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Abstract

This is an English translation of the entry in the Dizionario gramsciano (Roma, Carocci 2009) on "Tania" (here "Tanja" or in full "Tat'jana") Schucht, Gramsci's wife's sister. Tanja played a well-known self-denying role for Gramsci; she was a complex 'you' for him, conveying moral, material and emotional aid, and providing an essential link with the outside world. This latter included his wife Julija (Giulia), living in Moscow, with many letters to Tanja also meant to be read by Julija. Further to this, there is a more latent side to the relationship between the two of them. Gramsci was often critical of her, and to her letters of solicitude to his demands and her self-denial, he often replied in a pressing fashion, adopting a patronizing and sometimes authoritarian tone and not undertaking personal initiative. When she undertook some well-meaning action, somewhat typical, in a letter of his dating to 1932, is his charge of 'irresponsible dilettantism' on her part. At the same time his bonds of affection with her were very close, though subject to the aspect of being functional to his requirements. Judged from the outside it was a relationship not of equals but of 'man-intellectual' against 'woman-child'.

Keywords

Tanja Schucht; prison letters archive; psychological mainstay; Gramsci's patronization; emotional stress.

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‘Tanja is really a very fine girl. That’s why I’ve tormented her quite a bit’ (Gramsci’s letter to his wife of 18 April 1927 in Gramsci 2020, p. 96; in English Gramsci 1994 I, p. 101). Right from the start Gramsci recognized the nature of his relationship with Tat’jana (Tanja) Schucht (1888-1943), the sister of his wife Julija (Jul’ka) and the recipient of the greater part of the letters he sent from prison, to then also be transmitted to other people, mainly to Julija and to Piero Sraffa. Despite Gramsci’s use here of the Italian *passato prossimo* tense¹ to describe the situation, including the emotional and material turmoil that he would inflict on Tanja, was in 1927 only just at the start. As with Julija, Tanja too is not an entry in the *Gramsci Dictionary* in the sense of a recurrent concept, but it is readily apparent that many of the most widely quoted and famous expressions of the *Prison Letters* are contained in pages that start ‘Dear Tanja’, from the celebrated ‘für ewig’ (19 March 1927: Gramsci 2020, p. 75; in English Gramsci 1994, I, p. 83) to the similarly well-known metaphor of the shipwreck and cannibalism (6 March 1933: Gramsci 2020, p. 952; in English Gramsci 1994, II, p. 278). Putting it in a nutshell, from the point of view of letters, Tanja is a complex ‘you’, carrying out the most diverse roles: from the maintenance of the bond of affection and information with the outside world to the satisfaction of various needs involving basic assistance, especially the provision of books; from interlocutor for theory and for the intellect to psychological mainstay; from political mediation to the safeguarding of the burgeoning letter archive; from the possibility for Gramsci to express his own dimensions of feeling to the possibility of manifesting the vocation of pedagogue and paternal figure (Natoli, ‘Introduction’ to Gramsci and Schucht 1997). This young Soviet biologist, then, who stayed back in Italy to help her imprisoned brother-in-law, while the entire Schucht family was living in Moscow, was the fundamental nerve centre for the whole itinerary of Gramsci’s letters.

Going beyond the profile of Tanja that can be constructed through her letters and her life – a profile showing a woman tending towards self-isolation and devoted to a form of dispassionate love for her fellow-being – the portrait of her that appears from the letters between her and Gramsci is redolent of the general conception that Gramsci had of women and of the superposition that involves the figures of Tanja and Julija in the mind of the prisoner. ‘Dearest Tanja, I want you to write to Julija for me. And anyway, are you still sending her my letters? They are not only written for you: nor am I always able to think about you as detached from Julija. Otherwise how could I go on giving you so much trouble? Which would be trouble, in fact, if there were not something of Julija in you and I did not think of you as inseparable from Julija. So you see, this is a kind of epistolary Pirandellism’. (letter of 27 August 1928 in Gramsci 2020, p. 286; in English Gramsci 1994 I, p. 220). Here and elsewhere Gramsci openly refers to the existence of channels of identification between the two women, which are among the most intimate reasons for Tanja’s devotion to Gramsci, and among the most deeply concealed causes of her difficulty to construct an independent life for herself. Even in the formulas that Gramsci uses to begin his letters and his use of the vocative, he utilizes the same expressions both for Tanja and for Julija. Although Gramsci recognizes the solicitude and involvement shown by Tanja in replying to his requests and demands, he does not hesitate to turn to her in an ever more pressing fashion, because of the reserve that she demonstrates in never stressing that the effort that this solicitude demands of her. To his sister-in-law’s self-denial Gramsci constantly responded using patronizing authoritarian forms and a rise in his expectations of her assistance, but above all he responded by requiring her to carry out solely the mandates that he gave her without undertaking any personal initiative whatsoever. The personal initiative that in some cases Tanja assumed were the subject of continual carping: ‘There is no doubt that you have caused me serious embarrassment, more serious than you might think with your, let me say, irresponsible diletantism’ (letter to Tanja, 19 September 1932 in Gramsci 2020, p. 1082; in English Gramsci 1994 II) and even derision from Gramsci (‘Your attitude towards the life of all these years, which has been so harsh and unremitting, is the attitude that

one can derive from reading Madame de Ségur's sentimental romances²² (letter to Tanja of 3 October 1932 in Gramsci 2020, p. 1088; in English Gramsci 1994 II, p. 214). In particular, the two events that gave rise to Gramsci's angry reaction were the presentation of the request for release from imprisonment, made on his behalf by Tanja and her hiding from him of a number of aspects of Julija's illness.

Gramsci had great need of Tanja and his ties of affection to her were very close, while at the same time his relationship with her was essentially functional. In the very letters in which he was advising her to have herself seen to medically, to be careful of her health and not to tire herself out, he was also subjecting her to material demands and extremely strong emotional stress and not doing at all enough to persuade her to return to her family in Moscow. He often addresses some moral plea to her, as was his style, but he is not thereby showing some sign of intimacy or of taking her into his confidence but have, rather, a pedagogic twist to them and always serve as an indirect reproof. On the one hand this lightens the personalization of the 'mistakes' from time to time committed by Tanja, but on the other it distances at the level of objective evidence the relation of empathy between their two specific persons, with the final result of sharpening his ungrateful responses and his often unjust or excessive reproofs. The disparity between the man-intellectual and the woman-child is unbridgeable and Tanja becomes an unwilling accomplice in its construction.

'You, like all women in general have plenty of imagination and little fantasy, and what's more in you (as in women in general) imagination operates only in one direction, in the direction that I would say characterizes (I can see you jump) ... that of societies for animal protection, vegetarians, nurses: women are lyrical (just to raise the tone) but they are not dramatic. They imagine the life of others (of their children too) only from the point of view of animal suffering, but they don't know how to recreate with their fantasy all of another person's life, as a whole, in all its aspects' (letter to Tanja of 25 April 1927 in Gramsci 2020, p. 97; in English Gramsci 1994 I, p. 105). It is obvious from this generalization-abstraction that Gramsci never considered his relationship with Tanja to be one of equals, even though this did not stop him from having the most sincere and deep affection towards her. Like Julija, but even more

than Julija, for Gramsci Tanja belongs to that part of the human race which needs more to be educated, formed and trained, and which is to be rendered particularly permeable to intellectual and moral reform.

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¹ Though not always equivalents, in this context the *passato prossimo* finds an overlap in English with the present perfect tense, as used here, to indicate an ongoing process.

² Countess Sophie de Ségur (née Sofija Rostopčina, daughter of the Governor General of Moscow during Napoléon's 1812 campaign), was the authoress of various novels of moralistic 'self-improvement' for girls (trans. note).