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## Lycée Essay (3): When a Truth is that Old, It is on its Way to Becoming a Lie

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## Lycée Essay (3): When a Truth is that Old, It is on its Way to Becoming a Lie

### Abstract

The subject of Gramsci's essay, here in its English version, is taken from a paraphrase of words in Henrik Ibsen's 1882 play *An Enemy of the People*: "Truths, in getting old, become errors". Each generation has had its syntheses, truths following one another, each believed by its supporters but excluding the others. Intellectual ruins and contradictory substrata of human consciousness are the outcome, and even science has not escaped this débacle. Contradictory truths have led even to massacres and reprisals, with the destruction of society's dynamic and progressive aspects. Some truths are long-lasting, such as the Ptolemaic universe or the existence of God, whose mummified corpse can still however make its presence felt. Many contemporary problems can be traced back to old truths which – through official compromise and hypocrisy – still have to be respected. Humanity will construct other, more rational truths, in order to reach some destiny, but we cannot know if this will consist of annulment or deification.

### Keywords

Truth; Error; Contradictory Consciousness; Succession of Beliefs; Rationality; Destiny.

## ***Lycée Essay (3): When a Truth is that Old, It is on its Way to Becoming a Lie***

Antonio Gramsci

Men have always felt the need to seek the causes of life's phenomena and to create a complete reconstruction of the world from its origins. This is an impellent need of the spirit, so much so that the so-called sceptics, who deny the faculty of knowledge in man, force themselves to demonstrate something, seek something, even if it is something negative. Thus in every age, indeed in every generation, by bringing together and synthesizing all the discoveries made up to that point, they have sought to calm their souls, starved of the absolute, tossing them some system of philosophy that with more or less reliable hypotheses sought to fill the gaps left by experience. And thus we have seen one truth follow upon another, all of them evident, all of them believed, but each excluding the others. Therefore one can assert that the substrata of which modern consciousness consists are formed of so many negations, a miraculous succession of ruins, but nothing up to now that has been demonstrated in absolute terms. Therefore, when we reflect well on things, man appears a very strange being. For thousands of years he has been in torment, agitation, at one time happy and at another sad, at one time waving a flag of victory and a short while later martyring and torturing himself for a defeat, and finding himself back at the starting point. All this that he has suffered is not enough; disillusion has not changed him, he has remained the eternal child amusing himself in the sand, and wanting constantly to win out over the wind that has destroyed his construction efforts.

If indeed we observe how many of the assertions made from time immemorial have been saved from destruction, we see that the whole of the work carried out up to now has been in vain; science itself, which seems to some a queen and goddess, has not been spared from this tearful fate: it is not many years ago that Brunetière asserted its *débauche*.

It is saddening solely to think that these believed truths have been the cause of bitter struggles, of massacres and ferocious

reprisals. The most bestial part of man, which appears static and conservative, has always shown its ugly qualities in the attempt to destroy what instead there is of dynamic and progressive.

The Ptolemaic and Aristotelic belief that the Earth is the centre of the universe on the basis that man, the most perfect being, lives there, served for nearly two millennia; it contented souls and was certainly a truth, because truths are what are believed to be such by men, and no truth was more believed than this one. We, who have gone beyond it, see the organic defect in it that connects up with a whole system of individualistic civilization. We cannot however see whether the truth that has replaced it has some other fault in it; we are a long way from saying that scientific instruments have now been perfected; it is always man who uses the instrument, and he is not at all changed. Another truth which over time has been subject to various fortunes is the existence of God; and this is what has caused most ill to men; its positive aspect, very great for many, was to have wonderfully filled all the voids, and provided the consolatory balm to minds driven to the limit by their research. But a mind had to arise possessing reasoning, and Immanuel Kant beheaded the old God; the burial has not yet accepted it and the well-mummified corpse still from time to time gives men a sharp nip.

And in modern life many causes of the imbalances, of the aberrations that come about, must be sought in some of those truths that have become old and which no longer content us, but officially they are however still truths and have to be respected; if not, all the birdbrains – on a par with the Capitoline geese – will start their tormented honking. The whole life of society is based on these small hypocrisies and on these compromises; the idols of bronze and wood have been replaced by moral and intellectual idols. All the gullible and those duped with vague illusions or taken in by subtle convenience oppose any renewal and oppose all that is healthy and vital which exists and which moves fervidly without finding any way forward, hampered and being sucked into the morass enveloping everything. But man, tending to whatever unknown destiny that awaits, will be able to batter down these prejudices or these truths, whatever they may be, and will form other, better and more rational, ones than the past ones. We have overcome quite other ages and quite other beliefs; and these have always been refined and perfected. Life is a constant becoming, and

only thus can this fact of the eternal error be justified. All ages are nothing but periods of transition, and have passed with all their train of prejudices and errors; no one can ever say whether we will reach annulment or deification.

Passano le glorie come fiamme di cimiteri  
Come scenari vecchi crollan regni e imperi:  
[Like cemetery flames, glories pass and pall  
Like old scenes kingdoms and empires fall:]

Carducci – to Victor Hugo

Other glories and other dominions are replaced, and all believe themselves eternal and immutable, even though they originate from a ruin. It is eternal nature that gives us this illusion, that we may live.

Essay with full of maturity of thought, and almost equally praiseworthy in form

8+/10

V. A. Arullani

[The signature “A. Gramsci” appears under the judgment and signature of Arullani and the grade]