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Fabio Frosini

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## Gramsci Dictionary - Dizionario gramsciano: Piero Sraffa

### Abstract

Piero Sraffa, a few years younger than Gramsci, first met him in Turin in 1919. He followed closely the activity of the Ordine Nuovo group and its journal, having a letter of his published anonymously in it, to Gramsci's critical discussion in reply. The two then met again in Rome when, as parliamentary deputy having immunity, Gramsci had returned to Italy from Moscow and Vienna. Sraffa became a decisive figure for Gramsci after the latter's arrest, opening an unlimited account for him at a Milanese bookshop and, through Tanja Schucht, became Gramsci's channel for communication with the Italian Communist Party's Foreign Centre in France. At a distance and indirectly, then, the two men acted as stimuli for each other, mainly for Gramsci but the reciprocity in the relationship should not be overlooked. In 1932, for example, there were requests for Gramsci to further his work on the intellectuals in Italian history, and on the recent publications of the philosopher-historian-literary figure, Benedetto Croce. Gramsci in his turn asked Sraffa for information, for example, on Machiavelli and economic science, and on David Ricardo and philosophy and the two exchanged opinions, once more through Tanja, on the position of Italian Jews under fascism. Sraffa also channelled administrative efforts to have a revision of Gramsci's trial and some attempts at gaining his freedom.

### Keywords

Piero Sraffa; Ordine Nuovo; mainstay; intellectual stimulus; Italian Communist Party.

## Gramsci Dictionary / Dizionario gramsciano: *Piero Sraffa*

Fabio Frosini

Gramsci first met Piero Sraffa in Turin in 1919 through Umberto Cosmo, the historian of Italian literature (letter to Tanja of 23 February 1931: Gramsci 2020, pp. 553-7; in English Gramsci 1994 II, pp. 13-16). A sympathizer of the Socialist Party and then the Communist Party, while not taking part openly in political life, Sraffa was an habitu   of the *Ordine nuovo* environment and collaborated with it. In 1924, Gramsci described him in the article *Problemi di oggi e domani* [*Problems of Today and Tomorrow*] as ‘an old subscriber and friend of *L’Ordine nuovo*’ (*L’Ordine nuovo* 1-15 April 1924: Gramsci 1971, p. 175; in English Gramsci 1978, p. 229). The article published and critically commented on a letter of Sraffa’s on the prospects of the Italian Communist Party (PCd’I). Letters also show that the two of them met up while Gramsci was in Rome (Sraffa 1991, pp. XXI-XXII; cf. in English Gramsci 2014, pp. 306, 310), but Sraffa’s role in Gramsci’s life became decisive after the arrest of the latter. Immediately after his preventive detention on the island of Ustica, Gramsci contacted him (letters of 11, 17 and 21 December 1926, and 2 January 1927 in Gramsci 2020, pp. 19, 20, 28-9 and 38-40; in English Gramsci 1994 I, pp. 44, 45, 52-4 and 57-9) and obtained immediate help through the opening of an unlimited account at a bookshop in Milan (letters to Tanja of 19 December 1927, 3 January 1927, in Gramsci 2020, pp. 26 and 41; in English Gramsci 1994 I, pp. 50 and 60). Through Tanja, Sraffa thus became Gramsci’s main channel of communication with the PCd’I). So, on 23 May 1932, to dispel any doubt on the matter, Gramsci earnestly asked her to write to Sraffa regarding the ‘appeal for clemency sent by Federico Confalonieri to the Emperor of Austria [...] as the writing of a man reduced to the nth degree of humiliation and abjectness’ (Gramsci 2020, pp. 790-91; in English Gramsci 1994 II, p. 176).

Sraffa also provided a constant source of theoretical soundings for Gramsci. Each time through Tanja, Sraffa first urges Gramsci to write

a prospectus of his research on the intellectuals (cf. letter to her, 7 September 1931 in Gramsci 2020, p. 637; in English Gramsci 1994 I, pp. 66-7), another time asks for information on the transliteration system from Russian to Italian (letter to Tanja, 4 January 1932 in Gramsci 2020, pp. 713-4; in English Gramsci 1994 II, pp. 123-4), intervenes in the discussion on ‘two worlds’<sup>1</sup> (letter to Tanja, 8 February 1932 in Gramsci 2020 pp. 730-2; in English Gramsci 1994 II, pp. 135-7), then prods Gramsci into discussing Croce’s most recent historical works (letters to Tanja, 21 and 30 April 1932 in Sraffa 1991, pp. 58 and 61). In his turn, Gramsci asks for information on Machiavelli as economist (letter to Tanja, 14 March 1932 in Gramsci 2020, p. 752; in English Gramsci 1994, II, pp. 150-1), and on Ricardo as philosopher (letter to Tanja, 30 May 1932 in Gramsci 2020, pp. 794-5; in English Gramsci 1994 II, p. 178). From the start of 1933, Gramsci who had always called him ‘Piero’ and then ‘the Attorney Piero’, for safety begins to call him ‘the Attorney’. Sraffa’s role was indeed to channel bureaucratic and administrative business relative to the revision<sup>2</sup> of Gramsci’s trial and, as regards the PCd’I, the USSR’s attempts with Italy to have him freed.

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<sup>1</sup> This was a coded reference to the positions of Jews in Italy after the 1929 State-Vatican Concordat; Gramsci recognized ‘that an anti-Semitic tendency might still arise’ while Sraffa cited specific cases of Jews ‘excluded, in fact if not legally, from certain positions’ (trans. note).

<sup>2</sup> Sentences of the Special Tribunal were not subject to appeal, but only ‘revision of judgment’ should, e.g., new facts or evidence come to light afterwards (trans. note).