

Antonio Gramsci's "Felix Error"

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Abstract

This paper re-examines Antonio Gramsci's rejection of Raffaele Corso's definition of folklore as "contemporary prehistory" and argues that the concept can be reconsidered in light of Gramsci's critique. Gramsci opposed Corso's positivist, evolutionary view, emphasizing instead the complexity, instability, and fragmentary nature of folklore. In the *Quaderni del carcere*, he framed folklore as a by-product of the dialectical relationship between hegemonic and subaltern classes, where elements of dominant culture "fall" into subaltern traditions and are recombined into contradictory worldviews. The paper suggests that folklore may indeed be understood as "contemporary prehistory," not as a stage to be overcome, but as an unofficial, unwritten, and persistent cultural process that preserves what official history excludes. Folklore functions both conservatively, maintaining repressed social elements, and subversively, offering resources for cultural resistance. Gramsci's background in linguistics shaped his recognition of folklore as a dynamic system akin to language-stratified, fossil-like, yet continually alive. By situating Gramsci's contributions within broader cultural theory, the study highlights both the strength and the limits of his Marxist approach. It concludes that engaging critically with folklore remains crucial today, especially in the face of conspiracy theories and misinformation, which demonstrate its enduring social power.

Keywords

Folklore, Gramsci, Cultural Theory, Hegemony, Marxism

Il "felix error" di Antonio Gramsci

Abstract

Questo articolo riesamina il rifiuto di Antonio Gramsci della definizione di folklore di Raffaele Corso come "preistoria contemporanea" e sostiene che il concetto possa essere riconsiderato alla luce della critica di Gramsci. Gramsci si oppose alla visione positivista ed evoluzionista di Corso, sottolineando invece la complessità, l'instabilità e la natura frammentaria del folklore. Nei *Quaderni del carcere*, inquadra il folklore come un sottoprodotto del rapporto dialettico tra classi egemoniche e subalterne, dove elementi della cultura dominante "ricadono" nelle tradizioni subalterne e vengono ricombinati in visioni del mondo contraddittorie. L'articolo suggerisce che il folklore possa effettivamente essere inteso come "preistoria contemporanea", non come una fase da superare, ma come un processo culturale non ufficiale, non scritto e persistente che preserva ciò che la storia ufficiale esclude. Il folklore funziona sia in modo conservativo, mantenendo elementi sociali repressi, sia in modo sovversivo, offrendo risorse per la resistenza culturale. La formazione linguistica di Gramsci ha plasmato la sua concezione del folklore come un sistema dinamico affine al linguaggio: stratificato, fossile, eppure in continua evoluzione. Collocando i contributi di Gramsci all'interno di una più ampia teoria culturale, lo studio evidenzia sia la forza che i limiti del suo approccio marxista. Conclude che affrontare criticamente il folklore rimane cruciale oggi, soprattutto di fronte alle teorie del complotto e alla disinformazione, che ne dimostrano il perdurante potere sociale.

Keywords

Folklore, Gramsci, Teoria culturale, Egemonia, Marxismo

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1. The "felix error"

In the *Quaderni del carcere*, Antonio Gramsci refers to a definition of folklore as «preistoria contemporanea» (contemporary pre-history), given by Raffaele Corso in his work *Folklore: storia, obietto, metodo, bibliografia* (*Folklore: History, Object, Method, Bibliography*).¹ It is known that Gramsci did not have direct access to the book, but he resorted to journalistic sources, probably a negligible and not very rigorous article by Massimo Scaligero published in 1932, in which the phrase is attributed to Corso.² The exact expression³ is nevertheless present in his work and it is so important to contextualize it that I will report it in its entire paragraph:

Ethnography is directed towards uncultured (inculti) or uncivilized (incivili) human groups who, almost lesser children in the great universal family, are located around the developed peoples, who have long ago left infancy behind. Ethnography takes on the specific name of *folklore* when it observes the more obscure and deeper strata of the civilized nations represented by common groups, in whom, as in a fond, there are deposited, sometimes in order once more to bud, so many forms of activity and manifestations that seemed to have disappeared for ever. In this sense *folklore* may be called the «ethnography of the rural classes», as the science which explores and studies a field that up to yesterday was unknown or neglected, full of fantastic wonders and surprises and revelations which have made them deserve the title of *contemporary pre-history*.⁴

Corso had a positivist view of the subject: as ethnology is the science of uncultured people in the *not yet civilized* world, so folklore is the science for *not yet civilized* strata of modern societies. In both

¹ Q 9, § 15: *QC*, p. 1105; in English *Folklore: Contemporary Pre-History* in *Selections from Cultural Writings* (henceforward *SCW*), ed. by D. Forgacs and G. Nowell-Smith and trans. by W. Q. Boelhower, London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1985, pp. 194-95.

² G. B. Bronzini, *Come nacquero le osservazioni sul folklore di Gramsci*, «Lares. Quadrimestrale di studi demo-ethno-antropologici», 68, 2002, 2, pp. 213-15.

³ Some still attribute this creation to Corso. Cfr. D. Ó Giolláin, *Rethinking (Irish) Folklore in the Twenty-First Century*, «Béaloidseas», 81, 2013, pp. 37-52: 39.

⁴ R. Corso, *Folklore. Storia, obietto, metodo, bibliografia*, Roma, Leonardo da Vinci, 1923, p. 20; emphasis by the author.

cases, humanity of every latitude is meant to take an analogous path from a primitive state to a developed one (implying the so-called western Christian civilization), provided that the developed peoples have surpassed their *infancy*. The influence of the English school (Tylor, Frazer) is clear, an approach rejected, in Italy, first by Benedetto Croce and then by Gramsci himself.⁵

Gramsci used the phrase «preistoria contemporanea» in order to discard it:

[it] is simply a game with words to define a complex phenomenon that eludes compact definitions [...] Folklore has always been tied to the culture of the dominant class and, in its own way, has drawn from it the motifs which have then become inserted into combinations with previous traditions. Besides, there is nothing more contradictory and fragmentary than folklore.⁶

And, again, «folklore, at least in part, is much more unstable and fluctuating than language and dialects» and further in dealing with folklore, we are dealing with «a very relative and highly questionable ‘pre-history’ and there could be nothing vainer than to try and find the different stratifications in a single area of folklore».⁷

Resuming, Gramsci discarded the definition because he saw that the problem was far more complex and such complexity did not help in delineating historically the phenomenon, since folklore is mobile and fluctuant, more than language itself.

By rejecting the definition and overcoming Corso’s positivist approach, Gramsci made some decisive observations on the issue.

Bearing in mind that Gramsci did not give a precise definition of folklore, but indicated its humus in the constant dialectic between hegemonic and subaltern classes, moving in this way the focus of the discipline from the items to the processes of folklorization,⁸ it is possible to “crown” this vacuum with the sparse ideas we find in the *Prison Notebooks*, starting with the observations he made rejecting Corso’s definition:

⁵ G. Cocchiara, *Storia del folklore in Europa*, Torino, Boringhieri, 1952, pp. 541-47; A. M. Cirese, *Cultura egemonica e culture subalterne*, Palermo, Palumbo, 1973; F. Dei, *Antropologia culturale*, Bologna, il Mulino, 2016.

⁶ Q 9, § 15: *QC*, p. 1105; in English *SCW*, p. 194.

⁷ *Ibidem*, in English, *SCW*, pp. 194-95.

⁸ F. Dei, *Gramsci, Cirese e la tradizione demologica italiana*, «Lares. Quadrimestrale di studi demo-etno-antropologici», 77, 2011, 3, pp. 501-18.

- Folklore is a complex phenomenon.
- Folklore is a by-product of the relationship between hegemonic and subaltern strata.
- Folklore is a result of a combination between motives sprung from hegemonic culture and preceding traditions.
- Folklore is fragmentary and contradictory and more mobile and fluctuant than languages, national or local.
- The fifth point, below, seems to be the conclusion of all the others:
- Therefore, it would be very difficult to recognize and define, even in the same folkloric area, all the stratifications.

2. *Gramsci and language*

«When one conception gives way to another, the earlier language persists, but it is used metaphorically [...] language is a living thing and simultaneously a museum of fossils of past life».⁹

In order to fully grasp the ideas Gramsci had on folklore, a mention of his academic background is useful. He had an interest on glottology from 1911, during his high school senior year, and it continued while attending the University of Torino, under Matteo Bartoli's guidance, by whom he was probably involved in active research. He did not give up the idea of graduating at least until 1919, when his involvement in journalism became paramount.¹⁰ His interest in the subject was pivotal and in some ways central for the development of his entire political philosophy, not a simple intellectual curiosity but a “strada maestra” (“main highway”),¹¹ and transcended the field of linguistics: he transferred the concept of stratification, fragmentation and irradiation in the field of folklore, cementing the bases of his reading of society as hegemonically organized.¹² In a word,

⁹ Q 4, § 17: *QC*, p. 438; *PN* 2, p. 159. With *PN* followed by volume number we refer to: A. Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. by J. A. Buttigieg, New York, Columbia University Press, 3 vols., 1992, 1996, 2007. These are observations Gramsci made explaining the use Marx made of the word «immanence».

¹⁰ G. Schirru, *Antonio Gramsci studente di linguistica*, «Studi Storici», 52, 2011, 4, pp. 925-73: 925-26, 959-60; cfr. also *QC*, pp. XLIV-XLVI.

¹¹ T. De Mauro, *Questione della lingua*, in *Gramsci. Le sue idee nel nostro tempo*, a cura di C. Ricchini, E. Manca e L. Melograni, Roma, Editrice L'Unità, 1987, pp. 118-20; S. O. Gencarella, *Gramsci, Good Sense, and Critical Folklore Studies*, «Journal of Folklore Research», 47, 2010, 3, pp. 221-52: 228; Schirru, *Antonio Gramsci studente di linguistica*, cit., pp. 926, 947.

¹² Gencarella, *Gramsci, Good Sense, and Critical Folklore Studies*, cit., pp. 228-30; Gramsci, *SCW*,

linguistics gave Gramsci a solid method for the analysis of complex cultural phenomena.

As noted by Giancarlo Schirru, other than Bartoli, the main influence on Gramsci's thought probably came from Antoine Meillet, from whom he took three aspects:

1. Language is a social fact;
2. Historical linguistics is the study of linguistic changes;
3. Laws are useful in describing such changes, but only if limited to well circumscribed times and places.

If we compare these aspects with the motivations with which Gramsci rejected Corso's definition, this setting is clear:

1. Folklore is a by-product of social stratifications;
2. It changes as languages do;
3. We can understand such a complex phenomenon only through rigorous study, from which we can draw laws, such as the one about the "fall" of cultural items from hegemonic culture down to subaltern one and their recombination.

An extra-scientific but relevant aspect was the fact that among Meillet and his circle of fellows and students there grew a closeness to the working class Left, while the homologous Italian community veered toward fascism.¹³

Coherently, like folklore, dialects are a symptom of worldviews. In the section already mentioned we find in the *Notebooks*, after noticing that traces of «common» philosophy could be found in language, common sense and folklore, Gramsci wrote:

If it is true that every language contains the elements of a conception of the world and of a culture, it could also be true that from anyone's language one can assess the greater or lesser complexity of his conception of the world. Someone who only speaks dialect, or understands the standard language incompletely, necessarily has an intuition of the world which is more or less limited and provincial, which is fossilised and anachronistic in relation to the major currents of thought which dominate world history.¹⁴

Resuming, as we will see for folklore, Gramsci recurs to the concept of "fossils" (better: *living fossils*) referring to the remnants of

cit., pp. 166-67; Limón expressed some reserve: cfr. J. E. Limón *Breaking with Gramsci: Gencarella on Good Sense and Critical Folklore Studies*, «Journal of Folklore Research», 47, 2010, 3, pp. 253-57.

¹³ Schirru, *Antonio Gramsci studente di linguistica*, cit., pp. 965-68.

¹⁴ QC, p. 1377; SPN, p. 325.

past worldviews. The important detail is that he attributed the potentiality of life to apparently dead items as fossils. Furthermore, language is an expression of specific conceptions of the world. Now, for Gramsci language, common sense and folklore are all three aspects of common philosophy: every individual is a philosopher in his own way. The difference is in that it is important to distinguish between those who think «without having a critical awareness» and those who, on the contrary, consciously work out their «own conception of the world». ¹⁵

3. Gramsci and folklore

In order to fully appreciate Gramsci's contribution, it is important to understand what he meant by the word "folklore". The parts of the *Notebooks* titled *Osservazioni sul folklore*,¹⁶ written in 1935 and collected in the 1950s, had an important impact on the Italian circle of folklore scholars.

Alberto Cirese noted that Gramsci had introduced the concept of subalternity of social strata, while until then (despite some unsuccessful precedent) folklore was idealized as the «soul of the nation». Following Gramsci, scholars started to read folklore no longer as the genuine expression of people's character, but as a symptom of class divisions in all the so-called Western civilizations.¹⁷ To fully understand Gramsci's views on the phenomenon, his observations against Corso's definition are extremely useful. So I will try to examine them one by one.

3.1. Folklore is a complex phenomenon

Gramsci considered folklore a subject to study with maximum rigor and not with a nostalgic or idyllic approach. He intended folklore as the conception of the world of social strata that are not yet touched by modern schools of thought,¹⁸ so it had an irreplaceable value in giving intellectuals access to the Weltanschauung of the popular strata (obviously in a Marxist sense).¹⁹ As we will see further, that approach is a result of the substantially political basis of Gramsci's thought. It is im-

¹⁵ *QC*, p. 1375-76; *SPN* pp. 323-24.

¹⁶ *QC*, pp. 2311-17.

¹⁷ A. M. Cirese. *Cultura egemonica e culture subalterne*, Palermo, Palumbo, 1973, p. 218. See further for a discussion on Cirese's reading.

¹⁸ Q 1, § 89: *QC*, pp. 89-90; *PN* 1, pp. 186-87.

¹⁹ A. Dundes, S. J. Bronner, *The meaning of folklore: The analytical essays of Alan Dundes*, Logan, Utah State University Press, 2007, p. 193.

portant to note, however, that this starting point is essential to resolve a paradox that had bewildered scholars in the past. While Gramsci saw folklore as a subject worthy of maximum effort, at the same time he saw it as contradictory, incomplete, reactionary and unfit to create a coherent conception of the world useful for the liberation of subaltern strata.

These two theses are only apparently contradictory.²⁰ Corey Gibson proposes to read the paradox in a more theoretical light: since folklore implies reactionary as well as progressive elements, in a new social model, the latter could be integrated and developed, while the former have to be overcome. But if these popular conceptions of the world were unexamined, then cultural vanguards would have serious difficulties in communicating with the masses.²¹ Concluding, the serious nature of the subject is the starting point to understand Gramsci's conception of folklore.

In a sort of curious case of anticipatory plagiarism, positions similar to Gramsci's were not new in the Italian scene. As reported by Cirese, nineteenth century folklorists such as Vincenzo Padula, Carlo Tenca, Cesare Correnti and Ermolao Rubieri tried to recognize, through folklore, the social problems that it expresses. Such views were ignored in favour of the historical-philological and positivist ones.²² It is a case of anticipatory plagiarism because what they lacked was a cultural environment ready to accept their observations.²³

But yet more curious was the fact that Gramsci was in a situation similar to his predecessors, with the difference that he was aware of being in it. He wrote for a future generation of intellectuals, as could be inferred by the letter he wrote to his sister-in-law Tanja,²⁴ in which he expressed the will to do something "für ewig" (for eternity), probably meaning to concentrate his effort toward a prominent end,²⁵ and detailed four subjects: the formation of a public spirit in Italy; comparative linguistics; the

²⁰ G. Petronio, *Cultura «popolare»*, in *Gramsci. Le sue idee nel nostro tempo*, cit., pp. 86-87.

²¹ C. Gibson, *The Voice of the People: Hamish Henderson and Scottish Cultural Politics*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2015, pp. 99-106.

²² Cirese, *Cultura egemonica e culture subalterne*, cit., pp. 150-53.

²³ P. Bayard, J. Mehlman, *Anticipatory Plagiarism*, «New Literary History», 44, 2013, 2, pp. 231-50; S. Žižek, *Less than Nothing. Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism*, New York, Verso, 2013.

²⁴ Gramsci, letter of 19 March 1927 to Tanja Schucht, in *LC*, pp. 74-78: 75; in *English Letters from Prison*, ed. by F. Rosengarten and trans. by R. Rosenthal, New York, Columbia University Press, vol. 1, pp. 82-86; the words «für ewig» are on p. 83.

²⁵ Schirru, *Antonio Gramsci studente di linguistica*, cit., p. 931.

theater of Pirandello; the serial novels (feuilletons). Most importantly, he recognized that the common theme is the *spirito popolare creativo* (the popular creative spirit). We know that he meant by this an opening for the (future) intellectuals in the Weltanschauung of the subaltern strata.²⁶

Resuming, Gramsci recognized the complexity of the subject; such complexity is inherent in the processes of folklorization that, by their nature, are asystematic, occasional and conservative. In order to 1) understand the phenomenon and 2) use it for political purposes, a future class of dedicated intellectuals is required.

3.2. Folklore is a by-product of the relationship between hegemonic and subaltern strata

Fabio Dei noted that by the word «folklore» Gramsci meant an object created by a hegemonic culture in surveying and classifying items which were fossilized and dehistoricized. Put simpler, the same scholars that created the subject, created the contents.²⁷ As a reaction to this approach, Gramsci attributed a living character to folklore, reading it not as an inert collection of items or facts but a space of agency capable of expressing creative and even progressive innovations,²⁸ but only if “empowered” by intellectuals.

Therefore, folklore is not something that could be studied as fossilized because it is continually reworked by its own users. The definition of folklore given by Simon Bronner comes immediately to mind: «traditional knowledge put into, and drawing for, practice».²⁹

The focal point is that Gramsci refused to separate folklore from a hegemonic conception of the world, because it is created by it, also in reaction (by subalterns) to its impositions. Furthermore, as noted again by Dei, the line between the hegemonic class and the subaltern one is intended by Gramsci as mutable and consisting in contrastive gradual positions.³⁰

²⁶ Regarding the difficulties in interpreting this letter, see *ibidem*, pp. 928-31.

²⁷ It is interesting that similar worries were reported by Kenneth Goldstein in his guide, originally published in 1964, where he warned researchers on the perils of removal of findings from context or just of the mere existence of the collector, cfr. K. S. Goldstein, *A Guide for Field Workers in Folklore*, Bloomington, Trickster Press, 2020, pp. 11, 52.

²⁸ F. Dei, *Un museo di frammenti. Ripensare la rivoluzione gramsciana negli studi folklorici*, «Lares. Quadrimestrale di studi demo-ethno-antropologici», 74, 2008, 2, pp. 445-64: 456.

²⁹ S. J. Bronner, *Folklore. The basics*, London-New York, Routledge, 2017, cit., p. 46.

³⁰ F. Dei, *La demologia come scienza normale? Quarant'anni di Cultura egemonica e culture sub-*

It should not be forgotten that Gramsci was first and foremost a political activist. His interest for the subject was motivated by his “program” to use folklore as a means to get in touch with peasants and substitute it, contradictory and mutilated as it is, with a progressive conception of the world which incorporates the progressive parts, elaborated by the intellectuals.³¹

Gramsci's Marxism was, at the same time, his strength and weakness: on the one hand, it gave him a tool to recognize and understand the conflictual nature of folklore, on the other hand it implied an encapsulation of it in the dialectic of class struggle, with no way out.³² Kate Crehan noted that Gramsci did not have an “anthropological” idea of folklore: in other words, he did not see folklore as a culture, notably an item well defined in space and time, as the line that separated hegemonic from subaltern was continually shifting and changing.³³ More recently, she noticed how the same idea of “folklore” is shifting in his work and how much is revelative to focus on these shifts and turns in order to grasp their author's viewpoint.³⁴

Palmiro Togliatti, writing about Gramsci, noted that a Marxist cannot explain a historical fact by simply reducing it to a cause-effect relation: it is far more complex than that and implies action and reaction, interdependence and contrast. The historical process has in itself the positive and the negative.³⁵ In this perspective, the movement in itself is a characteristic of reality and the historical process is *causa sui*.³⁶ The use of folklore for Togliatti was coherent with the reading of Gramsci proposed by Crehan: it is a means to accelerate history.³⁷

As already observed, all the strength of Gramsci's approach is in his focus on the process of folklorization, not on the items. Such a focus provides the folklorist a key to search and single out items as they change (at least superficially). Dei, on this point, demon-
strat-

alterne, «Lares. Quadrimestrale di studi demo-ethno-antropologici», 81, 2015, 2-3, pp. 377-96: 385-86.

³¹ K. A. F. Crehan, *Gramsci, Culture and Anthropology*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2002, pp. 60-62.

³² Dundes, Bronner, *The meaning of folklore*, cit., p. 193

³³ Crehan, *Gramsci, Culture and Anthropology*, cit., p. 72; Dei, *Gramsci, Cirese e la tradizione demologica italiana*, cit., pp. 501-18; Id., *La demologia come scienza normale?*, cit., pp. 385-86.

³⁴ K. A. F. Crehan, *Gramsci's folklore bundle*, «Anuac», 11, 2022, 1, pp. 55-64.

³⁵ P. Togliatti, *Scritti su Gramsci*, Roma, Editori Riuniti, 2001, p. 97.

³⁶ See also Žižek, *Less than Nothing*, cit., pp. 70-72.

³⁷ Togliatti, *Scritti su Gramsci*, cit.

ed all the fragility of Cirese's attempt to conjugate the basic viewpoint of Gramsci (the conflictual one) with a more defined object of study, with the creation of the subject «demologia». The discipline was born old because at the time, during the decades after the second world war, Italy was in a turmoil of social and cultural changes, so the object itself of its study was changing.³⁸ This lack is probably due to the fact – observed Riccardo Ciavolella – that Cirese missed the historical, i.e. moving nature of hegemony and subalternity that Gramsci attributed to these two entities, which implied their own temporariness, being his approach one who had to supply the means to overcome them.³⁹

Summarizing, in Gramsci's view, there is no folklore without hegemony and this is the strength of his contribution: folklore creates itself and is created in opposition with official worldviews, imposed on societies by a work of negotiation. This strength, however, has a basic, inherent limit: by encapsulating folklore in class struggle, we risk to neglect the fact that it is an interclassist phenomenon, while the class-struggle is only one of its incarnations. We should not identify folklore with subaltern social strata, because we risk to mistake the accident for the substance.

3.3. Folklore is a result of a combination between motives which sprang from hegemonic culture and preceding traditions

Gramsci noted that contemporary common sense creates the future folklore,⁴⁰ meaning that as a culture evolves, it discards worldviews which become dated. Marcel Mauss expressed a similar concept, observing that the priests of a religion, when it is ousted, become wizards.⁴¹ These dated items, however, like the priests that become wizards but do not cease to exist for some time, do not disappear in oblivion but are reused by non-hegemonic worldviews, creating a «submerged» body of knowledge.

As folklore is a museum of fragments from all the worldviews of history, science and philosophy give materials for its formation too.

³⁸ Dei, *Gramsci, Cirese e la tradizione demologica italiana*, cit., pp. 501-18.

³⁹ R. Ciavolella, *Farsi soggetto politico: Considerazioni sul tradursi del folklore in politica*, «Anuac», 11, 2022, 1, pp. 65-74.

⁴⁰ Q 24, § 4: *QC*, p. 2271; *SCW*, pp. 420-21.

⁴¹ M. Mauss, *Teoria generale della magia e altri saggi*, Torino, Einaudi, 1965, pp. 12, 26.

According to Gramsci, these «hegemonic» materials, detached from their context, «fall» down to subaltern strata and are rearranged in the mosaic of tradition, forming *de facto* a repository for dismissed ideas.⁴²

Since folklore is incoherent by nature, it does not have the capacity to properly integrate new discoveries or ideas, but can just recombine it in a mostly mechanical way.⁴³ Having said that, folklore holds at the same time reactionary and creative, even progressive, stratifications, spontaneously created in determined conditions, in contrast with hegemonic conceptions of the world.⁴⁴

Folklore, therefore, exactly because of its rebellious (it arose by contrast with hegemonic worldviews) yet conservative nature (it permits one to exercise normally forbidden practices within the framework of a society without disputing its fundamental value), is also a repository of rejected knowledge which became «ancient wisdom»⁴⁵ and, in the most extreme cases – such as conspiracy theories or extremist political beliefs – this body of knowledge becomes the only true one.⁴⁶

These are patently the reactionary aspects of folklore, the ones that Gramsci saw as the enemy to defeat in order to create a more self-aware society, as, according to him, primary school teachers had to study folklore with the precise intent to overcome it, removing it from the minds of their pupils.⁴⁷

3.4. Folklore is fragmentary and contradictory and more mobile and fluctuating than languages.

The closest to a definition that Gramsci gave of folklore comes in the Notebook 11 in which he wrote that the system of beliefs, superstitions, opinions, views of thinking and acting appears⁴⁸ in what is generally called “folklore”.⁴⁹

⁴² Gencarella, *Gramsci, Good Sense, and Critical Folklore Studies*, cit., p. 229.

⁴³ Q 1, § 89: *QC*, p. 89; *PN* 1, pp. 186-87.

⁴⁴ Q 27, § 1: *QC*, p. 2313; *SCW*, p. 190.

⁴⁵ M. Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy. Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2005, pp. 23-24.

⁴⁶ U. Eco, *Il fascismo eterno*, Milano, La nave di Teseo, 2017, pp. 34-36.

⁴⁷ Q 27, § 1: *QC*, p. 2314; *SCW*, p. 191.

⁴⁸ I translate with the third singular person the plural of the original Italian text («si affacciano») that is, significantly, an anacoluthon, indicating once more the multiform yet unitarian nature of the subject.

⁴⁹ Q 11, § 12: *QC*, p. 1375.

Gramsci implied that such a heterogeneous corpus of knowledge, which contains pieces of cultural items so diverse could not be coherent, but – as observed earlier – it nonetheless represents a worldview of the subaltern social strata.

Furthermore, as seen in the previous section, Gramsci considered the decontextualized parts of hegemonic culture that “fall” into the subaltern ones. Now we see the cause of folklore incoherence in its inherent heterogeneity and with the «falling» phenomena, we witness a vicious circle in which the hegemonic falling pieces complicate the already chaotic subaltern worldview. So, while languages are inherently conservative, as «no new historical situation [...] completely transforms language» despite the fact that «the content of language must be changed»,⁵⁰ folklore is, yes, conservative by nature, but at the same time open, almost disarmed against the hegemonic cultures, because it lacks the inherent logic of languages.

In the same place where Gramsci discarded Corso’s definition,⁵¹ he proposed a parallel between the relationship within hegemonic culture and folklore and higher and lower arts (arti maggiori e minori), observing to what extent the latter are bound to the former, to the point of dependence. What we can perceive is that Gramsci thought folklore as more apt to accept extraneous cultural items because it does not need – contrary to language – to integrate them coherently.

Concluding this part on Gramsci’s reading of folklore, he thought that the subaltern strata – because of their very condition – do not have the means for creating a structured, coherent Weltanschauung, so, to interact with reality, they recur to an incoherent one, which unites primitive with modern, even futuristic, elements. In order to acquire a critical conception of the world, the subalterns need the help of the intellectuals, who, for their part, have to study folklore with extreme seriousness in order to communicate with subalterns and help them in eliminating the conservative conceptions of the world.

4. Gramsci and history

In order to fully understand Gramsci’s view of folklore, it is crucial to understand his view of history. History, in Gramsci’s read-

⁵⁰ Q 11, § 16: *QC*, p. 1407; *SPN*, p. 453.

⁵¹ Cfr. Q 9, § 15: *QC*, p. 1105; *SCW*, pp. 194-95.

ing, has a dialectical core⁵² and, despite the fact that the mission of Marxism was to accelerate it, he did not have a teleological view of it. Gramsci was quite critical towards determinism, to the point of attributing it to the passivity of the masses⁵³ and as a dangerous, religious approach to reality, comparing it to an exciting drug,⁵⁴ but saw human history as progressive nonetheless.⁵⁵ Therefore, history is determined, if it could be, by humanity itself which has the mission to interpret its own cultural product as scientifically as possible in order to obtain the best living system: the socialist society. For this purpose, the intellectuals have the task to recognize progressive folklore, as stated, and integrate it in their coherent narration.

By the expression “progressive folklore” Ernesto De Martino meant all the folkloric manifestations that weren’t just cultural items fallen down from the elites and passively retained by the subalterns, but, on the contrary, those by which the subaltern stratas expressed their own vision of the world, their protest, their, in a word, «will to be historical subjects».⁵⁶

De Martino registered some examples of what he thought was progressive folklore, pointing to the «protesting» element of it: in Lucania people used to call the black male goat «De Gasperi», referring to the post-WWII head of the Italian government. As is well known, traditionally this animal was associated with Satan, so the protest orientation of this cultural product should be quite clear.⁵⁷ Disputable as it is, de Martino’s example,⁵⁸ it is precisely folkloric: it is a case in which a character that embodies a predicate found a new

⁵² A. M. Girese. *Gramsci’s Observations on folklore: Conceptions of the world, spontaneous philosophy and class instinct*, «Anuac», 11, 2022, 1, pp. 17-48.

⁵³ Q 15, § 13: *QC*, p. 1770; A. Gramsci, *Further Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. by D. Boothman, London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1995, p. 15.

⁵⁴ K. Crehan. *Gramsci, Culture and Anthropology*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2002, 76-80. Cfr. also Q 10 II, § 48: *QC*, p. 1388.

⁵⁵ Crehan, *Gramsci’s folklore bundle*, cit., p. 58.

⁵⁶ G. Satta, *Gramsci’s «Prison Notebooks» and the “re-foundation” of anthropology in post-war Italy*, «International Gramsci Journal», 2, 2017, 3, pp. 239-57: 248.

⁵⁷ E. De Martino, S. Cannarsa, *Due Inediti su Gramsci: «Postille a Gramsci» e «Gramsci e Il Folklore»*, «La Ricerca Folklorica», 25, 1992, pp. 73-79.

⁵⁸ The episode appears to me more of a conservative, passive scapegoating by impotent strata more than a progressive cultural item – something that literally contributes to move forward a civilization. We need to keep in mind, however, that De Martino read all folkloric manifestations, even the more traditional ones, as forms of the subalterns’ subjectivity. Cfr. Satta, *Gramsci’s «Prison Notebooks»*, cit., pp. 249-51.

attribute, in this case intentionally, not for just filling a blank space left by oral circulation.⁵⁹

That being said, we have to overlook the finger and look at the moon: the sentiment of protest of the subaltern strata could be read as potentially progressive, if infertile, and ready to be revitalized by the intellectuals.

Concluding, for Gramsci the socialist society was not an obligated end of history, but a reality for which humanity has to fight by using all tools at its disposal. The most important one is a critical worldview which subalterns have to acquire with the help of Marxist intellectuals.

5. *Why folklore is contemporary prehistory*

Contrary to Gramsci's total rejection, nonetheless, what I propose in this paper is that folklore is, in fact, contemporary prehistory, but – paradoxically – the concept could only be understood in the light of Gramsci's very criticism of the definition itself.

Folklore is the unofficial – largely unwritten – dimension of culture, formed through the negotiation between dominant and subaltern groups. It recombines fragments of tradition and elite culture into living, variable practices that both preserve what official history excludes and provide resources for continuity and resistance to official, dominant narratives.

Now, we have to reject the positivist stance that folklore is but a “step” – or the remnant of it – of the human path towards a more evolute stadium of civilization, and we owe this to scholars as Gramsci, Cirese and De Martino who helped in overcoming the fascination earlier folklorists had had towards their own subject. At the same time, however, while the Marxist framework was crucial in this change of perspective, it encapsulated the subject in a class struggle frame, which is useful, revelative and sometimes true, but incomplete: folklore can't be overcome by a more coherent view of reality. It could be disarmed, but its existence, in some forms, is necessary.

In a paragraph of the *Quaderni* titled *The Study of Philosophy. Some Preliminary Points of Reference* (in the original *Appunti per una introdu-*

⁵⁹ T. Mikhailova, *Irish Banshee and Russian Rusalka: the Comb-Motif – its Meaning and Genesis*, «*Studia Celto-Slavica*», 3, 2010, pp. 221-37.

*zione e un avviamento allo studio della filosofia e della storia della cultura)*⁶⁰ Gramsci wrote that when a conception of the world is not critical or coherent but occasional and disaggregated, then a personality who partakes of it is bizarrely composed of elements of primitive men and the most modern scientific principles, prejudices of all past eras and intuitions of an incoming philosophy.⁶¹ What we can read is that the primitive aspects of humanity are to be overcome by the activity of progressive intellectuals, in order to create a new society.

What I propose, however, is that the so-called prehistoric traits preserved in and by folklore are there because they are part of the process of cultural elaboration, so they are not destined to be overcome by evolution (positivism) nor through the intellectual activity of progressive operators (Marxism) but, rather, controlled exactly by folkloric preservation, which contains them in a disarmed dimension (see below). I will begin by trying to explain the phrase “contemporary prehistory”, starting from the latter element of the hendyadis.

5.1. *Prehistory*

If we accept the definition of “history” as a written record of events that a civilization judged relevant for itself, then some of the cultural items that were not officially recorded but survived nonetheless were (and are) folkloristic. These items, having had to be pre-existent to writing, are pre-historic *per se*. Expanding the term “history” from the too narrow concept of written record, I mean, by this term, an official, hegemonic self-representation of specific civilizations. So, for instance, while the Nuragic civilization was not literate, it was nevertheless hierarchized and adopted peculiar languages in order to represent itself.⁶² Having said that, considerable bodies of knowledge remained and remain unwritten and, despite the existence of physical folklore items, the unwritten form is one of the crucial characteristics of folklore.

As Alan Dundes has stated, folklore is an ethnographic autobiography, a people’s description of themselves, which is in contrast with the official (scientific, academic) ones that permits a sanc-

⁶⁰ Q 11, § 12: *QC*, pp. 1375-95; *SPN*, 323-43.

⁶¹ The passage cited is in Q 11, § 12: *QC*, p. 1376; *SPN*, p. 324.

⁶² R. Zucca, *Storiografia del problema della «scrittura nuragica»*, «Bollettino di Studi Sardi», 5, 2012, pp. 5-78.

tioned form of escape from their official values, those which regulate «real life».⁶³

Furthermore, according to Thomas Sebeok, unwritten bodies of knowledge would probably survive the written ones, since the former are changeable but with a slower rhythm (in the case he imagined, imposable) than languages, a particularity that makes «folkloristic devices» more reliable than written ones in the field of intra-millennial communication.⁶⁴

If, as I think, Gramsci was right about the fact that folklore is defined in relation by a hegemonic class, then it cannot exist without specialization and hierarchization within a society. Writing was a by-product of such specialization.⁶⁵ Knowingly born for practical purposes, writing soon also became an excellent means for propaganda, which was exclusively in the hands of restricted elites. At some point, many civilizations started recording what their elites decided to be important (or useful for their purposes) in a written form. This work of selection (and exclusion) was, again, in the hands of the hegemonic class but, as pointed out by John Storey on popular culture, in a dynamic of negotiation.⁶⁶

This does not obviously mean that specific cultural items could not become, during their history, subaltern nor that they cannot be integrated in the hegemonic narrative. What I mean is that the folkloric items are the ones that, at some point in their history, belonged to subaltern worldviews (but not necessarily or exclusively to subaltern social strata).

5.2. *Contemporary*

The two factors discussed above – its un-officiality and un-writteness – indicate that folklore is beyond a history intended as official self-representation of civilizations. If Dundes was right about its function of escaping space, folklore is an indispensable part of societies, something that cannot be overcome.

⁶³ Dundes, Bronner, *The meaning of folklore*, cit., pp. 55, 59.

⁶⁴ T. A. Sebeok, *Communication Measures to Bridge Ten Millennia*, Technical Report, April 1984, pp. 22-27; <https://doi.org/10.2172/6705990>.

⁶⁵ C. Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, Paris, Plon, 1955, p. 354; M. Liverani, *Antico Oriente. Storia, società, economia*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 2011, pp. 107-18; C. B. F. Walker, *La scrittura cuneiforme*, Roma, Salerno Editrice, 2008, pp. 9-13 (original *Reading the Past. Cuneiform*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1987).

⁶⁶ J. Storey, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction*, Milton Park, Taylor and Francis, 2021, p. 148.

In any age, folklore is not synchronically (endemic to subaltern strata) nor diachronically (dead things of the past) confined, but it is living and active. Contrarily to what, for example, Flavio Braccini wrote in the foreword of his work, folklore is not (only) the education of who does not have an education (*apaideutoi*),⁶⁷ neither does it suffice to recall the fact that educated people continue to have contact with uneducated ones,⁶⁸ because it exists specific folklore of educated people such lawyers, physicians, professors.⁶⁹

In order to exemplify my point of view, I propose two examples of folklore, the first a popular, widespread one, the second an “esoteric” specimen that show both the contemporary value for the performers/preservers of them and their atavistic call.

The first one is among the most spread and known: the evil eye. Evil eye is the individual ability to adversely affect ‘the status or well-being of other persons or things through a look or glance’, voluntarily or not. Persistent as it is in the Mediterranean world,⁷⁰ it was the fundamental theme of popular magic, for instance, in southern Italy,⁷¹ where it was known as *fascinazione* or *malocchio* and was intended as provoked by envy and often associated with dryness.⁷² Dundes proposed some conceptual principles as foundation of evil eye: (1) while life depends on liquids, dryness is death; (2) because it exists just a limited amount of goods, the gain of a person is the loss of another one; (3) because life entails an equilibrium model, if someone has too much, someone else has too little.⁷³ Now, being evil eye prac-

⁶⁷ “*απαιδευτοί*”.

⁶⁸ T. Braccini, *Folklore*, Roma, Inschibboleth, 2021, pp. 9-11.

⁶⁹ Bronner, *Folklore. The basics*, cit., pp. 131-32.

⁷⁰ *Encyclopedia of Folklore and Literature*, ed. by M. E. Brown and B. A. Rosenberg, Santa Barbara, ABC Clio, 1998, p. 192.

⁷¹ E. De Martino, *Sud e Magia* (1959), Milano, Feltrinelli, 2008.

⁷² In order to fully understand the nature of such a mechanism, De Martino reported an anecdote according to which a harvester, coming back home from a seasonal work, stumbled across a young mother, sitting at her own door in the little town of Vaglio, who was suckling her child. The tired man envied her breasts but continued his journey toward his city nonetheless. Arrived to destination, however, he felt his own chest full of milk, so he came back to the little town in which he saw the woman, who he found desperate, being without milk, and gave it back to her by a ritual: while he recited a formula, she had to give him a piece of bread that he bite and, while he was biting, she snatched it from his mouth saying “give me back my own bread” (*ibidem*, p. 57-58). The example makes clear that the evil eye is not necessarily a voluntary act and it is somehow bound to other people’s prosperity. Evil eye is traditionally associated with envy, jealousy and evil spirits.

⁷³ A. Dundes, *Wet and dry, the evil eye: An essay in Indo-European and Semitic worldview*, in *The evil eye*:

tices alive and well in the contemporary Mediterranean landscape, it is clear that such persistence is a way to preserve phylactery techniques that are perceived as still useful and, at the same time, a way to cope with irrational fears that probably exist from the dawn of Mediterranean civilizations: envy and enmity from our neighbours, also when benevolent, and, even more, of their consequences: scarcity and even death.

The second significant example of folklore I choose is the readaptation of a popular Christmas song made by detectives of Baltimore, registered by David Simon in his true crime book *Homicide*.⁷⁴ The song contains all the things that the detectives allegedly say (but should not) in order to deceive the suspects and convince them to confess, even when innocent. It is a way to 1) preserve this body of knowledge in an unofficial form; 2) exorcize the disputable moral aspect of such practices that, once, when the priority was rather to find a scapegoat than the real perpetrators of a crime, could have been tacitly accepted. We can be assured that this song will never appear in official police ceremonies but was part of the constabulary lore some decades ago. So, as noted earlier, folklore has a function: it permits civilizations to maintain pre-social, repressed aspects of human life while living in a society that normally rejects them. While hegemony is an imposed, if negotiated, worldview, the alternatives do not disappear in nothingness: they survive, sometimes lurking, in a folkloristic form.

Recapitulating: the denomination “contemporary prehistory” as intended by its user/creator Corso with his positivist approach is unacceptable, but rethought nowadays, through a filter that Gramsci provided in motivating its rejection, could be quite meaningful. In order to appreciate this, we must acknowledge that folklore is not merely a “moment” in human history to be superseded by history itself, but rather a stable and enduring presence within it.

A casebook, ed. by A. Dundes, Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1981, pp. 257-312: 265.

⁷⁴ «Deck the halls with boughs of holly, Fa-la-la-la-la-la-la-la-la! / Throw that stiff up on the dolly, / Fa-la-la-la-la-la-la-la-la! / Talk to us and if you're willing, / Fa-la-la-la-la-la-la-la! / Tell us who did all this killing, / Fa-la-la-la-la-la-la-la-la! / Tell us how you want forgiveness, / Fa-la-la-la-la-la-la-la-la! / You don't know we've got a witness, / Fa-la-la-la-la-la-la-la, / Talk to us, you've nothing to lose, / Fa-la-la-la-la-la-la-la-la! / Why is blood upon your gym shoes? / Fa-la-la-la-la-la-la-la! / Want to make a good impression? / Fa-la-la-la-la-la-la-la! / Make yourself a fast confession, / Fa-la-la-la-la-la-la-la-la!» — *Homicide* unit Christmas song. Cfr. D. Simon, *Homicide. A Year on the Killing Streets*, Boston, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1991, p. 547.

Conclusions

Despite Gramsci's rejection, folklore is in fact contemporary prehistory: it is practised tradition (Bronner) and an autobiography of peoples in opposition to the hegemonic ones (Dundes). If we intend history as an official way in which peoples narrate themselves, then folklore existed before history, because such a narration presupposes a selection that, at first, discarded all the non-hegemonic views of societies.

The mistake made by the purported creator of this definition was to read the noun «pre-history» in a positivist light, thus as a necessary «step» in the path of humankind; Gramsci noted this mistake and gave the tools to finally overcome the approach, when the times were ripe enough to do so. The «philosophy of praxis», as he called it, however, kept him in a class-struggle context, and so folklore became a symptom of subalternity to be destroyed (except for its progressive parts) in order to emancipate peoples.

The fact is that folklore is the answer to ancestral necessities that humanity brings with itself along its path through time, so what it is to be overcome is not folklore in itself but, rather, the beliefs in its literal efficacy and reliability. Gramsci was right on this: the State should, in fact, educate citizens regarding folklore.

While these conclusions were being written (August 2024), in the United Kingdom rioters were attacking mosques because of fake news regarding the presumed Islamic background of the perpetrator of a killing spree in which children lost their lives. This fake news, whoever had spread it, gave to the rioters a tool to both contrast what they believe to be the bogus official truth and, at the same time, to unleash their atavistic xenophobia.⁷⁵ Fake news is a form of contemporary folklore,⁷⁶ and scholars, but even more teachers, have the duty to understand it, to assume the role of the intellectuals thought by Gramsci. The dangers of the lack of education about folklore (such as conspiracy theories are) is obvious. Will we finally accept Gramsci's lesson and take folklore seriously?

⁷⁵ Text available at the site: <https://theconversation.com/riots-in-the-uk-online-propagandists-know-how-to-work-their-audiences-this-is-what-we-are-missing-236084> (26 November 2025).

⁷⁶ «As digital folklore, fake news is a story generated in a non-professional social context that uses the style of news either to parody that style, satirize issues and personalities in the news, or perpetrate a hoax or prank. Not all fake news is folklore, and not all the fake news that is folklore is digital folklore» (R. Frank, *Caveat lector: Fake news as folklore*, «Journal of American Folklore», 128, 2015, 509, pp. 315-32: 317).

