

# International Gramsci Journal

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Volume 5

Issue 3 *Gramsci: lycée essays; Gramsci in his situation and ours; Gramsci's translation of the brothers Grimm's folktales; book review section*

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Article 17

2024

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### Recommended Citation

Boninelli, Giovanni Mimmo, Dizionario gramsciano / Gramsci Dictionary: Folclore / Folklore, *International Gramsci Journal*, 5(3), 2024, 152-160.

Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/gramsci/vol5/iss3/17>

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## Dizionario gramsciano / Gramsci Dictionary: Folclore / Folklore

### Abstract

The term folclore appears infrequently in Gramsci's pre-prison writings, but is an important feature of the Prison Notebooks, the word appearing first as "folklore" and later in its Italianized form "folclore", in all appearing there around a hundred times. It is often linked to a "conception of the world" belonging to "given strata of society [...] not touched by the modern currents of thought". A linkage exists between folklore, common sense and philosophy with each successive philosophy leaving a sediment of "common sense" which is then the "folklore" of philosophy, standing midway between real folklore, as it is understood, and philosophy. Several points of contact can be singled out between Gramsci's treatment of folklore and that of a contemporary of his, Giovanni Crocioni (cf. Q 1 § 89 and its "C" text Q 27 § 1), a review of whose volume *Problemi fondamentali del Folklore* seems to have been one of the stimuli for Gramsci's reflections. Both recognize the dynamic aspect of folklore – its adaption to circumstances, and also the need to study it at school level in order to go beyond it (cf. Q 12 § 2). As conception of the world and life folklore is not merely a curiosity, and something merely "quaint" but, as Gramsci observes, is "very serious and to be taken seriously" (Q 27 § 1) and moreover produces innovative effects in the strata of the population able to express their own organic intellectuals; hence, by production of a new "common sense", culture and conception of the world, they can transform their social context. Editorial Note: see also the dictionary entry "Common Sense" in *International Gramsci Journal*, 4(2), 2021, 125-129.

### Keywords

Folklore; Conception of the World; Philosophy; Common Sense; New Common Sense; Innovation.

## *Folclore, folklore*

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Gramsci uses the two above spelling variations in his pre-prison writings, but the terms occur relatively rarely, as compared with their presence in the *Prison Letters* and the *Prison Notebooks*.

In one of his first letters from detention to his sister-in-law, Tat'jana (19 December 1926), in regard to his fellow detainees on Ustica, Gramsci writes that "I think that it would be possible to make some unique psychological and folkloric observations" (*LC*: 24; *LfP* 1: 49).<sup>1</sup> This comment, developed in part in subsequent correspondence, is enriched with the description, in the 11 April 1927 letter to Tat'jana, of the different prison cultures (Calabria, Naples, Puglia, Sicily) that he saw in the transfer from Ustica to Milan (*LC*: 90; *LfP* 1: 96). From these first prison pages there already transpires the echoes or the prolongation of the reflections contained in *Some Aspects of the Southern Question*. More generally, in the *Prison Letters* the references to aspects of Sardinian culture are numerous; united to the recollection of facts and circumstances there is a request in the 3 October 1927 letter to his mother to know of the new expressive forms and texts of local folklore: "if during some feast day they still have poetry contests, write and tell what themes are sung [...] You know that these things have always interested me very much" (*LC*: 160; *LfP*: 144). The letters to his sons are rich in stories derived from themes of local tradition. Analogous to this in the laboratory that constitutes the *Notebooks* there are annotations regarding proverbs and maxims (for example Q 8 § 154: *QC* 1033-4; *PN* 3: 322; and Q 14 § 50: *QC* 1708-9), as well as translations of folk tales (the Brothers Grimm), references to songs and theatre forms of expression and to popular literature (Q 6 § 207: *QC* 844-5; *PN* 3: 147-148 and *SCW*: 350-351). We are dealing with useful indications to strengthen the hypothesis that in Gramsci folklore is no marginal or occasional "stupidity with no

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<sup>1</sup> We quote here the page number of the recent (2020) annotated Italian version of the *Prison Letters*, followed by that found in the 1994 two-volume Rosengarten/Rosenthal English translation. For the key to the list of other abbreviations in the text, see the appendix at the end before the Bibliography.

head or tail to it [in Sardinian: *senza cabu né coa*]” (letter to his mother of 3 October 1927 in *LC* p. 160; *LjP*: 144), but “something which is very serious and is to be taken seriously” (Q 27 § 1: *QC* 2314; *SCW*: 191). We may argue that the themes mentioned here above provide a first level of reflection on the subject, a sort of “empirical observation” that underlies the more mature reflections.

On the opening page of the *Notebooks* (8 February 1929), *The Concept of Folklore* appears as number 7 of the *Main Arguments*, linked to number 13, *Common Sense*. The linkage is confirmed in the reformulation of the work plan – dating to November 1931 (in Gerratana’s opinion) or to a year before that (in that of Francioni) – where we find *Folclore and common sense* (Q 8: *QC* 935; *PN* 3: 233) with the spelling altered. The spelling “folklore” is used in 1929-1930 and reappears, almost *en passant* in a single draft “B” text in October 1931 (Q 7 § 62: *QC* 901; *PN* 3: 201 and *FSPN*: 123-124); in the same month the spelling “folclore” appears for the first time (Q 6 § 153: *QC* 810; *PN* 3: 116), a spelling which then becomes constant. A first rapid reading of folklore and folclore indicates that there are various parts of the *Notebooks* where the first draft notes (the so-called “A” texts) in a revised and amplifies form (“C” texts), find their better collocation: among the notes of Gramsci’s own *Introduction to the Study of Philosophy* in Notebook 11 (cf. Q 11: *QC*, 1375 and Q 24 § 4: *QC*, 2271; *SPN*: 323 and 326 n.5; respectively; *SCW*: 420-421), in the *Observations on “Folklore”* (Q 27, whose first two parts are in *SCW*: 188-94); in a less dense form the term also appears in *Popular Literature* (Q 21, most of which is in *SCW*, Sections VI and IX) and in *Literary Criticism* (Q 23; cf. *SCW*, section IX; there are also some references in Q 12 (*SPN*: 25 and 34) and in the notebook on *Journalism* (Q 24 § 4; *SCW*: 421). There are also a number of interesting “B” texts (Q 5 § 156, headed *Folklore*: *QC*, 679-80; *PN* 2: 399-400 and *SCW*: 195; and Q 9 § 15: *QC* 1105, headed this time *Folclore*; *SCW*: 194-195), all these notes are gathered together in the volume *Letteratura e vita nazionale* (1950) of the thematic edition of the *Notebooks*, to complete the two original notes of *Osservazioni sul “folclore”* of Q 27, cf. above). In Gramsci’s reflections theoretical-philosophical attention remains central, although in the prison writings other aspects are present (such as the classification of folclore, considerations on a number of subjects of juridical folclore, on proverbs, of literature and popular

theatre etc.), which enrich the range of elements (norms, tendencies and dynamics) that are useful for defining a political and practical strategy. The reflection on folklore reaches such advanced results as to be, even today, a terrain for lively and productive critical discussion. Folklore and common sense constitute a linkage that immediately comes to the surface in the *Notebooks*, where Gramsci notes that “every social stratum has its ‘common sense’” and “every philosophical current leaves a sedimentation of ‘common sense’” (Q 1 § 65: *QC*, 76; *PN* 1: 173 [“A” text; cf. the “C” text of Q 24 § 4, here *SCW*: 420-21 and footnote 5 in *SPN*, p. 326]), not something “rigid and immobile” but something that “is continuously transformed [...] ‘Common sense’ is the folklore of ‘philosophy’ and stands midway between real and proper ‘folklore’ and (i.e. as it is understood) and philosophy”. It “creates the folklore of the future, that is a more or less rigidified phase of a certain time and place. (It is necessary to establish these concepts firmly by thinking them through in depth)” (Q 1 § 65, *QC*, 76; *PN* 1: 173). An immediate link is formed between folklore, common sense and philosophy, a relation that constitutes the first bloc of those lemmas (vision and conception of the world, religion, good sense, conformism, tradition, morals etc.) which comes to form a “conceptual network” around the lemma “ideology”.

The importance of Gramsci’s observations lies in the different perspective that he adopts as compared with the scholars of his time. For him, folklore

has up to now been studied (in actual fact only the raw material has been collected) as a ‘picturesque’ element. It would be necessary to study it as a ‘conception of the world’ of given strata of society, who have not been touched by modern currents of thought. A conception of the world not only developed and given form to [...] but multi-faceted, in the sense of a mechanical juxtaposition of several conceptions of the world and of life which have succeeded each other in history. Even modern thought and science offer elements to folklore (Q 1 § 89: *QC*, 89; *PN* 1: 186-187).

The accent falls on the “conception of the world and of life” belonging to “given strata of society [...] not touched by the modern currents of thought”. One glimpses in this analysis the semi-hidden motive of linguistic expertise, fruit of his studies with Matteo Bartoli, the historical method and philology of his

“university apprenticeship”. Going back to his first years of journalism and the *Re-evocation of Gelindo* (25 December 1915 [CT: 737-8]), of the “theatrical chronicle” articles in which Gramsci describes the mask of Gelindo as an

incarnation of the popular Piedmontese spirit [...] which is placed on the margins of the development of the events that he illustrates, comments on, participates in, contraposing to them his particular vision of the world and his everyday life.

He goes on to add that in the “crystallized” dimension provided by Gelindo there is juxtaposed Gianduja “always active in the popular spirit” (CT: 737), and who comments critically on recent wars and on the one currently taking place. Gramsci writes more acutely in prison, analysing the different popular strata of society, speaking of

the fossilized ones which reflect conditions of past life and are therefore conservative and reactionary, and those which constitute a series of innovations, often creative and progressive, determined spontaneously by forms and conditions of life which are in the process of developing and which are in contradiction to, or simply different from the morality of the governing strata (Q 27 § 1: *QC* 2313; *SCW*: 190).

In another moment of his political activity, in the *Presentation of a Proletarian Writer*, he had even written that there “exists a conception of life and of the world which we call proletarian, a conception that is found in the class of working people” (“L’Ordine Nuovo”, 6-13 December 1919: attribution to Gramsci by Alfonso Leonetti).

One is dealing with social strata that are different, but not distant in their vision of the world. Moreover countryside and factory come into contact where Gramsci – making use in the *Notebooks* of “spontaneity and conscious leadership” – asserts that the first element is

characteristic of the “history of the subaltern classes” and, especially, of the most marginal and peripheral elements of these classes, who have not attained a consciousness of the class per sé, and who consequently do not even suspect that their history might possibly have any importance, or that that it might be of any value to leave documentary evidence of it (Q 3 § 48: *QC* 328, *PN* 2: 49, and with slight variation in wording in *SPN*: 196).

These are, then, diversified conceptions of the world, just as “the history of subaltern social groups is necessarily fragmented and episodic” but within them there is the “tendency towards unification, albeit in provisional stages” despite the dominant classes breaking it up in continuation (Q 25 § 2: *QC* 2283; Gramsci 2022: 44). Here the case is that of social strata “in contrast with official society” (Q 5 § 156: *QC* 690; *PN* 2: 400, and *SCW*: 195).

In his essay *La superstizione, i pregiudizi e la scuola* (in the review “La cultura popolare” (2), 1921), probably known to Gramsci, Giovanni Crocioni had already written that “in one single society two basic ways of conceiving life and its manifestations are perpetuated, that of the ignorant people and that of the civilized ones”. This is a thesis that he takes up again in *Problemi fondamentali del Folklore* (Crocioni 1928: 21-22), a book that Gramsci includes in his bibliographical notes (Q 1 § 86: *QC* 88; *PN* 1: 185) and which he knew through a review by Raffaele Ciampini (Q 1 § 89: *QC* 89-90; *PN* 1: 186-187). A collation of Gramsci’s text with Crocioni’s volume reveals unexpected analogies. For example:

a) the disintegration and change of folklore facts; Gramsci writes of that “activity of adaptation” which “is still going on in popular music, with widely popular tunes: there are so many love songs that have been made over two or three times and become political” (Q 6 § 208: *QC* 846; *PN* 3: 148 and a somewhat different choice of wording in *SCW*: 352-353): analogously, Crocioni writes that folklore

becomes worn out, becomes impoverished, becomes thinner, is renewed, is strengthened, is enriched, and [...] throws out elements that have become superfluous and useless, and takes on other necessary and precious facts, modifying its background, exchanging it from place to place, varying forms and aspects, and evolves in time, just as it diversifies in space: at that point where new superstitions take the upper hand, when the series seems concluded; [...] new proverbs [added] to the traditional norms of social life; the more conspicuous and awful facts themselves that happen under our eyes, notwithstanding the clamour of the newspapers, are taken on and explained in unexpected and surprising ways’ (Crocioni 1928, pp. 30-31);

b) the attention to “modern folklore” as a contemporary fact, the product both of “certain scientific notions and certain opinions” (Q 27 § 1: *QC*, 2312; cf. the “A” text of Q 1 § 89: *QC*: 89; *PN* 1: 186-

187 and also *SCW*: 189) and of active and creative involvement of given strata of society finds its correspondence in Crocioni, when this latter maintains that

folklore studies only the survivals, the leftovers of what there once was, and not rather what there is now, whether of ancient and of recent formation, having a traditional character or an aspect of modernity' (Crocioni 1928, p. 28),

and investigations will further have to be pursued on "*urban folklore* as much neglected as that of the countryside has been investigated" (*ivi*, p. 58). On the other hand, it must not be forgotten that Gramsci knew very well the urban cultural world of the factory worker, on which he wrote widely in the pages of "*L'Ordine nuovo*", just as he bore well in mind the *proletkult* experiences and experiments that he saw in his stay in Russia. All these were reasons that oriented his vision on 'folclore';

c) Gramsci's necessity for folclore to be studied critically in the schools, not in order to conserve it but to go beyond it, getting rid of the anachronistic aspects (Q 12 § 2: *QC* 1540; *SPN*: 33-34), a subject that finds analogous arguments in Crocioni:

Is it, perhaps, possible to continue to train adolescents [...] without having first understood from the inside the mentality of the pupils, the environment in which they were being formed, the ideas that they have acquired, without knowing what must be favoured and set in motion and developed, what has to be corrected or indeed combated and rejected? (Crocioni 1928, p. 39); To be beside civilization and remain outside it, rather under it. To converse with, to live with men of the twentieth century, and maintain the mentality of ten centuries ago. Oh, how sad this is (*ivi*, p. 51).

Gramsci clearly differs from the scholars of his time – fearful that modernity would destroy the object of their science (Q 11 § 67: *QC* 1506; *SPN*: 418-419) – at the point where the complex of folkloristic facts is not grasped within the context of the everyday link with hard grind and labour, but reduced to a 'picturesque representative of feelings or curious and bizarre customs' (Q 9 § 42: *QC* 1121). Gramsci opposes this reduction to curiosity, to the manifestation in fact of a "folkloristic" spectacle that the cultural policy of fascism imposed as a strategy of consent. Gramsci's "rhythm of thought" on folclore attempts a sort of definition, first



of all indicating it as a “complex phenomenon that eludes compact definitions” (Q 9 § 15: *QC* 1105; *SCW*: 194), going on later to speak of a “system of beliefs, superstitions, opinions, ways of seeing things and of acting, which are collectively bundled together under the name of ‘folclore’” (Q 11 § 12: *QC* 1375; *SPN*: 323 – words not present in Q 9 § 15, the “A” text of this part of Q 11 § 12); these words from Notebook 11 open with a reference to “popular religion”. More in general Gramsci argues that there is a “religion of the people” different from that of the intellectuals (Q 27 § 1: *QC* 2312; *SCW*: 190, the reference to intellectuals being absent from the “A” text of Q 1 § 89); indeed he regards the catholicism of the peasantry, of the petty bourgeoisie and the urban workers, of the women and of the intellectuals as being different one from another, but above all shows how catholicism is an “element of fragmented common sense” where the relation religion-common sense is much more “intimate” than the common sense-philosophy linkage (Q 11 § 12: *QC*, 1378 and 1397; *SPN*: 324 and 420 respectively). Present-day religion, just like those of the past, leaves sediments in customs and contributes to the formation of the “morality of the people” with imperatives “that are much stronger, more tenacious and more effective than those of official ‘morality’” (Q 27 § 1: *QC*, 2313; *SCW*: 190). In context, Gramsci deepens the critique of a certain type of superficial publication on “natural law”. Among the points analysed, he pauses over that “mass of ‘juridical’ popular opinions that assume the form of ‘natural law’ and these are juridical ‘folclore’”, in other words that

ensemble of opinions and beliefs concerning one’s “own” right, which circulate in continuation among the popular masses, and which circulate uninterruptedly among the popular masses and are continuously renewed under the pressure of real living conditions and the spontaneous comparison between the ways in which the various social strata live (Q 27 § 2: *QC* 2314-2317; *SCW*: 193 and 194 respectively).

He shows the influence of religion on these currents. As well as these elements modern thought and science with certain “scientific notions and certain opinions, removed from their context and more or less distorted, constantly fall within the popular domain and are ‘inserted’ into the mosaic of tradition” (Q 27 § 1: *QC* 2312; *SCW*: 189).

There are all the elements to evaluate folklore, such as common sense, a “disjointed, incoherent and inconsequential conception of the world” (Q 8 § 173: *QC* 1045; *PN* 3: 333) and, in other places we read “fragmentary”, “mechanical”, “degraded”, “stratified”, “occasional”. These are all adjectives that describe folklore in a negative, regressive, conservative, passive way. But folklore also spontaneously produces positive, progressive, innovative, and active fragments in those strata of the population able to express their own “organic intellectuals”. Gramsci’s thought entrusts them with the task, working on these elements, of acting to transform the given social context (“historical bloc”, “consent”, “hegemony”) by introducing forms of new culture and a new conception of the world. Moral and intellectual reform, intellectual progress of the masses cannot come about except by raising the quality, expertise and knowledges of a subaltern world, using as mainspring the autonomous and spontaneous capacity of its progressive and active part, of the educative role of a school that knowingly intertwines critical thought with practices of doing, of the function of the politics-philosophy of praxis, a thought in other words that is “coherent and systematic” (Q 11 § 13: *QC* 1396; *SPN*: 419) and which, acting on “civil society” and “political society”, promotes the development of a “new common sense”.

“Folklore”, as well as appearing in notes on other subjects, is the heading of two “B” texts. The first regards the division of popular songs suggested by Ermolao Rubieri (Q 5 § 156: *QC* 679-680; *PN* 2: 399-400) in which Gramsci reconfirms his own reading of the “way of conceiving the world and life, in contrast with official society; here, and only here, should one look for the ‘collectivity’ of popular song” (Q 5 § 156: *QC* 680; *PN* 2: 399-400 and *SCW*: p. 195). In the second “B” text, in polemic with Raffaele Corso who considered “the set of facts of folklore a ‘contemporary pre-history’”, Gramsci judges this definition to be

very relative and highly questionable [...] since it is hard to write a history of the influences absorbed by each area and one is often comparing heterogeneous entities. Folklore, at least in part, is much more unstable and fluctuating than language and dialects (Q 9 § 15: *QC* 1105; *SCW*: 195).

*Appendix:*

*Key to abbreviations of volumes of Gramsci's writings used in the text:*

CT: Gramsci (1980)  
FSPN: Gramsci (1995)  
LC Gramsci (2020)  
LpP: Gramsci (1994)  
PN 1: Gramsci (1992)  
PN 2: Gramsci (1996)  
PN 3: Gramsci (2007)  
QC: Gramsci (1975)  
SCW: Gramsci (1985)  
SPN: Gramsci (1971)

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