read the four that Tanja had sent to her sister, Jul'ka, after Gramsci's death, one grasps

a singular present sense of history, an uncommon ability in one so young to bring together men who are distant in time and space. One feels that the youth who was writing those pages was not unaware of the most burning questions of culture and of all the life of Italy of the time. One sees her and there the first stirrings of the wings of the eagle' (Togliatti 1949, now in *id.*, 2014, p. 1048).

When the young socialist Angelo Tasca began to associate with Gramsci at the University of Turin, he too recognized in the new friend “a spiritual agility, firmness of logic, and aptitude for seeing in events their link with the general” (letter of Tasca to Gramsci, September-October 1913, now in Gramsci 2009: 144).

The propensity to grasp a more general meaning in even minor phenomena, especially in the behaviour of the popular strata of society, is evident in these school essays. This comes out for instance in the observation (in *Non dee l'uomo ...*, above) that the “horrible lithographs” of the housewife, or the “baroque friezes” with which the shepherd decorated his pumpkin are the expression of a “love for beauty”, albeit primitive and as yet uneducated (see essay). A number of characteristics which we then find in his journalism such as his lexical research and the quotations from memory of numerous texts are already apparent in these early writings.

It is surprising to see in these youthful compositions (*Conosciuto, ancor che tristo ...* [see above]) the figure of Stenterello, which he would use years later as the “prototype of the Italian bourgeoisie, gossipy, vain, empty” (article *Stenterello* in “Avanti!”, 10 March 1917, now in Gramsci 2015: 171; cf. Gramsci 1994b: 226).¹¹

In this lycée essay, the inspiration to use this mask was a couplet of Carducci

La favella toscana, ch'è sí sciocca
Nel manzonismo de gli Stenterelli¹²
(<https://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/stenterello/>)
‘The Tuscan dialect, not the emasculated
Manzonian jargon of the Florentine buffoon’
(<https://www.poetrynook.com/poem/san-guido>)

with which the poet alluded to “those *litterati* who, falsifying the lesson of Manzoni, were content with an affected and artificial prose” (Togliatti 1944, now in *id.*, 2014: 991).

Gramsci would become a journalist five years later and his articles, to a great extent unsigned, stand out for their particular style, through his way of establishing links between the little facts of everyday life or town news and grand-scale history.

On the subject of his journalism, Togliatti had this to say:

He made insuperable use of the weapon of laughter and ridicule to lay bare the vanity and duplicity of those who preach morality to the people in the interest of the dominant classes. He had a deep-rooted knowledge of the life of the Italian people and their customs, legends and the stories created by them in which, in a naive and intuitive form, they expressed their needs, aspirations, dreams of freedom and justice, their hatred of the exploiting classes [...]. He was a bitter enemy of the tinsel and overblown eloquence that spoil so much of Italian literature and culture and which, among Italian literary strata, have suffocated the fresh springs of popular inspiration (Togliatti 1944, now in *id.* 2014, p. 991).¹³

¹¹ Gramsci had already used the figure of Stenterello in 1916 and it would return in various writings, including the *Prison Notebooks* (*Quaderni del carcere*: Gramsci 1975).

¹² G. Carducci, *Davanti a San Guido*, l. 84 of the original in *Rime Nuove* (1887). In the 1917 article, Gramsci quotes Giuseppe Giusti’s “Dietro l’avello di Machiavello / Giace lo scheletro di Stenterello” (*Mementomo* 1841), used also in one of Gramsci’s last articles *Noi e la concentrazione repubblicana*, “L’Unità”, 13 October 1926: in English see Gramsci 1978: 422 for the this latter article and the couplet “Behind the tomb of Machiavello / Lie the bones of Stenterello”.

¹³ The first part of the quotation reproduces what Togliatti had written in his article *La figura del Maestro e del Capo* for the volume *Gramsci* (1938).

4. *Where did these New Essays Spring from?*

But how did these new texts, now dating back over a hundred years, come to light? They were found among the papers of Francesco Scotti (1910-1973), a communist leader in Milan with a long history of political militance. He was born in Castelpusterlengo (now in the northern province of Lodi, near Milan) in 1910, became a member of the Communist Party in 1928 and was sentenced by the Special Tribunal in 1933; after that he was a commandant in the Spanish Republican Army and then in the Garibaldi Battalions in the Resistance in Italy, being awarded two medals for valour. At the Liberation of Italy he was secretary of the Milanese federation of the Communist Party, then a member of the Constituent Assembly and a parliamentary representative in a number of legislatures (cf. Cosmacini and Scotti 2014). As one may see, Scotti has a very full biography, but one that never intersects with that of Gramsci.

How could these essays have finished up in his possession? From a letter of Piero Sraffa to Tat'jana Schucht of 12 April 1938, we know that Carlo Gramsci had “four of Nino’s lycée compositions” in his possession. The figure induces us to think that these “four compositions” are the ones conserved at the Gramsci Foundation, which, in the light of the new findings, must be those mentioned by Tat'jana in the letter to her sister of 5 July 1937, wrongly described as four homework tasks from the junior high school.

It must therefore have been Carlo who gave these essays of his brother to Scotti, even though we do not know why and when. The youngest of the Gramsci brothers moved to Milan in 1931 to work for Snia Viscosa – a post obtained for him, thanks to Piero Sraffa’s involvement of Raffaele Mattioli, then Director General of the Banca Commerciale – and lived there, with short interruptions, until his death in May 1968. In the capital city of Lombardy, Carlo formed his (few) bonds of friendship: he joined the PCI, and from 1952, when fired by Snia Viscosa, worked for the Milanese edition of ‘L’Unità’. He was a frequent visitor to the Libreria Internazionale-Einaudi in the Galleria Manzoni. The leading light of this bookshop, of the publishing house which brought out his brother’s writings, was Vando Aldrovandi (1918-1987), an exemplary figure of partisan commandant and intellectual who, in 1971, would become the first president of the “Friends of the Gramsci House” (*Amici della casa Gramsci*), founded on the initiative of Mimma Paulesu, daughter of

Teresina (Antonio's sister) and Milanese by adoption. Aldrovandi was also linked to Piero Sraffa, with whom he exchanged frequent letters,¹⁴ and to Francesco Scotti.

We know that Carlo was very loath to let go the documentation left by his brother, and as late as 1963, when Togliatti pressed him to give all the 'written documents' in his possession, he replied:

You have put me in an embarrassing position by insisting on handing over all the letters that I possess, an embarrassment that disturbs me and makes me nervous. But I can only confirm what I have already written to you, that is, for the moment I do not feel able to make this handover (Carlo Gramsci to Togliatti, 1 June 1959, now in Daniele, 2005: 183).

However, on 24 June 1963 Carlo sent Togliatti 36 documents which included a number dating to the school period: one exercise book with physics notes and three bibliographic reference files relating to the library at Ghilarza (Daniele, 2005: 190-91). Was he convinced that he had sent the essays, and had done so through Scotti who, as a parliamentarian, went regularly to Rome? And why were they not handed over?¹⁵

Francesco Scotti's heirs, his son Giuseppe and his niece Alice Barrese have now donated the three compositions to the Fondazione Gramsci, where the originals have now augmented the Archivio Antonio Gramsci.

These three compositions are now to be included in the *National Edition of Gramsci's Writings* where they will be published following the criteria established for all the manuscripts, i.e. indication of the rethinkings, cancellations, interlinear additions, comments by the professor and, in so far as is possible, the explicit and implicit sources.

It is hoped that the curiosity aroused by this unexpected finding will lead to further attention given by scholars towards Gramsci's formative years before his arrival in Turin.

¹⁴ Writing to Sraffa (23 December 1959) Carlo asked him to 'tell me through Al.' (Sraffa papers, C117), 'Al' being Aldrovandi's *nom de bataille* (Archinto, ed. 1988).

¹⁵ On this cf. Eleonora Lattanzi's contribution at the conference 'Francesco Scotti, l'antifascismo e la democrazia', 10 November 2023.

Appendix: The Essay Titles, Sources and Grades.

1) Non si dee l'uomo contentare di fare le cose buone /
ma dee studiare di farle anco leggiadre
[Man must not be content to do good things /
but must study to do them gracefully]
(from Giovanni Della Casa: *Galateo overo de' costumi* (1558): in
modern English translations: Della Casa 1986 or 2013
(Beginning of chapter XXVIII)

Grade 7-8

2)... Conosciuto, ancor che tristo /
Ha suoi dilette il vero ~ Leopardi
(...the truth, when known,
Though sad, has yet its charms. ~ Leopardi
(from Giacomo Leopardi, *Al conte Carlo Pepoli*, ll. 151-152 in
Canti, 1831; English translation in "Delphi Classics")

Grade: 7-8

3) Le verità, invecchiando, diventano errori – E[nrico] Ibsen (from
Giuseppe Giacosa, in *La lettura* (12), December 1902, p. 1082,
who summarizes in this way the passage from a play which he
does not specify; the passage is in fact from Act 4 of *An Enemy of
the People* (original *En folkefiende*, 1882).

A literal translation from an Italian version, published when
Gramsci was still an adolescent, reads: "now, when a truth has
become so old, it would be better denominated a 'lie' since it is on
the point of being transformed into a lie" (Treves Editions, 1906,
p. 84). In a recent English translation of the play: "when a truth
is that old, gentlemen, it is also well on its way to becoming a lie"
(Henrik Ibsen: *An Enemy of the People*, trans. copyright Barbara J.
Haveland 2012), which – abbreviated – provides the title of this
essay.

Grade 8+

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