

# *Gramsci Dictionary / Dizionario gramsciano*

## *Fordism*

Giorgio Baratta

Following his arrest (8 November 1926), and then his trial and imprisonment, on 8 February 1929 Gramsci began work on his *Prison Notebooks*. He realized the impact of the internationalization of the Southern question: the North-South issue took on a world-wide nature, beginning from the conviction that, faced with a conglomerate of the South of the world, which went from the South of Italy to countries like India and China, there arose the innovatory and rationalizing modernity of the United States. This conviction also took shape in Gramsci's mind through the opportunities he had in prison in the 1927 and 1928, sometimes very much chance opportunities, for wide-ranging readings either directly on America or which involved America.

Amongst these, there were two volumes of Henry Ford in a French translation, *My Life* and *Today and Tomorrow* (letter to Tanja of 25 March 1929).<sup>1</sup> In a previous letter to his sister-in-law Tanja, of 23 May 1927 Gramsci he had written that he found Ford's book *Today and Tomorrow* «very amusing because Ford, though he is a great industrialist, seems to me quite comical as a theoretician».<sup>2</sup> This is a significant observation, which on the one hand would however be transcended if it is true that, while in the first letter to Tanja about his prison writing project<sup>3</sup> he had made no mention of «Americanism and Fordism», this latter is clearly stated in the list of Main Subjects,<sup>4</sup> figuring again in the letter to Tanja of 25 March 1929. This is a sign, then, that a theoretical and ideological problematic stemmed from Ford and from the new industrial model that takes its name from him. On the other hand, however, that observation lays the basis for Gramsci's approach to Fordism, understood as the expression of a social philosophy and philosophy of life that remains completely flattened on the enormous productivity

---

<sup>1</sup> *LC*, p. 349; *LjP 1*, p. 257.

<sup>2</sup> *LC*, p. 111; *LjP 1*, p. 113.

<sup>3</sup> 19 March 1927: *LC*, pp. 75-76; *LjP 1*, pp. 83-84.

<sup>4</sup> *QC*, p. 1; *PN 1*, p. 99.

of the structures of society and in this sense, but only in this sense, it is able to exert «hegemony» over the entire body of society.

On 20 October 1930, Gramsci wrote to Tanja expressing his great worries about his wife Julija's psycho-physical state of health. He spoke of the psychological, as well as the social, difficulty for us «Europeans [who] are still too bohemian» to keep up with the times, characterized by a machinism that «crushes us», meaning by this a «machinism in a general sense, as scientific organization that encompasses also intellectual work». <sup>5</sup> In this context Gramsci quotes Ford who «has a corps of inspectors who check on the private lives of the workers and impose on them a certain regimen: they control even the food, sleeping arrangements, the room size, the hours of rest, and even their most intimate affairs; whoever won't go along is fired and no longer has the six dollars minimum daily salary» (ivi). This rapid description contains the essential nucleus developed by Gramsci in the set of notes on Fordism that culminate in the famous Notebook 22 on «Americanism and Fordism». One could maintain, using Marxist terminology, that by «Fordism» Gramsci means a social relation of production and reproduction corresponding to a material relation of production which is «Taylorism». Both lead us back to or are contained within the mode of production, Americanism, as the variant or development of capitalism. As compared with Marx's time, it must be noted – as the above passage shows – that Gramsci emphasizes how, in consequence, the relation of production *now* determines a mode of the social reproduction of life. In less mechanistic terms: the close connection between the mode and the relations of production and reproduction became one of the salient features of the *new* (American-Fordist) capitalism.

The description of Fordism presupposes that of Taylorism. This latter leads to the worker, an “appendix of the machine” (as Marx had already noted) in the big factory, being tendentially treated as a machine. Living labour is “scientifically” studied, analysed, cut and wrapped up – then controlled and subjected to detailed discipline at the moment when it is distributed – such as to ensure maximum intensity and productivity. This is the «Taylor system» which then becomes the «Taylor-Fordist system which creates a new type of skill

---

<sup>5</sup> *LC*, p. 509; *LjP 1*, p. 356.

and profession» when and in so far as it is «limited to certain factories, or even to specific machines and stages of the production process».<sup>6</sup> The factories, machines and moments of such a “system” do indeed characterize a vanguard of undertakings able to rigorously and systematically apply the motive force of the entire productive set-up, uniting it to a policy of high wages functional to the build-up of «an organic and well-articulated skilled labour force in a factory or a team of specialised workers».<sup>7</sup> Given that Taylorism guarantees a great increase in productivity, «Fordist industry» is able to operate a policy of higher wages than in other firms, with the goal of making acceptable «a discrimination, a qualification, in its workers, which other industries do not yet call for, a new type of qualification, a form of consumption of labour power and a quantity of power consumed in average hours which are the same numerically but which are more wearying and exhausting».<sup>8</sup> The fact is however that «in the given conditions of society as it is, the wages are not sufficient to recompense and make up for» the more intense and crushing pressure exerted on the labour force induced by the Taylor-Ford labour method.<sup>9</sup>

As happens with Taylorism, what emerges from Gramsci’s analysis of Fordism is rich in ambiguities and contradictions. Here the dialectical progression is perhaps more marked. Gramsci poses a basic question of the dilemma concerning the historicity of Fordism. It is worthwhile considering the following passage in its entirety:

the problem arises: whether the type of industry and organisation of work and production typical of Ford is “rational”; whether, that is, it can and should be generalised, or whether, on the other hand, we are not dealing with a malignant phenomenon which must be fought against through trade-union action and through legislation? In other words, whether it is possible, with the material and moral pressure of society and of the State, to lead the workers as a mass to undergo the entire process of psycho-physical transformation so that the average type of Ford worker becomes the average type of worker in general? Or whether this is impossible because it would lead to physical degeneration and to deterioration of the species, with the consequent destruction of all labour pow-

---

<sup>6</sup> Q 29, § 6: *QC*, p. 2349; *SCW*, p. 186 (translation of the first part of the quotation modified).

<sup>7</sup> Q 22, § 13: *QC*, p. 2174; *SPN*, p. 312.

<sup>8</sup> Q 22, § 13: *QC*, p. 2173; *SPN*, p. 311. What appears as «qualification» in the *SPN* translation – «qualifica» in Gramsci’s text – may also be read as «skill», given that an «operaio qualificato» is a «skilled worker» (trans. note).

<sup>9</sup> Q 22, § 13: *QC*, p. 2173; *SPN*, p. 312.

er? It seems possible to reply that the Ford method is “rational”, that is, that it should be generalised; but that a long process is needed for this, during which a change must take place in social conditions and in the way of life and the habits of individuals. This, however, cannot take place through “coercion” alone, but only through tempering compulsion (self-discipline) with persuasion. Persuasion should also take the form of high wages, which offer the possibility of a better standard of living, or more exactly perhaps, the possibility of realising a standard of living which is adequate to the new methods of production and work which demand a particular degree of expenditure of muscular and nervous energy.<sup>10</sup>

The passage is clear and requires no particular comments, except for one delicate point, where Gramsci speaks of “coercion” and “self-discipline”, which have to be confronted, beginning with the long process of change that would allow the Fordist method to become generalised and acquire “rationality”. To what end is this process directed? On the one hand, the general trend of the passage makes one think of an end-point within the capitalist system of production, and not therefore of revolutionary ruptures; on the other hand, Gramsci’s thought, as one adduces from the *Notebooks* in their entirety, leaves no doubt: «tempering coercion (self-discipline) with persuasion» is not compatible with capitalism.<sup>11</sup> Self-discipline is the practical outcome of working-class consciousness, it is the essential premise of socialism as the lived synthesis of «spontaneity» and «conscious leadership».<sup>12</sup> But if this is so, another question then arises: must there be a change in the Fordist method in itself, and how in itself is it to change in order to make the transition to a different mode of production and become a lever of production – if such were possible – of a set-up that has the «regulated society» as a goal? Gramsci, like Marx moreover, does not describe the «menu of the future». The *transition* is a dialectical question.

The central part of Notebook 22, from § 8 to § 13, transcribes and systematizes notes or passages written in Notebooks 1 and 4 (together with Notebook 9). This central part constitutes a complex elaboration, not always of an easy or unambiguous interpretation. As compared with the first drafts, Gramsci’s thought is clearer and

---

<sup>10</sup> Q 22, § 13: *QC*, pp. 2173-74; *SPN*, p. 312. (Here we reinsert inverted commas, present in the original but not included in the *SPN* translation – trans. note).

<sup>11</sup> Q 22, § 13: *QC*, p. 2173; *SPN*, p. 312.

<sup>12</sup> Q 3, § 48: *QC*, p. 328; *PN 1*, p. 48.

more mature – sometimes less incisive – but in any case more organic. He measures himself up against a nascent process of development of an epoch-making dimension, with Taylorism, Fordism and Americanism as its constitutive elements. The starting conditions, its reference framework and future horizon are all within the capitalist mode of production, which however, in a Marxist understanding, is structurally contradictory and in its DNA contains the dialectical potentiality for its transcendence. From the economic and social point of view the analysis of Fordism is the most immediately important. There are many points of force that make this phenomenon a basis for renewing and launching (more so than of stabilizing) the system; there are however also reasons for weakness. The theoretical struggle that Gramsci undertakes in his analysis is arduous, since he has to take account both of the revolutionary import of Fordism within the sphere of capitalism, and of its fallacious nature, which is also – but in a different sense – of a revolutionary import. There is here in play the formation of the “new man”, who *today* is only a potential. What is really new in “modern” capitalism is the killing-off of the old:

one should study the “puritanical” initiative of American industrialists like Ford. It is certain that they are not concerned with the “humanity” or the “spirituality” of the worker, which are immediately smashed. This “humanity and spirituality” [...] exist most in the artisan, in the “demiurge”, when the worker’s personality was reflected whole in the object created and when the link between art and labour was still very strong. But it is precisely against this “humanism” that the new industrialism is fighting.<sup>13</sup>

The Fordist method acts on the reproductive process of the workforce most of all through the high-wage policy. This however is very fragile, both because the compensation that it promises, as compared with the psychophysical wear and tear, is too weak, and the workers run off, and because it is a “two-edged weapon”, making the worker see needs and freedoms which have, rather, to be forcefully instilled. This is done through prohibitionism, and through a brake applied to every sexual abuse or irregularity, so as to guarantee «physical efficiency», in other words the «muscular-nervous» efficiency of the worker. «The attempts made by Ford, with the aid of a body of inspectors, to intervene

---

<sup>13</sup> Q 22, § 11: *QC*, pp. 2165-66; *SPN*, p. 303.

in the private lives of his employees» therefore constitute a profound need in the system, up to the point of proposing itself as a model that becomes expanded into a «state ideology». Such a policy has its limits however, because it has the sole end of «preserving, outside of work, a certain psycho-physical equilibrium which prevents the physiological collapse of the worker, exhausted by the new method of production».<sup>14</sup>

The «rationalization of production and work» is the fruit of the Fordist, or Taylor-Ford, method. Gramsci warns that the “puritan” initiatives of the Fordist industrialists should not be taken too lightly, congenial as they are to the Taylorist «necessities of the new methods of work». Together they represent an enormous «effort», «the biggest collective effort to date to create [...] a new type of worker and of man». We have seen how this involves the destruction of the old humanism. «Brutal cynicism» defines ideal types such as Taylor’s «trained gorilla» which, even if illusory, expresses the «purpose of American society».<sup>15</sup> The Fordist question involves a plurality of relations, both temporal and spatial, which in their turn involve the structure-super-structures nexus or, in more Gramscian terms, production, politics and culture. The interrogative to which we have drawn attention (how it must and can change) has to be channelled into a complex context, starting with the recognition of its *objectivity*.

The «modernization» carried out by Fordism comes from afar and responds to an impellent economic necessity – a matter of life or death – for the outcome of modern capitalism: «Henry Ford’s whole industrial activity can be studied from this point of view: a continual, incessant struggle to escape the law of the falling rate of profit by maintaining a position of superiority over his competitors. Ford had to get out of the strictly industrial field of production to organise the transportation and distribution of his goods».<sup>16</sup> In Q 10 II, § 41.vii<sup>17</sup> this subject is dealt with more analytically. Economically, Ford is presented with the spectre, the ghost, of the conjuncture of the two «crises of the New York Stock Exchange that have slowed down the production of automobiles! All the optimism of his industrial vision has been destroyed at a single blow and it will be difficult to revive it»

---

<sup>14</sup> Q 22, § 11: *QC*, pp. 2166-67; *SPN*, pp. 302-4.

<sup>15</sup> Q 22, § 11: *QC*, p. 2165; *SPN*, p. 302.

<sup>16</sup> Q 10 II, § 36: *QC*, pp. 1281-82; *FSPN*, p. 431.

<sup>17</sup> *QC*, pp.1312-13; *FSPN*, pp. 433-35.

(letter to Tat'jana of 4 November 1930).<sup>18</sup> Gramsci reserves his particular attention for the relation of Taylorism and American-Fordism to fascism (which introduced the Bedaux system). Here suffice it to mention how, according to Gramsci, «we have had the beginnings of a Fordist fanfare (exaltation of the big city – the great Milan etc.)»<sup>19</sup> and the idealization that Fordism drags along in its wake. Of significance in this respect is the short paragraph Q 7, § 27: «*Graziadei and the Land of Cocaigne*. See in Papini's *Gog* (interview with Ford, p. 24) the words attributed to Ford: "Manufacture, with no workers an ever greater number of objects that cost almost nothing"».<sup>20</sup>

The key point, close to Gramsci's heart, is the productive and reproductive *novelty* grafted on by Taylorism-Fordism and congenial to the Americanist «passive revolution», compared and contrasted with the revolutionary-socialist perspectives opened up by the Soviet October. Fordism aims at reaching a «psycho-physical equilibrium» of the new type of worker, the mass-worker, who however, in the given conditions of the capitalist mode of production, cannot «be purely external and mechanical». Gramsci notes that the equilibrium «can become internalised if it is proposed by the worker himself, and not imposed from the outside, if it is proposed by a new form of society, with appropriate and original methods».<sup>21</sup> In the context of the Soviet experiment, the most reliable positions with respect to the socialist appropriation of the American-Fordist model are those of «Lev Davidovitch» (Trotsky), whose «preoccupations were correct, but [whose] practical solutions were profoundly mistaken». In Gramsci's view the

tendency represented by Lev Davidovitch [Trotsky] [...] consisted in an "over"-resolute (and therefore not rationalised) will to give supremacy in national life to industry and industrial methods, to accelerate, through coercion imposed from the outside, the growth of discipline and order in production, and to adapt customs to the necessities of work.<sup>22</sup>

We find ourselves here at the threshold of a dramatic and unresolved question that "actually existing socialism" took with it to

---

<sup>18</sup> *LC*, p. 513; *LjP 1*, p. 358.

<sup>19</sup> Q 1, § 61: *QC*, p. 72; *PN 1*, p. 169.

<sup>20</sup> Q 7, § 27: *QC*, p. 876; *PN 3*, pp. 177-78.

<sup>21</sup> Q 22, § 11: *QC*, p. 2166; *SPN*, p. 303.

<sup>22</sup> Q 22, § 1: *QC*, p. 2164; *SPN*, p. 301.

the grave, in other words its (subjective) incapacity and (objective) impossibility to *translate* the American-Fordist coercion of the mode of production, living and feeling of the worker (passive revolution) into self-coercion or interior discipline (socialist intellectual and moral reform promoted by the workers).