

# *Gramsci Dictionary / Dizionario gramsciano* *Dialectic*

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As compared with the *Notebooks*, in his years in Turin Gramsci proposed an even more almost Heraclitean definition of the dialectic; «history is a continual becoming [...], an indefinite dialectical process».<sup>1</sup> What is being invoked is the passage from a Heraclitean to a Hegelian system, contained in a report on the didactic activities among the prisoners: «During the course we gave the dialectic the place it deserved. We therefore called into play Empedocles and Heraclitus (of whom we have fragments, about which Hegel was able to say that there was no part of his philosophy that he had not included in his logic)».<sup>2</sup> And there was a generic reference to Hegelianism in the letter that Gramsci wrote to his sister-in-law Tatiana on 25 March 1929: «... dialectics, that is, the form of concrete historical thought...».<sup>3</sup> The invocation of Hegel becomes more explicit in the letter of 30 May 1932: in the philosophy of praxis «the law of causality of the natural sciences has been purged of its mechanistic aspect and has become synthetically identified with the dialectical reasoning of Hegelianism».<sup>4</sup>

But in the *Notebooks* the polemic against mechanicism alternates with the critique of the dialectic if Croce and that of Gentile, for which a «“reactionary” reform» of Hegel was carried out.<sup>5</sup> In the traditional conceptions «on the one hand there is an excess of “economism” and on the other an excess of “ideologism”; one side overrates mechanical causes, and the other overrates the “voluntary” and individual element. The dialectical nexus between the two types of

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<sup>1</sup> *Il problema delle commissioni interne. Postilla*, 23 August 1919, now in *ON*, p. 176.

<sup>2</sup> Giuseppe Berti to Antonio Gramsci, 20 June 1927, in *Gramsci al confino di Ustica nelle lettere di Gramsci, di Berti e di Bordiga*, a cura di V. Tusa, Palermo, Istituto Gramsci Siciliano, 1987, p. 72.

<sup>3</sup> *LC*, p. 350; A. Gramsci, *Letters from Prison*, Vol. 1, ed. by F. Rosengarten and trans. by R. Rosenthal, New York, Columbia University Press, 1994, p. 258 (*LfP*).

<sup>4</sup> Letter to Tatiana Schucht, *LC*, p. 795; *LfP*, vol. 2, p. 178.

<sup>5</sup> Quaderno 10 II, § 41x: *QC*, p. 1317. In English in *Further Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. by D. Boothman, London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1995, p. 400 (*FSPN*).

inquiry is not established precisely».<sup>6</sup> The philosophy of praxis on the other hand «surpasses both traditional idealism and traditional materialism (and in surpassing them retains their vital elements».<sup>7</sup> Indeed Marx «never used the formula “materialist dialectic” – he called it “rational” as opposed to “mystical”».<sup>8</sup> In rethinking the Risorgimento, with regard to the difference between the moderates and the Action Party, Gramsci accepts a concept which originated in Hegel: liberty becomes conscious of itself and together with this of its opposite or, rather, it becomes conscious of itself and together with this of its opposite, in so far as it is also conscious of its opposite. Notwithstanding this, since Gramsci considers the «the concept of “liberty” identical to history and to the dialectical process, and hence always present in every history»,<sup>9</sup> the problem is posed of whether in the future there may not be «the beginning of a historical phase in which necessity-freedom are organically fused in the social fabric and there will be no dialectic other than the dialectic of ideas».<sup>10</sup> Indeed, though Engels had reposed the (Hegelian) dialectic of quantity-quality, Gramsci tends to substitute for it the one between necessity and liberty, accepting Marx’s concept of a “realm of freedom” to designate the society of the future. Gramsci argues that «the dialectic is also a technique», such as is formal logic, «but it is also a new thought, a new philosophy. Can one separate the technical from the philosophical?»<sup>11</sup> Elsewhere he writes that «thinking dialectically goes against vulgar common sense, which is dogmatic and eager for peremptory certainties and has as its expression formal logic».<sup>12</sup> The dialectic is a «doctrine of knowledge and the very marrow of historiography and the science of politics».<sup>13</sup> This does not mean that one can apply the dialectical method, in so far as it is philosophical, to every historical (or political) event: what was «not transmitted di-

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<sup>6</sup> Quaderno 4, § 38: *QC*, p. 456; A. Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. by J. A. Buttigieg, New York, Columbia University Press, 3 vols., 1992, 1996, 2007 (PN2, pp. 177-78).

<sup>7</sup> Quaderno 7, § 29: *QC*, p. 877; PN3, p. 179.

<sup>8</sup> Quaderno 8, § 206: *QC*, p. 1065; PN3, p. 354.

<sup>9</sup> Quaderno 8, § 240: *QC*, p. 1091; PN3, p. 381.

<sup>10</sup> Quaderno 8, § 238: *QC*, p. 1090; PN3, p. 380.

<sup>11</sup> Quaderno 4, § 18: *QC*, p. 439; PN2, p. 160.

<sup>12</sup> Quaderno 11, § 27: *QC*, p. 1425; A. Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. by Q. Hoare and G. Nowell-Smith, London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1971, p. 435 (SPN).

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*.

alectically in the historical process – was in itself irrelevant [...] and contingent dross».<sup>14</sup>

The significance for Gramsci of the dialectic as a “new philosophy” is made clearer in relation to the concept of passive revolution. In its opposition between the old and the new, passive revolution consists of an attempted conservative synthesis, which accepts «a certain part of the demands expressed from below» in order to save the old.<sup>15</sup> It is therefore the attempt at «incorporating a part of the antithesis».<sup>16</sup> But is there here implicitly a reciprocity rule? After having brought to conclusion its intransigent struggle, the antithesis, too, even with “destructive intentions”, could «achieve its full development, up to the point where it would even succeed in incorporating a part of the antithesis».<sup>17</sup> That is to say, could the antithesis attempt a synthesis of its own, in its turn alternative to the conservative synthesis? In other almost contextual remarks, the tendency to “destroy” characterizes, in the antithesis, only a first, and more acute, phase: the «economic-political passion is destructive when it is external, imposed by force»:<sup>18</sup> it is no longer such «when the process is normal and non-violent, i.e. when there is homogeneity between structure and superstructure and the state has overcome its economic-corporative phase».<sup>19</sup> The will to “destruction” refers, then, to a (preliminary) stage, more visible in the «war of manoeuvre» (in its turn «imposed with force» by the adversary); the war of position, on the other hand, consists in a “reciprocal siege”,<sup>20</sup> in which the direction (of the historical process in so far as it is hegemonic action) changes if «it is revolution or restoration which predominates».<sup>21</sup> The notion of past and present (or future) relativize even more the destructive tendency present in the antithesis: the innovative force «cannot but itself in a certain sense be the past, an element of the past, whatever of the past is alive and developing; the innovatory force is itself conservation-innovation and contains within itself all the past worth developing and perpet-

<sup>14</sup> Quaderno 7, § 24: *QC*, p. 873; *PN3*, p. 175.

<sup>15</sup> Quaderno 10 II, § 41.xiv: *QC*, p. 1325; *FSPN*, p. 373.

<sup>16</sup> Quaderno 15, § 11: *QC*, p. 1768; *SPN*, p. 110.

<sup>17</sup> Quaderno 15, § 11: *QC*, p. 1768; *SPN*, p. 109.

<sup>18</sup> Quaderno 10 II, § 41.x: *QC*, p. 1316; *FSPN*, p. 400.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Quaderno 6, § 138: *QC*, p. 802; *PN3*, p. 109 and *SPN*, p. 239.

<sup>21</sup> Quaderno 13, § 27: *QC*, p. 1619; *SPN*, p. 219.

uating».<sup>22</sup> In the Hegelian system, the synthesis is singular and is the only necessitated resolution of the contradiction; both its moments are *conserved* on the side of the “thesis” rather than being superseded. For Gramsci, the opposites cannot be resolved in any synthesis and rather «balance each other in a catastrophic manner; that is to say, they balance each other in such a way that a continuation of the conflict can only terminate in their reciprocal destruction»;<sup>23</sup> and here we recognize the echo of the *Communist Manifesto*. But, according to historical conditions or to the innovatory synthesis, they can give rise to two opposite syntheses: to the conservative synthesis or to the innovatory synthesis; and it the *positive* synthesis which is exactly the one that is produced starting from the negative.

Gramsci puts the structure-superstructure under the microscope of criticism. First he expounds it in traditional terms, juxtaposing it to the Crocean dialectic, but shortly afterwards proposes its revision, which recognizes in the superstructure not an epiphenomenon that is almost obliged to reflect passively – or intentionally distort – the structure, but a dialectical opposite bound to the structure by a symbiotic relation of active, and not necessarily conflictual, correlation: «The concept of the concrete (historical) value of the superstructures in the philosophy of praxis needs to be developed further by juxtaposing it with Sorel’s concept of the “historical bloc”. If people become conscious of their social position and their tasks on the terrain of the superstructures, this means that there exists a necessary and vital nexus between structure and superstructure».<sup>24</sup> In the structure Gramsci sees a «non-mechanical dialectical “causation” of the superstructures».<sup>25</sup> On its part, «the superstructure reacts dialectically on the structure and modifies it».<sup>26</sup> The separation between structure and superstructures is then «to be understood in a dialectical sense, as between thesis and antithesis».<sup>27</sup> But there is no struggle between

<sup>22</sup> Quaderno 10 II, § 41.xiv: *QC*, p. 1326; *FSPN*, pp. 374-75

<sup>23</sup> Quaderno 13, § 27: *QC*, p. 1619; *SPN*, p. 219.

<sup>24</sup> Quaderno 10 II, § 41.xii: *QC*, p. 1321; *FSPN*, pp. 396-97.

<sup>25</sup> Quaderno 4, § 56: *QC*, p. 503; *PN2*, p. 231.

<sup>26</sup> Quaderno 7, § 1: *QC*, p. 854; *PN3*, p. 157.

<sup>27</sup> Quaderno 7, § 1: *QC*, p. 854; *PN3*, p. 156. In the translation of these two short quotations from Quaderno 7, § 1 (*PN3*, p. 157 and 156), we have taken the slight liberty of modifying the prepositions “to” in the first quotation and “in” in the second one so as to read “on” and “between” respectively, following to the letter what is in Gramsci’s original (trans. note).

the two: there is a «reciprocity between structure and superstructures (a reciprocity that is precisely the real dialectical process».<sup>28</sup>

For this reason Gramsci has no trouble in recovering, from Crocean terminology, the phrases that can be traced back to the dialectic between necessity and liberty. Among these there is the term “catharsis”: in the superstructures «the cathartic process coincides with the chain of syntheses which have resulted from the evolution of the dialectic».<sup>29</sup> In the same paragraph Gramsci writes that «the term “catharsis” can be employed to indicate the passage from the purely economic (or egoistic-passional) to the ethico-political moment, that is the superior elaboration of the structure into superstructure» and can indicate the «passage from “objective to subjective” and from “necessity to freedom”».<sup>30</sup> For Gramsci, are structure and superstructure, in an almost Crocean meaning, distinct but not opposite terms? They are distinct only if the distinction is conceived as a modality of the opposition in which each opposite, while not *in struggle* against the other, is in a relationship of (dialectical) *tension* with the other. After an initial rejection, the dialect of distincts becomes for Gramsci an imperfect expression to indicate that organic tension-cohesion. He asks himself «Can one even speak of a dialectic of distincts? Concept of historical bloc, that is unity between nature and spirit, unity of opposites and of distincts».<sup>31</sup> He also explains that «the introduction of dialectical activity and a process of distinction into the “historical bloc” does not mean negating its real unity».<sup>32</sup>

The dialectical (but organic) nexus between structure and superstructure leads to (and in a certain sense includes) the organic exchange, in the form of productive activity, between nature and human history. It therefore regards «practical activity, which is the dialectical mediation between man and nature».<sup>33</sup> Gramsci then writes: «*The unity in the constituent elements of Marxism*. The unity comes from the dialectical development of the contradictions between man and matter (nature-material forces of production [...]). In philosophy –

<sup>28</sup> Quaderno 8, § 182: *QC*, p. 1052; *PN3*, p. 340.

<sup>29</sup> Quaderno 10 II, § 6: *QC*, p. 1244; *SPN*, p. 367.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibidem*; *SPN*, pp. 366 and 367 respectively.

<sup>31</sup> Quaderno 8, § 61: *QC*, p. 977; *PN3*, p. 271 and cf. *SPN*, p. 137.

<sup>32</sup> Quaderno 7, § 1: *QC*, p. 854; *PN3*, p. 157.

<sup>33</sup> Quaderno 4, § 47: *QC*, p. 473; *PN2*, p. 197.

praxis – that is, the relation between human will (superstructure) and the economic structure. In politics – the relation between the State and civil society – that is, the intervention of the State (centralized will) to educate the educator, the social milieu in general».<sup>34</sup>

In the dialectical relation between structure and superstructure, a crucial category, subject to Gramsci's original re-examination, is that of civil society. When he deals with the «superior elaboration of the structure into superstructure»<sup>35</sup> he outlines a dialectic of distincts in which the superstructure can incorporate a structure which is, as one might say, “superstructuralized”: and here it may be seen that the “economic society” (as structure) becomes State or, rather, the State subsumes it transmuting it into one of its internal moments which, as a (superstructural) “civil society”, is posed as in an “identity-distinction” with the State itself. The identity is «organic» or concretely historical, while the distinction is merely «methodological»,<sup>36</sup> in other words an abstraction that has a heuristic value, with however a real foundation. Here perhaps Gramsci has in mind Croce's definition of philosophy as the “methodology of history”. The modifications in the “C” text of Q 12, § 1<sup>37</sup> are symptomatic of the modifications made as regards Gramsci's first draft “A” text.<sup>38</sup> In the “A” text, civil society and State are «two types of social organization» while in the “C” text they are «two major superstructural “levels”»; and again in the “A” text, the distinction is made between «private organizations in society»<sup>39</sup> while in the “C” text it is between «organisms commonly called “private» and «command exercised through the State and “juridical” government». In the “A” text the State is, simply, an «apparatus of coercion»,<sup>40</sup> while in the “C” text it becomes the «apparatus of State coercive power which “legally” enforces discipline». Gramsci asks himself the question «what does State mean? Only the State apparatus or the whole of organized civil society? Or the dialectical unity between government power and civil society».<sup>41</sup> But government power is not only coercion.

<sup>34</sup> Quaderno 7, § 18: *QC*, p. 868; *PN3*, p. 170.

<sup>35</sup> Quaderno 10 II, § 6: *QC*, p. 1244; *SPN*, p. 366.

<sup>36</sup> Quaderno 13, § 18: *QC*, p. 1590; *SPN*, p. 160.

<sup>37</sup> Quaderno 12, § 1: *QC*, p. 1528; *SPN*, p. 12, dating to May 1932 or shortly afterwards.

<sup>38</sup> Quaderno 4, § 49: *QC*, p. 476; *PN2*, p. 200, dating to November 1930.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>40</sup> Quaderno 4, § 49: *QC*, p. 476; *PN2*, p. 201.

<sup>41</sup> Quaderno 15, § 33: *QC*, p. 1587.



It must also, and perhaps prevalently, be that of the educator: «... the State is obliged to keep its citizens informed gratis of all its actions; in other words, it must educate them. This is a democratic argument transformed into a justification of oligarchic action. The argument is not however without merit: it can be “democratic” only in those societies wherein the historical unity of civil society and political society is understood dialectically (in a real and not just conceptual dialectic)».<sup>42</sup>

A relation, comparable with that between State and civil society may be (or may become) that between “high” culture and popular culture. «The intellectual stratum develops both quantitatively and qualitatively, but every leap forward towards a new breadth and complexity of the intellectual stratum is tied to an analogous movement on the part of the mass of the “simple”, who raise themselves to higher levels of culture».<sup>43</sup> «Historical materialism, in its dialectic of popular culture-high culture, is the crowning point of this entire movement of intellectual and moral reform».<sup>44</sup> Gramsci does not ignore the complexity and duration of this process, especially when writing «the joining together of various rural classes which comes into existence as a bloc by means of the various intellectual strata can be dissolved, so that it becomes a new formation [...] only if strength is mustered from two directions – from the peasant base by accepting their demands and making them an integral part of the new government program, and from the intellectuals by emphasizing the issues most likely to interest them. The relation between these two actions is dialectical; if the peasants move, the intellectuals start to waver and, reciprocally, if a group of intellectuals establishes itself on the new basis, it ends up by carrying with it increasingly important segments of the masses. One may say that given the dispersal and the isolation of the rural population and thus the difficulty of concentrating it into strong organizations, it is better to begin the political work with the intellectuals, but, generally, it is the dialectical relation between the two actions that must be kept in mind».<sup>45</sup>

Lastly, just as there is a struggle between rival hegemonies, as well as in social life, in that of each individual, so there also spring up

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<sup>42</sup> Quaderno 6, § 65: *QC*, p. 734; *PN3*, p. 49.

<sup>43</sup> Quaderno 11, § 12: *QC*, p. 1386; *SPN*, p. 334.

<sup>44</sup> Quaderno 4, § 3: *QC*, p. 424; *PN2*, p. 142.

<sup>45</sup> Quaderno 1, § 44: *QC*, p. 48; *PN1*, p. 145.

dialectical tensions in individual existence: «Both personality and will are dialectical products of an inner struggle that can and must be externalized, when internally the antagonist is stifled because of a pathological process; the important thing would be for that “tormenting” not to be abstract but a concrete stimulus to awareness wielded and applied rationally».<sup>46</sup> And in Gramsci’s letter to Tatiana of 7 March 1932, «it is possible to achieve serenity even in the raging storm of the most absurd conflicts and under the pressure of the most implacable necessities, if one succeeds in thinking “historically”, dialectically, and in identifying with intellectual sobriety one’s task or a well-defined and limited task of one’s own».<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Letter of Gramsci to his wife, Julija Schucht, of 7 December 1931, now in *LC*, p. 693; *LfP*, vol. 2, p. 111.

<sup>47</sup> *LC*, p. 749; *LfP*, vol. 2, p. 148.