

Towards a historicist anthropology. Gramscian reflections

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Abstract

The article reconsiders the relationship between anthropology and the thought of Antonio Gramsci by exploring the possibility of a properly historicist anthropology grounded in the conceptual horizon of the *Prison Notebooks*. Rather than revisiting the now familiar anthropological uses of notions such as hegemony, the paper shifts attention to a broader epistemological convergence between Gramscian historicism and the anthropological problem of culture. Engaging critically with influential interpretations, including that of Kate Crehan, the article suggests that, although Gramsci's use of the lexeme "culture" differs from its disciplinary meaning in anthropology, his reflections on history, social relations and ideology open a productive terrain for dialogue. By foregrounding the processual and relational character of human activity in Gramsci's thought, the paper proposes that anthropology may find in his philosophy of praxis resources for rethinking some of its central conceptual assumptions. Without reducing Gramsci to an anthropological thinker, the article points toward the contours of a possible convergence whose implications remain to be explored.

Keywords

Social Relations, Culture, Cultural Anthropology, Historicist Anthropology, Critique

Verso un'antropologia storicista. Riflessioni gramsciane

Abstract

L'articolo intende ragionare sul rapporto tra antropologia e pensiero gramsciano, esplorando la possibilità di un'antropologia integralmente storicista, fondata sull'orizzonte filosofico dei *Quaderni del carcere*. Piuttosto che tornare sugli ormai noti usi antropologici di concetti come egemonia, l'articolo si concentra su una più ampia convergenza epistemologica tra lo storicismo gramsciano e il problema antropologico della cultura. Discutendo criticamente alcune interpretazioni influenti, tra cui quella di Kate Crehan, l'articolo suggerisce che, sebbene l'uso che Gramsci fa del lessema "cultura" differisca dal suo significato disciplinare in antropologia, le sue riflessioni sulla storia, sui rapporti sociali e sull'ideologia aprono un terreno fecondo per l'epistemologia antropologica. Mettendo in primo piano il carattere processuale e relazionale dell'attività umana nel pensiero di Gramsci, l'articolo propone che l'antropologia possa trovare nella sua filosofia della praxis le risorse per ripensare alcuni dei suoi presupposti concettuali centrali. Senza ridurre Gramsci alle dimensioni di un antropologo, l'articolo indica i contorni di una possibile convergenza le cui implicazioni rimangono da esplorare.

Keywords

Rapporti Sociali, Cultura, Antropologia Culturale, Antropologia Storicista, Critica

Towards a Historicist Anthropology. Gramscian Reflections

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The idea for this contribution stems from an interest in the reception – at times rather superficial – of Gramsci's work within contemporary anthropology. The issue is not a simple one. First of all, anthropology, like many other disciplinary fields, is not a unified discipline, but is fragmented into a multiplicity of subfields, defined either by their object or by the geographical area on which they focus. According to the oldest and most established division, anthropology may be classified in terms of the regions with which anthropologists are concerned: Asia, Oceania, the Middle East, Latin America, Mesoamerica, Europe, Africa, and so forth. It may also be divided by object of study: economic anthropology, political anthropology, the anthropology of religion, medical anthropology, and demology. Today, further branches and sub-specialisations have been added, such as the anthropology of psychiatry, the anthropology of institutions, the anthropology of language, ethnopsychiatry, the anthropology of tourism, and the anthropology of sport. Needless to say, each of these fields is in turn further subdivided according to the specific social groups and contexts with whom researchers engage. Those who study people diagnosed with schizophrenia, as in my own case, are not always able to enter into a meaningful dialogue with those whose research focuses on drug addicts. Yet both scholars should recognise themselves as working within the broader framework of the anthropology of psychiatry and medical anthropology, sharing common theoretical, epistemological, and methodological concerns. To this must be added, in order to return to the subject of the present reflections, the fact that Gramsci's work – especially in the English-speaking world – has long been received through a legitimate, albeit partial, intellectual operation: namely, through the selection and compilation of his writings. In some cases, it has been mediated even more indirectly through the interpretations offered by other authors. As Katy Crehan has observed, this was notably the case with the circulation of Gramsci's thought through the

work of Raymond Williams.¹ In addition to these difficulties, which stem from different forms of disciplinary fragmentation, one must also take into account the particular complexity of Antonio Gramsci's work. His writings are not always straightforward to interpret, study, or employ, partly owing to their "unfinished" nature. This is true of all posthumous works that were intended to form part of a systematic project but remained at the stage of preparatory notes, albeit, as in Gramsci's case, notes marked by a high level of elaboration and internal coherence.

For these reasons, my aim is not to examine the many ways in which individual Gramscian concepts – such as hegemony, class, or molecular – have been appropriated within the various fields and sub-fields of cultural and social anthropology. Rather, I wish to focus on something that clearly emerges from the *Prison Notebooks*: a conception that bears a striking resemblance to the notion of culture understood in a strictly anthropological sense.

In the following pages, I therefore revisit a number of concepts that recur throughout Antonio Gramsci's *Notebooks* – including ideology, philosophy, social relations, history, and class – in order to show that, beyond the interpretations advanced even by leading scholars, and in particular by the aforementioned Crehan,² there exists a genuine point of convergence between Gramscian historicism and cultural anthropology. More specifically, I argue that the epistemological approach that emerges from the *Notebooks* is one that anthropologists can readily recognise in light of the notion of culture – the unavoidable conceptual core of the discipline. This constitutes, if not a paradigm, at least an historicist anthropology in the Gramscian sense.

The aim of revisiting this convergence – one that was already recognised, at least in part, by De Martino's anthropology some sixty years ago³ – is to return to the notion of critique as developed in

¹ K. Crehan, *Gramsci, Culture and Anthropology*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2002.

² While Crehan has published two volumes on Gramsci, this essay addresses only the first, which is more closely focused on the anthropological debate surrounding the concept of "culture". However, the second, more recent volume is also relevant and deserves consideration. See K. Crehan, *Gramsci's Common Sense: Inequality and Its Narratives*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2016.

³ E. de Martino, *Sud e magia*, a cura di F. Dei e A. Fanelli, Roma, Donzelli, 2015; *La fine del mondo. Contributo all'analisi delle apocalissi culturali*, Torino, Einaudi, 2019; *Morte e pianto rituale. Dal lamento funebre antico al pianto di Maria*, Torino, Einaudi, 2021; *La terra del rimorso*, Torino, Einaudi, 2023; *La storia velata. Crisi e riscatto della presenza*, a cura di M. Massenzio, Torino, Einaudi, 2025.

certain passages of the *Notebooks*, and to identify a double advantage in a possible Gramscian reformulation of the notion of culture. Firstly, it allows culture to be restored to the centre of anthropological reflection, despite the fact that the category has often been criticised or even abandoned by anthropologists in recent decades. Secondly, it enriches the concept by foregrounding its dimension of becoming. In other words, the question is to what extent Gramsci's philosophy – a distinctively historicist interpretation of Marxism – has been, or can be, incorporated into contemporary anthropology and, at the same time, how it might broaden our interpretative horizons.⁴

1. *Culture and anthropology*

In her ambitious essay, Kate Crehan addresses two highly interesting issues from the outset. The first concerns a remark made by Michel Foucault in a letter to Joseph Buttigieg, the main editor of the English edition of Gramsci's works: anthropologists had begun citing the *Notebooks* from the 1980s without really knowing them.⁵ Just to give an example from medical anthropology, one may consider the interest shown in Gramsci's philosophy by medical anthropologists in the late 1980s, particularly within the American school of critical medical anthropology. As early as 1988, the prestigious journal *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* devoted an entire section to the anthropological appropriation of Gramsci. To return to Crehan's criticism, however, many of these works associate Gramsci, somewhat indiscriminately, with the Frankfurt School, phenomenology, and deconstructionist theories, with the explicit aim of criticising the spread of biomedicine in contemporary Western societies and the so-called medicalisation of everyday life.⁶

⁴ Many of the reflections developed in this article are indebted to the valuable philosophical work of Yohann Douet, whose study reconstructs the significance of the concept of history in Gramsci's thought. Drawing not only on Gramsci's writings themselves but also on an extensive body of secondary literature, Douet offers a compelling framework for understanding both the historical meaning of Gramsci's philosophy and its contemporary relevance. As I will argue, this perspective is particularly valuable today, as it provides a way of moving beyond certain forms of postmodern and poststructuralist fragmentation while avoiding both the disarticulation of historical processes and the reductive teleologies often associated with the philosophy of history. Cf. Y. Douet, *L'Histoire et la question de la modernité chez Antonio Gramsci*, Paris, Classiques Garnier, 2022.

⁵ Crehan, *Gramsci, Culture and Anthropology*, cit., p. 1.

⁶ See T. J. Csordas, *The Conceptual Status of Hegemony and Critique in Medical Anthropology*, «Medical Anthropology Quarterly», II, 1988, 4, pp. 416-21; S. E., Estroff, *Whose Hegemony?: A Critical*

I will return to this point at the end of the present section. The second issue concerns the way in which anthropologists have approached Gramsci's thought.

On the one hand, their interest has been shaped by the recurring presence of the notion of "culture", often without recognising that Gramsci's understanding of culture has little to do with culture as an anthropological category. Crehan herself emphasizes this point in the opening pages of her seminal work on the relationship between Gramsci and anthropology: «what culture means in Gramsci's writings is often very different from what it has commonly meant in anthropology».⁷ Well, although a more systematic review would be required, I am not persuaded by the claim that anthropologists' interest in Gramsci since the 1980s has been driven by the category of culture, albeit through a misinterpretation of its significance in Gramsci's philosophy. Especially in Anglophone contexts – unlike the Italian case, where a different argument could be made with reference to Demartinian and post-Demartinian demology – interest in the *Notebooks* appears to have centred above all on notions such as hegemony, subalternity, and power relations. These concepts have often enabled post-structuralist anthropologists to move away from a holistic understanding of culture in favour of forms of dogmatic post-Marxism aimed at transforming the discipline into a form of knowledge more directly concerned with exposing power relations interpreted as transcendental and constitutive of the social field. A paradigmatic example is the use of Gramsci by authors such as Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe who, although not anthropologists, provide in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* an excellent example of the kind of reduction of Gramscian thought that has also occurred, to a large extent, in other fields, including anthropology.⁸ Another controversial target of this prolific (and, in some respects, imprudent) tradition of scholarship is the state, understood as an ab-

Commentary on Critical Medical Anthropology, *ibidem*, pp. 421-26; R. Frankenberg, *Gramsci, Culture, and Medical Anthropology: Kundry and Parsifal? Or Rat's Tail to Sea Serpent?*, *ibidem*, pp. 324-37; B. Kapferer, *Gramsci's Body and a Critical Medical Anthropology*, *ibidem*, pp. 426-32; A. Richters, *Fighting the Pests of Our Times: Medical Anthropology and Cultural Hegemony*, *ibidem*, pp. 438-47.

⁷ Crehan, *Gramsci, Culture and Anthropology*, *cit.*, p. 2.

⁸ E. Laclau, C. Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, London, Verso, 2001, p. 195. See also F. Dei, *Di Stato si muore? Per una critica dell'antropologia critica*, in *Stato, violenza, libertà. La "critica del potere" e l'antropologia contemporanea*, a cura di F. Dei e C. Di Pasquale, Roma, Donzelli, 2017, pp. 9-49; Douet, *L'Histoire et la question de la modernité*, *cit.*, pp. 23, 67-68.

solute entity, as an operative rationalisation exercising control at every level of society and imposing a form of domination by neoliberal elites. Throughout this line of research, the aim is not to criticise specific historical manifestations of the state, nor particular ways in which state functions are exercised, but rather the very notion of the state as such. An example of this is the reinterpretation of *Americanismo e fordismo* (*Americanism and Fordism*) proposed by Gianni Pizza, who identifies in it the theoretical basis necessary for a critique of the state as an autonomous actor, shaping bodies and gender identities in the service of neoliberal domination.⁹ With regard to these interpretations of Gramsci's thought, Riccardo Ciavolella has shown that:

...political anthropology began to refer to Gramsci at the same time as post-structuralism gained a growing influence in the discipline: this has led to an incoherent use of Gramsci, producing ambiguities in using the Gramscian idea of the formation of a historical political subject with the poststructuralist reference to ahistorical structures. [...] anthropologists' reading of Gramsci often oscillates between the idea of the immutability of power from above on the one hand, and emancipation in the microforms of resistance of ordinary subaltern people on the other. Both ways of integrating Gramsci into the 'science of man' miss some crucial aspects of his reading of history and society, insisting either on a structural or an idealist Gramsci.¹⁰

Also Gianfranco Rebutini, with a similar approach, has highlighted how the reception of Gramsci has often been mediated through its fusion with theories of subjectivation associated with post-structuralist philosophy. He objects to this type of reception, arguing that Gramsci's philosophy must be understood as a philosophy of praxis. Notions such as common sense, hegemony, historical bloc, collective subject, and class cannot therefore be considered independently of the theoretical and practical framework in which they are rooted, namely historical materialism. Nor can they be reduced to a purely discursive and extra-historical function.¹¹

⁹ G. Pizza, *Antonio Gramsci e l'antropologia medica ora. Egemonia, agentività e trasformazioni della persona*, «AM. Rivista della Società italiana di antropologia medica», XV-XVI, 2003, pp. 33-51. See also, G. Pizza, *L'antropologia di Gramsci. Corpo, natura, mutazione*; Roma, Carocci, 2020.

¹⁰ R. Ciavolella, *Hegemony and the Political Subject in Anthropology*, in *Cultural Hegemony in a Scientific World Gramscian Concepts for the History of Science*, ed. by M. Badino and P. D. Omodeo, Leiden-Boston, Brill, 2020, pp. 57-79.

¹¹ See G. Rebutini, *Culture, hégémonie et subjectivités. «Traductions» de Gramsci dans les sciences sociales*

On the other hand, attention has centred on the notion of hegemony, which has frequently been interpreted in a narrow sense, as a specific form of power rather than as a condition for the production and reproduction of relations of power. Once again, Crehan's insights prove extremely valuable:

So far Gramsci has found a home in anthropology as little more than a name associated with the concept of hegemony, and more generally with an open, undogmatic Marxism. [...] Anthropologists have tended to understand hegemony as a concept that describes a particular form of power, rather than, as it is in Gramsci, as a way of approaching the problem of how power is produced and reproduced.¹²

Not unlike the forms of reception she seeks to correct – while leaving their broader intellectual and practical orientation largely intact – Crehan argues that Gramsci's notion of culture differs from the anthropological one. Indeed, she maintains that Gramsci lacks an anthropological concept of culture in any strict sense. From this very reason, she suggests that an anthropological engagement with Gramsci is valuable insofar as it enables the discipline to move beyond its longstanding focus on culture and to recover the notion of class as a powerful hermeneutic tool for analysing systems of inequality. According to this perspective, the category of culture is ultimately dissolved into a more or less immanent form of power that constructs forms of inequality and subordination. The author consistently emphasizes this point, which emerges as a recurring theme in her work:

critiques anglophones, «Actuel Marx», LVII, 2015, n. 1, pp. 82-95; see also F. Frosini, *Beyond the Crisis of Marxism: Gramsci's Contested Legacy*, in *Critical Companion to Contemporary Marxism*, ed. by J. Bidet and S. Kouvelakis, Leiden-Boston, Brill, 2007, pp. 663-78.

¹² Crehan, *Gramsci, Culture and Anthropology*, cit., p. 166. As Riccardo Ciavolella and Gianfranco Rebutini have more recently shown, the notion of hegemony has also enjoyed wide circulation within post-colonial studies and cultural studies, often mediated through the work of scholars such as Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall, and Jean and John Comaroff. This context has also given rise to attempts to synthesise Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of the symbolic and doxa with Gramsci's notions of hegemony and common sense. In this regard, and particularly with respect to the possible convergence between domination and hegemony, Michael Burawoy's work is particularly noteworthy. See M. Burawoy, *The Roots of Domination: Beyond Bourdieu and Gramsci*, «Sociology», XLVI, 2012, n. 2, pp. 187-206. See also R. Ciavolella, *Les deux Gramsci de l'anthropologie politique*, «Condition humaine/Conditions politiques: revue internationale d'anthropologie du politique», 2020, DOI: 10.56698/chcp.109; Rebutini, *Culture, hégémonie et subjectivités*, cit. On the widespread reception of Gramsci within critical theory, see R. Keucheyan, *Hémisphère gauche. Une cartographie des nouvelles pensées critiques*, Paris, Zones, 2010.

Gramsci's usefulness here, I would suggest, derives from his insistence that ultimately the most important question is that of power. [...] For Gramsci, any adequate account of power is also an account of class.¹³ All I have tried to do is draw attention to certain persistent assumptions associated with how [...] have tended to approach «culture» as an object of study. These assumptions are that cultures are in some sense patterned wholes with their own logics [...], that cultures, again in some sense, constitute some kind of bounded wholes (however porous their boundaries), and that there exists a basic opposition between «tradition» and «modernity». One of my reasons for writing this book was that it seems to me that Gramsci, if read seriously, can perhaps help us exorcise some of these ghosts that continue to haunt the discipline. [...] for Gramsci the primary object of study is never specific «cultures», it is always power, more specifically particular constellations of power relations in particular times and places.¹⁴

To pursue this argument, Crehan devotes an extended chapter (Chapter 3, pp. 36-58) to the various ways in which anthropologists have sought to define the concept of culture over the course of the discipline's recent history. Here we will focus on the two definitions most frequently invoked in anthropological debates, those proposed by Edward Burnet Tylor¹⁵ and Clifford Geertz.¹⁶

Tylor's definition exemplifies what Francesco Remotti, discussing the classificatory approach of early anthropology and referring in particular to Kroeber,¹⁷ has described as a "stratigraphic" concept of culture. In the opening passage of *Primitive Culture* – often regarded as the founding text of modern cultural anthropology – Tylor defines culture as «the complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities acquired by man as a member of society».¹⁸ Culture thus appears as a series of layers superimposed upon what human beings are in themselves. On the one hand, this definition has the merit of identifying as cultural all those symbolic and material products that be related to human action within specific social contexts; on the other hand, it tends to represent culture as an aggregate of distinct elements, the removal of which would

¹³ Crehan, *Gramsci, Culture and Anthropology*, cit., p. 6.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 66.

¹⁵ E. B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture. Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art, and Custom*, London, Murray, 1871.

¹⁶ C. Geertz, *Thick Description: Toward an Interpretative Theory of Culture*, in *The Interpretation of Cultures*, New York, Basic Books, 1973, pp. 3-30.

¹⁷ F. Remotti, *Cultura. Dalla complessità all'impoverimento*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 2011.

¹⁸ Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, cit., p. 1.

reveal a kind of Ur-man. Culture consequently acquires the character of something “external” to humanity: a garment, an accessory, an adornment that, however important, remains not entirely immanent adornment to human existence itself.

It is perhaps a certain dissatisfaction with this stratigraphic interpretation of culture that led Clifford Geertz, in the early 1970s, to propose what he himself described as a “semiotic” definition of culture, drawing on the reflections of Ludwig Wittgenstein and Gilbert Ryle on ordinary language:

Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of these to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretative one in search of meaning.¹⁹

Like all definitions, Geertz’s has both strengths and limitations. On the one hand, it allows us to move beyond the stratigraphic dimension by treating culture as constitutive of human existence itself. Culture is thus understood as the linguistic and practical – and therefore symbolic – field that structures human experience while being constantly reshaped through human action. On the other hand, by retaining a certain degree of exteriority – inasmuch as culture is something that humans produce and which, in turn, contributes to their formation – it leaves room for forms of transcendence. Obviously, such transcendence is only apparent, since this “web of significance” enjoys no ontological priority over either human beings or reality itself. Rather, culture is nothing other than the reality of human action itself, which cannot be conceived apart from the constant desire to give meaning to experience. In this sense, power relations, wedding celebrations, the drafting of criminal codes, the construction of St. Peter’s Basilica and the making of a violin, the Eucharistic rite and *Dialoghi con Leucò*, Orokaiva rites of passage and election campaigns, everyday breakfast practices and Wari’ funerary cannibalism are all instances of culture. Transcendence is only a distorting effect of ordinary language, which objectifies the term “culture” and obscures its purely descriptive function. It therefore seems possible to dissociate what humans do from what motivates their actions, as though culture were something entirely

¹⁹ C. Geertz, *Thick Description*, cit., p. 5.

different from action itself, from the unfolding of human beings in their social dimension. I believe that it is precisely from this linguistic distortion that the various post-modern and post-structuralist efforts to abandon the very notion of culture arise, treating it as a kind of veil concealing other structural dimensions that would underlie human action, once again in a transcendent manner. The idea that the notion of culture is a reworking of an epistemological fracture of Cartesian origin – one that radically separates subject and object – is an anti-culturalist critique that takes various forms, from the feminist post-Marxism of Lila Abu-Lughod²⁰ to the more recent perspectives of the so-called ontological turn, rooted in the Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's work of the 1990s.²¹ They seem to me, however, to be nothing more than abstract conceptual re-propositions of this transcendent reinterpretation of the notion of culture, which is then replaced by other notions that in no way eliminate its aura of transcendence.

Returning to Tylor and Geertz, their respective definitions of culture, despite the misunderstandings to which they may give rise, establish a close connection between human beings in their concrete actions and the products of these actions. Ultimately, Crehan is correct to argue that Gramsci's use of the word "culture" cannot simply be equated with these anthropological formulations of the concept (as distinct from the thing itself). However, one may still ask whether, beyond the specific term, there is not in Gramsci something very close to what anthropologists mean by culture and whether, in the characterisation of this "something very close", one might not find an enrichment of the notion itself.

2. *History, culture and historicism. Towards a historicist anthropology*

While we may agree that Gramsci's use of the term "culture" differs significantly from the way it is understood in cultural anthropology, it should also be emphasised that this conception of history opens up lines of enquiry of considerable relevance to anthropologists.

It is well known that the approach developed in the *Notebooks* seeks to avoid both forms of continuist empiricism and essentialist historicism.

²⁰ L. Abu-Lughod, *Writing against Culture*, in *Recapturing Anthropology: Working in the Present*, ed. by R. G. Fox, Santa Fe, NM, School of American Research Press, 1991, pp. 137-62

²¹ E. V. De Castro, *Cosmological perspectivism in Amazonia and elsewhere (1998)*, Manchester, HAU Journal of Ethnographic Theory, 2012.

As Douet has shown, for Gramsci, the analysis of history – or, more precisely, of historical processes – must take into account structural elements, regularities, and lines of force, thereby distancing itself from continuist empiricism. At the same time, it must «restore the intrinsic complexity of the historical process – which involves elements that cannot be reduced to one another, marked by heterogeneous temporalities, each consisting of a multiplicity of specific socio-historical situations»²² – abandoning any essentialising temptation of historicism. In this sense, Douet defines Gramscian historicism as a “processual ontology”²³ capable of reinterpreting history as a process of constant transformation in social relations. All the elements of the process – and indeed the process itself – are free from any form of transcendence: they are neither superficial effects of structural dynamics whose origin cannot be fully understood, nor passive actors of a substantialised becoming, with their own logic and grammar. It is not a question of reducing the process to a rigid deterministic structure-superstructure dichotomy, as in the Marxism of Nikolai Bukharin, whose *Historical Materialism: A System of Sociology*²⁴ is the target of numerous criticisms throughout the *Notebooks*, nor of absolutising it according to orthodox Hegelian perspectives leaning towards teleological philosophies of history. Rather, the Italian philosopher invites us to return historical phenomena to the immanence of human action:

...man is a process, and, more exactly, the process of his actions. [...] All hitherto existing philosophies [...] conceive of man as an individual limited to his own individuality and of the spirit as being this individuality [...] One must conceive of man as a series of active relationships (a process) in which individuality, though perhaps the most important, is not, however, the only element to be taken into account. The humanity which is reflected in each individuality is composed of various elements: 1. the individual; 2. other men; 3. the natural world. [...] The individual does not enter into relations with other men by juxtaposition, but organically, in as much, that is, as he belongs to organic entities which range from the simplest to the most complex. Thus Man does not enter into relations with the natural world just by being himself part of the natural

²² Douet, *L'Histoire et la question de la modernité*, cit., p. 19.

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 39.

²⁴ N. Bukharin, *Historical Materialism: A System of Sociology*, New York, International Publishers, 1925. On Gramsci's overcoming of the dichotomy between structure and superstructure, see G. Cospito, *The Rhythm of Thought in Gramsci. A Diachronic Interpretation of Prison Notebooks*, Leiden-Boston, Brill, 2016, pp. 135-67; G. Vacca, *Modernità alternative. Il Novecento di Antonio Gramsci*, Torino, Einaudi, 2017, pp. 66-93, 183-85.

world, but actively, by means of work and technique. [...] These relationships are not mechanical. They are active and conscious. [...] So one could say that each one of us changes himself, modifies himself to the extent that he changes and modifies the complex relations of which he is the hub. [...] If one's own individuality is the *ensemble* of these relations, to create one's personality means to acquire consciousness of them and to modify one's own personality means to modify the *ensemble* of these relations.²⁵

The passage quoted above raises a number of important issues for anyone seeking to rethink the anthropological notion of culture from a Gramscian perspective. First of all, Gramsci argues that human beings are not separate entities but processes. We are confronted here with what might legitimately be described as a paradigmatic shift. Although Gramsci retains a notion of the individual, his conception of socio-historical reality is not confined to the individual conceived as a self-sufficient entity, thrown into the world as pure ontological reality.²⁶ To assert that the human being, even as an individual, is a process means recognising that he does not present himself as an absolute given, but rather as a series of active relationships. Pursuing this line of reasoning further, precisely because the individual is a manifestation of active relationships, he is at once more than a mere individual – and more than a subject. This point conflicts with any attempt to reduce Gramsci's thought to post-structuralist philosophies, which remain strongly centred on the notion of the subject, where they seek, often insistently, to overcome it as an actor of history²⁷ – that is, a person.²⁸ The most immediate implication for anthropology is that the human being – understood in its objectified dimension as an individual – acquires its full meaning only within a society (human and material), understood as a web of relationships.

²⁵ Q 10, § 55 [G II, 54]: *SPN*, pp. 351-52 (*QC*, pp. 1344-45). For the texts in the *Prison Notebooks*, the numbering system established by Gianni Francioni for the Edizione Nazionale will be used. Where discrepancies arise, the numbering system from the Gerratana edition will be used, preceded by G in square brackets.

²⁶ Douet, *L'Histoire et la question de la modernité*, cit., p. 19.

²⁷ F. Rambeau, *Les secondes vies du sujet. Deleuze, Foucault, Lacan*, Paris, Hermann, 2016.

²⁸ Of particular interest to anthropologists is Gramsci's clear preference in the *Notebooks* for the notion of the person over that of the subject. See F. Frosini, *La religione dell'uomo moderno. Politica e verità nei Quaderni del carcere di Antonio Gramsci*, Roma, Carocci, 2010; P. D. Thomas, *Gramsci e le temporalità plurali*, in *Tempora multa. Il governo del tempo*, a cura di V. Morfino, Milano-Udine, Mimesis, 2013; Douet, *L'Histoire et la question de la modernité*, cit.; see also Ciavolella, *Hegemony and the Political Subject in Anthropology*, cit.

This, in turn, leads Gramsci to address a question that is once again not far removed from concerns central to cultural anthropology, especially those associated with the relativist tradition that traces its origins to Michel de Montaigne.²⁹ Within this conceptual framework, he seeks to redefine what may legitimately be meant by “human nature”. Commenting on Feuerbach’s idea that man is what he eats, Gramsci writes:

It is also true that «man is what he eats» insofar as nutrition is one expression of the ensemble of social relations, and every social group has its own basic dietary system. This, however, is just like saying that «man is what he wears», «man is his housing», or «man is his particular way of reproducing himself, that is, his family», for nutrition, clothing, housing, and reproduction are components of social life that do indeed reveal the ensemble of social relations in the most obvious and broadest [that is, at a mass level] manner. [...] That «human nature» is the «ensemble of social relations» is the most satisfying answer, because it includes the idea of becoming - man becomes, he changes continuously with the changing of social relations - and because it negates «man in general».³⁰

Indeed, if we bear in mind that Gramsci’s aim is to overcome every form of transcendence and to return both the historical process and human beings themselves to a wholly immanent plane, then it makes no sense to speak of an abstraction such as “human beings in general”. There is no human being in the abstract because human nature is nothing other than the history of human beings themselves: a constant process of becoming. Yet this becoming is not merely that of a specific individuality: it is the becoming of humanity itself as a set of existing power relations. Becoming thus presents itself as a transcendental form of humanity and takes shape through this network of relationships, within which each process is expressed within given (and transformable) relationships.³¹ This understanding of “human nature” is developed further in *Notebook* 16, where Gramsci introduces the element of contradiction in order

²⁹ F. Remotti, *Noi, primitivi. Lo specchio dell’antropologia*, Torino, Bollati Boringhieri, 1990.

³⁰ Q 7 [b], § 35 [G 35]: *PN* 3, pp. 185-86 (*QC*, pp. 884-85).

³¹ Keeping in mind what was noted above, I will simply point out that this “processual ontology”, as defined by Yohann Douet, although distant from Foucault’s project in terms of intellectual lineage, presents significant theoretical affinities with the notion of an ontology of the present developed by Michel Foucault in his *Was ist Aufklärung?* (2001). Furthermore, starting from a reinterpretation of social worlds in the terms of relations and connections, and while always recognising the important theoretical differences involved, it may be a fruitful epistemological exercise for social scientists to reinterpret the *Notebooks* in light of the fundamental contribution made by the French sociological school to social theory, particularly in works such

to account for the concrete differences among human beings who, in the words of Ernesto de Martino, stand in history and fall in history.³² Gramsci writes: «The ensemble of social relations is contradictory at every moment and in constant flux, so that the “nature” of man is not something homogeneous for all men at all times».³³

We are therefore faced not only with a general conception of how human beings behave in certain social contexts – which, evidently, corresponds to the function of the notion of culture in anthropology – but also with an account of the production of differences.³⁴ The idea of “contradiction” is then taken up and developed further, providing an interpretation of the dialectical relationship between different practical ways of constructing a socio-historical horizon of meaning. Every philosophical system, understood as ideology, is in fact linked to a particular class. Although Gramsci never, in my view, offers a fully explicit definition of class, the notion operates on several levels in his writings. Nevertheless, *Notebook 4* (§ 38), later revisited and systematised in *Notebook 13* (§§ 16-18), contains what I take to be a good formulation of the notion of class, closely tied to the analysis of material relations of power as they are historically configured within a given social structure. Gramsci’s analysis of these relations unfolds in three stages. It seems to me that the first two provide the basis for two possible definitions of class. Gramsci

as *De la division du travail social* and *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse*. Cf. E. Durkheim, *De la division du travail social*, Paris, Gallimard, 2013 (1893); *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse. Le système totémique en Australie*, Paris, Gallimard, 2013 (1912).

³² E. de Martino, *Note lucane*, in Id., *Sud e magia*, cit., 2015, p. 163. Fabio Dei has written particularly clearly on the question of how Gramsci’s historicism was received by Ernesto de Martino: «De Martino asserts the need for a radical re-founding of Italian ethnology on the basis of the De Sanctis–Croce–Gramsci historicist tradition. [...] De Martino reacted to these attitudes [those of ahistorical folklorism] by seeking to bring the ethnological theme – the encounter with the other and with the subaltern – to the very heart of historical understanding. It is the attitude that Carla Pasquinelli has called ‘heroic historicism’: history must be constantly nourished by ethnological problems if it is to pursue its crucial objective, namely the progressive expansion of our awareness». F. Dei, *Gramsci, Cirese e la tradizione demologica italiana*, «LARES. Quadrimestrale di studi demotnoantropologici», LXXVII, 2011, n. 3, pp. 501-18: 513-14. While an examination of De Martino’s integral humanism in light of his reception of Gramsci’s historicism would merit a more extensive discussion, space constraints allow only a few brief remarks here.

³³ «L’insieme dei rapporti sociali è contraddittorio in ogni momento ed è in continuo svolgimento, sicché la “natura” dell’uomo non è qualcosa di omogeneo per tutti gli uomini in tutti i tempi» (Q 16, § 12: *QC*, pp. 1874-75).

³⁴ It is clear that Gramsci is thinking here of class relations within a given social system corresponding to a nation-mass, but there is no reason why the same reasoning cannot be applied to the understanding of the heterogeneous development of distinct social contexts.

writes: «on the basis of the level of development of the material forces of production, and each one of these groups represents a function and a position within production itself». ³⁵ Class, in this sense, appears as a “natural” organisation, i.e. one that respects objective material relations within the social structure. The second definition, by contrast, presents class more as a process of formation. In Gramsci’s account of power relations, the initial stage – described in *Notebook 4* as the “primitive economic” moment – is characterised by an awareness of one’s social position and function based on a primary form of identification. The trader recognises that his interests coincide with those of other traders, yet is unable to perceive any affinity between his own interests and those of the manufacturer. The second stage, which corresponds to the formation of class consciousness proper, is reached when this initial form of corporatism is overcome and relationships of solidarity are established between all members of a social group, albeit still on a purely economic level. The final stage consists in transcending economic corporatism altogether through its incorporation into a collective entity: the Party. At this point, awareness emerges of interests that converge beyond the limits of the corporation itself. Gramsci writes: «this is the most patently “political” phase, which marks the clear-cut transition from the structure to complex superstructures». ³⁶ In other words, it marks the transition to the sphere of ideologies, understood as a systematised and philosophical worldview. Indeed, in another passage of the *Notebooks* in which the relationship between class and hegemony is explicitly addressed, Gramsci reflects on the transition from the strictly economic moment to the ideological-political one in Marx’s thought. He writes:

Production of [new] *Weltanschauungen* that enrich and nourish the culture of a historical epoch and the kind of production that is philosophically oriented along the lines of the original *Weltanschauungen*. [...] The establishment of a class of leaders [that is, of a state] is equivalent to the creation of a *Weltanschauung*. ³⁷

At the heart of the matter lies a practical and philosophical effort to overcome the disintegration and fragmentation characteristic of common sense, which Gramsci understands as a disorganised philosophy, a kind

³⁵ Q 4 [b], § 39 [G 38]: *PN 2*, p. 179 (*QC*, p. 457).

³⁶ *Ibidem*.

³⁷ Q 7 [b], § 33 [G 33]: *PN 3*, p. 183 (*QC*, p. 881).

of folklore of philosophy. The aim is to move towards the systematisation of worldviews and, ultimately, towards entry into the terrain of hegemonic struggle. In this sense, Gramsci's account of the formation of classes remains closely linked to his broader reflection on common sense, language, and ideology, and can readily be reformulated in terms familiar to the anthropological concept of culture. For Gramsci, an individual philosophical system does not in itself reveal contradiction, which becomes apparent only when one considers the totality of struggles among all philosophical systems. «All hitherto existing philosophies (philosophical systems) have been manifestations of the intimate contradictions by which society is lacerated».³⁸ Contradiction thus appears as the interdependence of two opposing entities situated within a structural relationship that is simultaneously a social relationship and a relation of power.³⁹ We are faced with a complex web of interconnections. Human beings are active processes because they exist only within relations; these relations require an effort of self-awareness, that is, an awareness of one's own historicity. Such self-awareness transforms the individual into a person and makes the person organic, insofar as it consciously situates them within a processual reality and within a class. Each class, in turn, is the bearer of a particular worldview, which manifests itself in dialectical relations with other classes. This dialectic is expressed through contradictions immanent to the field of social forces and, therefore, is an expression of spaces of difference. From this perspective, we can return to the question of ideology, understood as the organised expression of a worldview. It is no coincidence that Gramsci ultimately asks what it means for human beings to know the world objectively.⁴⁰

Objective always means "humanly objective" which can be held to correspond exactly to «historically subjective»: in other words, objective would mean

³⁸ Q 11, 6°, § 13 [G 62]: *SPN*, p. 404 (*QC*, p. 1487).

³⁹ Cf. Douet, *L'Histoire et la question de la modernité*, cit., p. 59.

⁴⁰ Gramsci's notion of ideology owes much to Marx's *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, where Marx argues that «men become aware of the conflicts that occur in the economic world on the terrain of ideologies». Gramsci, in turn, defines ideology as «the highest expression of a conception of the world that manifests itself implicitly in art, law, economic activity, and in all manifestations of individual and collective life» (Q 11, 1° [G 12]: *QC*, p. 1380) [«il significato più alto di una concezione del mondo che si manifesta implicitamente nell'arte, nel diritto, nell'attività economica, in tutte le manifestazioni di vita individuali e collettive».] Evidently, I am aware the cited passage does not simply provide a definition of "ideology." Rather, Gramsci specifies that he is employing the term ideology "in its highest sense", namely as a conception of

«universal subjective». Man knows objectively in so far as knowledge is real for the whole human race historically unified in a single unitary cultural system. But this process of historical unification takes place through the disappearance of the internal contradictions which tear apart human society.⁴¹

Gramsci goes on to emphasise that these contradictions are precisely what give rise to the formation of distinct and antagonistic social groups. Hence the need to conceive of struggle – which, for Gramsci as a reader and translator of Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach*, constitutes an inseparable practical moment – as a process of universal (i.e. historical) cultural unification. This final point resonates strongly with Ernesto de Martino's notion of “ethnographic humanism”, understood as a form of integral historicism.⁴² More importantly, it brings us to the heart of the convergence between Gramscian philosophy and anthropological thought. The issue is not merely a possible overlap between anthropological definitions of culture and Gramscian thought. Rather, we are confronted with a theory of the production of culture itself: of the process of formation and, differentiation of culture – its very genesis. This is a crucial step, for it enables us to avoid attributing transcendence to the notion of culture by treating it as a super-organic entity.

Although Gramsci never describes this complex network of conceptual relations in terms of “culture”, anthropologists can nonetheless recognise in these pages the emergence of that notion which remains fundamental to their discipline. What emerges is a meaningful and historically constituted reality – an ideology, in the Gramscian sense – which exists only insofar as human beings, situated within history and engaged in the constant process of becoming, act and attain some degree of awareness of their own actions.

We are therefore not faced with something that precedes action and imposes form upon it – there is no underlying ontological structure at work – but rather with the conscious organisation of action itself.

the world that is embodied in social practices and institutions. Nevertheless, I find very useful for cultural anthropology this possible qualification of “ideology”, sustained by other quotations, like «“Objective” means this and only this: that one assents to be objective, to be objective reality, that reality which is ascertained by all, which is independent of any merely particular or group standpoint. But, basically, this too is a particular conception of the world, an ideology» (Q 11, 3°, § 2 [G 37]: *FSPN*, p. 291). See F. Frosini, *Gramsci e la filosofia. Saggio sui “Quaderni del carcere”*, Roma, Carocci, 2003; P. D. Thomas, *The Gramscian Moment*, Leiden-Boston, Brill, 2009, pp. 302-6.

⁴¹ Q 11, 2°, § 5 [G 17]: *SPN*, p. 445 (*QC*, pp. 1415-16).

⁴² De Martino, *La fine del mondo*, cit.

Conclusions. Understanding the world, changing the world

In the preceding pages, and in respectful disagreement with Kate Crehan, I have sought to show that, although Gramsci's use of the term "culture" differs significantly from its anthropological meaning, the *Notebooks* nonetheless contain a number of elements that allow us to identify a genuinely anthropological conception of culture within his thought. However, as anticipated, I also believe that these elements do not merely allow us to recognise that "in Gramsci, the notion of culture in the anthropological sense is identifiable", which would amount to a purely theoretical divertissement of limited value; rather, the way in which these elements can be brought together within a coherent framework allows us to enrich our conception of culture. This is due to at least two elements. On the one hand, Gramsci's model frees conceptual categories from any risk of transcendence. To rethink culture in a Gramscian sense therefore means avoiding the mistake of treating "culture" as a thing in itself, a kind of structure or field endowed with its own ontological status and capable of acting upon social actors, thereby making them into "something". In other words, it would avoid the effect of sociological ventriloquism, whereby people are spoken for by their own culture, which in turn becomes a sociological object in its own right, relatively independent of the actions of the concrete human beings who constitute it. On the other hand, it also has the considerable merit of introducing a dimension that is rarely addressed with such clarity as in Gramsci's philosophy: the dimension of becoming. Bringing human action back to processes and becoming has, in fact, the dual advantage – as I have sought to demonstrate – not only of providing, through the analysis of the notions of class, ideology, and contradiction, an account of the genesis of difference, but also, and perhaps more importantly, of accounting for change itself. Change is no longer understood as absolute discontinuity, nor as the random outcome of an evolutionary process, but as concrete dialectical action within a field of social relations.⁴³

There is one final element I would like to discuss; the question of "critique". As an anthropologist, this is a theme that has accompanied the theoretical and methodological reflections of the discipline for

⁴³ A similar approach can be discerned in the development of cultural studies and in the thinking of Stuart Hall, who, from a Gramscian perspective, reflects on the mechanisms through which subcultures are formed and on the element of conflictual continuity between hegemonic and subaltern cultures. See S. Hall, *Essential Essays. Volume 1: Foundations of Cultural Studies*, ed. by D. Morley,

several decades.⁴⁴ Didier Fassin recently observed, with reference to the “profession of anthropology”, that literature is concerned with truth, whereas ethnography is concerned with reality.⁴⁵ By this he means that the anthropologist’s task, as Geertz argued in the 1970s, is to produce ethnographic descriptions – that is, textual representations of observable social facts. Starting from this textual relationship with reality, anthropologists have repeatedly questioned the political and critical dimension of such textualization.⁴⁶ The use of Gramsci, then, has often been reduced to a rigid and stereotypical form of criticism of the state, thereby claiming a kind of primacy for critical intellectuals. In doing so, different levels of analysis have been conflated, resulting in precisely the position that Gramsci himself criticised nearly a century ago:

...since the State is the concrete form of a productive world and since the intellectuals are the social element from which the governing personnel is drawn, the intellectual who is not firmly anchored to a strong economic group will tend to present the State as an absolute; in this way the function of the intellectuals is itself conceived of as absolute and pre-eminent, and their historical existence and dignity are abstractly rationalised.⁴⁷

This passage may usefully be compared with another from the Notebook 4, in which Gramsci is equally critical of the tendency to confuse what is permanent and what is occasional at the structural level:

Durham, Duke University Press, 2019; *Selected Writings on Marxism*, edited by G. McLennan, Durham, Duke University Press, 2021. However, to my knowledge, no anthropologist has systematically reflected on the ways in which cultural systems are transformed, disappear, or are superseded (apart from the almost self-evident theme of the so-called cultural encounter, within which, however, the encounter itself once again appears in a transcendent form, since it is always conceived an encounter between “cultures” understood as separate entities and never as an encounter between active historical processes).

⁴⁴ To remain within the Italian context, one may consider the controversy that began with the publication of *Stato, violenza, libertà*: see *Stato, violenza, libertà*, cit. See also F. Dei, *Per una critica dell’antropologia critica. Una replica*, «il lavoro culturale», 2018; <https://www.lavoroculturale.org/per-una-critica-dellantropologia-critica-una-replica/fabio-dei/2018/> (9 June 2026); C. Di Pasquale, *Un’antropologia nel presente o un’egemonia critica?*, *ibidem*, <https://www.lavoroculturale.org/unantropologia-nel-presente-o-unegegnomia-critica/caterina-di-pasquale/2018/> (9 June 2026); D. Cutolo, *Anti anti-criticism. Per un’antropologia nel presente*, *ibidem*, <https://www.lavoroculturale.org/anti-anti-criticism/> (9 June 2026); P. Saitta, *Verso un’antropologia integrata? Note critiche a “Di Stato si muore?”*; <https://www.lavoroculturale.org/antropologia-integrata-note-critiche-a-di-stato-si-muore/> (9 June 2026).

⁴⁵ D. Fassin, *Leçons de ténèbres: Ce que la violence dit du monde*, Paris, La Découverte, 2025.

⁴⁶ G. E. Marcus, M. M. J. Fischer, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique. An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences*, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1996.

⁴⁷ Q 10, § 62 [G II, 61]: SPN, p. 117 (QC, p. 1361).

Obviously, if this is a serious error in historiography, it becomes even more serious in political journalism, where the issue is not the reconstruction of past history but the construction of present and future history. One's own desires take the place of impartial analysis, and this happens not as a «means» for stimulation but as self-deception: the snake bites the snake charmer; that is to say, the demagogue is the first victim of his own demagoguery.⁴⁸

Underlying Gramsci's thought, however, is a markedly different notion of critique. As he writes, «The identification of theory and practice is a critical act, through which practice is demonstrated rational and necessary, and theory realistic and rational».⁴⁹ Once again, the influence of Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach* is unmistakable, particularly that of the last one. Here too, within a perspective in which history is understood as wholly immanent, understanding and transformation, thought and action, are neither polar opposites nor dimensions of human existence linked by a simple relation of cause and effect. Rather, they constitute a single moment of historical becoming, in which understanding is already a form of critical action, while action itself cannot but be illuminated by the interrogation of reality, understood as the ensemble of social relations. It is precisely this point that Douet captures most effectively:

Thinking of historical materialism as philosophers of praxis, Gramsci emphasises the unity of theory and praxis. The notion of contradiction has precisely to do with this unity: talking about contradictions allows us to establish a continuity between the analysis of socio-political phenomena and a practical task, insofar as diagnosing a contradiction already means demanding that it disappear.⁵⁰

If we return to the idea of ethnography as an engagement with reality, it becomes difficult not to ask how anthropology could have strayed so far from this circular relationship between understanding and action – a relationship inseparable from an awareness of our own historical situatedness. Too often, Gramsci's lesson has been reduced to a mere denunciation of “ideal fetishes” a reading that has little to do with the processual and dialectical character of cultural life. An entirely historicist anthropology cannot surrender to the dichotomy

⁴⁸ Q 4 [b], § 39 [G 38]: *PN* 2, p. 178 (*QC*, p. 456).

⁴⁹ Q 15, § 22: *SPN*, p. 365 (*QC*, p. 1780).

⁵⁰ Douet, *L'Histoire et la question de la modernité*, cit., p. 61.

between acting and thinking. The alternative itself rests on an interpretative error: the assumption that the eleventh thesis posits a disjunction where, in Gramsci's thought, there is instead an identification of theory and practice.⁵¹ Yet to understand fully what is meant by an integrally historicist anthropology, we must bring the identification of theory and practice back within a historically circumscribed form of knowledge. When Gramsci speaks of theory and practice, he does so in the sense of that historical becoming – that is, action – to which a more or less self-conscious and systematically organised form of thought is immanently linked. He is certainly not talking about individual “technicalised” forms of knowledge, which, taken in themselves, amount at most to meta-theoretical constructions designed to interpret other social realities. It is those, social realities themselves, however, that bear the historical task of realising the identification of theory and practice. The responsibility of knowledge as a profession – and, in this case, anthropological knowledge in particular – is to become aware that the objectifying description of processes and relationships, what anthropology calls ethnography, is itself the element of greatest critical force, precisely because it constitutes a way of collectively producing an awareness of reality.⁵²

At the end of this reinterpretation, two possibilities emerge: that of a Gramscian anthropology and, perhaps, even that of reading Gramsci himself as an anthropologist. These are two sides of the same coin, both of which invite us to rethink the fundamental categories of our discipline. If, as I have tried to show, the notion of culture in anthropology risks being reinterpreted as a transcendent and extra-historical element, i.e. as a metaphysical category, detached from

⁵¹ It is important to emphasize that Marx's original text contains no such disjunction. Thought and action – and, crucially, their unity as the motor of transformative praxis – are not separated either temporally (as a sequence of before and after) or conceptually (as mutual exclusive alternatives). Rather than establishing an opposition between the two, Marx conceives them as intrinsically interconnected moments of a single process. The adversative conjunction *but* («The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; *but* the point is to change it») is an editorial alteration introduced by Engels in the 1888 edition. See W. F. Haug, *Theses on Feuerbach*, in *Historical-Critical Dictionary of Marxism*, ed. by W. F. Haug *et al.*, Leiden-Boston, Brill, 2024, pp. 646-63.

⁵² D. Fassin, R. Rechtman, *L'Empire du traumatisme. Enquête sur la condition de victim*, Paris, Flammarion, 2024. On critique in anthropology, see L. Quarta, «*Qu'est-ce que la critique?*». *Didier Fassin e l'attitude critique in antropologia*, «LARES. Quadrimestrale di studi demotnoantropologici», LXXXV, 2019, n. 1, pp. 85-107.

the properly human dimension of action, then in Gramsci history is always immanent; as repeatedly emphasised, it is nothing other than the expression of human activity itself. Gramsci's thought thus offers one of the most radical resources for the renewal of anthropology, understood in its strictly ethnographic sense. It enables us to move from the concrete existence of the various Giovanni and Giuseppe who populate his letters – that is, from individual historical beings – to a broader level of analysis concerned with the mass man and collective entities. Ultimately, it leads us to the social itself. And, indeed, to what anthropologists have always called “culture”.