

Gramsci Dictionary – Dizionario gramsciano: “Philosophy”

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Gramsci paid lively attention to philosophy right from the start of his journalistic activity, in particular in the 1914-1918 period. In those years he discussed philosophical questions beginning essentially from the idealist turn (identified with modernity itself) that Hegel had impressed on the discipline, and which in Italy had been taken up by Croce and Gentile. Marx himself comes over as a disciple of the idealist Hegel and his philosophy as a transposition of idealism into mass politics. More in general, idealism is identified with modern philosophy par excellence, since it stresses the absolute immanence of the idea in the world, in consequence entrusting mankind with the task of humanizing reality, in other words making that reality come more in line with universal reason. From this way of posing affairs Marxism takes up the substance, redefining the idea as ideology and universal reason as a process of practical historical universalization.

In the *Prison Notebooks*, this conception of philosophy, as thus forcefully outlined and placed at the centre of politics, is taken up again with a number of modifications and innovations, which lead to a global revolution of the conceptual framework in which philosophy may be thought. While previously Gramsci was not at all preoccupied with outlining a line of independent thought for Marxism, in the prison writings this is precisely his sole departure point. On the other hand, a constant centrality is assigned to philosophy (but in what way it is redefined is yet to be seen) in the context of Marxism and in general in its political relation to the modern world, a data element that emerges if nothing else from the massive frequency of the lemma, which occurs over 1300 times. While previously Gramsci assumed a given concept of philosophy – the idealist one – without subjecting it to criticism and paid

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attention above all to its political “use value”, in the *Notebooks* his argument arises precisely from the need to outline the «new philosophy»¹ of Marx as that which aims at the «overthrow of the question of philosophy from its traditional position and to the death of philosophy in the traditional sense».² With regard to this Gramsci writes that the

essential part of Marxism consists in its surpassing of the old philosophies and also in its way of conceiving philosophy – and this is what must be systematically demonstrated and developed. In the realm of theory, Marxism is not to be confused with or reduced to any other philosophy; it is original not only because it surpasses previous philosophies but also, and above all, because it opens up a completely new road: in other words, it renews from top to bottom the whole way of conceiving philosophy.³

This claim is accompanied by the double attempt, on the one hand, to outline the *reasons* for the philosophical autonomy and independence of Marxism and, on the other, to construct a concept of philosophy sufficiently *general* to embrace as much traditional philosophy as Marxism, articulating them in their difference. In its turn, this attempt is corroborated by an insistent even though unsystematic reflection on the concept of “scientific philosophy”, by which Gramsci means the aspect of philosophy which cannot be reduced to history and to historicity and which can therefore be assimilated in some way to *method*. The reflection on this latter intent – what Gramsci calls the “translatability of languages” – aims at reinforcing the theoretical autonomy of Marxism, enabling it to maintain its autonomy in the critical relationship with traditional philosophies.

Thus, if on opening a page, as a direct inheritance of what was written in Turin, the *Notebooks* exhibit an extremely traditional sense of philosophy as a synonym of the general conception of life and

¹ Q 4, § 3: *QC*, p. 424; *Prison Notebooks*, Vol. 2, p. 144 (henceforward *PN* with the corresponding volume number; all volumes ed. and trans., J.A. Buttigieg, Columbia University Press, New York (1992, 1996 and 2007 for volumes 1, 2 and 3 respectively); all follow the critical edition used here.

² Q 1, § 132: *QC*, p. 119; *PN* 1, p. 216.

³ Q 4, § 11: *QC*, p. 433; *PN* 2, p. 153.

of the world,⁴ there emerges even immediately, through a clear sequence of texts in Notebook 1,⁵ the need to characterize the originality of Marxism insofar (and here Gramsci adopts with emphasis the position of Antonio Labriola) as it is «an independent and original philosophy».⁶ This need becomes concrete in Q 1, § 132, significantly entitled «*Actual idealism and the ideology-philosophy connection*», which contains an analytical sketch on two closely connected levels: the status of philosophy and the real historical transformations introduced in European society by the war. The positions of Gentile and of Croce – the identification of theory and practice and the distinction of theory from practice respectively – must be deciphered as reactions to the need to enable philosophy to take hold afresh in a world that has entered into a decisive crisis: «During the post-war period, the hegemonic apparatus cracks and the exercise of hegemony becomes even more difficult».⁷ Faced with these options historical materialism stood, as a form of thought in its actual constitution linked to a world in which all the elements enter into play, insofar as it intimately links theory and practice, of philosophy and (political) ideology not a metaphysical unitary concept, as is the case in Gentile, but the visual angle from which «all immutably “unitary” concepts are derided and destroyed».⁸ It is not, then, Gentile but Croce who is the bourgeois thinker aware of the gravity of that current situation:

Croce, in my view, is keenly aware that all movements of modern thought lead to a triumphal revaluation of historical materialism [...] He resists this pressure of historical reality with all his might, and with an exceptional understanding of the dangers and of the dialectic means with which to prevent them. Therefore the study of his writings from 1919 to the present is of great value.⁹

⁴ Q 1, § 46: *QC*, p. 56; *PN* 1, p. 153; Q 1, § 105: *QC*, p. 97; *PN* 1, p. 194 and also *Further Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (henceforward *FSPN*, ed. and trans. by D. Boothman, London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1995), p. 258; Q 4, § 13: *QC*, p. 434; *PN* 2, p. 154 etc.

⁵ Q 1, § 87; Q 1, § 92; Q 1, § 105; Q 1, § 132.

⁶ Q 4, § 3: *QC*, p. 422; *PN* 2, p. 140.

⁷ Q 1, § 48: *QC*, p. 50; *PN* 1, p. 156.

⁸ Q 4, § 45: *QC*, p. 471; *PN* 2, p. 195.

⁹ Q 1, § 132: *QC*, p. 119; *PN* 1, p. 211.

But Croce himself, Gramsci later points out, is not immune from the need to mix philosophy and ideology,¹⁰ a sign of the fact that philosophy can no longer in any way presuppose a given order, but has to transform itself into a political demand of construction of that order.

This line of reflection on the analogies and differences between Marxism and traditional philosophy, which never loses sight of its own *raison d'être* in the crisis of hegemony involving the contemporary world, starts from the particular concept of praxis characteristic of Marxism¹¹ and finds its point of arrival in the reformulation of the general concept of philosophy as the nexus between philosophy and common sense, as found in Notebook 8. This passage, which does not annul the initial position but enables it to be thought in a more clearly anti-speculative way, is dominated by two orders of reasoning:

a) it gives substance to the idea of a «philosophy of the time» or «philosophy of this period», an idea present right from the start of the *Notebooks*,¹² then to be repeated in *QC*, pp. 5, 54, 587 (*PN* 1, pp. 2, 313: «philosophy of the age»), where «the “philosophy of the epoch”»¹³ is defined as «the mass of sentiments [and of conceptions of the world]» predominating «in the “silent” multitude», expressing the need to reformulate in Marxist terms the Hegelian subject of the immanent nexus of philosophy and historical time.

b) but that passage also determines in non-reductionist terms the ideology-philosophy nexus, as present in each philosophical elaboration, in the form of the critique of common sense.

In both cases what dominates Gramsci's research is the need to establish what actually is the role of philosophy, as technically understood, in its relationship with the wider ideological world, thereby forcefully limiting the independence of the «individual philosopher», but also rendering precise his/her inescapable function.

¹⁰ Q 6, § 10: *QC*, p. 690; *PN* 3, p. 8; and Q 6, § 112: *QC*, p. 782; *PN* 2, p. 216; and again Q 10 I, § 10; *FSPN*, p. 352.

¹¹ Q 4, § 45: *QC*, p. 471 and *PN* 2, p. 195; and Q 7, § 35: *QC*, p. 886; *PN* 3, p. 187.

¹² Q 1, § 10: *QC*, p. 9; *PN* 1, 103; and Q 1, § 151: *QC*, p. 134; *PN* 1, p. 211 respectively.

¹³ Following Gramsci's context and phrases, this is the literal translation in the English wording used (trans. note).

The first document of the passage to a concept of philosophy as a critique of common sense is Q 8, § 173: *QC*, p. 1045 (November 1931). In criticizing Bukharin's *Popular Manual*, Gramsci here observes that a book such as that

aimed at a community of readers who are not professional intellectuals should have as its point of departure an analysis and a critique of the philosophy of common sense, which is the «philosophy of nonphilosophers» – in other words, the conception of the world *acritically* absorbed from the various social environments in which the moral individuality of the average person is developed?¹⁴.

And he then adds, in an important generalization:

Common sense is not a single conception, identical in time and place. It is the «folklore» of philosophy and, like folklore, it appears in countless forms. The fundamental characteristic of common sense consists in its being a disjointed, incoherent and inconsequential conception of the world that matches the character of the multitudes whose philosophy it is. Historically the formation of a homogeneous social group is accompanied by the development of a «homogeneous» – that is systematic – philosophy, in opposition to common sense (*ibidem*).

With a considerable difference, the nexus with common sense is generalized to every philosophical undertaking, and the opposition between coherent thought and disjointed thought is subtracted from the abstractness to which Croce and Gentile confined it¹⁵ and made functional to the expression of the *historical* process of political condensation of a project of hegemony. This is a process in which the ideological function of philosophy as a – from time to time – critical and aggregating element, becomes decisive.

On the basis of this generalization, the subject is developed in a programmatic paragraph:

Religion, common, sense, philosophy. Find out how these three intellectual orders are connected [...] There is not just one «common sense» but it, too, is a product of history and a historical process (*divenire storico*). Philosophy is the

¹⁴ PN 3, p. 333.

¹⁵ See respectively the above cited Q 8, § 173: *QC*, pp. 1045-46: PN 3, pp. 333-34) and Q 8, 175: *QC*, p. 1047; PN 3, pp. 335-36); for the philosophy-common sense nexus in Kant see also Q 3, § 48: *QC*, p. 331; PN 2, p. 51.

critique of religion and of common sense and it supersedes them. In this respect, philosophy coincides with «good sense».¹⁶

But this supersession, which as we have seen coincides with the historical elaboration of a «homogeneous social group», structurally (through the disproportion between the organized individual intervention and multiform life in constant development) is a fact that can never wholly be accomplished, and is thus destined to be continually reopened. As against this, when the need for a complete system predominates (as in the Marxist adoption of a materialist philosophy,¹⁷ or in the development of a Marxist economic science¹⁸) one inevitably falls into a speculative position. Gramsci writes in Notebook 8 that

one of the reasons, and perhaps the most important reason, for the reduction of historical materialism to traditional materialism resides in the fact that historical materialism could not but represent a primarily critical phase of philosophy, whereas there is a perennial demand for complete and perfect systems. Complete and perfect systems, however, are always the work of individual philosophers. The historically relevant aspect of these philosophical systems – namely the aspect that corresponds to contemporary conditions of life – is always accompanied by an abstract component that is “ahistorical”, in the sense that it is tied to earlier philosophies (thought that generates thought abstractly) because of external and mechanical systemic requirements (internal harmony and architecture of the system) and personal idiosyncrasies.¹⁹

And, taking up once more in a new way the subject of the «philosophy of the epoch», he goes on to say:

The philosophy of an epoch is not the philosophy of an individual or a group. It is the ensemble of the philosophies and groups [+ scientific opinion] + religion + common sense. Can such a philosophy be created «artfully»? Through the work of an individual or a group? The only possible way is through critical activity, and specifically through posing and critically resolving specific philosophical problems. In the meantime, though, one must start with the idea that the new philosophy is different from every previous philosophy, etc.²⁰

¹⁶ Q 8, § 204: *QC*, p. 1063; *PN* 3, pp. 351-52 (February-March 1932).

¹⁷ Q 8, § 211: *QC*, p. 1069; *PN* 3, pp. 358-59.

¹⁸ Q 15, § 45: *QC*, p. 1805-6; *FSPN*, p. 176.

¹⁹ Q 8, § 211; *PN* 3, p. 358.

²⁰ *PN* 3, pp. 358-59.

This posing of the question had already been sketched out in Q 7, § 45: *QC*, p. 893 (*PN* 3, p. 194), written in November 1931, in which the opposition also appears between the individual element and the historical element of philosophy, where the former is an «ensemble of abstractions that are purely rationalistic and abstruse». The novelty of Q 8, § 211 is the complete translation of the notion of the «philosophy of an epoch» in terms of the philosophy of praxis. It corresponds ideologically to the ensemble of social relations, with respect to which one can situate oneself in two fundamental ways: either attempting to represent its unitary sense as does metaphysics (including Marxist metaphysics) or by declaring that all representations of this kind are false, insofar as they would betray the essential nature of social relations – their intractability to administrative regulation – dealing with them as a closed system. This second option, which is the philosophy of praxis, will thus have to site itself as the aggregative intervention only insofar as it is able to maintain itself on the terrain of “critique”. The moment of centralization and of “distinguishing itself” is indispensable, but only in that it poses itself in a structural, internal, relationship, with the elaboration of the strictly “historical” element, that is to say of the mass (ideological).

This last point is argued in Q 8, § 213: *QC*, pp. 1070-71:

Should a movement be deemed philosophical just because it devotes itself to developing a specialized culture for a restricted group of intellectuals? Or is a movement philosophical only when, in the course of elaborating a superior and scientifically coherent form of thought, it never fails to remain in contact with the «simple» and even finds in such contacts the source of the issues that need to be studied and resolved? Only through this contact does a philosophy become «historical», cleanse itself of elements that are «individual» in origin and turn itself into «life».²¹

«Historical» philosophy is a function able to find the just balance between the roles of the individual and the mass, and it is here that the reason for its immanence is found. The philosophy of praxis assumes this equilibration as the essence of its status, as is stated in a paragraph of Notebook 8:

²¹ *PN* 3, pp. 359-61.

Insofar as the history of philosophy is the history of «individuals» (in fact, it develops essentially in the activity of exceptionally gifted individuals), it can be considered as the history of the «high points» of the progress of «common sense» – or, at least, of the common sense of the most culturally refined strata of the society.²²

In a B text of Notebook 10 this conception is, finally, projected onto philosophy in general:

The history of philosophy as it is generally understood, that is as the history of philosophers' philosophies, is the history of attempts made and ideological initiatives undertaken by a specific class of people to change, correct or perfect the conceptions of the world that exist in any particular age and thus to change the norms of conduct that go with them; in other words, to change practical activity as a whole. [...] The philosophy of an age is not the philosophy of this or that philosopher, of this or that group of intellectuals, of this or that broad section of the popular masses. It is a process of combination of all these elements, which culminates in an overall trend, in which the culmination becomes a norm of collective action and becomes concrete and complete (integral) «history».²³

As one may see Gramsci gradually rethinks the nexus between philosophy and ideology as *internal* to the concept of philosophy in general. In effect, even when it presents itself as speculative and disinterested, save the merely individual expressions, in the absence of any historical importance, this is always a political intervention on the ideological panorama in order to correct and reform it. This is the significance of the critical assumption of Croce's concept of «religion» to indicate philosophy in general:²⁴ this concept in fact designates precisely

the «logical» point at which every conception of the world makes the passage to the morality appropriate to it, when «contemplation» becomes «action» and every philosophy becomes the political action dependent on it.²⁵

²² Q 8, § 220: *QC*, p. 1080; *PN* 3, p. 369.

²³ Q 10 II, § 17: *QC*, p. 1255; *SPN*, pp. 344-45; see also Q 11, § 59: *QC*, p. 1485; *SPN*, pp. 345-46 (where *SPN* is *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. by Q. Hoare and G. Nowell-Smith, London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1971).

²⁴ Q 10 I, § 5: *QC*, p. 1217; *FSPN*, pp. 338-39.

²⁵ Q 10 II, § 28: *QC*, p. 1266; *SPN*, p. 369; see also Q 10 II, § 31: *QC*, p. 1269-70; *FSPN*, pp. 385-86.

What distinguishes the philosophy of praxis from all other philosophies is not the existence of this nexus but its assumption as theoretical pivot, not merely politico-ideological, of philosophy itself: in the philosophy of praxis

the philosopher himself, understood both individually and as an entire social group, [...] posits himself as an element of the contradiction and elevates this element to a principle of knowledge and therefore of action.²⁶

²⁶ Q 11, § 62: *QC*, p. 1487; *SPN*, p. 405.