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A Missed Encounter: Walter Benjamin and Antonio Gramsci

Abstract

This is the abstract of the English-language review of the volume *Un confronto mancato: Walter Benjamin e Antonio Gramsci*. The book (Macerata, Quodilbet, 2023) publishes the proceedings of a conference in Rome on the two Marxists held in Autumn 2022 which continues explicitly the earlier Vienna conference, the contributions to which are collected together in "International Gramsci Journal" 3(4), 2020. The proceedings fall into four sections. The first one deals with the philosophy of history and historical materialism, as elaborated by Gramsci in his "philosophy of praxis"; despite different starting points and apparently different assessments of historicism, there turns out in the end to be a convergence based on an anti-determinism. The second part focuses on revolution, counter-revolution and passive revolution, taking in the questions of the political subject and contemporary situations. Subjectivity is then the theme of the third section, as forms of life appropriate to the capitalist mode of production and as regards subjects attempting to emancipate themselves from this mode. The fourth section includes the two thinker-revolutionaries' approaches to the question of the various types of intellectual, including their conceptions of the artistic vanguards, folklore and kitsch, and the translation of experience from one country to another.

Keywords

Gramsci; Benjamin; Philosophy of History; Revolution; Subalterns; Intellectuals.

A Missed Encounter: Walter Benjamin and Antonio Gramsci

Giulia La Rocca

The volume *Un incontro mancato: Walter Benjamin e Antonio Gramsci* (Macerata, Quodlibet, 2023, 272 pp.) constitutes the proceedings of the conference of the Italian Walter Benjamin Association, held in Rome from 25 to 27 November 2022. The conference focused on the points of contact between the thought of Walter Benjamin and that of Antonio Gramsci with the scope of indicating possible lines of development. Basing themselves on the premises of these potentialities, the various interventions accepted the task of not only of filling a gap in the scientific debate, which up to now has not explored this line of research,¹ but, by juxtaposing the two, bringing out the actuality of their thought, its efficacy for the present. There emerges the picture of two authors, both of whom developed heterodox forms of Marxism in the need to understand the economic, social and political phenomena of their historical time. In the crisis following on the First World War, these included the role of the masses in society, the artistic vanguard movements, the advent of fascism, the Fordist model of the organization of work. However these affinities emerge as the meeting point of itineraries that set off from different theoretical horizons.

The first section of the volume concentrates on the philosophy of history and on historical materialism.

In the view of Frank Engster, Benjamin's conception of time is the only one really capable of breaking with Marxist historicism (even as regards its twentieth-century elaborations at the hands of Luxemburg, Lenin, Lukács and Gramsci). Wolfgang Müller-Funk on the other hand highlights the weaknesses inherent in promoting a Marxist programme. Revolution, considered as the interruption of the catastrophic course of history, and the redemption from it, would in effect show itself to be an illusion, a utopia. Gramsci, for

¹ An exception is provided by the monographic number *Gramsci und Benjamin – Passagen: Gramsci and Benjamin – Bridges*, "International Gramsci Journal" 3(4), 2020, of which the Rome conference is the explicit continuation.

his part, would constitute a more concrete hope for combating oppression. Indeed, while distancing himself from historicism as evolutionistic determinism, he does not give up the possibilities of conceiving revolution as an outcome of the course of history, although this course is not teleologically determined and has instead to be produced with an awareness in the sense, therefore, of a party form of organization. As Ingo Pohn-Lauggas points out in his contribution, while Benjamin and Gramsci are alike in refusing a teleological conception of history, their initial perspectives are different. In the former there is the theoretical necessity to deny the possibility of a systematic narrative of history, while the latter aims at the elaboration of a philosophy of praxis.

Francesco Raparelli argues that, despite the difference in theoretical itineraries of Benjamin and Gramsci in their attempt to rethink Marxism, which takes Benjamin to a refusal of any type of historicism and of its universal history, for Gramsci the two solutions are not then so distant from each other as regards absolute historicism. Both perspectives indeed would respond to the need to conceive a history in which the action of the historical subject would work to transform the present and produce an alternative.

On the basis of this examination of the conception of historicity in Benjamin and Gramsci, the book's second section concentrates on the concepts of revolution, counter-revolution and passive revolution.

Michele Filippini proposes a reading of passive revolution on the basis of the thesis that, in Gramsci's conception of history, multiple temporalities are co-present. One temporality asserts itself as hegemonic, subordinating to itself the others, which appear in the hegemonic one only in episodic and fragmentary ways, as subaltern histories. Passive revolution then consists in that process in which the demands of the subaltern social groups are reabsorbed within the structure and temporality of the hegemonic group, which thus blocks their process of emancipation. Such an interpretation of the concept of passive revolution has been developed, for example, in the recent theories of unequal development (cf. Adam David Morton). The confutation of this hegemony and the redemption of the subaltern temporalities are instead at the centre of Benjamin's reflection on the concept of history.

Marcello Mustè's intervention centred around the redetermination of the concept of revolution in Benjamin and in Gramsci. For the former, who accepts the Marxist conception of the political and historical subject as the oppressed class that fights, the revolution consists in the action that, taking on the burden of the tradition of the oppressed, halts the presumed progressive direction of the course of history. Gramsci on the other hand reworks the very concept of the historico-political subject, thinking through the process in which this becomes the hegemonic social group and thereby reaches its own autonomy. In this respect the category of passive revolution is introduced both as a function of critical analysis of the absence of the process of subjectivization of the subaltern classes in given historical phenomena, and a strategic one, as a programme of action. Vittoria Borsò concentrates on this latter function of passive revolution and defines it as an "instrument of practical transformation" (p. 114) and juxtaposes it with the destructive character of revolution as conceived by Benjamin.

Dario Gentili turns to passive revolution as an analytic category, referring both to phenomena contemporary with Gramsci – Americanism and fascism – and to our present time. On Americanism, Gentili takes up questions posed by Gramsci himself in the *Notebooks*, but the originality of his contribution lies in the interrogation of Benjamin's text on Paris, capital of the nineteenth century, and on the figure of Baudelaire as depicted there, in which a number of extreme consequences of Americanism may be seen to emerge. Benjamin in fact demonstrates how capitalism succeeds in attaching value to forms of metropolitan life traditionally thought of as non-productive (and thus subversive as compared with the productive system), such as the *flâneur*. As regards our contemporaneity, instead, the neo-sovereignties and neo-populisms that dominate the political debate would seem nothing but attempts at the conservation of the current relations of force, with the loss of any revolutionary character, demonstrating how today any progressive thrust, even one under bourgeois hegemony, is on the way to becoming extinguished.

A third section of the book is dedicated to Gramsci's and Benjamin's examinations of the forms of subjectivity, both as forms of life produced or appropriated by the capitalist mode of production and, against this, subjectivities that emancipate

themselves from this mode. Reflections by both authors are developed along these lines as regards Americanism and Fordism, fascism and the metropolis.

Massimiliano Tomba's contribution focused on the potentialities – regarding the emancipation of the human being – of technical development. For Gramsci, this becomes possible as the dialectical result of an intensification of the structural relations of capitalist society. In the “[a]utodiscipline of the working class over the working class” (p. 154), however, Tomba sees the risk of a substitution of domination in which the question of the relationship itself of domination is not questioned. For Benjamin, instead, we are dealing with bringing the structural tensions to a dead stop and thereby opening up the possibility of an alternative, of a change in direction. Technical progress is not emancipatory in itself and its intensification can be inverted as much in communism as in fascism.

Taking up Gramsci's analysis of Americanism and Benjamin's of Paris, Elettra Stimilli asks about the possibility of demolishing the suffocating logic of the metropolis, in which every space of private life and every possible subversive thrust are reabsorbed in the logic of self-reproduction of the system. The proposal would consist in rethinking, à la Benjamin, the silenced history of the oppressed, creating the conditions for the acquisition of consciousness of this oppression and the construction, beginning from this, of a hegemony from below.

Massimo Palma's contribution concentrated on the different reception of the *Reflections* of Georges Sorel by Gramsci and by Benjamin. Gramsci refuses anarchist spontaneism (arguing that this is unable to produce any organized political action) and his reference to Sorel regards, rather, the need to elaborate myth as ideology, as a conception of the world and as the consequent norm of action, in a form that can be made widespread and made its own by the masses. In this sense the myth is that of the person of the prince, taken from Machiavelli and thought of not as an individual but as the party itself that organizes an alternative hegemony. It is instead just the anarchist aspect of the theory of Sorel that is accepted by Benjamin who criticizes the superstructural violence inherent in any institution of power and which is reproduced, even after the revolutionary event that, with the new State that it founds, puts an end to a given order.

Through the examination of what may be defined as two case studies, namely the two singular figures of the rebel Davide Lazzarettti and of the rag picker taken from Baudelaire's poetry, and researched by Gramsci and Benjamin respectively, Birgit Wagner develops considerations on the concept of the subaltern in the two authors. In both cases we are dealing with insufficiently politicized persons. Rather, because of their condition they have not developed an awareness of the structural aspect of their oppression and are therefore unable to combat in an organized way, and give rise to subversions that necessarily have only an episodic nature or remain in the realm of fantasy.

Continuing this analysis Marco Gatto draws attention to the lack of representation of the subaltern classes on the part of the intellectuals, for whom both Gramsci and Benjamin demand a political role, by elaborating respectively the figure of the organic intellectual and the programme of literary criticism. This contribution thus opens the fourth section of the volume, which develops a number of political implications of a cultural dimension, with relevance to the subject of translation, of criticism, of the artistic vanguard forces and of folklore.

Sami Khatib's intervention concentrates on bringing out the link, in both Gramsci and Benjamin, between the concept of translation and that of history. Both refuse the model of translation as a mechanical transposition of contents that would remain unaltered by the context of departure and arrival, likewise the idea of a universal language stemming from the abstraction of particularity, as exemplified by Esperanto. To translate means, rather, to transform a content in transporting it to different contexts. Gramsci makes use of the term "translation" in an explicitly political sense, in relation to the need to adapt revolutionary processes and experiences in transferring from one country to another. As regards Benjamin, Khatib insists on parallelism, instituted in the preparatory material for the thesis *On the Conception of History*, between Esperanto as an abstract universal language and the universal history of the historicist narrative.

Daniel Balicco brings Gramsci and Benjamin together in their analysis of the artistic vanguards. Both show interest in them and yet recognize that the radical aesthetic innovation, just like that of

technique, by themselves do not contribute to the cause of emancipation.

Marina Montanelli, lastly, presents a reflection on Gramsci's concept of folklore and on Benjamin's concept of kitsch. Folklore for Gramsci is a conception of the world and of life which is concretized in norms of conduct, practices, uses and customs of the popular classes. It is by its very nature fragmentary, irreducible to a coherent system and is kept subaltern as compared with the hegemonic vision, often giving rise to contradictions between this latter, unknowingly assumed as reference point by the subaltern groups, and the effective action of these groups. In the same way, kitsch demonstrates a subalternity in which mass culture is immersed. It is in fact a form of commodity fetishism in that it seeks to give an aura to what cannot have such, namely industrial production, thereby increasing submission to consumerism, to the mechanism of production.

In conclusion, the volume brings together contributions that articulate multiple points of contact between Benjamin and Gramsci: the philosophy of history, the concept of criticism, the philosophy of translation, aesthetics and their various implications. It further shows the importance of the categories of Gramsci and of Benjamin for the critical analysis of our present. An indication in this direction, given by Michele Filippini, is the dialogue between the concept of plural temporalities in Gramsci and the theories of unequal development, into which Benjamin's concept of a universal history can be inserted as the constellation of partial histories, which then takes us to the chapter by Sami Khatib. Gramsci and Benjamin can help to respond to the need, coming above all from post-colonial studies, to think through the co-presence of different historical times and their power relations. A translation of Gramsci's concept of passive revolution in these contexts allows the analysis of the peculiar form of civil hegemony present in post- and neo-colonial societies, in which global capitalist expansion is in tension with the subaltern forces whose non-modern temporality is resisting assimilation to this expansion. An exemplary case of this analysis is Morton's study of Mexico. Benjamin, moreover, insists on the revolutionary potential of these tensions, which bring the presumed unicity of capitalist temporality to a dead halt. The space

for a proper universal history would thus be opened, which would not be the abstract universal history of hegemony exerted by one model of temporality over others, but one which would articulate the collectivity of subaltern temporalities. Another, further, indication is constituted by the contrast, emerging from Dario Gentili's contribution, between the possibility of a progression, however passive it may be, in the political phenomena examined by Gramsci and by Benjamin and today's immobility, in which transformation is nothing other than the reformulation of a structure with the goal of preserving it just as it is. In this case, the concept of passive revolution could serve as a guiding criterion for singling out, *ex negativo*, the dynamics that today hinder advance and lead to a standstill.

Finally, this volume has the merit of welcoming the potentialities of a juxtaposition between Gramsci and Benjamin, up to now all but unexplored, thereby establishing itself as a trail-blazer for further research on the subject.