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2021

Cover page

Derek Boothman

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Cover page

Abstract

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Keywords

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Political detainees on the prison island of Ustica just before Gramsci's transfer to Milan for interrogation and trial. Gramsci is in the second row on the left. (See review of the new edition of the *Lettere dal Carcere*).

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International Gramsci Journal

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Issue 2 *PHILOSOPHY; EDUCATION;
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Article 2

2021

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Derek Boothman

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Article 3

2021

Editorial

Derek Boothman

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Editorial

Abstract

This is an abstract of the Editorial of IGJ 14

Keywords

Editorial

Editorial

The summer 2021 number of the *International Gramsci Journal* has among its main subjects ideology, in various old and new forms, the subaltern groups, and the intertwined question of common sense.

We open with a highly original contribution from Roberto Finelli that starts off from Gramsci's notes on *Americanism and Fordism*, and the ideology that, at the time, sprang from the factory system of the "New World". In his analysis the author deals with a nexus of questions taking in the notions of *Technologie* and *Technik* in German cameralism, the use and extension of their meaning made by Marx in his analysis of the role of machines, big industry and abstract labour, thence on to present-day digital technologies and the digital economy. Here the author analyses the ideological sleight of hand that confuses the transmission and processing of information (in the form of 0s and 1s) with knowledge, treated as a mathematical science, independent of interpretation. In this approach the author makes wide use of Spinoza, this latter's "vertical" mind-body axis and the linkages through a "horizontal" axis with the outside world, thence into feeling. Finelli speaks of the "unity of a biological-emotional organism" and, while not explicitly calling Gramsci into play here, the link up with what the letter has to say on knowledge and feeling is apparent, as also is the question of an ideology that springs from labour un-mediated by intellectual intervention.

Panagiotis Sotiris wrote a well-received article for the *IGJ* in 2017, dealing with the national-popular in Gramsci. Here Salvatore Cingari follows on this line, investigating the roots of the concept in France and nineteenth-century Russia, in his analytical study of the use of the term "populism" in these sources and in Gramsci's contemporary reading matter and their critical use in the *Notebooks*.

Articles in the *IGJ* have frequently centred on education and its relation to hegemony. This line continues with Peter Mayo's contribution on Gramsci's influence in *Critical Studies in Education*. Mayo's main reference points include, most of all, Paulo Freire, and then the work of the North American school, with stand-out names such as Henry Giroux, Peter McLaren and Michael W. Apple.

The article in Italian by Marco Casalino deals with the subalterns as discussed by Gramsci especially in *Notebook 25*, linking up the paragraphs there with the pre-prison writings, in particular the essay

published as *Alcuni temi della questione meridionale* (*Some Aspects of the Southern Question*), but also with Marx's *18 Brumaire*, with Gramsci's own writings on the "moderates" of the Risorgimento and with the themes derived from Leonida Rèpaci's 1933 novel, *I fratelli Rupe*.

We then have a set of three interlinked articles dealing explicitly with "common sense". The British philosopher and novelist Tony McKenna contributes a thoughtful – and sometimes critical – piece on this notion, and the way in which Gramsci's interpretation fits into a line stemming from Aristotle, going through Roman stoicism, on to the Renaissance and early modern era, and then its use in the Britain of today. As a follow-up to this article we publish an English-language translation of Guido Liguori's entry in the *Dizionario gramsciano* on "common sense". Then, passing into the book review section, Rob Jackson reviews Kate Crehan's *Gramsci's Common Sense* in which the author discusses movements in contemporary North American society and, in dealing with various notions of "common sense" – and also knowledge – provides a counterpoint to the article by McKenna's and, in a more indirect way, to that by Finelli.

Caesarism and Bonapartism in Gramsci, an important new book by Francesca Antonini, is here discussed by Roberto Dainotto. Both terms, often overlooked by Gramsci scholars, unfold from a situation of "catastrophic balance", and though similar are generally not interchangeable: Antonini rights the balance by describing Caesarism as a form of "charismatic leadership" while Bonapartism is "a generic form of authoritarianism". Next come reviews by Gianni Fresu (in Italian and English), of Giacomo Tarascio's *Nazione e Mezzogiorno* in which the author tellingly links Gramsci's writings on the South with today's post-colonial studies. Last, a major publishing event in Gramscian studies is Francesco Giasi's extended and fully annotated new edition of the *Lettere dal carcere*, reviewed by the editor of this journal. After describing the initial reception of the *Lettere* in 1947, and the reasons why that volume is incomplete, the reviewer singles out for treatment just a few themes present in the letters. These include Gramsci's relations – sometimes strained – with his family, the attempts to obtain his freedom or a reduction in his sentence, his disagreements with the Comintern line of the early 1930s, a number of his coded political messages (and the reviewer's attempt – right or wrong – to interpret some of them) and, finally, the last letters written from the clinic in Rome to his wife and sons.

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Article 4

2021

Marx, Spinoza and the New Technologies

Roberto Finelli

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Marx, Spinoza and the New Technologies

Abstract

The purpose of this essay is to investigate the nature of the ideology that is developing from new information technologies. The basic thesis is that there is a confusion between the accumulation and mathematical processing of "information" on the one hand and "knowledge" on the other. While knowledge, it is argued, is always based on the world of life, as a set of problems that arise from the materialistic, biological, emotional reproduction of a living human body, information represents the most abstract and formal version of it, which can be accumulated and calculated, but whose true meaning always depends on the meaning and reproductive intention of an organic-human life. Those who think of information as knowledge without a foundation in a materialistic and non-linguistic sense, fall into the ideology of conceiving the world as a massive information process and, consequently, of conceiving the human mind as a calculating machinic structure similar to the way a computer works. In this perspective, the essay, taking up the fundamental intuitions expressed by Gramsci in Americanism and Fordism, analyzes the origin of the term "Technology" in Marx's Capital, its distinction of meaning from the term "Technique" and the likely influence exercised in this field on the Marx's thought from German Technologie, as a fundamental teaching discipline of the 18th century German Cameralism.

Keywords

Ideology, Technology, Spinoza, Marx, Cameralism

Marx, Spinoza and the New Technologies

Roberto Finelli

1. Introduction.

It is in the notes on *Americanism and Fordism* in *Notebook 22* that Antonio Gramsci gives rise to a new topology of the systemic categories of his thought, comparing the new forms of American capitalism with the economic and social organization of the old European continent. And it is precisely from this reconfiguration and rearrangement of the organic concepts of his thinking, with reference to the new forms of production and technology summarized in the term “Fordism”, that it is worth starting out as an introduction and guide to this essay which attempts to try and reflect on the new digital technologies and the new “humanity and spirituality” that derive from them. Americanism in Gramsci’s pages essentially refers, as is well known, to the technological and social revolution of Fordism, based on the one hand on mass production through assembly lines and a Taylorist division of labour and, on the other, on the increase in wages and consequent consumption. But above all it refers, to move from this radical transformation of the productive structure, to a sort of totalization of capital, in the sense of an economic structure that produces not only material goods and class relations, but also worldviews, values, ideologies through which human beings live their social life. In an America not burdened by great historical and cultural traditions as in Europe,

it was relatively easy to rationalise production and labour by a skilful combination of force (destruction of working-class trade unionism on a territorial basis) and persuasion (high wages, various social benefits, extremely subtle ideological and political propaganda) and thus succeed in making the whole life of the nation revolve around production. Hegemony here is born in the factory and requires for its exercise only a minute quantity of professional political and ideological intermediaries. The phenomenon of the “masses” which so struck Romier is nothing but the form taken by this “rationalised” society in which the “structure” dominates the superstructures more immediately and in which the latter are also “rationalised” (simplified and reduced in number) (Q22§2, pp. 2145-6; *SPN* pp. 285-6).¹

¹ A. Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. by Q. Hoare and G. Nowell-Smith, Lawrence and Wishart, London 1971, pp. 285-6. The volume is available on the

It is superfluous to remember how much in the tradition of theoretical Marxism Gramsci dislocated the concept of ideology from the only negative connotation of false consciousness to its gnoseological, cognitive valorization: in the sense of interpreting the world of ideas, worldviews, ethical and moral values, as an indispensable medium, we could say Kantianly as a “transcendental”, to perceive, move and give meaning to reality. So much so as to define, the Sardinian thinker, for this epistemological, and at the same time ethical-political function, assigned to ideologies, with the term civil society much less the complex of economic relations and practices, as had happened in the Marxian lexicon, and much more that sphere of political activity par excellence, as a place where so-called private organizations (trade unions, parties, organizations of all kinds) appear on the scene, which have as their objective the production and confirmation of the consent or, on the contrary, the transformation of people's ways of thinking. But, without going into the very complex question, here what is important to underline is that Gramsci, with this definition of *Americanism-Fordism* as a social-historical field in which the economic structure directly produces the ways and values of generalized social conscience, has made his own - without being sufficiently aware of them either philological or philosophical - the lesson of the Marx of *Capital*, for which, with the doctrine of fetishism, the ideological production of ideas is produced by the same economic relations of exchange, without the need for social actors specifically and professionally dedicated to cultural activities. In other words, that lesson of Marxian fetishism that tells us that the place of genesis and configuration of the ideological is *not in the superstructure*, as the *German Ideology* and the *Introduction of '59* wanted, but directly, and paradoxically, *in the structure*.

I leave it to the reader to reflect on the epochal scope, in my opinion, of this different location of the foundation of ideology, according to which the production of capital and, at the same time, the production of its self-dissimilation are intrinsically linked, specifically when capitalism reaches the most advanced technological transformations that are most appropriate to its nature. But what is more significant in my view is that this intrinsic

Internet with this page numbering; an alternative electronic version also exists, published by ElecBooks (London), 1999, but with a different page numbering.

connection, originally conceived by Gramsci, between *economic structure* and *ideology* appears to be the most consonant introduction to the content of the reflections that follow in this essay.

2. The “German Technology”.

In order, from a Marxist perspective, to carry out certain critical considerations on new information technologies today I think it is necessary to reflect briefly on the different meanings of the terms “Technique” and “Technology”, with particular reference to the history of the meaning of the word “Technology” (*Technologie*) in German. The main hypothesis that I intend to present is in fact that the German meaning of “Technologie”, which Marx uses above all in *Capital* and in the *1863-65 Manuscripts*, is profoundly different from the meaning of the English terms *Technology* and *Technique*.²

The semantic context of the term *Technologie* in the context of late eighteenth-century German culture appears marked by deeply original characteristics. German *Technologie* is an academic discipline that was born and developed as a science of administration and politics in the German principalities. *Technologie* was taught in German Universities and was part of the *curriculum* of the state officials, civil servants, who had the function of managing the growth of material wealth and production activity. *Technologie was a science* whose scope was to give state officials a precise knowledge of craft and manufacturing activities, their classification, articulation and distinction based on the different types of products, their best location, procurement and transport network, their relationship with agriculture and with other social and administrative areas of the cameral (“chamber”) and police sciences. As the long title of Johann Beckmann’s *Anleitung zur Technologie* says, “Technologie” had its field of study in “knowledge of crafts, factories and manufactures, above all those which are in closer connection with

² The indispensable reference on all this is to the research work that Guido Frison has been carrying out for many years now, and from whose writings I personally have drawn the fundamental indications for the study of cameralism in German culture and society and, at the same time, for the deepening of the semantic and conceptual distinction between the German entries “Technologie” and “Technik”. Of Frison’s considerable production, suffice it to mention here G. Frison: *Linnaeus, Beckmann, Marx and the foundation of technology. Between natural and social sciences: a hypothesis of an ideal type*. First Part: *Linnaeus and Beckmann, Cameralism, Oeconomia and technologie*, in “History and technology”, 1993, vol. 10, pp. 139-160; Second and Third Parts, *Beckmann, Marx, technology and classical economics*, in “History and technology”, 1993, vol. 10, pp. 161-173. By the same author see also *Technical and technological innovation in Marx*, in “History and technology”, 1988, vol. 6, pp. 299-324.

agriculture [*Landwirtschaft*], police [*Polizey*] and cameral science”, where *Polizey* meant, approximately, government administration.

The aim of *Technologie* was to increase the wealth of the State and, as such, it had as its object of knowledge much more the classification and definition of the procedures and phases of a production activity – starting from the nature and specific type of the object of work – than the study of machinery and work tools. One of its fundamental purposes was to subtract artisan know-how from a purely empirical and practical competence and to translate it into a precise path, into a method of rigorous knowledge, which was not used by the craftsman but by the state bureaucrat.

It [*Technologie*] must not train any weaver, any beer-maker, nor in general any craftsman (*Handwerker*) because to practise their art they need great ability and dexterity which [both] have to be acquired separately through boring exercise, but are useless abilities for those to whom I am referring (Beckmann, *Anleitung zur Technologie*, Vorrede, 2nd ed. 1780).

In handicraft workshops knowledge was only of a customary nature, according to the instructions of the master craftsman to companions and apprentices. Instead *Technologie* ordered work operations in a rigorous and systematic way, according to the view of a social actor, who, external to the production process, was able to direct a production that was not only efficient in itself but coherent with the entire territory of the Prince and of the state, as well as with the well-being of the whole population.

Technology is the science which teaches how to treat (*Verarbeitung*) natural objects (*Naturalien*) or the knowledge of crafts (*Gewerbe*). Instead in the workshops, it is only shown [that] one must follow the instructions and the habits of the master in order to produce the commodity, [on the contrary] technology provides in systematic order fundamental introduction[s] in finding the means to reach this final goal on the basis of true principles and reliable experiences, and how to explain and to utilize the phenomena which take place during the treatment (J. Beckmann, *Anleitung zur Technologie*, 2nd ed., 1780: 17).

Due to its exteriority to the production processes understood in the strict sense, *Technologie* therefore showed a dual nature. On the one hand, in fact, it was a *political-administrative discipline*, which participated in state power, in state authority, and on the other it was a *scientific discipline* because, similarly to the natural sciences, it

objectively described the necessary way of being and of carrying out production processes. Both these characteristics came together in the same goal: to separate the *knowledge of doing* from the *doing* in the context of economic activities and to differentiate learned and skilful men (the cameralistic bureaucrats as much as the businessmen) according to a hierarchical relationship of competences or expertise from the executors of manufacture and crafts.

Johann Beckmann studied the methods of working the mines, factories and foundries as well as the collections of art and natural history, during his travels in Holland, Denmark and Sweden. Inspired by the taxonomic work of the botanic scholar Linnaeus, he taught “Philosophie und Technologie” at the University of Göttingen, which had been since its foundation one of Germany's best universities open to the modern culture of the Enlightenment. There he lectured on political and domestic economy, and in 1768 created a botanical garden according to Linnaean principles.

Among the many works by Beckmann, those most significant for our topic are the *Anleitung zur Technologie* (1777) and the *Beiträge zur Geschichte der Erfindungen* (1780–1805).

What is important to consider is that his activity as a scholar of manufacturing, craft techniques, mining and his teaching of *Technology* (*Technologie*) as a university discipline, falls into the socio-political and administrative context of the era of so-called *Cameralism*.

Cameralism (from the German *Kammer*, the prince's *treasure chamber* first, and after the prince's *council chamber*.) characterized the political and administrative theory and practice of the German principalities during the eighteenth century and continued to influence German state theory, especially Prussia, even during the nineteenth century.

The conception of the state in the cameralistic tradition was profoundly different from the tradition of English liberalism. In the latter, the public authority must essentially guarantee *order*, so that everyone can act freely with his own private initiative, provided that it does not harm the private sphere of the others. On the contrary, in the German tradition, where the prince was also *the father* of his subjects, the state had to guarantee people not only order but also happiness and wellbeing. In this context, *Technologie* was a university discipline aimed at increasing the wealth of the state and constituted the competence, the *knowledge* of the cameralistic bureaucrat as regards

his ability to direct a production process, in which the workers had to follow the prescriptions of the competent scientist.

Moreover, understanding the function of *Technologie* as a university discipline for the formation of the bureaucracy of the German Principalities implies underlining the different vision of the economy that distinguished the British culture and the German culture of the second half of the 1700s. In the former, the *economy* was increasingly a *political economy*, that is, a science that had the market as its fundamental object as a place of socialization and comparison between free economic players. It is a *political economy* because it considers the market as the characteristic institution through which modern civil society lives and reproduces itself, as a social sphere distinguished from the political state. In the modern market, the formation of prices is impersonal, each person's action not depending on anyone in particular, since it depends on everyone's economic action. For this reason, in English *political economy*, the nature of economic law has a different character from the nature of political law, based on decision and choice. Instead, in the German culture of the late eighteenth century, economics still has a profound link with the classical-Aristotelian meaning of economy as *oikos-nomos* (administration of the house).

According to an ancient conception by which the patrimony of the sovereign is not yet distinct from the patrimony of the state, the Prince in the German principality was not only sovereign but also, as said, father of his subjects. As a father (as head of the *oikos*) he had the obligation and the honour to guarantee not only order but also the well-being of his subjects-children. In this sense *Technologie* was part of the more general *Polizey*, as having care of the whole of the *polis*, that is, as management and functioning of the State with particular reference to the well-being of the population. Nor was it by chance that the two university chairs that were established in 1727 at the Universities of Halle and Frankfurt an der Oder are chairs of *Ökonomische-, Polizey- und Kameralwissenschaft*. That is to say, the cameralists were not so much economists, in the most modern sense of the term, as primarily bureaucrats and political scientists, in the historical context of the extraordinary reforming push produced by so-called "enlightened absolutism" on the basis of the political effects of Protestantism.

Johann Beckmann's *Anleitung zur Technologie* (1777) was the first work that self-consciously developed the concept of technology as a discipline devoted to the systematic description of handicrafts and industrial arts. Beckmann sought to make *Technologie* into a true knowledge (*Wissenschaft*) by creating a classificatory scheme equivalent to the Linnaean system for plants and animals.

From this point of view Beckmann tried to develop through the whole work of his life a number of overall classification frameworks that could contain the entire complex of the manufacturing and production processes of goods. From the raw materials and the natural resources of agriculture handled in his *Principles of German Agriculture* [*Grundsätze der deutschen Landwirtschaft*, 1769], through the description of the different productive branches and its corresponding innovation process in his *Guide to Technology* [*Anleitung zur Technologie*, 1777], to the classification in material-physical sense of final goods in his *Introduction to the Commodity Sciences* [*Vorbereitung zur Waarenkunde*, 1795-1800] and, finally, to the *Guide to Science of Trade* [*Anleitung zur Handelswissenschaft*, 1789].

Nevertheless it can be emphasized that the most general characteristic of cameralist culture was grounded in a natural-historical approach to knowledge and as such, focused on classifying rather than explaining. Beckmann's *Technologie* rested indeed firmly in the tradition of Bacon's proposal for a natural history of trades, a project also pursued in Denis Diderot and Jean D'Alembert's contemporary project of the *Encyclopédie ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*. However, this scientific tradition was included in the education processes belonging to cameralism, as a set of practically-oriented academic disciplines concerned with state administrative organization.

In this historical and social context, the meaning of *Technologie* in the German language of the eighteenth century combined in an inextricable way a meaning that belonged to the *natural sciences* and a meaning that belonged to the *social and political sciences*.

3. Marx between Technology and Technique

Marx is well aware of this meaning, attributed to "*Technologie*" by German cameralistic culture. In the *1861-63 Manuscripts* he expli-

citly wrote about it: “Beckmann, 1772, braucht zuerst die Bezeichnung Technologie” [*Beckmann first used the denomination of Technology*].³

This means that he was well aware of *Technologie* as a newly established discipline, whose origin dated back to the work of Beckmann (*Anleitung zur Technologie*), which Marx cites here with the wrong year 1772, instead of 1777. As we know from the London notebook of 1851, ten years earlier Marx had come into contact with the German technologists, with Beckmann’s *Beyträge zur Geschichte der Erfindungen*,⁴ with the *Geschichte der Technologie* of J. H. M. Poppe, a pupil of Beckmann, and with other works by Poppe himself. Previously Marx had approached the study of the labour process in the manufacturing and modern factory system through the works of A. Ure, C. Babbage and W. Schulz. With the extracts of 1851 he widened his gaze to the history of techniques before the industrial revolution. So testifies his letter to Engels of October 13, 1851: “just recently I have been slogging away in the library I use, reading above all about technology and its history, and about agronomy, to get at least some idea of this rubbish”.⁵ We also know from another letter to Engels of January 28, 1863 that later, precisely during the writing of the 1861-63 manuscript, he felt the need to return to his technology extracts.

I am inserting certain things into the section on machinery. There are some curious questions which I originally failed to do with. To elucidate these, I have re-read all my note-books (extracts) on technology and am attending a practical (only experimental) course for workers on the same by Prof. Willis (in Jermyn Street; the Institute of Geology, where Huxley also gave his lectures).⁶

In my opinion it is precisely with the *1861-63 Manuscripts* that Marx starts making a distinction of meaning between the term *Technologie* and the term *Technik*, to which I would like to draw attention, starting from the very explicit definition of *Technologie* that Marx gives with the first edition of the first book of *Capital* in 1867.

The principle of large industry to resolve in its constitutive elements each production process, considered in and of itself and without taking man's hand

³ K. Marx, *Manuskript 1861-1863*, MEGA, II, 3.6, p. 1932.

⁴ [English translation *A History of Inventions, Discoveries, and Origins*, Bohn, London, 1846; modern reprints by Kessinger, Whitefish (MT), 2010, and HardPress, Sligo 2012 – ed. note.]

⁵ Marx-Engels, *Collected Works*, 38: 476.

⁶ Marx-Engels, *Collected Works*, 41: 449; in English also in Marx-Engels (1983), *Letters on Capital*, trans. A. Drummond, London, New Park, p. 82.

into account, has created the most modern science of technology. The multi-colored configurations of the social production process apparently devoid of reciprocal and stereotypical connection, broke down into applications of the natural sciences, consciously planned and systematically distributed according to the useful effect that was intended. Technology has also discovered the few great fundamental forms of movement in which every production action of the human body is carried out by necessity, despite the multiplicity of the tools used: just like mechanics that in machines there is a constant reproduction of elementary mechanical powers, and he cannot be fooled by the maximum complication of the machinery.⁷

In this definition it seems to me that Marx welcomes the basic inspiration of the cameralistic *Technologie* as objective knowledge of the production processes, borrowed from the precision and objectivity of the natural sciences. In this objectivistic reduction of *Technologie* there is no space or relevance for any autonomous agency of human action.

But at the same time Marx extends the meaning of *Technologie*, or to put it better, concentrates it on a production process also understood as a work process, the size of which had remained extraneous to German technologists. *Technologie* for Marx does not only concern, as he will say in other places, “the application of machinery, and in general the transformation of production processes into the conscious application of natural science, mechanics, chemistry etc., for certain purposes (*die Anwendung der Maschinerie, und überhaupt die Verwandlung der Produktionsproccses in bewußte Anwendung der Naturwissenschaft, Mechanik, Chemie etc., für bestimmte Zwecke*)”.⁸ *Technologie*, then, is not only knowledge related to innovation made up of machines, i.e. knowledge of the way in which science enters directly into the production process, but it is also, at the same time, study and knowledge, in its naturalistic-objectivistic perspective, of the movements of the workforce. *In other words, for Marx, the machine is intended simultaneously as a specific form of use of the workforce.* Furthermore *Technologie* is precisely the new science which, while dealing with the introduction of machines, takes as object of its knowledge the use of the workforce as an objective and impersonal performance.

⁷ K. Marx, *Capital*, vol. I, *Collected Works*, 35: 489. [For Moore and Aveling’s original 1887 translation, see *Capital* Vol. 1, London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1967, p. 486 – ed. note.]

⁸ K. Marx, *Ökonomische Manuskripte 1863-1867*, MEGA, II, 4, 1: 95 (my translation).

Modern Technology in the first volume of *Capital* is therefore intrinsically connected with the concept of *abstract labour*, as the capitalist use and disposition of the labour force in the modern factory system. It is the science of the machine-force-labour system, in which the latter is itself machine activity, from which every possible element of subjectivity and intentionality is absent.

But it is precisely the *1861-63 Manuscripts* that is the text in which Marx first came to a theorization on the machinery that allowed him to confirm what he had already intuited in drafting the *Grundrisse*: namely that the original reality of abstract work, as substance of value, is placed not in the sphere of exchange and circulation but in that of the labour process as capitalist use of labour-power within the machinery system.

At the centre of the initial page of notebook XIX Marx wrote «*Theilung der Arbeit und mechanisches Atelier, Werkzeug und Maschinerie*», to carry out from there a long discussion that occupies the whole of Notebook XIX and the first ten pages of Notebook XX. The central question is that of the metamorphosis of the tool in the machine and the transition from craftsmanship as a determining factor of production to work as a subordinate and marginal factor with respect to the productive force of science. The machine, on this Marx is very clear, does not arise from the division of labour and the breakdown of labour operations. This was in fact the path that Adam Smith had followed, writing in the *Wealth of Nations*:

I shall only observe, therefore, that the invention of all those machines by which labour is so much facilitated and abridged, seems to have been originally owing to the division of labour. Men are much more likely to discover easier and readier methods of attaining any object, when the whole attention of their minds is directed towards that single object, than when it is dissipated among a great variety of things.⁹

Instead for Marx, the introduction of the machinery interrupts all historical continuity with the centrality of an anthropomorphic principle in production in favor of a production process that is autonomous from the knowledge and centrality of the human being.

Already in the *Grundrisse* he had written that the machine was born from the specialization of the instruments and their synthesis

⁹ A. Smith, *An inquiry into the nature and cause of the wealth of nations*, Elecbook Classics: 23-24. [Printed version, cf. *Ibid.*, London, Ward, Lock and Tyler, 1910, Ch. 1, p. 23 – ed- note.]

in an automatism that autonomized itself, through science, from the shape and limits of the human body. The theory of *formal* subsumption and of *real* subsumption, that Marx has already developed here, is based precisely on this autonomization of knowledge deposited in the machine by the knowledge and doing of the craftsman who in manufacture was one with his instrument.

The autonomization (differentiation) of the system of machines from the human body implies the radical transformation of the knowledge involved in the production process. We move from the competence and experience of the “partial worker”, i.e. of the *Teilarbeiter* of manufacturing, to the sciences of nature transformed into the materiality of the means of labour. As a consequence of this overcoming of the limits of the human body it is impossible to deduce the introduction the machine system moving from the manufacturing division of labour.

It is altogether erroneous to suppose that modern machinery originally appropriated those operations alone, which division of labour had simplified. Spinning and weaving were, during the manufacturing period, split up into new species, and the implements were modified and improved; but the labour itself was in no way divided, and it retained its handicraft character. It is not the labour, but the instrument of labour, that serves as the starting-point of the machine.¹⁰

For Marx “this subjective principle of the division of labour no longer exists in production by machinery”¹¹ and this disappearance of subjectivity means that work in the new factory system becomes abstract work, no longer highly individualized and particularized work like that of the *Teilarbeiter* of Manufacture, but work reduced

to a purely barren abstraction – a simple property which appears in unvarying monotony in the same operation and for which the total production capacity of the worker, the manifoldness of his abilities, is confiscated.¹²

Application of the natural sciences to production through the creation of the machinery and transformation of the virtuous and very particular work of the *Teilarbeiter* into abstract work: these are the two deeply connected characteristics for Marx of the factory as

¹⁰ K. Marx, *Capital*, vol. I, *Collected Works*, 35: 381n. [1967 London edition, cit., p. 378, n.]

¹¹ *Ivi*, 382. (1967 London edition, cit., p. 380)

¹² K. Marx, *MEGA II*, 3/1, p.252 (*1861-1863 Manuscripts*). [English trans. in R. Beamish Marx, *Method and the Division of Labor*, Urbana and Chicago, University of Illinois Press 1992, p. 109].

a new production system and as a specific object of the new science of *Technologie*.

With respect to this meaning of *Technologie*, it should be emphasized that Marx rarely uses the term *Technik* in *Capital* and in the preparatory manuscripts, while he uses the adjective technique that derives from it more frequently. I think that the term *Technik* in the Marxian lexicon refers to a much less structured and much less historically determined context of meaning. It means the ability of *homo faber*, in general, throughout the history of its species, to intervene on the work object through means and procedures appropriate to the peculiar characteristics of the work object. That is the term *Technik* refers to a production process seen from the anthropological perspective of the worker-producers and their skills, acquired through apprenticeship and generational transmission over time, in order, through tools and means of work, to make useful an initially useless work material.

In this view in Marx's texts of *Capital*, the term "Technik" generally has two meanings: it means, more frequently, either the *set of means of production*, that is, the physical set of tools or machinery for working objects of work, or, with fewer occurrences, the procedures, the skills of an art, that is, the systems of action of an actor oriented towards a productive end. It is a meaning that in both cases refers to the degree of development of the productive forces, in their relationship with nature and work materials, without considering the social relations between the means of work and the workforce.

Think of Marx's concepts of *technische Basis*, *technische Unterlage*, *technische Grundlage* or their synonym as *technische Bedingung* or, again, technical progress. Think also of the category of the "technical composition of capital" [*technische Zusammensetzung*], where the relationship between the means of production and the workforce is only physical, quantitative, and does not refer to the qualitative nature of the relationship.

In short, even if the occurrences of the terms *Technologie* and *Technik* in Marxian texts are not always distinguished precisely, I believe that it can be said that the two concepts are used by Marx with reference to the action of two different social actors: *Technik* refers to the history of the tools and means of work created and accumulated by man, as a characteristic of the human species, in its diversity from other living species, to know how to confront and

work nature (development and accumulation of productive forces over time), while *Technology* refers to a production system through machines created by science and at the same time under the control and direction of those who through the monopoly of science organize the specifically capitalist production process, in which the producers are themselves, like nature, made the object and subordinate elements of the work process.

Based on this diversity of meanings between *Technik* and *Technologie* it is legitimate, in my opinion, to theorize an expansion of the concept of *fetishism*, even if this formulation is not explicitly stated in Marx's text. Fetishism is not only the one explicitly theorized by Marx in the first book. It is not just that of the "commodities" that move autonomously themselves, of their own life, like fetishes. But it is also *the fetishism proper to capital*, when the meaning of *Technik* overlaps that of *Technologie*, making every dimension of domination and authoritarianism, every asymmetrical relationship and power between human beings disappear from the representation of the production system.

Fetishism means reification, concealment and dissimulation of the relationships between human beings in the body of things. Here, more as *capital fetishism* than *commodity fetishism*, it means a process of capital enhancement that disappears in the face of the objectivity of the work process: it means a process of social relationships, based on inequality and exploitation, that takes the form of a process marked by the objectivity and truth of science and, specifically today, by the creativity and intelligence of the new knowledge-worker.

We must not forget that the doctrine of fetishism in Marx's work is connected with a profound transformation of the concept of "ideology". With the Marxian theory of fetishism in *Capital*, *ideology* becomes intrinsic to the economic process. It is generated by the economic structure itself. It is no longer *false consciousness*, implemented by the abstract and fallacious thinking of philosophers and ideologists. Nor is ideology the production of ideas and images of the world that takes place within the superstructure, according to the indication of the *1859 Preface*. In *Capital*, ideology is the representative counterfeiting that the economic structure produces by itself, objectively, without the intervention, if not only acquisitive and passive, of human consciousness.

4. "Information" against "knowledge": the last ideology.

It is through this thesis of a structural fetishism, intrinsic to the production process, and today to be reread as the exchange between *Technologie* and *Technik*, that we can arrive at a critical analysis of the enormous transformation that we are experiencing today with the new information technologies applied to the production of capital. In other words, we can analyze the enormous mystification that happens through a surface of *technical* staging that hides the deeper *technologies* relationships of exploitation.

From this point of view I believe that, in the world of post-Fordism, the most widespread contemporary ideology is that of seeing new technologies as linked to the development of an intelligence and knowledge, both individual and collective, ever wider and always freer from slavery and repetition of Fordist manual work. The new ideology concerns the new information technologies conceived as techniques capable of putting an end to the anthropological era of labour as effort and initiating the new historical era of a work based on knowledge, and therefore characterized by the enhancement of the most creative and logical-discursive faculties of the human mind. It is the ideology of the easy establishment, through the fielding of new mental work with computer machines, of a collective subjectivity which, freed from the differences and heaviness of bodies, works an essentially common alpha-numeric language.

In my opinion, the core of this new ideology, linked to new technologies, consists in confusing *human knowledge* with the *transmission and processing of information*. It is, namely, an ideology which confuses the construction of *knowledge as interpretation*, as solving problems and clarifying with meanings the intricate and troubled spheres of life, with *the communication and calculation of information* through automatic procedures by systems of signs.

In order to better explain the difference between knowledge and information that I intend to propose to your attention, it is very useful, in my opinion, to refer to the conception of the cognitive process theorized in Spinoza's *Ethics*. In the second book of his more important work Spinoza writes:

The object of the idea constituting the human mind is the body, in other words a certain mode of extension which actually exists, and nothing else» (Spinoza, *Ethics*, II, prop. XIII).

And he adds in proposition XXIII:

The mind does not know itself, except in so far as it perceives the ideas of the modifications of the body.

This means that for Spinoza *the human mind first thinks of its own body*, assumes it as a privileged object and content. But the Jewish-Dutch thinker also emphasizes that the body itself is an individual formed by many individuals:

The human body is composed of a number of individual parts, of diverse nature, each one of which is in itself extremely complex (*Ethics*, II, Prop. XIII, postulate I).

The human body is a “society” made up of many parts and functions. The human mind takes care of this manifold organism by ensuring with its thought activity, as far as possible, to feed the plurality of the body with a variegated multiplicity of sources of energy and life present in the external world. The truth of knowledge, of the activity of the mind, lies in the degree of intensity that manages to ensure the body’s effort to maintain itself and to develop its life force, and it also lies in the degree of vital solicitation that is able to assure for all the components of his body. As is known, Spinoza defines the condition of maximum intensity of life of the body with the Latin term: *laetitia*. While defining the opposite condition of low vital activity of the various components of the body: *tristitia*. All this leads us to say that in Spinoza the *logical* value of knowing depends on the *biological* value of the «conatus». The maintenance and reproduction of the body organism, with the emotional feeling that accompanies them, is therefore the place of the *origin of meaning*: origin of the value, what distinguishes *good* from *evil*, *laetitia* from *tristitia*.

In this perspective the act of knowing (from language to the highest conceptual functions), is the activity of the mind that *does not create meaning*, but safeguards it, protects it and brings it to light: because it is able to bind the internal world of the body with the external world, allowing the body to practise the full set of relationships best suited to its life needs.

For all this Spinoza's *Ethics* looms large in the history of modern philosophy, because it has profoundly connected *body paths* and *thought paths*, and because he was the first in the history of Western culture to propose a *materialistic-corporeal conception of the distinction between good and evil*. According to Spinoza, in fact, that fundamental distinction does not arise from knowing but from feeling.

An *intellectualistic* ethic presupposes that good and evil are external objects, belonging to a tradition or an objective structure of reality. Whereas the *Ethics* of Spinoza considers *good* what increases the power of life of the emotional body of the human being and produces the feeling of "laetitia": whereas it considers *evil* what diminishes and saddens that same power of life, generating the feeling of "tristitia". This kind of passage from an *intellectualistic ethics of knowledge* to a *materialistic ethics of feeling* is still fundamental today, in my opinion, to understand the depth of the interpenetration of mind and body in human experience and to understand how much emotions, instead of abstract reason, can be a source of knowledge.

Over the past few decades, contemporary psychologists, psychoanalysts and neurobiologists have referred to this conception of Spinoza. Some of them have developed a so-called "two-axis anthropology", according to which the existence of the human being must be conceived as the organization of two constitutive axes. On the one hand the *vertical axis*, as the structure of all possible relationships between mind and body, between thought and emotional dynamics and on the other the *horizontal axis* as the structure of all possible relationships between that body / mind and the other external minds or external environment.

The nature of these two axes is deeply heterogeneous. Their characteristics, their way of proceeding, are different. Nevertheless according to these scholars it is fundamental to focus on their intertwining, following Spinoza's lesson, to access a deeply materialistic conception of life and in particular of human knowledge. The basic thesis of these scholars is in fact that the more the mind expands its external field and horizon of knowledge, the more it accesses a rich and deep drive dynamic on the vertical plane, and *vice versa*.

In biological terms this means that knowledge of the external world finds its original meaning in the way in which the unity of a

biological-emotional organism, such as the human body, pre-intents the environment, anticipating and promoting the purpose of its reproduction. Therefore even the most abstract and elaborate human knowledge finds its original and remote but no less present meaning (without falling into easy reductionisms) in the body-emotional system. It is always an organism, *as a unity*, that acts and moves, that attributes meaning to an incoming signal or perturbation.

But the peculiarity of the human brain is that of being able to fix, through abstraction and generalization, invariants, general concepts or general modalities of meaning and behaviour that can be used not only once, in a single context, but several times, by several people, in different and variable contexts. These invariants of knowledge, these formations of universal and generalized use, constitute information properly so called, the codification of which allows the accumulation and transmission of any fundamental cultural heritage for the reproduction of individual societies as for the history of humanity as a whole.

As is evident the choice and type of identification and communication of information codes – what signs to use, what the rules of their combination, what their grammars and syntax are – has profoundly marked the evolution of human history. In this sense we must recognize, that the greatest transformations in the history of human civilization have always been accompanied by profound revolutions in terms of the techniques of communication. In a very schematic way, it can be indeed summarized, as follows:

1. The invention of the alphabet made it possible to synthesize the entire field of communication, both oral and written, in just 25/30 signs, allowing humanity to get out of an iconographic communication, the use of which remained in the hands of few. In this way the alphabet represented the fundamental means of passage from a society based on an aristocratic-priestly culture to a society of culture potentially accessible to great masses of the population.

2. Many centuries later the other major step in the field of communication technique was certainly represented by the invention of printing and the abandonment of the amanuensis technique, with the enormous diffusion of the book and the written document that followed.

3. Today we are undoubtedly experiencing the third great revolution with computers, capable of transmitting and processing an enormous quantity of signs condensed in a small silicon unit¹³.

5. *The world as a «massive information process»*

However we must not forget what level of abstraction has been reached today by the mathematical coding that underlies the different computer languages. The modern invention of machines for transmission and processing of information, independently of meaning, as strings of dots and lines in Morse alphabet, *0s* and *1s* in today's computers, has fully detached information from any concrete and empirical meaning. *The enormous power to accumulate, process and transmit information today is founded on the possibility of translating the alphabetical code into numerical-mathematical code and in turn of translating the numerical-mathematical code into electronic signs, into energy differentials.* In this way the transmission and elaboration of information has become a mathematical science and information could be formally analyzed, elaborated and transmitted, independently of any interpretation.

The revolution of new technologies offers today, but even more in the future, an enormous possibility that the mankind may enter into communication with itself, reach a self-awareness of itself, precisely through the enormous ability to store and process information. However we must not forget that this enormous acceleration of information processing is based on a logic of moving signs according to formal rules prescribing how to write and re-write them. At the heart of computability, of computational approaches of the notion of information, lies the powerful promotion of *meaningless formalismus* as information carriers.

In the context of this technological revolution, contemporary ideology consists, as I have said, in seeing the world as «a massive information process», in which human intelligence itself is considered as a computational machine that processes information and which can be replaced by artificial intelligence, through machines which can process a huge amount of signs.

On the contrary I believe that it is necessary to maintain the profound difference between “sign” and “symbol”, with the

¹³ On this topic see the excellent book by Clarisse Herrenschildt, *Le trois écritures: langue, nombre, code*, Gallimard, Paris 2007.

distinction between *syntax* and *semantics* that this entails. In fact, a system of signs follows the formal rules of connection /disjunction, which constitute its grammar, for example those of a binary code with their respect for the principle of non-contradiction. These formal rules of movement of the signs are in fact “formal”, because they form a *syntax* that is independent of meaning. *Indeed alphabetical signs and numbers do not exist in nature.* On the contrary the symbol, from the perspective of the human sciences, is a sign that refers to a meaning, to a semantics, which actually directs our life, separating the good from the evil, and thus building intentions and the prospects of our agency in the world.¹⁴

I would say that the meaning of the signs as symbols is therefore what constitutes *the content, not reducible to the language of our life*, not reducible to any code, and which has its roots in the body of our memory and our feelings. Because it is by our memory and our feelings that we gradually build the perspectives, according to which we give organization and form to the world we are living in: precisely through an emotional memory that selects the important invariants in our experience and discards what is outside our vital interest.

This means, in a materialistic perspective, that knowledge is generated in the human being only when *knowledge* is deeply connected with *feeling*: a complex of feelings that give meaning to and direct our exchange, our “agency”, with respect to our biological and social environment. In the human being there is an indispensability of the body, physical and emotional, in building meaningful knowledge. As Giuseppe Longo states, the human brain, like the animal brain, forms information in the sense of knowledge through a way that is completely different from the way in which that same information will then be processed and formalized in the binary languages of the digital computer.¹⁵

¹⁴ The deeper reflections on this topic can be found, in my opinion, in G. Longo, *Information at the Threshold of Interpretation Science as Human Construction of Sense*, in *A Critical Reflection on Automated Science - Will Science Remain Human?*, Bertolaso M. and Sterpetti F. (eds), Cham (CH), Springer 2020, pp. 67-100. For a more in-depth knowledge of Giuseppe Longo’s extensive work see: <http://www.di.ens.fr/users/longo>.

¹⁵ G. Longo, *Information at the Threshold of Interpretation Science as Human Construction of Sense*, particularly p. 87 and following. But see also by the same author, *Quantifying the World and its Webs: Mathematical Discrete vs Continua in Knowledge Construction*, <https://www.di.ens.fr/users/longo/files//letter-to-Turing.pdf>. DOI:[10.1177/0263276419840414](https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276419840414).

But against a materialistic vision of the human being, based on the interaction of the two axes, vertical and horizontal, the exchange of knowledge with information and with computational approaches to information, an identity of human subjectivity is developing built only on a horizontal axis of identity and relationship, to the detriment of the development of the vertical axis.

This anthropology of the horizontal, due to the removal of the *vertical* dimension, makes impossible any critical distance from which individual and collective life processes can be evaluated and directed. It represents in fact the diffusion over the entire social body of a managerial behaviour, as a way of acting in a world connected, organized through the network, in a horizontal-rhizomatic world, where the primary competence consists in the ability to enter into relationship and to build bonds.

It is the production of a horizontal mind, as a typology of diffuse and mass mind, which therefore today is on the agenda as a fundamental anthropological function for the production and valorization of capital.

The myth of contemporary society of being a society of knowledge and creative participation of all in the world understood as a massive information process is central to this process.

This ideology, based on the exchange between knowledge and information, once again plays the appearance and surface of a concrete work that hides the reality of an abstract work.

It is said that new information technologies need increasingly communicative work performance and therefore a subject capable of interacting with his working environment through all his intelligence and mental skills, his autonomous ability to choose. According to this vision, in the flexible economy of post-Fordism the contexts of production and the market, because of the network organization that characterizes them, are increasingly complex and differentiated. In relation to this it is necessary to make full use of the complexity and elasticity of the human mind. Therefore today we need a performance with strong subjective participation and a degree of individualization that would refute the Marxian discourse on abstract labour, which can now only refer to the past for nineteenth-century and twentieth-century capitalism. According to this vision, with post-Fordist and post-industrial society, the effectiveness of work and concrete knowledge, the need for

personalized intervention, with respect to standardized models of behaviour, would have been extended to a very large extent.

In my opinion the verisimilitude of this discourse reflects only a surface reality, which in hindsight should be reversed. It seems to me that today it is the alpha-numeric language of computer machines that, with its binary codes – that is, codes that are simple and highly formalized – commands human intelligence. It is the computer language deposited in data processing programs that requires an environment that is already simplified and capable of being processed by the computer, which requires an environment with a very low degree of unpredictability. Nor is it a coincidence that the most efficient artificial intelligence systems are those that operate within very simplified work environments and are homologated to the limits of their calculation procedures.

I mean, in short, that the problem of new technologies today is not so much that they, in the near future, would put an end to human work, with the threat of integrally replacing the human mind with automation and artificial intelligence. It is instead that of a reduction/conformation of the world-environment, including workers of the mind, according to parameters mainly of simplification and quantitative measurement, suitable for constituting the massive information process database. The real problem is that of a superficialization of the world reduced to measurement fields and only quantitative evaluation, which exclude value-oriented criteria and parameters. That is, to use Max Weber's sociological language, criteria that are valid for acting, determined for purpose and not for value-oriented action, able to discuss, compare and choose between purposes.

In fact, the intelligence required by information technologies is an intelligence that can certainly operate and choose between several variables, but using programs that already in some way predetermine and force the field of possible answers. That is to say that the field of action of the intellectual worker can be incomparably more varied and polysemic than that of the ancient manual worker, but at the same time that same field is structured according to syntax and work sheets which, however many, refer to a semantics, a choice that is articulable and innovative meanings and aims within a given horizon. Even in this sense of a historically

given and unachievable horizon we can say that flexible and global capitalism increasingly needs a horizontal mind.

In conclusion I believe that it can be affirmed that if in Fordism the *Maschinerei-Arbeitskraft* system required the use of a *mindless body*, today the post-Fordist capitalist economy, in its most advanced places of development, requires a *mind without a body*. A mind that must be anaffective and decorporated and in which there is *knowledge without self-recognition*: that is acquisition and processing of information without recognition of the meaning and emotional value (and therefore of the ethical-political value) of their contents.

For this reason, the social and cultural movements, today critical of capitalism, cannot in my opinion avoid deepening the breadth of their social criticism and attempting, against the computer-dominated knowledge society, to intertwine and strengthen, with each other, the *critique of political economy* and the *critique of the libidinal economy*.

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The term “populism” in Gramsci’s Prison Notebooks

Abstract

The article opens by underlining that Laclau’s juxtaposition of Gramsci and populism is in part analogous to the operation carried out some decades ago by Alberto Asor Rosa and Rosario Romeo, although their evaluation was contrary to that of Laclau. We then attempt to demonstrate the limits of these interpretations, through a reconstruction of the national-popular theme in Gramsci: the correct interpretation of this category goes back not to the romantic imaginary of the Volkstum but to a development linked to the most enlightened circles of Russian culture. The national-popular thus alludes to a historically and nationally determined dimension, albeit one capable of universalization. This is confirmation of the non-“populist” nature of Gramsci’s argument. In his view, folklore has to be not idealized, but studied seriously, with the aim of superseding it in a paradigm that fuses together spontaneity and leadership, popular and high culture. As corroboration of this thesis we look at the ways in which the word “populism” is actually used in the Notebooks. The conclusion is that Gramsci, following Lenin’s example, referred “populism” to politico-cultural and literary phenomenologies unable to emancipate the people while, at the same time, he argued that it was necessary to understand and develop in a truly democratic perspective the social needs that populism expresses. This thesis is of great current relevance for those who believe that the social necessities lying behind the current “populist moment” must be understood in order to develop a higher “popular” perspective.

Keywords

People, class, populism, Volkstum, narodniki, national-popular

The term “populism” in Gramsci’s Prison Notebooks

Salvatore Cingari

1. Introduction

Populism is quite evidently a theme of the utmost topicality.¹ To investigate the real use of this term in Gramsci will prove useful to the contemporary theoretical-political debate, within the framework of its new actualization in the field of the radical left attempted by Laclau. It is noteworthy that Laclau’s interest in Gramsci originates from the opposite motive to that which, more than fifty years ago, prompted a young Asor Rosa to refute the legacy of communist leader in *Scrittori e popolo*, that is, the de-substantialization of the concept of “class” and an evaluation of the category of “people” not strictly identified with that of working class. Laclau is interested in *hegemony* as overcoming of idea of class. However, I am not going to discuss his use of Gramscian categories here.² But it is worthwhile to stress that, while for the Laclau³ of *On Populist Reason* the term “populism” is superimposed on the very idea of “the political” – to be taken as the space in which a “people” is built

¹ On this see D. Palano, *In nome del popolo sovrano? Il populismo nelle postdemocrazie contemporanee*, S. Cingari and A. Simoncini (eds), *Lessico postdemocratico*, Perugia, Perugia Stranieri University Press 2016, pp. 157-86.

² E. Laclau, *La razón populista*, Buenos Aires, Fondo de cultura economica 2005 (English translation; *On Populist Reason*, London, Verso 2005). I will confine myself to register what Geminello Preterossi has stressed as regards the fact that there was in Gramsci’s concept of “hegemony” much more “substance”, not in essentialist terms but in economic, social and cultural terms, than in Laclau’s linguistic-libidinal interpretation. This was what made Preterossi state: “Gramscian hegemony was not ‘populist’”. See G. Preterossi, *Ciò che resta della democrazia*, Roma-Bari, Laterza 2015, pp. 136-7.

³ In *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (London, Verso Books 1985), there was a distinction between “radical democracy” and “popular” politics: cf. E. Laclau and C. Mouffe, *Egemonia e strategia socialista* (1985), Genova, Il Melangolo, 2011 (for example, pp. 66-7, 87, 119-120, 127, 133, 210-13, 217; in the English translation, see pp. 22, 35, 63-4, 69, 72-3, 131-4, 137). The two authors distinguished a “right wing populism” from “radical democracy”, accepting Stuart Hall’s theses on Thatcherite populism, blending traditional values and freedom of enterprise in a new liberal-conservative hegemony (*Egemonia e strategia socialista*, pp. 252 and 254-5; *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, pp. 168 and 169-170). On this use of Gramscian categories see D. Boothman, “Introduzione”, in D. Boothman, F. Giasi, G. Vacca (a cura di), *Gramsci in Gran Bretagna*, Bologna, Il Mulino 2015, pp. 22-6 and Stuart Hall, *Popular-Democratic vs. Authoritarian Populism* in *Marxism and Democracy* (ed. A. Hunt), London, Lawrence and Wishart 1980, pp. 157-85; in Italian, *La politica del thatcherismo: il populismo autoritario, ivi*, pp.107-37.

against an “internal” enemy, by triggering a conflict that escapes the differentiating forms of the institutional wielding of power – in Gramsci “populism” means something totally different. Its connotation is Marxist-Leninist (which was then absorbed after the Second World War into the liberal-democratic lexicon): that is, a political ideology which praises the virtues of “the people”, without providing the instruments of a real emancipation. The historical example from which the word originates are the Russian populists. What is interesting, though, is that, in the *Notebooks*, Gramsci uses the term also to mean something closer to a contemporary usage, that is, to refer political-cultural movements, which are properly bourgeois, and even conservative, that focus on the “the people”.

It may be noted that, while in the pre-prison writings⁴ Gramsci seems to use the term according to a Bolshevik and Leninist interpretation,⁵ in the *Prison Notebooks* themselves he pays attention to populist sensitivity in areas which differ from those of the leftist movements. Gramsci does not subject the phenomenon to a denunciation but is interested in its deep social core, to be developed into a genuinely “popular” politics. In this light, the authentic lesson that Gramsci’s writings offer us seems to detach itself at the same time from a certain contemporary use of the term “populism”, intended as a hallmark of positions that are critical of inequalities, and from the tendency of progressive or liberal socio-cultural communities to liquidate the popular success of populist leaderships, even reactionary ones, as purely “pathological” phenomena.

However, it is necessary first to focus on the question of “populism” of which Gramsci was charged in the past (cf. Asor Rosa, above) and on the category of the national-popular.

⁴ It is thanks to Michele Filippini, who was in charge of digitalizing Gramsci’s pre-prison writings, that we are able to identify the few occurrences of the term: A.Gramsci, *Fuori del dilemma*, in “Avanti!”, 29 Novembre 1919; id. *Operai e contadini*, in “Avanti!”, 20 Febbraio 1920; id. *Nel paese di Pulcinella*, in “Avanti!”, 20 Ottobre 1920; Id., *Vladimiro Ilic Ulianov*, “L’Ordine nuovo”, Marzo 1924, pp. 2-4; Id., *Il partito repubblicano. II*, “l’Unità”, 22 ottobre 1926.

⁵ On Lenin’s critique of populism, see in English: Lenin, 1893, 1894 and 1894-5, and also Lenin 1899 (for these references in Italian and English, see the attached Bibliography of Lenin’s works quoted in this contribution.) Lenin considered populism a utopian and subjective movement, driven by petit-bourgeois tendencies, and incapable of formulating a realistic analysis of capitalism, while being inclined, on the one hand to idealize the obščina and other forms of traditional agricultural property without realizing its pre-capitalistic and unequal potential, and on the other to misunderstand the progressive character of capitalism itself as compared to pre-modern forms of dependence.

2. *The Question of Populism in Gramsci and the National-Popular*

First, it is crucial to clarify that in Gramsci the organic-hegemonic reorganization of a differentiated popular mass always aims at “politically” transcending the original stage into which the “people” were, to use a Heideggerian concept, “thrown” [*geworfen*]. As is well known, Gramsci’s attention to folklore never showed any condescending attitude or populist complacency towards the “Little World of the Past” for which – at the limit – he showed feelings of *pietas*.⁶ There was no cult of the natural *naïvité* of the people, as would emerge in the socialist realism of the inter-war period.⁷ Spontaneity and conscious leadership were one and the same thing in the *Notebooks*, and Gramsci always thought that an antagonistic cultural autonomy had to be directed at the appropriation of high culture, renewing it without appearing external or alternative to it.⁸

On the other hand, Asor Rosa’s theses in *Scrittori e popolo* (*Writers and People*) – a book born on the wave of the impact caused by Mario Tronti’s *Operai e capitale*⁹ – lose part of their merit in the light of the sociological decline of the workers as subjects, whose centrality was all founded on his analyses. We should remind ourselves that Asor Rosa himself then acknowledged, towards the end of the eighties, that the possibility for the working class to seize power no longer existed, although he continued to defending the

⁶A. M. Cirese, *Concezioni del mondo, filosofia spontanea, folklore*, in P. Rossi (ed.), *Gramsci e la cultura contemporanea*, vol. II, Roma, Editori Riuniti, 1970, pp. 297-328. See also *Id.*, *Intelletuali, folklore, istinto di classe* (1975), Torino, Einaudi, 1976, pp. 108 e 117; C. Tullio Altan, *Populismo e trasformismo. Saggio sulle ideologie politiche italiane*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 1989, pp. 293-4; G. M. Boninelli, *Frammenti indigesti. Temi folclorici negli scritti di Antonio Gramsci*, Roma, Carocci, 2007, pp. 18 and 179; F. Dei, *Dal popolare al populismo: ascesa e declino degli studi demologici in Italia*, in “Meridiana”, n. 77, 2013, pp. 83-100; *Gramsci, Cirese e la tradizione demologica italiana*, in “Lares”, n. 3, 2011, pp. 501-18; *Id.*, *Popolo, popolare, populismo*, International Gramsci Journal, 2(3), 2017, pp. 208-38. For Antonio Fogazzaro’s *The Little World of the Past* see among other references in the *Quaderni del carcere*, Q1§44, p. 43; in English *Prison Notebooks* (henceforward *PN*), Vol. 1, ed. and trans. J. A. Buttigieg (with the help of A. Callari), New York, Columbia University Press 1992, p. 139. Vols. 2 (covering notebooks 3, 4 and 5) and 3 (notebooks 6, 7 and 8), referred to later, came out in 1996 and 2007 respectively with the same publisher.

⁷ See R. Mordenti, *I Quaderni del carcere di Antonio Gramsci*, in *Letteratura italiana*, ed. A. Asor Rosa, vol. 16, Torino, Einaudi, 2007, p. 302.

⁸ See R. Mordenti, *op.cit.*, pp. 302-4.

⁹ See M. Tronti, *Operai e capitale*, Torino, Einaudi, 1966, pp.79 (“la classe operaia rifiuta politicamente di farsi *popolo*”: “the *working class* refuses politically to become a *people*”) and 84 (“il popolo ha da difendere i suoi diritti, la classe operaia deve richiedere il potere”: “the people has its rights to defend, the working class has to demand power”), 102, 108, 110-111, 196, 217, 233, 242, 245. In English, cf. *Id.*, *Workers and Capital* (trans. David Broder), London, Verso 2019.

structure and the significance of *Scrittori e popolo* in view of its capability to supply instruments able to demystify ideology and to look at the world from a *different* perspective from the dominant one.¹⁰

However, a number of years before that, Asor Rosa had already reassessed Gramsci's advanced attention for the more modern economic-productive processes in his notebook on Americanism. This happened despite the fact that he continued to underline the idealist matrix of such a perspective of intellectual and moral reform aimed at through economic-structural changes. And he also highlighted the fact that in Gramsci the "socialization" of Fordism seemed to lay undue emphasis on capitalism itself.¹¹ In his book on culture in the *Storia d'Italia* published by Einaudi in 1975, Asor Rosa does not hint at taking up again the position he expressed in *Scrittori e popolo*,¹² essentially attributing Gramsci's continuity with a specific humanist-bourgeois tradition to Togliatti's interpretation of his writings in the post-war era.¹³

And yet, Asor Rosa is not the only one who advocated a "populist" connotation for Gramsci's thought. We may refer to Rosario Romeo and his *Risorgimento e capitalismo*.¹⁴ Disputing Gramsci's propositions on the rural-democratic revolution which had not been endorsed by the *Partito d'azione*, Romeo argues that the national-popular category in Gramsci originates from the Russian *narodnost'*, which is in turn a calque of the German *Volkstum*; and, he adds, such a transposition via Herzen and the slavophiles had been reformulated democratically prior to entering Russian revolutionary thought. The German origin of this Russian term proposed by Romeo is taken from Franco Venturi,¹⁵ who, in his monumental reconstruction of the revolutionary currents of nineteenth-century Russia, was in all truth far from wanting to denounce any reactionary and anti-modern components; on the contrary, at times the reconsideration seems to criticize Leninist or deterministic outlooks

¹⁰ See A. Asor Rosa, *Scrittori e popolo. Il populismo nella letteratura italiana contemporanea*, Torino, Einaudi 1988, pp. VII-VIII.

¹¹ A. Asor Rosa, *Intellettuali e classe operaia. Saggi sulle forme possibili di uno storico conflitto e di una possibile alleanza*, Firenze, La Nuova Italia 1973, pp. 545-88.

¹² See A. Asor Rosa, *La cultura*, in *Storia d'Italia*, Vol. IV, Tomo II, Torino, Einaudi 1975, pp. 1439-48, 1456-64, 1548-67.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp.1593-5.

¹⁴ R. Romeo, *Risorgimento e capitalismo* (1959), Bari, 1963 (second edition, 1970 reprint), p. 26n.

¹⁵ F. Venturi, *Il populismo russo*, Einaudi, 1952.

via a perspective, as Walter Benjamin argued, that in order to proceed one needs at times to look back to the past.

In actual fact, as has been noted by Maria Bianca Luporini¹⁶ the *narodnost'*-*Volkstum* connection is flawed. As a concept the *nazionale-popolare* – this is the form Gramsci used, not the one which elides the first “e” *nazional-popolare* (used even by scholars of the calibre of Norberto Bobbio, Omar Calabrese, and Luigi Firpo) or even the fusion of the two terms in *nazionalpopolare* – does not refer to Russian populism as much as to the debate, at a high cultural level, between classicism and romanticism in the figures of the poet and literary critic P. A. Vjazemskij (an admirer of French liberal thinkers), Puškin, the Dekabrist Turgenev, and the philosopher and literary critic V. G. Belinskij. Even Tolstoj, defending himself from the populists’ accusation of having failed to represent the people in *War and Peace*, argued that he had instead represented *narodnost'*: national and popular, even though in his novel it was incarnated in members of the upper classes. We should not therefore refer to *Volkstum* as the source of *narodnost'*; rather, we should look at the French *nationalité*. Gramsci in fact translated *narodnost'*, which is at the same time *popular* and *national*. The step towards *national-popular*, which allows for the assimilation of the term in popular language, which seems parallel to attempted appropriations of Gramsci by the “national right”, is due to such a misconception. M. B. Luporini argued that the reference to “Russian revolutionary thought” in Gramsci’s term is linked to its mistaken identification with “populism”. And yet, for Puškin, *narodnost'* was present in Shakespeare, in Lope de Vega, in Ariosto, in Racine and in Calderon (*O narodnosti v literature*), just as for Gramsci the national-popular is to be found in the Greek classics, in Shakespeare, in Tolstoj, in Verdi.¹⁷ And, in referring to Romeo in *Scrittori e popolo*, even Asor Rosa had resorted to the idea of the Russian and populist origin of the national-popular, using the category to distinguish Dante from Petrarch.¹⁸

¹⁶ See M. B. Luporini, *Alle origini del “nazionale-popolare”*, in G. Baratta e A. Catone (eds), *Antonio Gramsci e il “progresso intellettuale di massa”*, Milano, Unicopli 1987, pp. 43-51.

¹⁷ See L. Paggi, *Antonio Gramsci e il moderno principe*, Vol. I, *Nella crisi del socialismo italiano*, Roma, Editori Riuniti, 1970, pp. 184-5.

¹⁸ M. B. Luporini, *op.cit.*, p. 47.

In drawing attention to this analysis of Luporini's, Lea Durante¹⁹ has more recently restated the “non-populist” nature of the “people-nation” and the “national popular” concepts in Gramsci. Asor Rosa's intention was influenced by a liberating drive in the light of the official interpretation of the PCI, which Togliatti gave of his guiding light,²⁰ an interpretation which adhered too closely to the historicist-idealistic paradigm.²¹ Furthermore, the fact that the national-popular cannot be identified with common sense is illustrated by Gramsci's critical analysis when applying the very notion to Croce's thought. Durante has noted how in Gramsci's “national-popular” – at times referred to as “popular-national” – also alludes to the dimension of the State.

Luporini's and Durante's analyses have been reinforced by an essay by Giancarlo Schirru, in which another tessera is introduced in the mosaic of Gramsci's “national-popular”, that is, the debt towards the internal debate in Bolshevik culture in the early 1920s on the need to valorize the nationalities of the non-Russian languages, so as to realize a type of hegemony that could be questioned exactly by setting off from a sense of belonging based on identity. A similar stance was taken by Palmiro Togliatti in the postwar period.²²

The notion of the “national-popular” stems then, in Gramsci, from the necessity to recompose the romantic-historicist phase in the development of thought and of political projects in the solidity of material and cultural relationships, but also in close connection with the necessity to enfranchise the popular classes from the elements of a subaltern nature in a national-popular subject aspiring to become international, just as the “non-class class”.²³ Gramsci's interest in the national popular reverberations in the work of Alfredo

¹⁹ See L. Durante, *Nazionale-Popolare*, in *Le parole di Gramsci. Per un lessico dei Quaderni del carcere*, Roma, Carocci, 2004, pp.150-169.

²⁰ F. Frosini has given some attention to Togliatti's “populistic” interpretation of Gramsci in F. Frosini, *Prefazione* to G. Savant, *Bordiga, Gramsci e la Grande Guerra (1914-1920)*, Napoli 2016, p. 14.

²¹ See R. Mordenti, op.cit., pp. 325-30.

²² See. G. Schirru, *Nazionalpopolare*, in F. Giasi, R. Gualtieri, S.Pons (a cura di), *Pensare la politica. Scritti per Giuseppe Vacca*, Roma, Carocci, pp. 239-53.

²³ See G. Baratta, *Le rose e i Quaderni*, Roma, Carocci, 2003, pp. 47, 158. In this sense, no appropriation of Gramsci from right-wing readings appears legitimate when based on the idea of the “territoriality” of truth and therefore the idea of Gramsci as an “Italian thinker” put forward by Diego Fusaro in *Antonio Gramsci* (Milano, Feltrinelli, 2015) seems misleading. Even the rightist Italian journalist and political philosopher Marcello Veneziani has highlighted the impossibility of assimilating Gramsci into Italian conservatism, given the “illuministic” root of the concept of the “national popular” (M. Veneziani, *La rivoluzione conservatrice in Italia*, Roma, SugarCo 1994, pp. 89-93 and 254).

Oriani²⁴ derived from his interest in the relation between intellectuals and the question of the “people-nation”, but also from the necessity to make the working movement come up to the challenge posed by fascism which, as argued by George L. Mosse, did not wish to “educate” or “refine” the workers’ tastes, but was happy with the “common man’s preferences” so as to make them instrumental to its own ends.²⁵ However, the fact remains that most references to Oriani in the *Notebooks* were negative and reductive, due to the “provincial” nature of his legacy and his message.²⁶ Something similar can be argued in relation to Vincenzo Gioberti’s influence on Gramsci’s reflections regarding the “popular” and the “national” – as rightly analysed by Asor Rosa²⁷ – an influence that Gramsci would then develop, through his immersion in Russian culture, in a different interpretation of history, as he had done in relation to Vincenzo Cuoco’s “passive revolution”.²⁸ Gramsci’s appreciation of Gioberti, the author of the *Primato Morale e Civile degli Italiani*²⁹ as also for other Italian moderates, possessing a greater realism than the democrats, cannot be viewed in isolation from his general evaluation of the moderate and “innovative-conservative” paradigm achieved by linking together Gioberti and Croce or even Proudhon.³⁰

²⁴ See Gramsci Q9§42, p. 1121 (first draft “A text”); Q8§165, p. 1040 (sole draft “B text”); and Q23§8, p. 2196; in English cf. *Selected Cultural Writings* London, Lawrence and Wishart 1985 (henceforward *SCW*), ed. D. Forgacs and G. Nowell-Smith and trans. W. Q. Boelhower, pp. 214-5 (second draft “C text”, including material from Q9§42).

²⁵ G.L. Mosse, *L’uomo e le masse nelle ideologie nazionaliste*, Roma-Bari, Laterza 1982, p. 178; in the original English *Masses and Man: Nationalist and Fascist Perceptions of Reality*, New York, Fertig 1980.

²⁶ A. Gramsci, *Quaderni del carcere*, vol. I, Q1§100, Q4§68, Q6§68 (pp. 95, 512, 735-736 respectively); vol. II, Q9§56 and Q9§107 (pp. 1130 e 1172 respectively) and vol. III, Q19§5 (p. 1977); all except the last-mentioned are to be found with this paragraph numbering in *PN*, Vols. 1, 2 and 3, *cit.*; the part cited from Q19§5 is not as yet in an English-language anthology. The aspect referred to in the text is not taken into account by S. Valitutti (*Origini e presupposti culturali del nazionalismo in Italia*, in R. Lill, *Il nazionalismo in Italia e in Germania fino alla prima guerra mondiale*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 1983, pp. 100-1). Valitutti underlines Gramsci’s “recognition” of Oriani as the representative of an “Italian national-popular grandeur”, without further contextualizing it in its wider and quite differently articulated judgment that may be reconstructed from the *Notebooks*.

²⁷ See A. Asor Rosa, *Scrittori e popolo*, 1965, pp. 264-70 (1979 edition, pp. 213-8). Norberto Bobbio touches on Asor Rosa’s point in his famous study *Gramsci e la concezione della società civile*, in P. Rossi (ed.), *Gramsci e la cultura contemporanea*, *cit.*, Vol. 1 p. 97n. More recently, Gioberti’s influence on Gramsci’s “national-popular” has been emphasized by D. Fusaro, *op. cit.*, p. 54.

²⁸ See L. Durante, *op. cit.*, pp. 163-4.

²⁹ See A. Gramsci, *Quaderni*, Q1§46, p. 55 (*PN* Vol. 1, *cit.*, p. 152) and vol. III, pp. 1914-5.

³⁰ See *Quaderni*, Q7§79, p. 912; Q8§30, p. 959; Q8§39, p. 966, Q10I§6, p. 1220; Q10II§41XIV, p. 1326, Q13§18, p. 1592; Q14§72, p. 1740 and Q15§11, p. 1766. All here up to Q8 are in *PN* Vol 3, *cit.*; Q10I§6 and Q10II§41XIV are in *Further Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. D. Boothman, London, Lawrence and Wishart 1995, pp. 342 and 373-4 respectively; for

3. *The Prison Notebooks*

We shall now proceed to examine the use Gramsci makes of the term “populism” in his *Prison Notebooks*.

In the adjectival form or as a noun the terms “populismo/populista” in the *Notebooks*, just as in the early writings, are rarely used by Gramsci, even though he does use these terms more than is indicated in the subject index list at the end of the Einaudi Italian edition; even the *Dizionario gramsciano*, published by Carocci, is not very comprehensive as regards such a usage.³¹ We should also include all the passages where he uses the Russian term *narodniki* and others. Though Domenico Mezzina’s entry in the *Dizionario* has the merit of bringing to the fore such a crucial question, it seems to focus only on the negative shades of the concept in Gramsci, without paying too much attention to its semantic intricacy. In my view, the way he deals with this subject highlights what is only partly a negative assessment. On the one hand Gramsci speaks of populism in terms that are very far from the use made of them in Laclau’s interpretation of the concept: for Gramsci, populism is considered a cultural-political habit incapable of emancipating the popular masses. And yet he sees in it features of interest in so far as it may be taken as a way to bridge the gap between the intellectuals and the people, in a socio-cultural scenario such as the Italian one, where this relationship was never very easy. It is this shade of meaning which a young Asor Rosa thought Gramsci to be guilty of: as compared to the era of the factory councils he had, so to speak, carried out a “Moderate” involution with respect to with “working-class autonomy”, and had become more and more interested in the “people” in its genericity, thereby making his own message appeal to the moderate-and-transformist paradigm of post-unification Italy, a paradigm that was modernizing and at the same time conservative.

It is quite obvious how the semantic enrichment of the usage of the term “populism” in the *Prison Notebooks* as compared to the early writings (which is, as I suggested, in line with Lenin’s use of it), is linked to the different framework of political and internal motivations which animated Gramsci’s thought: it was necessary, during the prison years, to the reasons for the defeat of the

Q15§11, see *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Q. Hoare and G. Nowell-Smith, London, Lawrence and Wishart 1971, p. 108.

³¹ See D. Mezzina, entry in G.Liguori e P.Voza, *Dizionario gramsciano. 1927-1936*, Roma, Carocci 2009, pp. 654-6.

workers' movements, and to elaborate a higher vision of politics capable not just of developing antagonisms, but also of understanding the core truth in the discourse of enemies and adversaries.

However, let us now take a close look at Gramsci's words where the term appears, beginning from the places in which the meaning is still the canonical one. In Q8§35, in which Gramsci criticizes the abstract nature of the agrarian reform program put forward by Giuseppe Ferrari, a parallel is created with "Bakunin, and the Russian *narodniki* in general: the landless peasants are mythologized for the 'pandestruction'", however, Ferrari (and Gramsci notes that he is "not against inheritance of the capitalist kind"), unlike Bakunin, was "aware of the liberalizing nature of the reform".³² By the same token, in Q15§52,³³ while discussing Nello Rosselli's book on Pisacane,³⁴ Gramsci disagrees with the interpretation of Pisacane as a "precursor" of Sorel. His "popular initiative" is, rather, coloured by "extreme 'populist' tendencies", that is to say, Russian nihilism, the "theory of 'creative pandestruction' (even with the low-life underworld)"; and the flaws of the democrats as ruling class, unlike the Russian Jacobins can be referred to this – though Rosselli does not mention such a connection. It goes without saying that the reference to Russian populism in this passage (as in the pre-prison works) makes Romeo's thesis of Gramsci's "populism" animated by an idea of the national popular originated in Russia, even more problematic. Let us see now how the use of the term populism in Gramsci is rather more complex than this.

4. *The Semantic Slide*

In Notebook 3 Gramsci equates the *narodniki* (but also the social-revolutionaries or the Slav national-socialists) to the Italian socialist movement, because of the presence of individuals of bourgeois origin who endorsed the cause of the proletariat only to opportunistically "return to the fold" in times of crisis (in the Italian case this happened with the advent of nationalist trade unionism and with fascism itself). Populism then, becomes the

³² See A. Gramsci, *Quaderni del carcere, cit.*, Q8§35, pp. 961-2; PN Vol. 3, p. 257.

³³ *Ibid*, Q15§52, pp. 1815-6.

³⁴ See N. Rosselli, *Carlo Pisacane nel Risorgimento italiano* (1932), Torino, Einaudi 1977, pp. 219-24.

result of a detachment between “ruled” and “rulers” rather than the mark of a short circuit.³⁵

Elsewhere in the Notebooks Gramsci seems almost to bring Asor Rosa’s *Scrittori e società* to the reader’s mind. In Notebook 6 (1930-1932) he comments on an article by Arrigo Cajumi³⁶ on Giovanni Cena,³⁷ in the journal “Italia letteraria” (24 November 1929). The passage is quite interesting since the term “populism” is referred to a literary feeling, alluding to the historico-political topos of “going to the people” Concerning Cena, Cajumi wrote (Gramsci’s comments are in brackets):

A self-educated man who miraculously escaped from the brutalizing experience of his father’s work and from his small native town, Cena unconsciously became part of the movement which in France – continuing a tradition (!) deriving (!) from Proudhon on (!) through Vallès and the Communards up to Zola’s *Quatres évangiles*, the Dreyfus affair, and the Popular Universities of Daniel Halévy, and which continues today in Guéhenno (!) (rather than in Pierre Dominique and others) – was defined as going to the people. (Q6§42; PN Vol. 3, p. 33 and SCW p. 270).

And here are Gramsci’s observations:

Cajumi takes a catchphrase of today, used by the populists, and transports it into the past. In the past, from the French Revolution up to Zola, there was never a split between the people and the writers in France. The symbolist reaction created a wide gap between people and writers, between writers and life; Anatole France is the perfect example of a bookish and caste writer. (*loc. cit.*)

The use of the term “populism” is, then, here referred on the one hand to a movement which *aspired to being popular* but, differently from the pre-Zola phase, *did not succeed in so being*, and maintained an élitist separation from the “people” itself; on the other, it refers to a writer who – as Gramsci notes – in mixing socialist orientations and openings to nationalism, anticipated fascism:

³⁵ On this see G. Schirru, p. 252. I owe to Schirru’s essay the passages in which Gramsci uses the term *narodniki*.

³⁶ A journalist, Arrigo Cajumi (1899-1955) began writing in *La Stampa*. Dissenting from the regime, he adopted left-liberal positions (after WWII he would write for Pannunzio’s *Mondo*), yet was critical of Croce’s idealism.

³⁷ Q6§42, pp. 716-9; PN Vol. 3, pp. 32-5.

In his article “Che fare?” [“What is to be done?”] Cena wanted to fuse the nationalists with philo-socialists like himself. But, in the end, wasn’t this petty bourgeois socialism à la De Amicis an embryonic form of national socialism that attempted to advance itself in so many ways in Italy and found fertile ground in the postwar period? (Q6§42; *PN*, Vol. 3, pp. 34-5 and *SCW*, p. 271).

This usage of the term populism, albeit originating from its own semantic domain, aims at defining a political phenomenology at one and the same time “*élitist-bourgeois*” (though striving to show the popular features) and right-wing, hence anticipating the future developments of the political lexicon.³⁸ It will then be of interest to look at the passages in which Gramsci’s reasoning becomes more articulated and intent on the explication of the reasons for populist positions. In a different passage from Notebook 6,³⁹ Gramsci starts from an article by Alberto Consiglio⁴⁰ published in “*Nuova Antologia*” (April 1, 1931) entitled *Populism and the New Tendencies of French Literature*.⁴¹ Consiglio classifies as populist writers who seem to “address popular readers, or who write works based on popular subjects”.⁴² We are dealing with a type of leftist literature influenced by communist culture, which aims at representing the life of working-class people “in an extremely objective manner and through cold accounts”, whose ambition was therefore to be read by proletarians. As well as to Gide and Mauriac, Consiglio also refers to Romain Rolland, Duhamel, Chamson, Prévost, Thérive, Carco, Guéhenno. And yet, in his view, theirs are at the end of the day intellectualistic experiments capable of attracting only the interest of intellectuals. To be sure, he believed that “the people was and still is absent from true art”.⁴³ The difference between them and the serialized literature of the likes of Ponson du Terrail and Dumas could not be bigger, as the latter aimed at being read by the *élite*, though appealing mainly to the people. “Populism” is then here

³⁸ A still tentative research in need of further confirmations into Italian dictionaries of the first four decades of the century, shows that the term “populism” was never included, not even in the authoritative *Enciclopedia Treccani*. Here it was absent till 1958, whereas the *Dizionario enciclopedico italiano* (published by Treccani) of the same year has it only in reference to the Russian and the North American movements.

³⁹ A. Gramsci, *Quaderni del carcere*, cit., Q6§171, pp. 820-1; in English *PN* Vol 3, p. 127.

⁴⁰ Alberto Consiglio (Napoli, 1902-1973), journalist and writer, was a member of the PNM (National Monarchist Party) after WWII.

⁴¹ A. Consiglio, *Populismo e nuove tendenze della letteratura francese*, in “*Nuova antologia*”, 1 April 1931, pp. 380-9.

⁴² “*Nuova Antologia*”, 1 April 1931, p. 381.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 388.

intended as the tendency to speak of the people as well as the will to be read by the people. We are still within the limits of the established political meaning of the term, given that the viewpoint is still that of the communist left, though not yielding any truly emancipatory result.

The comparison with Italy is very significant: Consiglio had referred to the “polemical attitude” of Strapaese and Stracittà (“Super-Country” and “Super-City”) which – he wrote – “focused respectively on parochial literature and on the serial novel”.⁴⁴ Hence, we are not just dealing with a “rural” or traditional populism, but also with an urban and modern one (as in the intentions of Stracittà).

Gramsci overtly stretches Consiglio’s interpretation (which rather aimed at criticizing a literary tendency hegemonized by leftist ideologies):

faced with the growth of the political and social power of the proletariat and its ideology, some segments of the French intellectual set are reacting with these movements “toward the people”. In that case the effort to get closer to the people signals a revival of bourgeois thought, which does not want to lose its hegemony over the popular classes, and, in order to exercise this hegemony better, it embraces a part of proletarian ideology. (Q6§168 p. 820; in English *PN* Vol. 3, p. 126)

What Consiglio considered a futile intellectualism was for Gramsci a tendency deserving of being taken seriously also from a political point of view:

This would constitute a return to “democratic” forms that are more substantial than the “formal” democracy of the present time. It remains to be seen if a phenomenon of this kind is also of great historical importance and whether it represents a necessary transitional phase and an episode in the indirect “education of the people”. It would be interesting to construct a list of “populist” tendencies and analyze each one of them: one might “discover” one of Vico’s “ruses of nature” – that is, how a social impulse, directed toward one goal, achieves its opposite. (*loc. cit.*)

In this context it is worth noting the interesting analysis carried out by Fabio Frosini. He reminds us that Gramsci’s interpretations of phenomena which he never considered populist – although they

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 382.

would become paradigmatic instances of populism (such as Bonapartism or Boulangism) – exemplify the ruling class’s specific modality of reaction to the growing frailty of the “trench war” strategy adopted by liberalism in order to keep down the working class. The result is a dynamic populist war: a passive revolution that promises inclusion and radical changes to the people, and while ultimately maintaining class division and exclusion, is thus put into operation.⁴⁵ We should not ignore, however, that in the above passage Gramsci seems to argue that populism, albeit intended as a bourgeois cultural-political attitude, an attitude which allows one to look at the people from just another hegemonizing social position, can even in the end be taken to stand for a transitional stage towards the overcoming of the bourgeoisie itself, that is, a supersession of a merely formal democracy.

The passage may indeed be fruitfully re-read in the light of another, in which Francesco De Sanctis’s literary criticism is taken into account. In Notebook 23 (1934) Gramsci seems to allude to a positive use of the term “populism”. De Sanctis, to be sure, in the last phase of his intellectual career, focused on naturalism and *verismo* which were for Gramsci, in Western Europe

the “intellectualist” expression of a more general movement of “going to the people”. It was a populist expression of several groups of intellectuals towards the end of the past century, after the democracy of 1848 had disappeared and after large masses of workers had emerged with the development of large urban industry. (Q23§1, pp. 2185-6; *SCW* pp. 91-3, here p. 92)

The lack of “faith” and “culture” denounced by De Sanctis in *La scienza e la vita* needed a “coherent, integral and nationwide ‘conception of life and man’”. This implied a unification of the intellectual class but also

a new attitude towards the popular classes and a new concept of what is “national”, different from that of “historical Right”, broader, less exclusive and, so to speak, less police-like. (Q23§1, pp. 2185-6; *SCW* pp. 92-3)⁴⁶

⁴⁵ F. Frosini, “Pueblo” y “guerra de position” como clave del populismo. Una lectura de los “cuadernos de la cárcel”, in *Cuadernos de ética y filosofía política de Antonio Gramsci*, n. 3, 2014, pp. 63-82.

⁴⁶ [The *SCW* translation omits the adjective “historical” from the text, though then going on to explain it in a footnote – editorial note]

Here we find again the analysis of the *national-popular* which a young Asor Rosa would blame Gramsci for, as he considered the intellectual guilty of allowing himself to be soaked up in the moderatism of the Italian tradition. And yet, Asor Rosa⁴⁷ mentions only one single instance of Gramsci's use of the term "populism", that is, a passage from Notebook 15 written in 1933 (Q15§58, pp.1820-2; in English *SCW*, pp. 99-102) regarding an article by Argo (probably the pseudonym of Luigi Chiarini, and certainly not Vittorio Ciampi⁴⁸) published in *Educazione fascista*.⁴⁹ The article is a critical analysis of an essay by Paul Nizan published in *La Revue des Vivants*.⁵⁰ Argo blamed Nizan for having fostered the idea that a revolutionary work of art could only be characterized by a "proletarian revolution". Argo thought that Fascism was revolutionary too, and that working-class life could not be reduced to class conflict. Without dealing with this aspect, and formally granting some kind of reason to Nizan's position (then still in line with Stalin's positions),⁵¹ Gramsci discusses the "only sensible objection" formulated by this fascist author, which he then uses to trigger a wider reflection on "the impossibility of going beyond a national and autochthonous stage of the new literature and the 'cosmopolitan' dangers of Nizan's conception" (Q15§58, p. 1820; *SCW* p. 100). From this perspective, according to Gramsci, Nizan's many criticisms of French intellectuals needed to be revised, and among them he places those which are referred to "populism". For Argo "populism" was to be intended in terms of the "popular picturesque" of

⁴⁷ A. Asor Rosa, *Scrittori e popolo*, Roma, Samonà e Savelli, 1965, pp. 271-2; 1979 edition p. 220.

⁴⁸ Valentino Gerratana, in his name index to the *Notebooks* refers to a certain Vittorio Ciampi who used the pseudonym Argus. However, in two different sources quoted in "Indice biografico degli italiani", he appears to have been born in 1920 (in Lucera). Gerratana, in a note to a comment by Gramsci on Nizan, refers to a "contributor to 'Educazione fascista' who signed himself Argo", but he does not mention Ciampi. Even Asor Rosa spoke of a "certain Argo" (1988 edition, p.180). Argo should in fact be identified with Luigi Chiarini. R.Ben-Ghiat (*La cultura fascista*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2000, pp. 57-58) contends that Luigi Chiarini was in charge of the columns *Idee d'oltre confine*, which hosted Argo's piece discussed by Gramsci. I owe this last detail to Dr. Luisa Righi of Fondazione Gramsci di Roma.

⁴⁹ Cf. Argo, *Idee d'oltre confine*, "Educazione fascista", March 1933, pp. 264-8.

⁵⁰ P.Nizan, *Letteratura rivoluzionaria in Francia*, in "La revue des vivants", September-October 1932, now in P.Nizan, *Letteratura e politica. Saggi per una nuova cultura* (ed. S. Suleiman), Verona, Bertani editore, 1973, pp. 34-42.

⁵¹ Gramsci stressed that Nizan's critical positions on the *Le Monde* group had to be re-read, as it had been considered "socialdemocratic" and "radical-socialist", and therefore rehabilitated by Stalin in the context of his new frontist perspective. See F. Fè, *Paul Nizan. Un intellettuale comunista*, Roma, Savelli, 1973, pp. 34-7.

Thérive, Pallu, Prévost and Bost⁵² (again Gramsci uses the term “populism” with reference to a literary semantic), which still has a strong political significance. Accordingly, we cannot dismiss such literature without highlighting what roots it in a historically-determined popular reality, not to speak of revolutionary and internationality political objective, which is yet another aspect. However, according to Nizan the bourgeoisie “sees the proletarian as alien and at the same time so frail, so uncultivated”.⁵³ And he added: “we are not in need of human truth, but of revolutionary truth”.⁵⁴ Such a position was for Gramsci unacceptable.

As Gramsci wrote, it is impossible for the “new literature” not to “manifest itself ‘nationally’ in relatively hybrid and different combinations and alloys” (Q15§58, p. 1820; *SCW* p. 100). What should be stressed here is the fact that Gramsci uses the word “cosmopolitan” in a negative sense. In a similar vein he had exposed the intellectuals’ distance from life from the Renaissance onwards: and yet, if he did that it was not because he wanted to expose its universalism, but rather its failed rootedness in the socio-historical context, which in the end jeopardized the very essence of that universalism. Nor was the communist intellectual inclined to favor a unique progressive line: what he preferred to envisage was a series of temporal social layers (hence the break in the linearity of development, in the Marxist tradition, as articulated and emphasized by Laclau, and condemned by Asor Rosa as the mark of a revolutionary inadequacy in Gramsci). The artist should look at society as it is and not as it should be, which is the task of the politician. This further shows that Gramsci’s idea of politics transcended reality, even popular reality. Almost surprisingly he sets up politics as a dimension of what has to be, against art, which (in line with De Sanctis and Croce) represents the world as it is. And yet, even in Art there is room for transcending. This is why Gramsci avoids referring to some sort of mirroring (as Asor Rosa seemed to believe), preferring to talk of elaboration:

The premiss of the new literature – he added in fact – cannot but be historico-political, popular: it must aim at elaborating that which already exists, whether polemically or in some other way does not matter. What does matters,

⁵² See Argo, *cit.*, pp. 267-8.

⁵³ P. Nizan, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

though, is that it sink its roots into the humus of popular culture as it is, with its tastes and tendencies etc., and with its moral and intellectual world even if it is even backward and conventional. (Q15§58, p. 1822; *SCW* p. 102, translation slightly modified)

To be sure, Gramsci did never refer to popular culture in ruralist or traditionalist terms. He also spoke of urbanized subjects, vulnerable to the influence of the same cultural industry which would be analysed by Horkheimer and Adorno fifteen years later, and which Nizan seems not to take seriously:

Nizan does not know how able to deal with so-called “popular literature”, that is with the success of serial literature (adventure stories, detective stories, thrillers etc.) among the national masses, a success that is assisted by the cinema and the newspapers. And yet, it is the question that represents the major part of the problem of a new literature as the expression of an intellectual and moral renewal, for only from the readers of serial literature can we select a sufficient and necessary public for creating the cultural base of the new literature.

It appears to me that the problem is this: how to create a body of writers who are, artistically, to serial literature what Dostoyevsky was to Sue and Soulié or, with respect to the detective story, what Chesterton was to Conan Doyle and Wallace etc. With this aim in mind, one must abandon many prejudices, but above all it should be remembered that one cannot have a monopoly but also that one is faced with a formidable organization of publishing interests. The most common prejudice is this: that the new literature has to identify itself with an artistic school of intellectual origin, as was the case with Futurism. (Q15§58, pp. 1821-1822; *SCW* pp. 101-102)

The forms of the industrialization of culture have to be looked at with much care and without biases. Unlike Nizan, Gramsci's position is closer to the one enucleated by Walter Benjamin and Fredric Jameson, aiming at a political overturning of the serialization of art, as a path towards a new civilization. It also seems to anticipate some of Umberto Eco's intuitions. Fabio Dei has devoted a number of convincing reflections to this, stressing how Italian demology forgot to account for Gramsci's suggestions as regards popular culture. Folklore was seen as detached from an urban mass culture which devoured tradition in the same ineluctable and homologating device. This discipline was then confined to

a “patrimonialistic and identitarian”⁵⁵ conception of popular culture, unable to provide analytical tools capable of overcoming the negative mark assigned by the reflections of Adorno and Pasolini to phenomena connected to market “neo-populism”.

A possible re-evaluation of “populism” can be found in relation to an imaginary that is detached from the concrete dimension of Italian folklore. This is further explicated in Notebook 6, which collects Gramsci’s notes between 1930 and 1932.⁵⁶ Here Gramsci links the “exaltation of the idealized ‘peasant’ by populist movements” back to a specific source, utopian literature, given the references to wild and primitive eras. Unsurprisingly Gramsci considers such an attitude inadequate to a mature political consciousness. And yet, he stresses that utopian literature as the source of inspiration for a specific populist literary taste, “has been quite important in the history of the dissemination of sociopolitical views among determinate masses and hence in the history of culture” (Q6§157, p. 812; *PN* Vol. 3, p. 118 and *SCW* p. 237)

This is why we can conclude that the term “populism” was not a mark of ill fame for Gramsci, but rather encapsulated, as praxis or representation of the real, a number of elements useful in the development of emancipatory politics. Such an analytical openness is at the basis of his judgment on phenomena which – as already argued – were not at that time defined “populist” in political jargon but constitute nowadays the classical paradigms of populism. I am here referring to Boulangism,⁵⁷ but also to Caesarism and Bonapartism.⁵⁸ It was again Fabio Dei who stressed how, by analysing the phenomenon, Gramsci was far from considering it irrational, or influenced by the illusionistic practices of power, but rather wished to understand its internal rationale by means of which the interests of the ruling class were shared with the needs of the subaltern.⁵⁹ To understand as much, in line with Gramsci, can also

⁵⁵ See F. Dei, *Gramsci, Cirese e la tradizione demologica italiana*, *cit.*, p. 517; *Popolo, popolare, populismo*, *cit.*

⁵⁶ Gramsci, Q6§157, pp. 811-2; in English *PN* Vol. 3, p. 118 or *SCW*, p. 237.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, Q4§38, p. 464 (in English *PN* Vol. 2, pp. 186-7; and Q13§18, pp.1596-7 (in English *SPN*, pp. 166-7).

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, vol. I, pp. 464 (*cit. supra*) and Q4§66, 511 (in English *PN* Vol. 2, pp. 239-40); Q6§97, p.772 (in English *PN* Vol 3, pp. 82-3), Q9§136, pp. 1197-1198; Q13§23, p. 1608 (in English *SPN*, pp. 214-5; Q13§27, pp. 1619-22 (in English *SPN* pp. 219-22); Q14§23 pp. 1680-1 (in English *SPN* pp. 222-3).

⁵⁹ F. Dei, *Popolo, popolare, populismo*, *cit.*

prove to be useful in rebuilding the basis for a type of politics which aims at being “popular” and not “populist” (in the sense the term has acquired in the second half of the Twentieth Century).

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The Turn to Gramsci in Critical Studies in Education in North America

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The Turn to Gramsci in Critical Studies in Education in North America

Abstract

This article explores the impact of Gramsci's writings (in particular pedagogy as a hegemonic relation) on Critical Studies in Education (CSE) in North America. CSE focuses among other things on education for social justice and ecological questions. It refuses the separation of culture from power relations, and attempts to reconstruct knowledge to serve social needs through its insertion in the interstices of social reproduction, schools included. Indeed the classroom is one site for a war of position. But the school – and the university – are not the only institutions of and for education, which takes place as a lifelong process during which subaltern groups can use their critical learning capacities within and outside dominant class-based forms of knowledge. This locates the intellectuals produced by the subaltern groups in a two-way relationship with teachers, considered in their position as organic and potentially transformative intellectuals: in short there is a pedagogical relation that characterizes every form of hegemony and which here can form part of an alternative hegemony to that of the dominant classes. And in establishing an alternative hegemony, taking Freire and Gramsci each in their own way as reference points, one has to move from popular experience to then go on to movements or parties and the wider social context.

Keywords

Critical Studies in Education (CSE), Paulo Freire, North American pedagogists, social class, ethnicity, hegemonic relations

The Turn to Gramsci in Critical Studies in Education in North America

Peter Mayo

Introduction

Critical Studies in Education (CSE) refer to a broad domain in educational enquiry covering the interrelated areas of critical education and critical pedagogy.¹ Though having an international resonance, partly influenced by Paulo Freire from Brazil and spreading widely to places such as Italy and Turkey, CSE features prominently, as a body of thinking and practice, among the Left in North America.² It has been a gradually growing area of scholarship over which considerable influence has been exerted by Antonio Gramsci, recognized as one of the twentieth century's greatest left wing (Communist) political activists³ and leading social theorists, one aspect of which was his theorization of power and its contributory sources, including education.

On the educational front, the prime focus within CSE is on education for social justice as well as ecological sensitivity. CSE also centres on the education-power nexus insofar as it raises questions

¹ I am greatly indebted to Professor Renate Holub of the University of California, Berkeley, for her suggestions in the development of this paper and to the following academics for providing me, throughout the Covid-19 lockdown, which kept me away from my university office library, with electronic versions of important texts on which I draw here. These are: Martin Carnoy, Henry Giroux, Peter McLaren, Raymond A. Morrow (who procured me several electronic versions of books I have in my office and others), Shirley Steinberg and Carlos A. Torres.

² Paulo Freire's two-year sojourn in Massachusetts, while in exile, where he had his *Pedagogia do Oprimido* (Freire, 2013) manuscript translated and published for the first time in English (Freire, 1970, 1993, 2018), had much to do with this.

³ Despite his physical disability, he was made by the Fascist Regime to languish in prison, with a view, according to Enrico Berlinguer, one of his major successors as Secretary General of the Italian Communist Party, to being killed "scientifically". Berlinguer was, in effect the leader of the largest communist party in West Europe, famous for breaking away from the Soviet orbit and giving rise, together with Georges Marchais of the French Communist Party and Santiago Carrillo, their Spanish counterpart, to Euro-Communism, a western European form of communism operating in a western-style representative democracy. Like Gramsci, Berlinguer - a recognized luminary on the Italian Marxist left - was also from Sardinia. Berlinguer was from Sassari, like his cousins Antonio Segni and Francesco Cossiga who were both to serve as Presidents of the Italian Republic. Both of them belonged to the ruling post-war Christian Democratic Party, while Segni was also a member of its forerunner, the Partito Popolare of Don Luigi Sturzo. Like Gramsci, he was a much revered public intellectual of considerable standing.

on “the relationship between what we do in the classroom,” and on “our effort to build a better society free of relations of exploitation, domination, and exclusion...” (McLaren, 2015b: xxvi). We can substitute ‘classroom’ with ‘learning setting’ as CSE deals with an array of sites of pedagogical practice.

Antonio Gramsci and Critical Studies in Education

Antonio Gramsci, undoubtedly a major source of influence and inspiration in CSE, appears in the work of most of the important figures in the field. More often than not, they expound and engage his main ideas. He features in anthologies of critical pedagogy or critical education (Apple *et. al*, 2009; Darder, Mayo, Paraskeva, 2016) and in introductory books (Giroux, 2020; McLaren, 2016). Including Gramsci in such books has become *de rigueur*. Henry A. Giroux, a key figure in the critical pedagogy movement, gives Gramsci great prominence by stating: “Refusing to separate culture from systemic relations of power, or politics from the production of knowledge and identities, Gramsci redefined how politics bore down on everyday life through the force of its pedagogical practices, relations, and discourses.” (Giroux, 2020: 53). Similarly, Joe Kincheloe, another key figure in critical pedagogy, noted that in “the context of oppressive power and its ability to produce inequalities and human suffering, Antonio Gramsci’s notion of hegemony is central to critical research” (Kincheloe, 2008, 54).⁴ Michael W. Apple *et al* (2009), also give prominence to Antonio Gramsci at the very outset of their handbook on critical education, stating that “... Gramsci (1971a) argued that one of the tasks of a truly counter-hegemonic [*a term Gramsci never used –P.M.*] education was not to throw out ‘elite knowledge’ but to reconstruct its form and content so that it serves genuinely progressive social needs”. Apple *et. al* remind us that Gramsci warned against “intellectual suicide” (p. 4), one of the things to bear in mind in critical educational research and action (*Ibid.*).⁵ I will return to the concepts enumerated above.

⁴ “Gramsci understood that dominant power in the twentieth century was [*exercised*] not always... simply by physical force but also through social psychological attempts to win people’s consent to domination through cultural institutions such as the media, the schools, the family, and the church.” (Kincheloe, 2008, 54).

⁵ They state that “...there are serious intellectual (and pedagogic) skills in dealing with the histories and debates surrounding the epistemological, political, and educational issues involved in justifying what counts as important knowledge.” (Apple, et al, 2009, 4)

This Paper

This paper is intended to shed light on this area of educational research, confining itself geographically to the two countries in question (Canada and the USA) where Gramsci has exerted and still exerts a tremendous influence. It centres around a number of key questions regarding Gramsci's relationship with CSE in North America. CSE in North America and elsewhere (for example the UK and Brazil) promotes the idea of schools and education more broadly as sites of struggle, despite any intention by those who have significantly influenced general education policies to have education become a source of social reproduction. As with hegemony in general, institutions or nominally capitalist-conditioned forms of reproduction contain within their own interstices the means of subverting the very same process they are meant to serve.

Many educators, whether salaried or otherwise, have served as the means of disrupting or unsettling hegemonic relations. In short, reproduction is not a smooth mechanistic process. It is this which allows educators of left wing persuasion a strong sense of hope, of teaching against the grain, of actually regarding teaching, in the words of Postman and Weingartner (1969), as a potentially subversive activity. And this is where Gramsci and others (e.g. Paulo Freire) become key sources of inspiration.

The first part will provide an overview of the key figures who have appropriated conceptual tools from Gramsci to discuss aspects of CSE in North America. Some of the scholars have used Gramsci in their CSE-oriented analyses of the educational systems in countries outside the continent. This reflects a tendency towards the internationalization of the CSE research carried out in North America. While North American universities command the international student 'market' globally, they simultaneously maintain an international composition among researchers and the professoriate. Both factors contribute to the international range and reach of research interests. The second part will be more analytic in scope and thrust. The analysis will be framed around the following points:

- a) The most important Gramscian concepts on pedagogy which have been appropriated by the leading North American intellectuals in CSE and the applications of these instruments in their respective analyses;
- b) The significance of these conceptual appropriations;

c) Commonalities and difference in the North American appropriation of Gramsci and other important thinkers in CSE such as Paulo Freire.

Part I: Key Exponents and Themes

Among the writings in CSE one comes across reactions to a very influential book on Gramsci and education that was authored by Harold Entwistle (1979), over forty years ago. He argued that Gramsci had advocated a conservative schooling for a radical politics.⁶ Arousing much controversy, his point was that one would be selling working class children short if one were to deny them the tools which allowed the bourgeoisie to govern, to be the *classe dirigente*. Important figures in critical approaches to education subjected Entwistle to their critique; among them were Henry A. Giroux, later to be joined, in critical pedagogy, by Peter McLaren and Donaldo P. Macedo, and Michael W. Apple. Giroux and Apple's critiques first appeared in *Telos* (Giroux, 1980a) and later in the *British Journal of Sociology of Education* (Giroux, 1980b) and *Comparative Education Review* (Apple, 1980). They indicated how the conservative readings of Gramsci, which followed Entwistle's orientation, neither tallied with Gramsci's writings on hegemony nor, for instance, with the need to avoid 'encyclopedic knowledge' (see Giroux, 2002: 49; Gramsci, 1975: 20, 21).⁷

Giroux, like Apple, continues to use Gramsci fruitfully in many ways. He retains his critique of Entwistle's reading of schooling, praising nevertheless the latter's rigorous research especially on the subject of adult education (Giroux, 2002). Giroux provides a more 'open reading' of Gramsci as part of an engagement with the Marxist tradition (Giroux, 1992: 13) which, he insists, needs to be revitalized. He carries forward this critique to confront the misuses of Gramsci by liberals and conservatives such as Alan Bloom and E. D. Hirsch regarding their advocacy of cultural literacy and the so-called Great Books. He expands the discussion to emphasise the role of hegemony (Giroux, 1981; Giroux, 1983) as a process that contains possibilities for change within its interstices. Like Gramsci

⁶ The other chapters referred to Gramsci's more general concepts and his views on Adult Education.

⁷ These include E. D. Hirsch in particular Giroux (2002), Buttigieg (2002) and also – somewhat – Guy Senese (1991) and Thomas Clayton (2005), the last mentioned praising Entwistle for carrying out rigorous research (p.57).

(Buttigieg, 2002a: 69-70; Buttigieg 2015: XII), he sees education, in its broadest sense, as central to hegemony.⁸ He emulates Gramsci in analysing a whole range of cultural production, also underscoring aspects of its underlying political economy, including film, public schooling, journalism, the entertainment industry, Higher Education and music (see Giroux, 2018). He captures the sense of creativity embedded in them, in which youngsters and adults invest. At the same time, he indicates how these popular culture areas are riven by contradictions and are subject to corporate encroachment. A full scale study on Gramsci features in one of these books (Giroux, 2000). He moves from the organic intellectual as cultural worker to the public intellectual examining intellectual life along the continuum of cementing and challenging hegemonic structures and relations. He finds Antonio Gramsci instructive in this regard (Giroux, 2006: 196). He does so by reiterating Gramsci's emphasis on the cultural as an important sector within the superstructure in which agency can be found. Culture, he and Roger I. Simon argued, echoing Gramsci, is a very important vehicle for the development, contestation and renegotiation of the present hegemonic arrangements (Giroux & Simon, 1989: p. 8).

The theme of intellectuals is also addressed by Peter McLaren, a key US-based Marxist, writing about the committed intellectual. McLaren *et al.* (2005), focus on Gramsci's concept of the organic intellectual analysing it against post-Marxist and postmodern accounts of intellectual engagement based on Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's "non-sutured nature of the social". Committed political intellectual work is discussed, by McLaren and his colleagues, against the background of a totalizing notion of capital. They argue that discourses are never divorced from a wider context of "objective labour practices or disentangled from social relations arising from the history of productive labor". (McLaren, *et al.*, 2005: 444) They bring social class back into the debate in CSE trying to separate class analysis from fashionable 'pseudo progressive fads' which throw out the class baby with the reductionist class bathwater.⁹

⁸ Buttigieg (2015) writes: "...in one of his early contributions to *Il Grido del Popolo*, entitled 'Socialism and Culture' (1916), Gramsci found occasion to argue at some length for the primacy of education, or culture more generally, in political struggle" (p. xii).

⁹ McLaren and Fischman criticise postmodernisms' appropriation of Gramsci to serve such ends as giving priority to representation and language to the detriment of the politics of social

The issue of social class, ethnicity and other forms of difference, with regard to Hegemony, is addressed by Donaldo Macedo. He and two colleagues (Bessie Dendrinis and Panayiota Gounari) demonstrate how language-work in education, and related areas, can never be neutral. It is very much tied to issues of power often on a global scale, relegating other languages to subordinate and marginal positions. This is demonstrated in work centring on Gramsci's conception of hegemony (Macedo *et al.*, 2013).¹⁰ Importance is attached to Gramsci's elaboration of language questions which come into prominence and highlight such issues as the enlargement of the ruling class and efforts to establish stronger and 'intimate' relations between powerful groups and the masses (Macedo et al, 2003: 17). As critical educator, Macedo and his co-authors criticised the pretence of 'objectivity' and neutrality of such schools as the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Macedo states that a professor there admonished a student, quoting Gramsci in a seminar presentation, for dropping "names of esoteric authors one stumbles upon." (Macedo *et al.*, 2013: 2)

Michael W. Apple is the other figure who stands out in the CSE literature in terms of continuously engaging Gramscian conceptual tools. He presents himself as a "neo-Gramscian" (Apple, 2012: XXVII). He engages Gramsci's notion of the state surrounded by a whole network of supporting structures (2004: 158) along the divide of civil and political society, more intertwined than the separation for heuristic purposes might suggest. Civil society is a site of contestation in which much of the struggle for power takes place. As he puts it, "to win in the state you must win in civil society" (*Ibid.*). The curriculum and paraphernalia related to it, such as textbook publishing, are key sites in the struggle over hegemony (Apple, 2004: 173). They help produce what he calls 'Official Knowledge' (*Ibid.*; Apple, 2000) (read: hegemonic knowledge –

class struggle (Fischman and McLaren, 2005: 17). The contention is that the international capitalist division of labour refracts oppressions such as those of race, class and gender. I infer from this that the task of the committed intellectual is to relate the struggles of new social movements to those engaged in by the 'old' Marxist movement targeting Capitalism's overarching structuring force.

¹⁰ According to Peter Ives (2004, 43) Gramsci first became aware of the concept of Hegemony through linguistics debates in which it featured. This is something, Ives contends, that was overlooked by scholars who attribute the origins of the term to the Russian Social Democrats, Plekhanov or Lenin. Ives (2010) also made a contribution to CSE through Gramsci by virtue of his writings on the hegemonic status of Global English and education, a work which, in many respects, complements that of Macedo et al. (2003).

hence they play a part in cementing hegemonic relations and challenging them). They constitute key sites for surrounding the state in changing relations of power which incorporates other sectors such as trade unions, including teachers' unions, to which Apple has been committed in many ways (Apple, 2004: 184). He argues, along Gramscian lines, for: "a struggle on a variety of fronts. One of these fronts is certainly education." (Apple, 2004: 121). He advises caution however when seeking these opportunities involving the state-civil society nexus, all part of the integral state, as there are moments when one might have to "look a gift horse in the mouth" (*Ibid*). A series of questions need to be posed, as one engages tactically as part of a larger strategy.¹¹

Apple, McLaren and Giroux espouse a Gramscian notion of the state, seen as a site of reproduction, resistance and cultural production with educators, from schoolteachers to other cultural workers (Apple, 2012; Giroux and McLaren, 1989) playing an important role. They are, after all, key agents in the struggle over hegemony. They operate at different levels of the state including municipal and regional levels, often opposed to the Federal state. Examples, in Apple's case, derive from Rio Grande do Sul in Brazil in the early 2000 (Apple, 2004: XIII).¹²

Two central scholars who have focused on the State from a Gramscian perspective are Martin Carnoy and Carlos Alberto Torres. Carnoy writes in detail on Gramsci when discussing the role of outside-of-school education. His view of Gramsci and formal education is expressed within the context of a number of theories of social and cultural reproduction that dominated Sociology of Education from the mid-seventies till the very early 1980s: "Schools therefore not only favour the children of the bourgeoisie; they are

¹¹ He says the state offers opportunities which can or should not be taken up. It all depends on whether they involve processes that can lead to structural change via civil society. Important strategic questions therefore need to be posed: "What reforms can we genuinely call non-reformist reforms, that is, reforms that both alter and better present conditions and can lead to serious structural changes?" (p.120)

¹² He writes: "After many years of electoral losses, the Workers Party has won consecutive elections in Porto Alegre and for a number of years had electoral control of the state of Rio Grande do Sul. One of the reasons it won was that it put forward a very different vision and set of policies for a more substantive set of democratic institutions. More democratic and participatory schooling was a central part of their proposals, as was an immediate and substantial increase in teachers' salaries, because they knew that teachers would not support proposals that simply caused them to work even harder for salaries that were declining each year." (Apple, 2004, XIII)

important to the maintenance of class based power relations. The schools, therefore, cannot be a source of developing proletarian hegemony” (Carnoy, 1982: 90) In this regard he sees Gramsci as projecting the Party as educator (*loc. cit.*), a position that overlooks the role of teacher and other movements as mediators in the process of cultural transmission, renegotiating relations of hegemony through schools and outside schools (Giroux, 1981, 1983).¹³ Carnoy’s emphasis on the party is often to the detriment of Gramsci’s views on schooling, the subject of much debates. He contends, much like John Holst, that, for Gramsci, the most important arena for education and counter-culture (a proletarian culture) is the party and not the school in opposition.¹⁴ Carlos A. Torres also wrote about the state in Gramsci (Torres, 1985) while simultaneously highlighting the Latin American resonance of Gramsci’s thought. He works, in this regard, in tandem with Raymond A. Morrow (Morrow and Torres, 1995, 2001, 2002, 2004). Their work has great resonance in North America given the massive presence of Latino/a communities. It brings to the fore the work of Paulo Freire on whom both Torres and Morrow wrote profusely. They advance the concept of the “two Gramscis” in their 1995 book:

In short, a depoliticizing view of educational reform (as the critical-social-appropriation-of-knowledge approach pretends, i.e., to create the citizen through enlightenment), as opposed to a political view (i.e., popular public schooling) that proposes using education and schooling as a tool in the struggle for hegemony. Is it the case that there are two Gramscis? (Morrow and Torres, 1995: 231).

More appropriately the question can be framed around the apparent contradiction of two views. On the one hand, there is Gramsci’s view of schooling. He argues for a ‘disinterested education’, as John Baldacchino (2002) points out in his perceptive essay, not ‘mortgaging the child’s future’. Then there are his views

¹³ This situation is quite akin to that of John Holst (2010, 2017) that it need not be rehearsed here save for his warning that we miss more than a trick when we overlook party in Gramsci’s strategy and as the fulcrum whereby the working class develops its intellectual independence (Holst and Brookfield, 2017, 202).

¹⁴ Influenced also by Claus Offe, Carnoy argued in the 80s for the state reconciling two arms, the accumulation of capital and the need to legitimise itself democratically (Carnoy and Levin, 1985). It is in this process of democratization, one infers, that one can find the space to renegotiate relations of hegemony.

on a wider education, including adult education, which resonate with those of Paulo Freire in the latter's popular education work. For Rebecca Tarlau (2017), Gramsci provides the theoretical framework for her analyses of tactical and strategic work involving the landless peasant movement (the MST) in Brazil (Tarlau, 2019), where Gramsci's figure, next to Freire, Makarenko and Guevara, looms large.¹⁵ She identifies a number of phases in a Gramscian war of position in the MST movement, namely: a) Grassroots leadership and the Myth of the Intellectual (*construed in its traditional sense – my italics*) (Tarlau, 2017, pp. 110 and 115); b) The Philosophy of Praxis and Common Sense (*Ibid.*, pp. 115-9); c) Public Schools as a terrain of contestation (*Ibid.*, pp. 119-23).

Among North American researchers who make use of Gramsci directly is a very influential adult educator, Stephen D. Brookfield. He focuses on the concept of the adult educator as organic intellectual (Brookfield, 2005: 108-12). Brookfield engages some of Gramsci's signature concepts to provide an overarching theoretical framework in which progressive and radical adult education can be carried out. This is in line with Gramsci's various endeavours regarding the pedagogical relational aspect of hegemony. This relational aspect is also availed of by D. W. Livingstone in research concerning workers' education where direct influence is drawn from the Factory Council writings (Livingstone, 2002). Livingstone highlights Gramsci's uncritical acceptance of the assumptions of Eurocentric modernism, very evident, I would add, in his *Notebook 22 – Gramsci's insights on Americanism and Fordism*. At the same time, Livingstone argues that Gramsci's insistence on working-class self-activity as the kernel of transformative work, continues "to offer a fruitful starting point for contributing to the democratic transformation of capitalist societies" (Livingstone, 2002: 237). Livingstone provides evidence to suggest that subaltern groups, including workers at different plants, persevere in exercising "their own creative and critical learning capacities both within and outside dominant class forms of knowledge" (*Ibid.*). The emphasis, in this

¹⁵ A number of North American-ensconced critical educators provide empirical work in the edited volume by Thomas Clayton, a US Professor working on language and comparative and international education at the University of Kentucky (Clayton, 2005). The rubric for the volume is Hegemony and the various case studies, contained therein, are preceded by an entire chapter, drawing on English and Italian sources, focusing on Gramsci and his signature concepts, penned by the editor.

study, grounded empirically in qualitative research, is on the social relations of production complemented by other related sites such as those of the household and unions (the former overlooked by Gramsci, the latter reactive to market dynamics rather than being expressive of autonomous working class interests and desires: cf. Livingstone, 2002: 234).¹⁶ Livingstone's work focuses on the relational aspect of hegemony, the counter-tendencies that it spawns, and the hegemonic and counter/oppositional cultures that are inextricably intertwined with them.

Meanwhile Stanley Aronowitz expresses a pessimistic view regarding the contemporary status of the 'philosophy of praxis,' thereby engendering more 'pessimism of the intellect' than 'optimism of the will'. (Aronowitz, 2002: 120).¹⁷ He argued that major sites of previously waged emancipatory struggles, such as trade unions, are foreclosed by their bureaucratization and their becoming business institutions.¹⁸ Jerrold L. Kachur (2002), for his part, takes the concept of the *Modern Prince*, or the party further in terms of contemporary intellectual work which, as with corporate transnational production, takes on the form of "anonymous intellectual practice" (Kachur, 2002, 325). He calls into question the adequacy of the term modern, regarding Machiavelli's legacy from *The Prince*, arguing for a far-reaching postmodern prince in this regard.

Part II: Analysis of Appropriation of Key Gramscian Concepts

The key concept appropriated in North American CSE is unsurprisingly Hegemony. While some scholars such as Giroux and McLaren focus on both its repressive (Giroux, 2010; McLaren, 2015a) and consensus side, others focus more on the consensual

¹⁶ Gramsci wrote the following in an article *Il fronte unico «Mondo» - «Tribuna» - Ancora delle capacità organiche della classe operaia* (*The United Front. 'World' - 'Tribune' Again the Organic Capacities of the Working Class*) in "L'Unità", 1 October 1926, reproduced in Livingstone (2002, 234): "if the [factory council] movement failed, the responsibility can be laid [addossata] not at the door of the working class as such but at that of the Socialist Party which came up short [venne meno] in its duties; which was incapable [incapace] and inept [inetto]; which was at the tail of the working class and not at its head. (my translation from the Italian original: Gramsci, 1964: 773 and also in Gramsci 1971b: 345).

¹⁷ This is often attributed directly to Gramsci without apparently any cognizance of the fact that it was coined by Romain Rolland.

¹⁸ He laments the situation among the US Left more generally which, he alleged in 2002, provides critiques of schooling but never on the side of a formative curriculum.

element (Apple, 2004).¹⁹ This is often related to the historical moment in which they advanced their research. They perforce highlighted the politics of schooling by confronting it with an alternative approach to learning within the interstices of state institutions such as schools. Teachers can be mediating influences in the process of cultural transmission and production. This approach can build on the form of resistance demonstrated by students; reproduction is not a smooth process. There can be counter-cultural education within the terrain of outside-school or popular education. Some hearkened to the role of social-class-committed workers' education in the dialectical relationship between capital and labour (Apple, 1982; 2012; Livingstone, 2002). Others highlighted ideas from Latin American popular education (Morrow and Torres, 2002, 2004; Torres and Morrow, 2001; Cavanagh, 2007; Tarlau, 2017). The influence of Paulo Freire and socialist-oriented labour education is strong in CSE. It would be unfair to state that these exponents highlighted only the ideological nature of education as opposed to repression but this literature could have had the effect of equating hegemony with consensus building only, rather than its being a feature of what Gramsci calls 'the integral state' (a term used by McLaren, 2015, 246) therefore hegemony = repression + consent.

The State, Hegemony and War of Position

The 'war of position', the trench warfare involving advances and retreats, often translating to working 'in and against' the system or, as they say in Brazil, being 'tactically inside and strategically outside' the system, has offered possibilities for agency inside state institutions such as schools. This has helped educationists and critical educators break from the old reproduction straitjacket and see education as one of many sites in which relations of hegemony can be renegotiated as part of a long revolution. Sheila Macrine writes:

one of the reasons that Gramsci remains so significant for the educational Left is that, unlike Althusser, Gramsci emphasizes the extent to which hegemonic power is always fragile – it is always held tentatively and always requires educational work. The work that teachers and other cultural workers

¹⁹ The use of force and the repressive state occurred not only under Republicans and New Right leaders as the two Bushes and Reagan but also Democratic Presidents – the *carceral state* (Giroux, 2020b, 28).

do is always political in that it produces knowledge and ways of seeing that represent the material and symbolic interests of particular groups of people (Macrine, 2016, 3).

CSE proponents find much purchase in the civil society terrain as a space where a ‘war of position’ can be waged.²⁰ Gramsci’s war of position and war of manoeuvre are central to the political and economic world in which we are currently situated. Apple’s argument, reproduced earlier, of treading warily even when opportunities present themselves, asking questions concerning overall strategy, is couched in terms of a ‘war of position’ (Apple, 2012: 121). The same applies to McLaren in his discussion on contestation. McLaren (2007) asserts that

we are currently living in ... a ‘war of position’” (p. 313) in that we are presently engaged in unifying a diverse network of socially and politically active net-works; this will allow an opportunity for a ‘war of manoeuvre’. For critical pedagogues, the classroom is a site [*among many other sites –my insertion*], for a war of position.” (*Ibid.*)

In adult education, Brookfield (2005: 112) argues in the same way:

The overall task of adult education will be to fight a war of position in which adults are helped to acquire a consciousness of their oppression and to organize in solidarity to struggle against that situation.

There is therefore room for large scale action within and across the institutions primarily, but not 100%, associated with ‘civil society’ (each institution has its repressive aspect, the school included). The state can be surrounded and transformed not just by agencies we associate with the non-formal domain or political parties, as argued by Carnoy and others, but also by institutions such as schools and universities as indicated by Apple, Morrow, Torres, Giroux and many others.

²⁰ Recall that a war of position involves social organization and the gradual assertion of cultural predominance for a shift in the basis of power which, only once this shift is created, with the ‘new cultural values’ steeped in popular consciousness, can the final push (through a frontal attack, a war of manoeuvre) for the conquest of the state occur. In countries where this war of manoeuvre occurred, as in Soviet Russia, the apparatuses of civil society need to be built for the revolution to be rooted in popular consciousness, otherwise it is bound to fail and exist only through a passive revolution, an imposition from above. Every genuine and popular revolution must be preceded by the diffusion of culture and spread of ideas on a wide scale for it to be grounded in popular and firm roots (Gramsci, 1977, 12; Gramsci, 1967, 19) as historically was the case with the Protestant Reformation.

Intellectuals

These institutions are meant to furnish society with most of its intellectual potential, though Gramsci, as is well known, broadens the definition of ‘intellectual’ cognizant of the thinking element that can be activated in any activity; all persons can therefore be intellectuals. The concept of intellectual, in Gramsci’s view, is analysed through a focus on not some immanent feature but a person’s function in society, generating or consolidating, through thought and action, a particular worldview.

This Gramscian view of intellectuals remains key among US- and Canada-based authors. It has become stronger in this day and age as a result of Trumpism and fake news. It has been there however for a long time in connection with analyses of a variety of opinion-makers regarding Neoliberalism – and its implications for everyday life – militarism and industrial, race and gender relations. Gramsci’s ideas and conception of intellectuals, in terms of organic, traditional, grand and subaltern, continue to hold sway in CSE. They hold sway in the current period of an ascendancy of a particular brand of ‘populism’.²¹ Giroux and others refer to this as:

a period of crisis which as Gramsci observed ‘consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born [and that] in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear’ (Q3§34: 311; Gramsci 1971a: 276). Those morbid symptoms are evident in Trump’s mainstreaming of a fascist politics in which there is an attempt to normalize the language of racial purification, the politics of disposability, and social sorting while hyping a culture of fear and a militarism reminiscent of past and current dictatorships (Giroux, 2020b: 21).

Despite this perceived dwindling of public intellectuals there are still those who take up the role described by Gramsci. It is that of intellectuals defined through their function in rendering the worldview of ‘big business’ and the military-industrial complex part of everyday common sense. They operate as spin-doctors and influence opinions in a variety of sites such as prime-time television, blogs, op-eds, community radio [talk show] phone-ins, municipal assemblies, social movement activity, union locals, community halls, school classrooms and other learning settings.

²¹ The current phase is one wherein well researched and value driven democratising knowledge is at a premium or plays second fiddle to fabrications which are repeated over and over again to become part of the everyday mantras.

Giroux deals with public intellectuals, and he laments the gating of these intellectuals especially those within the academy. These criticisms are to be found not exclusively but certainly in his writings on Higher Education. Gramsci included these types in his repertoire of intellectuals without using the term ‘public intellectuals’. Giroux also wrote about many who would fit Gramsci’s category of subaltern intellectuals, addressing teachers as potentially transformative intellectuals (Giroux, 1988).²² Teachers, together with a large array of cultural workers, involved in a variety and at different levels of cultural transmission, are conceived of as organic intellectuals by many US proponents of CSE engaged in what Giroux calls “public pedagogy”. They are all agents in what Gramsci regards as “the pedagogical relation” that characterizes “every relation of hegemony” (Q10II§44: 1331; Gramsci 1971a: 350 [translation modified to use “pedagogical” rather than the 1971 “educational”]). As Apple puts it clearly:

As Gramsci – one of the most influential figures in the analysis of the relationship between culture and economy – notes, this has been one of the prime tasks of “intellectuals”, spreading and making legitimate dominant ideological meanings and practice, attempting to win people over²³ and create unity on the contested terrain of ideology. Whether we accept it or not, educators are in the structural position of being such “intellectuals” and, therefore, are not isolated from these ideological tasks (though many of them may struggle against it, of course). Again Gramsci’s insights are helpful. The control of the cultural apparatus of a society, of both the knowledge preserving and producing institutions and the actors who work in them, is essential in the struggle over ideological hegemony.” (Apple, 2012: 14)

It is to these educators, engaged as intellectuals, especially those who swim against the current, that North American and other CSE

²² The critical pedagogue, Sheila Macrine (2020) writes that, from the 1970’s onward, some critical educators, “writing on the interrelationships among education, culture and contested publics, have appropriated Gramsci to put forward a vision for teachers to become transformative intellectuals [*Giroux, 1988, my insertion*]to recognize the politics of the curriculum as implicated in the struggle for civil society (Apple 2003), and to challenge how neoliberal and neoconservative ideologies, policies, and political projects inform the changing nature of educational privatization efforts by the Right (Saltman 2000)”. (Macrine, 2016, 1).

²³ US-based critical pedagogue, Kenneth J Saltman (2020) underlines “the pedagogical dimensions of culture as a counter-hegemonic practice that involves acting in a Gramscian sense as a permanent persuader to educate the opponent to the common sense of organic intellectuals.” (p.74): again we respectfully point out that “counter-hegemonic” is a term never used by Gramsci.

appeal. Educators are exhorted to work towards transforming people into imagining a world not as it is but as it can and should be – a world governed by greater social justice, a democratic socialist world.

The concept of organic intellectual in party, social movement and revolutionary movement-oriented education (including higher and adult education) is demonstrated by the work of Peter McLaren, Stephen Brookfield and Henry Giroux. The last mentioned deals with this recurring theme in both Gramsci's pre-prison and prison writings. While Apple, Giroux, McLaren and others (e.g. Saltman) target education in general, Stephen Brookfield targets adult education as he includes Gramsci in his expansive view of Critical Theory which *noblesse oblige* focuses on the Frankfurt School but is extended beyond this coterie of writers:

The intellectual's task is to galvanize working-class opposition and translate this into an effective revolutionary party. In this analysis adult education is a site for political practice in which organic intellectuals can assist the working class in its revolutionary struggle. His idea of the adult educator as organic intellectual has been acknowledged by people as different as the Welsh cultural critic Raymond Williams [...], the African-American Philosopher Cornel West [...] – who views Black pastors and preachers as organic intellectuals – and the aboriginal educator Rick Hesch [...] To West [...], adult educators who work as organic intellectuals “combine theory and action, and relate popular culture and religion to structural social change (Brookfield, 2005: 112).

For Brookfield and others therefore the concept of “organic intellectual” continues to enjoy much currency in a view of pedagogy which is targeted at bringing about structural change and not simply ‘ameliorative’ reforms, the latter guided by a vision that does not transcend the present system. It is clear from this section that Gramsci's portrayal of the tasks carried out by people functioning as organic intellectuals, either supporting capitalism in its different phases or struggling to supplant it, furnishes North American CSE exponents with the means with which to analyse intellectual life.²⁴ He does so both on a large canvas, where education is viewed in its broadest meaning, central to the workings of hegemony, and in a narrower one of specifically designated and employed teachers working among children, university students and

²⁴ Gramsci's views intellectuals operating at different levels and in myriad spheres.

adults in general. One can add community members. The question which remains to be addressed is the topic of the next section: should organic intellectuals, engaging in CSE, operate within the context of party work or within larger, progressive frameworks such as those of social movements?

Party or social movements

A considerably big split in the literature is apparent between those who associate political education *a la* Gramsci with party or social movements.²⁵ John D. Holst has been critical of those favouring the latter for obscuring the notion of party (Holst, 2002; 2010). Freire-inspired educators would point to the importance of a party open to movements without taking them over as these have to retain their autonomy to be effective. This is indicated by the case in Brazil with respect to movements and the Workers' Party at the municipal level (São Paulo) as reproduced and commented on by US-based researchers, some with a Latin American background (O'Cadiz, Wong and Torres, 1998: 37).

Much depends on context. Giroux (2006) once called for a US third party, echoing Stanley Aronowitz (2006: 157-8) in this context:

Any viable attempt to challenge the biopolitical project that now shapes American life and culture must be organized through a multifaceted third party or, as Stanley Aronowitz argues, a radical party...Aronowitz further argues that a new party must not only address the concerns of the working and middle classes but must also join with "rank-and-file activists of trade unions, women's organizations, environmental and ecology movements, various factions of the freedom movements for Blacks, Latinos, Asians, and other oppressed peoples, and the anti-war and global justice movements to expose the illusion of democracy in the United States." (Giroux, 2006: 66-7)

Many, concerned with US politics, are reluctant to call for party and more likely to see in social movements a nodal point at particular moments in time. People however highlight the importance of context in this regard and have often pinned faith in

²⁵ Aronowitz laments that progressive social movements have renounced struggling at the level of world views, not having offered alternatives to replace the free market 'common sense' and the technical-rational (scientific) faith.

parties abroad, especially in Latin America.²⁶ They would have captured their imagination at specific times. These would include the FSLN (Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional) in Nicaragua in the 80s, the PT (Partido Trabalhadores – Workers’ Party) in Brazil in the 90s and now the MST (O’Cadiz *et al.*, 1998; Tarlau, 2017, 2020). The MST had a historical affinity, though not affiliation, with the PT. Education of a critical nature operates at the intersection of both party and movements, although the most articulated and detailed accounts are of those operating in the context of social movements (*Ibid.*). There are cases when CSE proponents write about revolutionary pedagogy within a political movement, e.g. the *Frente Zapatista* (McLaren, 2000: 45-51) which always presented itself as a political movement and not as a party.²⁷

Most of the literature on these organizations by critical education researchers were in the field of comparative education. Exponents of CSE, such as US-based Gustavo Fischman and Peter McLaren (2005), however, write of “new bonds between labor and new social movements” (p.48), implying coalitions. They often invoke Gramsci’s adopted concept of “historical bloc”, also engaged by Carlos A. Torres (2013) with respect to Neoliberalism (formulating sixteen theses concerning aspects of education affected by Neoliberalism). It is used by many others often without proper nuanced explanations of this term which signifies a deep rooted, almost epochal relationship rather than simply an alliance which can be a contingency and therefore conjunctural and possibly ephemeral. The point to register is that Gramsci is used in the CSE

²⁶ The influence of Latin American popular education on North American critical education and practice is quite strong. Equally strong are Gramscian concepts that become a key feature of educational praxis in North America via Latin America where Gramsci holds a widespread influence as indicated by Morrow and Torres (1995, 2002) and Tarlau (2017, 2019). One such concept from Gramsci is that of “conjunctural analysis” in popular education adopted by the now defunct Doris Marshall Institute at the Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice in Toronto. Canadian popular educator Chris Cavanagh (2007) states: “Naming the Moment has its core, a process of democratic *conjunctural analysis* [*my italics*], identifying and examining the movement of key forces (economic, political, cultural and so on) and their impact on various structures of society. The democratic nature of the process allowed participants to advocate for various actions according to the needs of the moment and to also recruit allies. As a popular education process, ‘Naming the Moment’ drew on a wide range of means of dialogue from the common small-group discussions to the use of popular theatre, visual art and song. And, as with popular education, it took more time and resources than more conventional processes of community organizing.” (Cavanagh, in Borg and Mayo, 2007: 44-5).

²⁷ According to McLaren: “They do not seek party representation via the state. Their Indigenous council has put forward spokespersons (Indigenous women) who do run for office, but the Zapatistas are not an official political party” (personal electronic correspondence).

literature through both a scriptural reading, emphasising party, or a more open reading around old and new social movements, trade unions, workplace (Livingstone, 2002) and party. In the latter case, this occurs if and when a party, open to structurally transformative policies, exists. In the work of many writers, such as Giroux, Aronowitz and McLaren, the call is for a combination of all the agencies listed, much depending on specific context.

What is significant about the conceptual appropriations from Gramsci is that they have provided a context for education for social justice-oriented change – struggling [*in and...?*] against the system. Hegemony provides the overarching concept for this struggle in education – a vision and a conceptual tool. It entails a series of steps and actions as part of an overall scheme, whose underlying vision *transcends* the given framework. We can obtain purchase here in Gramsci's view of the Factory Council. Prior and during the factory occupation, it was first expressed as an educative agency to *replace* the reactive trade unions – unions bargain within and do not transcend the given wage relation. Later, after the end of the factory occupation, it was conceived as an educative agency that *complements* the work of trade unions. It was to provide unions with a vision that does not regard the present 'industrial relations' system as establishing the boundaries of what is possible (TINA: There is no alternative). CSE and critical action are thus provided with a language of criticism and possibility (adapted from Giroux) guided by the process of imagining a world not as it is but as it can and should be.

It provides the sense of educating to challenge common sense, which contains elements of good sense but is fragmented, often characterised by a contradictory consciousness. Furthermore, it provides the challenge to not simply regard forms of art and culture as bourgeois, androcentric and racist but to read them 'against the grain' of obscuring different and alternative readings. These readings can make the vision connect with a "whole new way of life", in Raymond Williams' phrase. Gramsci's ideas, as adopted in CSE, are often mediated by Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall whose respective ideas have been so influential in CSE especially with Henry Giroux and Michael Apple. The influence of all three (Gramsci, Williams and Hall) is felt especially among those, echoing Giroux, who manage to bring *Cultural Studies* into educational

discourse and education into cultural studies (one North American-based exemplar, in this regard, is Handel Kashope Wright at UBC, Canada). Cultural Studies see forms of cultural production as sites of struggle where one works through the contradictions of cultural politics, sifting through the elements of good sense contained in common sense, and separating coherent ‘good’ sense from that which is wayward in one’s contradictory consciousness. Again, Henry Giroux is the one person who has done most to bring this mode of analyses into education drawing on Gramsci in the process. He draws on Gramsci’s exposition of the reconstructive, propositional element in Hegemony, including, in this specific case, cultural hegemony. A challenge for CSE, more generally, is to go beyond ‘ideology critique’ to contribute to the process of cultural renegotiation and renewal associated with working inside hegemony’s interstices.

Part III: Gramsci and Paulo Freire

Many of the writers to whom I refer here are beholden to Paulo Freire. Freire’s sojourn in the US, when in the process of publishing *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, translated by Myra Bergman Ramos (Freire, 1970, 1993, 2008) from the original manuscript in Portuguese (Freire, 2013), was to leave a lasting legacy among critical educators in the USA and Canada. It is significant that this classic and one of the most important books in CSE, was first published in English translation in the USA. Daniel Schugurensky’s (2000) analysis of published efforts in comparing Gramsci and Freire indicates how the two are often mentioned in the same breath. In my view, rather than differing from Freire, Gramsci has strong affinities with the Brazilian, a point Freire himself underlines (Freire, 1995, 63-4). The key concept found in both is *Praxis* which is the kernel of Freire’s pedagogical politics (the Pedagogy of Praxis) and Gramsci’s overall philosophy (the Philosophy of Praxis). It is central to the CSE discussed by most of the writers mentioned in this essay. As an example, I draw from McLaren in this regard:

Life in Schools is the story of my reinvention as an educator, from a liberal humanist who pressed the necessity of reform to a Marxist humanist who advocates a revolutionary praxis. By “revolutionary praxis,” I mean educating for a social revolution through critical pedagogy. The unfulfilled or unrealized

democracy that I envision is unashamedly socialist (McLaren, 2015b: xvii [reprinted from the fifth edition of 2007; first edition 1989]).

Some CSE authors combine insights from Gramsci and Freire. Both underline the politics of education and the sense of commitment and competence necessary not to allow a democratic education to degenerate into *laissez faire* pedagogy. Freire, for the most part, highlights moving from popular knowledge to a higher level of thinking. For him, knowledge is dynamic and needs to be co-investigated collectively. Gramsci, for his part, infers this in urging the ongoing struggle to move from common sense to good sense as indicated, for example, by Apple (2004, 157). Gramsci celebrates the creative spirit that lies within the popular but also provides examples of how ‘disinterested’ knowledge, as emphasised by Baldacchino (2002) in his critique of a ‘sociology of knowledge’ approach, can enable people to engage with this knowledge in the search for the creation of a new *civiltà*.

Freire gives examples, primarily from the popular, to indicate the existential situation from where one must begin to move to higher order of thinking, Gramsci does likewise with his fascination with popular forms of knowledge and manifestations of the creative spirit. He however also covers areas such as theatre, philosophy, novels (including popular serial novels) and forms of art to examine ways by which they can contribute to a new *civiltà*. These areas and others, including film, television, advertising, music and the entertainment industry, are also the domain of CSE proponents. Critical educators such as Giroux use Gramsci in their analysis of the cultural realm to scour this vast field and therefore broaden the terrain of enquiry for an education based on praxis.

They do so, however, without overlooking their indebtedness to Freire for providing them with some of the language and conceptual tools that form part of their battery. What Freire offers such pedagogues are examples of pedagogical approaches, context-conditioned, that are consistent with an overarching ‘philosophy of praxis’. Gramsci, for his part, highlights the importance of not throwing out the *powerful knowledge baby* with the *ideological bath water* (see this essay, footnote 4). There is some hegemonic knowledge that one must know to survive and thus be able to transform.

General Conclusion

There is no doubt that Antonio Gramsci is an iconic figure in CSE in North America. We have seen how the above writers, in the main, draw and most creatively build, on his 'open' approach to Marxism. They avail themselves of the light he shed on different aspects of the local and international body politic, through his journalistic writings, theatre reviews, cultural and political economic analysis in his pre-prison and prison periods (including the letters). All this renders him an important person to think with in the quest for a critical approach to education. This openness is instructive for those seeking new pathways in a variety of fields including education which, when viewed in its larger dimensions, is central to his conception of Hegemony, every relationship of which, to reiterate one more time, is unmistakably pedagogical.

I have not seen any reference to Gramsci in CSE used pejoratively, either in North America or beyond. Beyond CSE, of course, there are gross misrepresentations of Gramsci. All this is part of a bid to denigrate him and render him an integral scarecrow in the 'communist bogey' on which US right wing politics, including pedagogical politics, feed in their quest to foment scare-mongering. CSE writers, by and large, together with writers from a range of areas, provide an important riposte. In his analysis of the relation between education and power, there are several insights for a democratising education, with, to my mind, much more still to be explored for CSE praxis in Canada and the USA.

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Per una storia dei gruppi subalterni. Considerazioni sul Quaderno 25

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Per una storia dei gruppi subalterni. Considerazioni sul Quaderno 25

Abstract

Il presente contributo cerca di approfondire lo studio del concetto di gruppo subalterno nel pensiero di Gramsci a partire dalla lettura del monografico Quaderno 25. Il lemma subalterno assume, all'interno della riflessione carceraria gramsciana, un ruolo abba-stanza significativo, soprattutto in relazione al concetto di egemonia. Il presente concetto infatti lo troviamo alla base delle riflessioni compiute dal filosofo sardo in merito allo studio sulla natura e la formazione delle due classi che subiscono in maniera diretta l'azione egemonica della classe dominante: i contadini e gli operai. L'indagine attorno al concetto di subalterno ci consente inoltre di allargare il discorso oltre al quaderno monografico ad esso dedicato per creare dei collegamenti con le note ed i paragrafi contenuti nei Quaderni 13, 19 e 27 dedicati a Machiavelli e la politica, al Risorgimento e al folklore, tutti utili per studiare la formazione di questi gruppi. Sull'azione politica dei subalterni non si è potuto poi non fare riferimento al saggio pre-carcerario Alcuni temi sulla quistione meridionale, dove emerge con chiarezza ed una certa insistenza la necessità di organizzare politicamente il blocco operaio-agrario ai fini di instaurare una nuova egemonia comunista.

Abstract

This contribution seeks to deepen the study of the concept of the subordinate group in Gramsci's thought starting from a reading of the monographic Notebook 25. Within Gramsci's prison reflection, the lemma "subaltern" takes on a quite significant role, especially in relation to the concept of hegemony. Indeed, we find this concept at the basis of his reflections regarding the study of the nature and formation of the two classes that directly undergo the hegemonic action of the ruling class: the peasants and the workers. The investigation regarding the concept of subaltern also allows a broadening of the discussion beyond the monographic Notebook 25, devoted to it, to create links with those paragraphs of Notebooks 13, 19 and 27 on the subject of Machiavelli and politics, of the Risorgimento and of folklore, all of use in studying the formation of these groups. On the political action of the subalterns, reference is obligatory to the pre-prison essay Some Aspects of the Southern Question, where with clarity and a certain insistence there emerges the need to politically organize the worker-peasant bloc in order to establish a new communist hegemony.

Keywords

Hegemony, subalterns, folklore, common sense, popular religion, peasantry

Per una storia dei gruppi subalterni. Considerazioni sul Quaderno 25

Marco Casalino

1. Introduzione

L'analisi gramsciana in merito al concetto di *subalterno/gruppo subalterno* si pone, a mio modo di vedere, come una sorta di prova della validità della riflessione attorno al concetto di egemonia. E questo per una serie di motivi ben precisi. Come si evince dallo sviluppo dell'intera riflessione carceraria, Gramsci individua nel concetto di *egemonia* il punto cardine attorno al quale far ruotare tutta la riflessione riguardante l'economia, la politica e la cultura. L'egemonia poi viene definita come l'azione con cui una classe, nel nostro caso la borghesia capitalista, esercita il suo ruolo dirigente nei confronti dei suoi alleati, ma soprattutto *dominante* nei confronti delle classi ad essa opposte. Ed è proprio in relazione a questo aspetto che si inserisce la riflessione attorno ai cosiddetti *gruppi subalterni*. Gramsci fa riferimento a questo particolare soggetto politico utilizzando il termine "gruppo" preferendolo a quello tradizionale di "classe". A mio avviso questa scelta operata dal nostro autore è giustificata dal fatto che questa condizione di subalternità, sia essa di carattere propriamente politico o intellettuale-culturale a seconda del contesto, non definisce quasi mai una sola realtà omogenea ma può riferirsi a più soggetti, anche facenti parte della stessa classe. Come ha giustamente notato Joseph A. Buttigieg nella sua ricostruzione filologico-contestuale del termine:

L'elemento distintivo dei subalterni e dei gruppi subalterni è la loro disgregazione. Questi gruppi (o classi) sociali non sono solo molteplici, ma sono anche divisi e piuttosto differenti gli uni dagli altri. Sebbene alcuni di essi possono aver raggiunto un livello significativo di organizzazione, altri mancano di coesione, mentre negli stessi gruppi esistono vari livelli di subalternità e di marginalità.¹

¹ J. A. Buttigieg, voce *Subalterno, subalterni*, in G. Liguori e P. Voza (cura) 2009, p. 827; nella versione originale in inglese dall'autore, vedi Buttigieg, Joseph A., *International Gramsci Journal*, 3(1), 2018, 8-17.

La *disgregazione* è il tratto distintivo della subalternità e che tende a segnare in modo decisivo non soltanto l'esistenza di più gruppi che operano all'interno del tessuto sociale ma anche quella di una sola classe. Non a caso infatti Gramsci arriva a definire la società meridionale come «una grande disgregazione sociale»², espressione che verrà ripresa ed analizzata più avanti nel testo, proprio per dimostrare come all'interno della medesima classe contadina, il gruppo più consistente di essa, sussistano diversi gradi di subalternità determinati dal diverso grado di miseria materiale e culturale. La frammentarietà determinata da questa condizione rende necessario riferirsi ai subalterni più in termine di gruppo, o per meglio dire di gruppi, anziché di classe. L'utilizzo del termine "classi subalterne" nel §1 del *Quaderno 27*, preso in esame più avanti nel corso del testo, non soltanto è subordinato al termine *folklore* ma lo troviamo citato soltanto fra parentesi e subordinato ulteriormente al più generale termine "popolo". Lo stesso *Quaderno 25* nel titolo fa riferimento alla storia dei "gruppi sociali subalterni" e non ad una classe di subalterni dai contorni ben definiti.

Per Gramsci fare la storia di questi gruppi è importante perché si può arrivare a comprendere e definire nei suoi contorni il cosiddetto "blocco storico" che anima la dialettica della società. Anche in questo caso, per operare un chiarimento a livello metodologico e terminologico, è più consono a mio avviso utilizzare il termine *blocco sociale* invece di *blocco storico*, data la natura complessa di questo termine. Come ha giustamente osservato Giuseppe Vacca nel suo testo *Modernità alternative*, molto spesso si tende ad operare una confusione tra questi due lemmi del pensiero gramsciano. Il *blocco sociale*, infatti, si riferisce all'«insieme di forze necessarie per il conseguimento di determinate finalità politiche congiunturali», mentre «il concetto di "blocco storico" designa la fusione fra struttura e superstrutture che segna la nascita di un nuovo Stato»³. I gruppi subalterni possono dar vita con la loro unione ad un *blocco sociale* che ha sì delle finalità politiche immediate, quali l'alleanza politica per la contesa dell'egemonia alla classe dominante, e che a sua volta però può trasformarsi e porre le basi, una volta realizzata l'affermazione di una società comunista, di un nuovo *blocco storico* socialista. Diciamo dunque che tra questi due

² A. Gramsci, , 1990, p. 68.

³ G. Vacca, 2017, p. 179.

termini sussiste una relazione dialettica dove il *blocco sociale* delle forze subalterne contiene in potenza le possibilità di costituirsi come nuovo *blocco storico* dopo che con la sua azione ha saputo produrre un rinnovamento totale dell'ordine sociale. Questa chiarificazione terminologica ci può quindi aiutare a comprendere meglio alcune considerazioni gramsciane compiute nel periodo ordinovista⁴ in relazione alla situazione politica italiana e alla presenza di due blocchi sociali, quello operaio e contadino, la cui alleanza politica strategica risulta fondamentale per la lotta verso l'affermazione del socialismo.

L'importanza della riflessione sui subalterni è poi ravvisabile sia dalla struttura interna delle note che compongono il quaderno monografico ed essi dedicato che dalla loro collocazione in relazione agli altri quaderni. Com'è noto, a partire dal *Quaderno 10*, dedicato alla critica della filosofia di Benedetto Croce, Gramsci si impegna nella stesura di quaderni tematici frutto della rielaborazione ed integrazione delle note raccolte e disseminate nelle miscellanee precedenti. Pertanto si può notare come questo *Quaderno 25* incentrato sui subalterni venga posizionato, seguendo la linea tematica indicata dal nostro autore, dopo i *Quaderni 13* e *19*, rispettivamente dedicati a Machiavelli (e alla teorizzazione del partito come *Moderno Principe*) e alla storia, sia politica che sociale, del Risorgimento italiano, e prima del *Quaderno 27*, dedicato all'analisi del concetto di *folklore*. Perché attribuire importanza a questa scansione argomentativa? Perché, a mio avviso, al suo interno si possono individuare alcune indicazioni precise su come si deve articolare una storia, il più possibile autentica e precisa, di questi *gruppi subalterni*. Essa non può prescindere innanzitutto da considerazioni storiche concrete su come si è venuta a formare la società italiana dopo l'unificazione del paese, così come non può fare a meno di un'analisi politica su come organizzare l'azione di questi gruppi. Un altro aspetto poi che non può essere trascurato è quello della rappresentazione che la classe dominante propone di questo gruppo ma anche l'immagine che esso produce e accetta di sé stesso. L'immagine creata dalla classe dominante del subalterno

⁴ Il riferimento qui è sempre a quella parte dell'articolo dedicato alla questione meridionale, e su cui avrò modo di ritornare, nel quale Gramsci attesta l'importanza di organizzare politicamente i due blocchi sociali di operai e contadini, le due massime espressioni dello sviluppo economico-sociale dell'Italia post-unitaria. Cfr. A. Gramsci, *Note sul problema meridionale*, cit.

infatti influenza la sua percezione anche da parte delle classi ad esso affini. È il caso, come avrò modo di dimostrare prendendo in considerazione alcune riflessioni del *Quaderno 19*, della rappresentazione dei contadini del sud in relazione alle masse operaie del nord. Nei prodotti culturali della classe dominante Gramsci riscontra una rappresentazione deformata delle classi popolari, le quali, attraverso alcuni elementi che si possono definire folcloristici, a loro volta si convincono dell'esattezza di essa.

Questa struttura argomentativa è riscontrabile poi nella disposizione stessa delle poche note, in tutto 8, che compongono il *Quaderno 25*. I paragrafi 2 e 5, entrambi dedicati alla definizione del metodo da seguire per questa ricerca, sono stati posizionati da Gramsci a cavallo di note riguardanti la cultura, le analisi storiche sulla realtà italiana del passato e l'azione politica; questo a testimonianza dell'intreccio e della necessità di collegare lo studio della formazione e dello sviluppo di questi gruppi in relazione agli avvenimenti storico-politici che hanno segnato la storia del paese e della rappresentazione che ne è stata fatta e che popola l'immaginario culturale dell'epoca.

2. *Definizione della ricerca e fonti metodologiche*

Nell'affrontare questo studio Gramsci non esita a manifestare, a partire dal già citato §2 intitolato *Criteri metodologici*, un certo grado di difficoltà in quanto

La storia dei gruppi sociali subalterni è necessariamente disgregata ed episodica. È indubbio che nell'attività storica di questi gruppi c'è la tendenza all'unificazione sia pure su piani provvisori, ma questa tendenza è continuamente spezzata dall'iniziativa dei gruppi dominanti, e pertanto può essere dimostrata solo a ciclo storico compiuto, se esso si conclude con successo. I gruppi subalterni subiscono sempre l'iniziativa dei gruppi dominanti, anche quando si ribellano e insorgono [...]. Ogni traccia di iniziativa autonoma da parte dei gruppi subalterni dovrebbe perciò essere di valore inestimabile per lo storico integrale (*Q 25*§2, pp. 2283-4).

Nell'esaminare la formazione di questi gruppi sociali non si può non trovare difficoltà riguardanti la mancanza di fonti dirette che testimonino la loro azione. Complicazione già riscontrata nell'articolo *Che fare?* del 1923 dove, in riferimento alla storia nazionale, afferma:

Noi non conosciamo l'Italia. Peggio ancora: noi manchiamo degli strumenti adatti per conoscere l'Italia, così com'è realmente e quindi siamo nella quasi impossibilità di fare previsioni, di orientarci, di stabilire delle linee d'azione che abbiano una certa possibilità di essere esatte. Non esiste una storia della classe operaia italiana. Non esiste una storia della classe contadina.⁵

Ritornando al *Quaderno 25* e al suo §5, rientrando anch'esso nella stessa rubrica, il pensatore sardo tende a precisare ancora di più questo aspetto sostenendo che

L'unità storica delle classi dirigenti avviene nello Stato e la storia di esse è essenzialmente la storia degli Stati e dei gruppi di Stati. Ma non bisogna credere che tale unità sia puramente giuridica e politica, sebbene anche questa forma di unità abbia la sua importanza e non solamente formale: l'unità storica fondamentale, per la sua concretezza, è il risultato dei rapporti organici tra Stato o società politica e "società civile". Le classi subalterne, per definizione, non sono unificate e non possono unificarsi finché non possono diventare "Stato": la loro storia, pertanto è intrecciata a quella della società civile, è una funzione "disgregata" e discontinua della storia della società civile e, per questo tramite, della storia degli Stati o gruppi di Stati. (*Q* 25§5, pp. 2287-8)

La mancanza di unità politica è ciò che impedisce ai subalterni di farsi gruppo sociale vero e proprio e di dirigere coscientemente la propria azione politico-sociale. Ad essa Gramsci oppone invece l'unità politica, ma direi anche culturale, della classe dirigente la cui storia coincide con quella dello Stato a cui essa dà vita e forma in maniera progressiva. Ed è proprio la coincidenza tra questi due piani (Stato-classe) a rendere possibile la ricostruzione storica del formarsi e dello svilupparsi di una classe dirigente. È altrettanto vero però, come si evince dall'ultima frase di questo paragrafo, che è possibile, sempre adottando tutte le cautele del caso, ricollegare la storia dei gruppi subalterni a quella dei gruppi dominanti. Dato che la storia degli "Stati" si intreccia con quella della *società civile* – per riprendere la famosa formula «Stato = società politica + società civile, cioè egemonia corazzata di coercizione» (*Q* 6§88, pp. 763-4) – è possibile rintracciare all'interno di quest'ultima l'insieme delle forze sociali che per contrasto ed opposizione si affermano nella lotta per l'egemonia. Borghesia e proletariato sono entrambe espressione di determinati rapporti di produzione che trovano nella società civile la loro prima definizione. Questa dialettica tra forze

⁵ A. Gramsci, *Che fare?* in Id, *Per la verità* (1974), pp. 267-70.

sociali consente così a Gramsci di elaborare una serie di punti su cui articolare questo complesso studio sulla formazione dei gruppi subalterni. Bisogna pertanto studiare:

1) il formarsi obiettivo di gruppi sociali subalterni per lo sviluppo e i rivolgimenti che si verificano nel mondo della produzione economica, la loro diffusione quantitativa e la loro origine da gruppi sociali preesistenti, di cui conservano per un certo tempo la mentalità, l'ideologia e i fini; 2) il loro aderire attivamente o passivamente alle formazioni politiche dominanti, i tentativi di influire sui programmi di queste formazioni per imporre rivendicazioni proprie e le conseguenze che tali tentativi hanno nel determinare processi di decomposizione e di rinnovamento o di neoformazione; 3) la nascita dei partiti nuovi dei gruppi dominanti per mantenere il consenso e il controllo dei gruppi subalterni; 4) le formazioni proprie dei gruppi subalterni per rivendicazioni di carattere ristretto e parziale; 5) le nuove formazioni che affermano l'autonomia dei gruppi subalterni ma nei vecchi quadri; 6) le formazioni che affermano l'autonomia integrale ecc. (*Q* 25§5, p. 2288)

I gruppi subalterni nascono così dal terreno dei rivolgimenti economici. Anch'essi rientrano, per riprendere l'analisi economica marxiana, all'interno di quelle forze produttive che in un dato momento storico entrano in contrasto con i rapporti di produzione esistenti. La funzione «sommamente rivoluzionaria»⁶ attribuita da Marx alla borghesia in età moderna ha potuto contare anche sull'appoggio e sulla forza delle masse popolari, poi proletarie, nate in quello stesso periodo dalle trasformazioni economiche allora in atto. Ed è qui che arriviamo al secondo dei punti programmatici gramsciani, ovvero all'adesione passiva o attiva delle masse all'azione politica esercitata dalle classi dominanti. In merito a questo punto, ma anche in riferimento ai successivi dedicati alla politica dei subalterni, Gramsci si fa più preciso affermando che

la storia dei partiti dei gruppi subalterni è molto complessa, in quanto deve includere tutte le ripercussioni delle attività di partito, per tutta l'area dei subalterni nel loro complesso, e sugli atteggiamenti dei gruppi dominanti e deve includere le ripercussioni delle attività ben più efficaci, perché sorrette dallo Stato, dei gruppi dominanti su quelli dei subalterni e sui loro partiti. Tra i gruppi subalterni uno eserciterà o tenderà ad esercitare una certa egemonia attraverso un partito e ciò occorre fissare studiando gli sviluppi anche di tutti gli altri partiti in quanto includono elementi del gruppo egemone o degli altri gruppi subalterni che subiscono tale egemonia (*ivi* pp. 2288-9).

⁶ Cfr. K. Marx, *Manifesto del partito comunista*, in K. Marx, F. Engels, 1973, p. 488.

L'attività politica dei subalterni rischia di subire un doppio effetto egemonico. Da una parte va incontro all'influenza esercitata dalla classe dominante che, nel tentativo di mantenere la sua posizione egemone, cerca di incanalarne il malcontento all'interno di un'azione politica riformistica tendente ad accogliere alcune delle sue richieste. Dall'altra, all'apice del movimento che tende a rivoluzionare l'intero assetto economico-sociale, rischia di subire l'azione direttiva di altri o dell'altro gruppo subalterno nato dal terreno delle contraddizioni sociali che tenderà a sostituire la vecchia classe dominante. È questo il caso della borghesia francese durante la rivoluzione dell'89, una classe che per assurgere al ruolo di dominante ha saputo sfruttare al meglio l'azione popolare contro il vecchio sistema feudale. Questo perché la borghesia ha potuto, grazie anche ad una serie di fattori economici a lei favorevoli, organizzarsi e porsi come classe dominante anche prima di raggiungere il potere vero e proprio (cfr. *Q* 1§44, p. 41).

Lo spunto per queste considerazioni, a mio avviso, Gramsci lo ritrova nella lettura dei testi del Marx «scrittore di opere politiche e storiche concrete» (*Q*7§24, p. 871), e in particolare nel *18 Brumaio di Luigi Bonaparte*. Analizzando gli avvenimenti politici accorsi in Francia tra il 1848 ed il 1851 Marx ci dà prova di come un intero gruppo di forze sociali subalterne sia stato manovrato ed utilizzato dalla borghesia per contrastare le forze sociali – proletariato industriale cittadino (parigino) e residui del vecchio regime – in grado di minare la sua posizione di dominio. La descrizione che Marx ci fornisce della *Società del 10 dicembre* è illuminante su questo punto.

Col pretesto di fondare un'associazione di beneficenza, il sottoproletariato di Parigi era stato organizzato in sezioni segrete [...]. Accanto a roués (libertini) in dissesto, dalle risorse e dalle origini equivoche; accanto ad avventurieri corrotti, feccia della borghesia, vi si trovano vagabondi, soldati in congedo, forzati usciti dal bagno, galeotti evasi, birbe, furfanti lazzaroni, tagliaborse, ciurmatori, bari, maquereaux (ruffiani), tenitori di postriboli, facchini letterati, sonatori ambulanti, straccivendoli, arrotini, stagnari, accattoni, in una parola tutta la massa confusa, decomposta, fluttuante, che i francesi chiamano “la bohème”.⁷

Come possiamo notare, elementi abbastanza eterogenei ma accumulati dal fatto di appartenere a vari strati del sottoproletariato urbano e cittadino vengono sfruttati per fini politici dalla borghesia

⁷ K. Marx, *Il diciotto brumaio di Luigi Bonaparte*, in K. Marx, F. Engels, 1982, p. 155.

per difendersi da una parte dall'azione di minaccia del proletariato industriale, in Francia già abbastanza organizzato a livello politico, e dall'altra dalle pretese revisioniste dei residui dei vecchi strati sociali dominanti. Il Marx "storico" quindi fornisce a Gramsci un utile spunto per andare alla ricerca di quelle formazioni sociali che fino a quel momento la storia, ma soprattutto la politica, avevano dimenticato o di cui ignoravano, più o meno volontariamente l'esistenza.

3. Disgregazione politica e frammentazione sociale. Il caso del Risorgimento italiano

Gramsci, seguendo l'esempio del lavoro storico marxiano, si concentrò, prima della composizione delle note sui subalterni, all'analisi concreta di quel fenomeno storico che ha contribuito a definire la situazione politica, economica e sociale dell'Italia portandola verso l'unità statale: il movimento del *Risorgimento*, a cui è dedicato l'intero *Quaderno 19*. Gramsci decide di dedicarsi all'analisi di questo fenomeno sulla scorta delle numerose interpretazioni, alle quali vengono dedicati diverse note del quaderno⁸, affermatesi nel panorama culturale post-unitario ad opera di alcuni intellettuali sia appartenenti a gruppi culturali tradizionali – Gioacchino Volpe, Alfredo Oriani, Mario Missiroli, Gaetano Mosca, Adolfo Omodeo e il Benedetto Croce “apprendista marxiano” – che a gruppi più socialmente progressivi – Piero Gobetti e Guido Dorso – e che a suo avviso non rendono effettivamente conto di come si sono svolti gli avvenimenti risorgimentali ad opera dei suoi principali protagonisti. In particolare questi si dividono in tre gruppi politico-sociali fondamentali: le *masse popolari*, composte rispettivamente dai contadini rurali del Sud e dalle prime sacche operaie del Nord Italia, i *moderati*, rappresentanti gli interessi della grande proprietà (contadina e industriale) e dei residui del vecchio regime (ambienti legati ancora al papato), e il cosiddetto *Partito d'Azione*, colui che avrebbe dovuto, sulla scorta dell'esempio francese dell'89, rappresentare la parte più rivoluzionaria, o per meglio dire “giacobina”, della nascente borghesia italiana.

La relazione tra questi tre gruppi, il modo in cui si è venuta a determinare l'egemonia di uno di essi sugli altri, è ciò che ha contribuito a definire l'azione politica al momento dell'unificazione nazionale e a determinare un equilibrio sociale assai contraddittorio

⁸ Cfr., *Q19*§4, pp. 1973-74; *Q19*§5, pp. 1974-89; *Q19*§13, p. 2000.

con tutta una serie di problemi sociali irrisolti che ancora al tempo di Gramsci esercitavano una forte influenza sull'azione politica dei partiti dell'epoca nel tentativo di cercarne una soluzione. La situazione anomala che ha accompagnato i fatti del Risorgimento italiano ha fatto sì che questo movimento, come ha notato anche Alberto Burgio, si trasformasse da occasione per una profonda riforma sociale, determinata anche da istanze provenienti dal basso, a *rivoluzione passiva* frutto di «un rapporto di forze che permette al dominante di dirigere (volgendole a proprio vantaggio) trasformazioni divenute inevitabili»⁹. Il Risorgimento italiano «si è effettuato, senza “Terrore”, come “rivoluzione senza rivoluzione” ossia come “rivoluzione passiva”» (Q19§24, p. 2011) in quanto la classe politicamente e intellettualmente più organizzata, quella espressa dai *moderati*, ha saputo sfruttare la «debolezza costruttiva dell'antagonista» (Q14§23, p. 1681), ovvero delle classi subalterne, ma anche del *Partito d'Azione*, per piegare il suo carattere progressivo, ma disorganizzato, a proprio vantaggio¹⁰.

Gramsci ravvisa che l'emergere progressivo delle masse e del loro consistente peso nell'azione politica sia da ricollegare alla situazione politica settecentesca ed in particolare, come si evince dal §3 del *Quaderno 19* intitolato *Le origini del Risorgimento italiano*, alla progressiva affermazione di una parte “laica” della società italiana «in opposizione al papato, che cerca di rivendicare una funzione di primato italiano e di missione italiana nel mondo indipendentemente dal Papato» (Q19§3, p. 1967). La cosa più importante poi è data dal fatto che nel Settecento

questa tradizione cominci a disgregarsi per meglio concentrarsi e muoversi con una intima dialettica: significa che tale tradizione letterario-retorica sta diventando un fermento politico, il suscitatore e l'organizzatore del terreno ideologico in cui le forze politiche effettive riusciranno a determinare lo schieramento, sia pure tumultuario, delle più grandi masse popolari necessarie per raggiungere certi fini (*ibidem*).

Una classe quindi che pretende di svolgere un ruolo dominante deve dimostrare fin da principio di saper organizzare l'azione non soltanto dei suoi membri, ma anche delle grandi masse popolari che

⁹ A. Burgio, 2014, p. 370.

¹⁰ Sulla passività del movimento democratico riconducibile al Partito d'Azione nei confronti dei *moderati* cfr. F. Frosini, 2010, pp. 220-2.

possono fornire la forza necessaria per operare una azione di disturbo nei confronti degli avversari. Per Gramsci sostanzialmente questo ruolo organizzatore delle masse popolari nello svolgimento dell'intera azione risorgimentale spettò ai rappresentanti dello schieramento politico dei moderati. In apertura del §24, intitolato *Il problema della direzione politica nella formazione e nello sviluppo della nazione e dello Stato moderno in Italia*, Gramsci, riprendendo in seconda stesura alcune considerazioni già svolte nel *Quaderno 1*¹¹, afferma che

Tutto il problema della connessione tra le varie correnti politiche del Risorgimento, cioè dei loro rapporti reciproci e dei loro rapporti con i gruppi sociali omogenei o subordinati esistenti nelle varie sezioni (o settori) storiche del territorio nazionale, si riduce a questo dato di fatto fondamentale: i moderati rappresentavano un gruppo sociale relativamente omogeneo, per cui la loro direzione subì oscillazioni relativamente limitate (e in ogni caso secondo una linea di sviluppo organicamente progressivo), mentre il così detto Partito d'Azione non si appoggiava specificamente a nessuna classe storica e le oscillazioni subite dai suoi organi dirigenti in ultima analisi si componevano secondo gli interessi dei moderati: cioè storicamente il Partito d'Azione fu guidato dai moderati: l'affermazione attribuita a Vittorio Emanuele II di "avere in tasca" il Partito d'Azione o qualcosa di simile è praticamente esatta e non solo per i contatti personali del Re con Garibaldi ma perché di fatto il Partito d'Azione fu diretto "indirettamente" da Cavour e dal Re (Q19§24, p. 2010).

Ciò che ha determinato il successo dei moderati sui subalterni, ma soprattutto sugli alleati-rivali del Partito d'Azione, è stata la capacità di porsi fin dall'inizio, prima ancora della presa effettiva del potere, come gruppo sociale egemone in grado di esercitare la sua influenza politica, intellettuale e morale su tutti i gruppi sociali del paese. Per Gramsci infatti

la supremazia di un gruppo sociale si manifesta in due modi, come "dominio" e come "direzione intellettuale e morale". Un gruppo sociale è dominante dei gruppi avversari che tende a "liquidare" o a sottomettere anche con la forza armata ed è dirigente dei gruppi affini e alleati. Un gruppo sociale può e anzi deve essere dirigente già prima di conquistare il potere governativo (è questa una delle condizioni principali per la stessa conquista del potere); dopo, quando esercita il potere e anche se lo tiene fortemente in pugno, diventa dominante ma deve continuare ad essere anche "dirigente". I moderati continuarono a dirigere il Partito d'Azione anche dopo il 1870 e il 1876 e il cosiddetto "trasformismo" non è stato che l'espressione parlamentare di questa azione egemonica intellettuale, morale e politica (*ivi*, pp. 2010-11).

¹¹ Cfr. Q1§44, pp. 40-54.

L'influsso moderato si è poi determinato e consolidato grazie all'azione di una serie di intellettuali, espressione organica delle classi alte del paese quali «capi d'azienda, grandi agricoltori o amministratori di tenute, imprenditori commerciali e industriali, ecc.» (*ivi*, p. 2012), che sfruttando la loro posizione di preminenza sociale, data dalle loro disponibilità economiche e relazioni politiche, hanno saputo assorbire al loro interno, far rientrare tra i ranghi, gli elementi più progressivi non solo delle classi alleate, ma anche di quei gruppi sociali avversari che proponevano istanze progressiste in tutti i sensi e che «parevano irreconciliabilmente nemici» (*ivi*, p. 2011).

Ciò che è mancato al Partito d'Azione è stata proprio la capacità di esprimere una classe intellettuale in grado di assumere un ruolo dirigente, ma soprattutto la capacità di «imprimere al moto del Risorgimento un carattere più marcatamente popolare e democratico», elaborando un «programma organico di governo che riflettesse le rivendicazioni essenziali delle masse popolari, in primo luogo dei contadini» (*ivi*, p. 2013). Con queste parole Gramsci pone sostanzialmente in essere la questione del mancato carattere *giacobino* che avrebbe dovuto assumere questo partito nello svolgimento dell'azione rivoluzionari risorgimentale. La mancanza di spirito giacobino imputabile al Partito d'Azione Gramsci la ravvisa nel fatto che

i giacobini conquistarono con la lotta senza quartiere la loro funzione di partito dirigente; essi in realtà si “imposero” alla borghesia francese, conducendola in una posizione molto più avanzata di quella che i nuclei borghesi primitivamente più forti avrebbero voluto “spontaneamente” occupare e anche molto più avanzata di quella che le premesse storiche dovevano consentire (*ivi*, p. 2027).

Il terzo stato francese, in maniera abbastanza simile a quello che potremmo definire il “terzo stato” pre-unitario, si presentava anch'esso in maniera abbastanza disomogenea e tendente inizialmente verso posizioni politicamente moderate. Difatti i rappresentanti di questo terzo stato iniziarono con porre «solo le questioni che interessano i componenti fisici attuali del gruppo sociale, i loro interessi ‘corporativi’ immediati» (*ibidem*). La svolta ci fu quando una parte dell'élite intellettuale borghese capì che bisognava oltrepassare lo stadio corporativo di classe e far sì che anche i propri interessi superassero questa cerchia per trasformarsi

anche negli «interessi di altri raggruppamenti subordinati» (Q4§38, p. 457). I giacobini francesi si presentarono quindi come

il solo partito della rivoluzione in atto, in quanto non solo essi rappresentavano i bisogni e le aspirazioni immediate delle persone fisiche attuali che costituivano la borghesia francese, ma rappresentavano il movimento rivoluzionario nel suo insieme, come sviluppo storico integrale perché rappresentavano i bisogni anche futuri e, di nuovo, non solo di quelle determinate persone fisiche, ma di tutti i gruppi nazionali che dovevano essere assimilati al gruppo fondamentale esistente. [...] Essi erano persuasi dell'assoluta verità delle formule sull'uguaglianza, la fraternità, la libertà e, ciò che importa di più, di tale verità erano persuase le grandi masse popolari che i giacobini suscitavano e portavano alla lotta (Q19§24, p. 2028).

La forza del partito giacobino, che ha contribuito al suo successo politico, è stata proprio quella di approfittare dell'incertezza dell'ala moderata della borghesia francese, imporre i suoi interessi e rivendicazioni contro le classi dirigenti, ma soprattutto imporre questi interessi alle masse popolari sfruttandone la forza in vista dell'azione rivoluzionaria vera e propria che ha portato all'instaurazione dello stato borghese. I giacobini, in una parola, hanno saputo unificare attorno a sé le forze progressive del paese, quelle che incarnavano il movimento rivoluzionario reale.

Nel caso del Partito d'Azione «non si trova niente che rassomigli a questo indirizzo giacobino, a questa infallibile volontà di diventare partito dirigente» (*ivi*, p. 2030). Esso non è riuscito ad imporre la propria volontà, il proprio indirizzo politico sulle altre forze sociali; non è riuscito ad elaborare le giuste parole d'ordine capace di unificare le masse e le altre correnti della borghesia attorno a sé. Questa indecisione di fondo, la mancata uscita dalla propria cerchia economico-corporativa, ha fatto sì che i moderati continuassero ad esercitare la loro influenza sull'intera società italiana imponendo a tutto il movimento risorgimentale un andamento quasi evoluzionistico, che si è compiuto più per forza d'inerzia che per una reale ed effettiva frattura rivoluzionaria.

4. Disillusione di massa, questioni politiche irrisolte e ruolo giacobino del moderno principe

Coloro che più di tutti hanno subito l'influenza dell'azione politica moderata e del fallimento dell'organizzazione del Partito d'Azione sono stati i due gruppi subalterni principali: gli operai

delle città settentrionali, politicamente più organizzati, e i contadini centro-meridionali, che costituivano, nel periodo risorgimentale e non solo, la parte più numerosa e povera della massa di lavoratori italiani. Ed è proprio su quest'ultimo gruppo che si è esercitata maggiormente l'influenza degli intellettuali tradizionali e della politica trasformista post-unitaria. Un altro elemento di fondamentale importanza è dato poi dal modo in cui queste due parti del gruppo dei subalterni siano entrate in contatto politico fra loro e dal modo in cui l'operaio del nord percepiva le condizioni di svantaggio economico del suo corrispettivo sociale rappresentato dal contadino-bracciante meridionale e viceversa. È tutto un intreccio di esigenze e di interessi, per lo più disattesi dalle forze politiche dominanti, che ha contribuito a definire, il più delle volte in maniera negativa e inefficace, le strategie degli allora partiti di sinistra, socialisti e comunisti compresi, nei confronti della cosiddetta "questione meridionale", che dopo i fatti dell'Unità ha occupato una parte importante del dibattito politico di allora. Le note risorgimentali dei *Quaderni*, infatti, ben si ricollegano al saggio del 1926 dapprima intitolato *Note sul problema meridionale e sull'atteggiamento nei suoi confronti dei comunisti, dei socialisti e dei democratici*, successivamente pubblicato semplicemente con il titolo *Alcuni temi della questione meridionale*, dove Gramsci tenta di dare, per riprendere un concetto espresso da Francesco Biscione nella sua introduzione all'edizione critica del saggio gramsciano, una «descrizione delle linee di tendenza di uno scenario (storico, ma anche politico, culturale, ecc.) che ha radici nel passato ma che costituisce un orizzonte ancora del tutto presente all'autore»¹². Il filosofo italiano rintraccia l'origine storica della questione oggetto del saggio del 1926, come avrà modo di dimostrare nel già citato *Quaderno 19*, proprio nel modo in cui si sono svolti gli avvenimenti che hanno portato all'unità del paese e che hanno avuto forti ripercussioni sociali anche nel periodo avvenire¹³.

¹² F. M. Biscione, 1990, p. 39.

¹³ Sul collegamento tra gli argomenti dell'articolo del '26 e le note carcerarie, risalenti al 1934-35, sempre Francesco Biscione nella sua introduzione alla nuova riproposizione di esso scrive: «Il saggio *Note sul problema meridionale e sull'atteggiamento nei suoi confronti dei comunisti, dei socialisti e dei democratici* [...] è uno scritto di sintesi, che chiude una prima parte della produzione "letteraria" di Gramsci e anticipa per più versi quell'ampia riflessione sulla storia d'Italia e sulle trasformazioni dell'Occidente che saranno i *Quaderni del carcere*» (*ivi*, pp. 39-40). La riflessione meridionalista, che nella sua prima stesura assume più un carattere e una valenza politica immediata, fa dunque da apripista e rimane sullo sfondo al momento della stesura delle note

Per comprendere al meglio la relazione sussistente tra il blocco operaio settentrionale e quello contadino meridionale bisogna, a detta di Gramsci, indagare «i rapporti tra popolazione urbana e popolazione rurale» che, nel caso italiano, non presenta un carattere così schematico come può presentarsi invece in altre realtà sociali europee. Occorre dunque, per riprendere un concetto espresso in apertura del §26 del *Quaderno 19* intitolato *Il rapporto città-campagna nel Risorgimento e nella struttura nazionale italiana*,

stabilire cosa si intende per “urbano” e per “rurale” nella civiltà moderna e quali combinazioni possono risultare dalla permanenza di forme antiche e retrive nella composizione generale della popolazione, studiata dal punto di vista suo maggiore o minore agglomerarsi. Talvolta si verifica il paradosso che un tipo rurale sia più progressivo di un gruppo sedicente urbano. Una città “industriale” è sempre più progressiva della campagna che ne dipende organicamente. Ma in Italia non tutte le città sono “industriali” e ancor più poche sono le città tipicamente industriali (*Q19§26*, pp. 2035-6).

Roma e Napoli, due delle maggiori città italiane del tempo presentavano infatti una struttura urbana molto sviluppata; sono entrambe città non industriali dove però «esistono forti nuclei di popolazione di tipo urbano moderno» (*ibidem*). In città di questo tipo esiste

tra tutti i gruppi sociali, una unità ideologica urbana contro la campagna, unità alla quale non sfuggono neppure i nuclei più moderni per funzione civile, che pur vi esistono: c'è l'odio e il disprezzo contro il “villano”, un fronte unico implicito contro le rivendicazioni della campagna, che, se realizzate, renderebbero impossibile l'esistenza di questo tipo di città. Reciprocamente esiste un'avversione “generica” ma non perciò meno tenace e appassionata della campagna contro la città, contro tutta la città, tutti i gruppi che la costituiscono (*ibidem*).

Anche all'interno di città non propriamente industriali ma dal carattere moderno si è venuto sviluppando un nucleo cittadino che vede nella campagna e nella sua componente costitutiva rurale una sorta di nemico che può, con le sue rivendicazioni, entrare in contrasto con i propri interessi e con il proprio sviluppo. La relativa debolezza di queste forze urbane centro-meridionali in rapporto alle

carcerarie dedicate alla storia dell'Italia moderna. Questo perché è proprio lì che si trovano le radici per meglio comprendere ed affrontare l'irrisolta questione del Sud del paese e del suo destino politico.

forze rurali in molte occasioni ha dato vita ad «una vera e propria soggezione della città alla campagna» (*ivi*, p. 2043), come nel caso della Repubblica Partenopea del 1799, quando «la città fu schiacciata dalla campagna organizzata nelle orde del cardinale Ruffo» (*ivi*, pp. 2036-37), le quali sostenevano che la Repubblica, sia nella sua fase aristocratica che in quella borghese, si curasse poco degli affari rurali a vantaggio esclusivo di quelli urbani. Difficoltà queste che caratterizzano anche il Nord Italia in quanto «le forze rurali settentrionali-centrali ponevano alla loro volta una serie di problemi che la forza urbana del Nord doveva porsi per stabilire un rapporto normale città-campagna, espellendo le interferenze e gli influssi di origine estranea allo sviluppo del nuovo Stato» (*ivi*, p. 2044). L'intera penisola era dunque attraversata da questo contrasto tra masse cittadine e rurali che se almeno nel Nord Italia, dove la classe operaia industriale delle città era più sviluppata e organizzata, aveva trovato una parziale composizione e soluzione, nel Sud rimaneva ancora aperto e capace di influenzare in negativo l'azione politica di questi gruppi. Dal rapporto città-campagna emergono sostanzialmente quattro gruppi fondamentali: «1) la forza urbana settentrionale; 2) la forza rurale meridionale; 3) la forza rurale settentrionale-centrale; 4-5) la forza rurale della Sicilia e della Sardegna» (*ivi*, p. 2042).

Le masse rurali contadine costituivano la maggioranza del gruppo dei subalterni, in particolare quelle contadine del meridione.

Il Mezzogiorno può essere definito una grande disgregazione sociale; i contadini, che costituiscono la grande maggioranza della sua popolazione, non hanno nessuna coesione [...]. La società meridionale è un grande blocco agrario costituito da tre gruppi sociali: la grande massa contadina amorfa e disgregata, gli intellettuali della piccola e media borghesia rurale; i grandi proprietari terrieri e i grandi intellettuali. I contadini meridionali sono in aperto fermento, ma come massa essi sono incapaci di dare una espressione centralizzata alle loro aspirazioni e ai loro bisogni.¹⁴

Disgregazione politica che ha contribuito a mantenere questa cospicua parte della popolazione italiana meridionale sotto l'egemonia degli intellettuali organici alla classe dei grandi proprietari e che si sono dimostrati capaci di influenzarne l'azione smorzando qualsiasi spinta riformista e di rivendicazione sociale. Questa debolezza

¹⁴ A. Gramsci, 1990, p. 68.

di fondo, determinata dall'incapacità di poter esprimere un proprio gruppo intellettuale in grado di indirizzarne l'azione politica, ha determinato, con il corso del tempo, la creazione pregiudizi e diffidenze all'interno del gruppo urbano-proletario settentrionale nei confronti della situazione del Mezzogiorno. Ritornando al *Quaderno 19* e agli avvenimenti che furono alla base dell'azione politica risorgimentale, Gramsci evidenzia come

La "misera" del Mezzogiorno era "inspiegabile" storicamente per le masse popolari del Nord; esse non capivano che l'unità non era avvenuta su una base di uguaglianza, ma come egemonia del Nord sul Mezzogiorno nel rapporto territoriale di città-campagna, cioè che il Nord concretamente era una "piovra" che si arricchiva alle spese del Sud e che il [suo] incremento economico-industriale era in rapporto con l'impoverimento dell'economia e dell'agricoltura meridionale. Il popolano dell'Alta Italia pensava invece che se il Mezzogiorno non progrediva dopo essere stato liberato dalle pastoie che alla sviluppo opponeva il regime borbonico, ciò significava che le cause della miseria non erano esterne, da ricercarsi nelle condizioni economico-politiche obiettive, ma interne, innate nella popolazione meridionale, tanto più che era radicata la persuasione della grande ricchezza del terreno: non rimaneva che una spiegazione, l'incapacità organica degli uomini, la loro barbarie, la loro inferiorità biologica [...]. Si ebbe così una polemica Nord-Sud sulle razze e la superiorità e inferiorità del Nord e del Sud [...]. Intanto rimase nel Nord la credenza che il Mezzogiorno fosse una "palla di piombo" per l'Italia, la persuasione che più grandi progressi la civiltà industriale moderna dell'Alta Italia avrebbe fatto senza questa "palla di piombo", ecc. (Q19§24, pp. 2021-2).

Non comprendendo le vere cause che furono alla base dell'unificazione nazionale, ovvero la volontà espressa dalla nascente borghesia industriale di utilizzare il meridione come un territorio, un buon pezzo di mercato interno nel quale smerciare i prodotti delle proprie industrie, il proletariato industriale del Nord è rimasto prigioniero della visione propagata dall'ideologia industriale dominante per cui la mancata assimilazione della popolazione rurale meridionale al nuovo sistema era la causa del mancato progresso del settentrione. La debolezza organizzativa di queste masse e il loro facile soggiogamento da parte degli intellettuali tradizionali appartenenti al latifondo le faceva altresì apparire come agenti della reazione borbonica contro gli interessi della popolazione del Nord. Insomma i contadini meridionali, data anche la loro forte assimilazione all'interno del sistema delle forze dell'ordine nazionale, venivano additati come i principali oppositori alle rivendicazioni operaie imposte dal

progressivo affermarsi del primo capitalismo italiano. Questo pregiudizio affermatosi subito dopo il compimento dell'unità nazionale perdurò per molto tempo, tant'è che già nel saggio del 1926, e quindi ben otto anni prima della composizione del *Quaderno 19*, che a sua volta riprende note elaborate precedentemente nel 1930 (*Quaderno 1*) e 1932 (*Quaderno 9*), Gramsci affermava che

È noto quale ideologia sia stata diffusa in forma capillare dai propagandisti della borghesia nelle masse del Settentrione: il Mezzogiorno è la palla di piombo che impedisce i più rapidi progressi allo sviluppo civile dell'Italia; i meridionali sono biologicamente degli esseri inferiori, dei semibarbari o dei barbari completi, per destino naturale; se il Mezzogiorno è arretrato, la colpa non è del sistema capitalistico o di qualsivoglia altra causa storica, ma della natura che ha fatto i meridionali poltroni, incapaci, criminali, barbari, temperando questa sorte maligna con l'esplosione puramente individuale di grandi geni, che sono come le solitarie palme in un arido e sterile deserto. Il Partito Socialista fu in gran parte il veicolo di questa ideologia borghese nel proletariato settentrionale; il Partito Socialista diede il suo crisma a tutta la letteratura 'meridionalista' della cricca di scrittori della cosiddetta scuola positiva, come i Ferri, i Sergi, i Niceforo, gli Orano e i minori seguaci, che in articoli, in bozzetti, in novelle, in romanzi, in libri di impressioni e di ricordi ripetevano in diverse forme lo stesso ritornello; ancora una volta la "scienza" era rivolta a schiacciare i miseri e gli sfruttati, ma questa volta essa si ammantava dei colori socialisti, pretendeva essere la scienza del proletariato.¹⁵

A più di sessant'anni dall'unità il pregiudizio instillato fra gli operai nei confronti dei contadini meridionali resterà sostanzialmente immutato. Il Partito Socialista, commettendo lo stesso errore teorico-pratico del Partito d'Azione, contribuì, anziché risolvere, con la sua retorica intrisa di positivismo – un'impostazione molto diffusa fra i partiti socialisti legati alla Seconda Internazionale e contro cui Gramsci intraprese una lotta molto forte nel tentativo di liberare il marxismo da ogni influsso meccanico-positivista¹⁶ – a rinforzare gli stereotipi riguardanti la sorte ma soprattutto la natura intrinseca dei contadini del meridione arrivando così a creare una distanza incolmabile fra operai e contadini che in realtà erano accumulati dalla stessa sorte di sfruttamento, seppur con differenze di metodo legate alla diversità delle forme di produzione.

¹⁵ A. Gramsci, 1990, p. 55.

¹⁶ Sulla critica gramsciana alla presunta scientificità del marxismo, non solo quello derivato dalla seconda internazionale (marxismo positivista) ma anche quello dialettico-sovietico, sono da vedere le numerose note del *Quaderno 11*, dedicate proprio alla confutazione di queste teorie che hanno contribuito a snaturare l'impianto teorico marxiano. Cfr. *Q11*, pp. 1366-1509.

Soltanto il Partito Comunista, nato nel 1921 proprio dalla scissione con il Partito Socialista, ha posto il problema dell'«alleanza tra operai del Nord e contadini del Sud» come condizione centrale e necessaria «per rovesciare la borghesia dal potere di Stato»¹⁷. Il «merito “incontestabile”», la sua funzione “sommamente rivoluzionaria”, attribuito da Gramsci al gruppo dei comunisti torinesi – il gruppo che fin dall'inizio ha esercitato un ruolo fondamentale nella formazione e nello svolgimento iniziale dell'attività politica del partito – è stato quello di «aver imposto la questione meridionale all'attenzione dell'avanguardia operaia, prospettandola come uno dei problemi essenziali della politica nazionale del proletariato rivoluzionario»¹⁸. L'alleanza tra operai e contadini diventa effettivamente una delle condizioni, se non quella fondamentale, che il Partito Comunista deve porsi se vuole trasformarsi in partito d'avanguardia per il proletariato nella lotta per l'egemonia contro la borghesia.

Il proletariato può diventare la vera classe dirigente e dominante soltanto nella misura in cui

riesce a creare un sistema di alleanze di classe che gli permetta di mobilitare contro il capitalismo e lo Stato borghese la maggioranza della popolazione lavoratrice, ciò che significa in Italia, nei rapporti reali di classe esistenti in Italia, nella misura in cui riesce a ottenere il consenso delle larghe masse contadine [...]. Conquistare la maggioranza delle masse contadine significa dunque, per il proletariato italiano, [...] comprendere le esigenze di classe che esse rappresentano, incorporare, queste esigenze nel suo programma rivoluzionario di transizione, porre queste esigenze tra le sue rivendicazioni di lotta.¹⁹

Il Partito Comunista, per come viene descritto in questo passo del saggio del '26, nella sua funzione di organizzatore delle coscienze dei due grandi gruppi che costituiscono il proletariato italiano si presenta come il vero e più autentico *Moderno Principe*. La sua struttura organizzativa lo caratterizza come tale in quanto, per riprendere la definizione contenuta nel §1 del *Quaderno 13*,

Il moderno principe, il mito-principe non può essere una persona reale, un individuo concreto, può essere solo un organismo; un elemento di società complesso nel quale già abbia inizio il concretarsi di una volontà collettiva riconosciuta e affermata parzialmente nell'azione. Questo organismo è già

¹⁷ Ivi, p. 53.

¹⁸ Ivi, p. 54.

¹⁹ Ivi, pp. 54-55.

dato dallo sviluppo storico ed è il partito politico, la prima cellula in cui si riassumono dei germi di volontà collettiva che tendono a divenire universali e totali (Q13§1, p. 1558).

Il partito politico è il luogo concreto e operante dove si viene a creare una volontà collettiva ed un'unità di intenti, derivante dal superamento degli interessi di parte determinati da localismo e regionalismi, capace di produrre un'azione politica concreta che tenga conto degli interessi di tutti i suoi rappresentati. Che alla testa del movimento Gramsci ponga il proletariato industriale dipende soltanto dal fatto che questo è arrivato a comprendere per primo, a causa di una serie di fattori determinati dallo sviluppo storico, il ruolo di sfruttamento in cui si sono a venute a trovare le masse lavoratrici. Coscienza che sa di dover trasmettere ai suoi principali alleati nella lotta contro il dominio borghese. Il *giacobinismo* del *Moderno Principe* consiste proprio in questo, nella creazione ex novo di una volontà collettiva tra tutti i membri che si riuniscono attorno al partito. Quest'ultimo deve farsi propugnatore di una profonda riforma intellettuale e morale, «ciò che poi significa creare il terreno per un ulteriore sviluppo della volontà collettiva nazionale popolare verso il compimento di una forma superiore e totale di civiltà moderna» (Q13§1, p. 1560), che coinvolga in primis le due parti più consistenti del gruppo dei subalterni; riforma che tende a creare una nuova volontà collettiva che rispecchia gli interessi comuni di entrambi e *che per* troppo tempo, a causa dell'azione ideologica svolta dalla borghesia anche attraverso l'azione dei partiti riformisti "amici del popolo", per riprendere un'espressione di Lenin, sono rimasti separati e all'apparenza inconciliabili. Soltanto con la riunificazione di questi interessi comuni è possibile costruire un vero blocco storico tendente al comunismo in grado di spezzare la subalternità del vero gruppo motore della storia.

5. *La dimensione folklorica del mondo dei subalterni*

Un altro aspetto chiave della ricerca gramsciana sui gruppi subalterni è quello legato all'indagine attorno al concetto di *folklore*; dimensione questa che contribuisce a definire in maniera significativa la mentalità di questi gruppi. In particolare l'importanza di questo particolare elemento della cultura popolare può essere ravvisata in due momenti precisi: il primo nel tentativo dell'ideologia di penetrare fra le masse egemonizzate, il secondo nella

relativa difficoltà di organizzare queste masse, in quanto il folklore non soltanto pone una certa distanza tra cultura bassa e cultura politica medio-alta rappresentata anche dai partiti progressisti, ma tende a dividere le stesse masse in regionalismi e provincialismi vari.

Nel §1 del *Quaderno 27* Gramsci propone una definizione di *folklore* intendendolo come

“concezione del mondo e della vita”, implicita in grande misura, di determinati strati (determinati nel tempo e nello spazio) della società, in contrapposizione [...] con le concezioni del mondo “ufficiali” (o in senso largo delle parti colte della società storicamente determinate) che si sono successe nello sviluppo storico [...]. Concezione del mondo non solo non elaborata e sistematica, perché il popolo (cioè l'insieme delle classi subalterne e strumentali di ogni forma di società finora esistita) per definizione non può avere concezioni elaborate, sistematiche e politicamente organizzate e centralizzate nel loro sia pur contraddittorio sviluppo, ma anzi molteplice [...] se addirittura non deve parlarsi di un agglomerato indigesto di frammenti di tutte le concezioni del mondo e della vita che si sono succedute nella storia, della maggior parte delle quali, anzi, solo nel folklore si trovano i superstiti documenti mutati e contaminati [...]. Il folklore può essere capito solo come un riflesso delle condizioni di vita culturale del popolo, sebbene certe concezioni proprie del folklore si prolunghino anche dopo che le condizioni siano (o sembrino) modificate o diano luogo a combinazioni bizzarre (Q27§1, pp. 2311-2).

La concezione folklorica del mondo propria dei gruppi subalterni tende così, come si evince dalla prima parte di questo passo, ad adottare ed esprimere un carattere, come riscontrato anche da Guido Liguori nel suo saggio *Subalterno e subalterni nei “Quaderni del carcere”*, che potremmo definire “difensivo”²⁰ nei riguardi dell'azione egemonico-culturale espressa dall'ideologia o concezione del mondo propria delle classi dominanti. L'ideologia, nonostante il suo carattere organizzato e ben definito, fatica a penetrare tra le masse proprio perché disorganizzate non soltanto politicamente ma anche culturalmente. È come se in questa sua azione egemonizzatrice la classe dominante entrasse in contrasto con qualcosa che soltanto all'apparenza risulta frammentario e quindi facile da superare. Quando Gramsci afferma che le classi popolari non possiedono «concezioni elaborate, sistematiche e politicamente organizzate e centralizzate» ci dice che queste non sono in grado di organizzare sistematicamente questo insieme frammentario di nozioni, ma non

²⁰ Cfr. G. Liguori, 2016, p. 94.

esclude che questo loro sedimentarsi nel tempo non possa successivamente dar vita ad un blocco abbastanza granitico e difficile da scalfire, determinato anche dalla capacità delle masse di mantenere vite cose ormai storicamente soprassate. Questa contrapposizione di “mondi” culturali Gramsci la mette in evidenza alla fine del §65 del *Quaderno 1* quando afferma che

Ogni strato sociale ha il suo “senso comune” che è in fondo la concezione della vita e della morale più diffusa. Ogni corrente filosofica lascia una sedimentazione di “senso comune”: è questo il documento della sua effettualità storica. Il senso comune non è qualcosa di irrigidito e immobile ma si trasforma continuamente, arricchendosi di nozioni scientifiche e opinioni filosofiche entrate nel costume. Il “senso comune” è il folklore della “filosofia” e sta di mezzo tra il “folklore” vero e proprio (cioè come è inteso) e la filosofia, la scienza, l’economia degli scienziati. Il ‘senso comune’ crea il futuro folklore, cioè una fase più o meno irrigidita di un certo tempo e luogo (Q1§65, p. 76).

Il folklore, per il tramite della sua fase più fluida e meno rigida costituita dal *sensu comune*, riesce ad assorbire quegli elementi dell’alta cultura che ben si adattano agli altri sedimenti presenti nella sua struttura interna e che appartengono ormai ad una dimensione storica in via di superamento. Tutto ciò che riesce a lasciare un segno, a provocare stupore ed un senso di fascinazione nel misero immaginario popolare viene inglobato dalla dimensione folklorica ed utilizzato per dar nuova linfa vitale a quella «“morale del popolo”, intesa come un insieme determinato di massime per la condotta e dei costumi» (Q27§1, p. 2313) che in maniera costante governa le azioni e determina in modo fondamentale la costruzione dell’immaginario popolare

Tra gli elementi che entrano a far parte del folklore Gramsci individua anche la religione, forse quella che più della filosofia contribuisce a rinforzare questa particolare e misera concezione del mondo. Lo stretto legame che accomuna queste due realtà, come ha giustamente notato anche Giovanni Mimmo Boninelli nel suo testo *Frammenti indigesti*, è dato dal fatto che «la religione si apparenta a folklore e senso comune, proprio per la sua eterogeneità ideologica e sociale. D’altro canto, essa non si configura come insieme ideologico omogeneo»²¹. La religione proprio per la compresenza al suo interno di una dimensione dottrinale-ufficiale e di una più legata alle

²¹ G. M. Boninelli, 2007, p. 51.

masse e meno dogmatica, contribuisce più della filosofia e delle altre forme di pensiero scientifico a rinfocolare il calderone folklorico, soprattutto attraverso la sua componente bassa, popolare. Gramsci mette in evidenza questa peculiarità della dimensione religiosa e della sua connessione con le tradizioni popolari, anche di derivazione “pagana”, per così dire, nel §13 del *Quaderno 11*, dimostrando come

Ogni religione, anche la cattolica (anzi specialmente la cattolica, appunto per i suoi sforzi di rimanere unitaria “superficialmente”, per non frantumarsi in chiese nazionali e in stratificazioni sociali) è in realtà una molteplicità di religioni distinte e spesso contraddittorie: c’è un cattolicesimo dei contadini, un cattolicesimo dei piccoli borghesi e operai di città, un cattolicesimo delle donne e un cattolicesimo degli intellettuali anch’esso variegato e sconnesso. Ma nel senso comune influiscono non solo le forme più rozze e meno elaborate di questi vari cattolicesimi, attualmente esistenti; hanno influito e sono componenti dell’attuale senso comune le religioni precedenti e le forme precedenti dell’attuale cattolicesimo, i movimenti ereticali popolari, le superstizioni scientifiche legate alle religioni passate ecc. (Q11§13, p. 1397).

Ogni strato, ogni classe sociale ha una sua religione, sia essa il frutto di uno sviluppo più o meno strutturato, come nel caso delle parti più alte della società, oppure il risultato della combinazione di più elementi di derivazione anche extra-religiosa o precedenti l’affermazione del cattolicesimo. È questo il caso della religiosità popolare al cui interno vengono assorbiti gli aspetti più importanti della dottrina ufficiale o, per essere più esatti gli aspetti che meglio si conciliano con quelle forme di religiosità primitiva che costituiscono l’impianto delle tradizioni popolari e che si sono sedimentate nel sentire comune delle masse, soprattutto contadine. Religione e ideologia quindi seguono il medesimo destino, in quanto non riescono a penetrare fino in fondo nella mentalità delle masse ma devono adattarsi e convivere assieme alle numerose tradizioni che compongono il variegato mondo del folklore popolare.

Un personaggio dai caratteri folkloristici che si presenta come una cristallizzazione di tutti gli elementi presi fin qui in esame è certamente Davide Lazzaretti, un ribelle della seconda metà del XIX secolo fondatore di una setta eretica dal forte seguito popolare, alla cui figura Gramsci dedica il paragrafo di apertura del nostro *Quaderno 25* dedicato ai subalterni. Concentrando la sua azione “propagandistica” nei pressi del Monte Amiata, sua terra di origine,

Lazzaretti, sempre per riprendere un'espressione di Liguori, «aveva condotto una predicazione sulla base di confusi elementi visionari e superstiziosi, che aveva finito per allarmare sia lo Stato italiano che la Chiesa cattolica per il seguito popolare che raccoglieva nei paesi della zona»²², tant'è vero che di fronte a questa sua crescente popolarità il governo italiano fu costretto ad intervenire causandone la morte avvenuta per fucilazione nel 1878. Gramsci ravvisa la pericolosità del lazzarettismo nel fatto che

nel movimento la tendenzialità repubblicana era bizzarramente mescolata all'elemento religioso e profetico. Ma appunto questo miscuglio rappresenta la caratteristica principale dell'avvenimento perché dimostra la sua popolarità e spontaneità. È da ritenere inoltre che il movimento lazzarettista sia stato legato al non-expedit del Vaticano, e abbia mostrato al governo quale tendenza sovversiva-popolare-elementare poteva nascere tra i contadini in seguito all'astensionismo politico clericale e al fatto che le masse rurali, in assenza di partiti regolari, si cercavano dirigenti locali che emergevano dalla massa stessa, mescolando la religione e il fanatismo all'insieme delle rivendicazioni che in forma elementare fermentavano nelle campagne (Q25§1, p. 2280).

Da quest'analisi sul carattere del movimento notiamo come ancora una volta Gramsci imputi il suo successo politico-sociale al fatto che proprio l'*apoliticismo* ha condotto le masse contadine di questa parte d'Italia ad eleggere questo suo membro a rappresentante delle proprie rivendicazioni sociali. Il successo della figura di Lazzaretti è così imputabile alla mancanza di contatto tra le masse e un partito politico che riuscisse a farsi interprete delle proprie istanze. La mancanza di guida politica ha condotto così questa parte della popolazione rurale italiana ad affidare il suo destino a una figura dalle indubbie capacità politiche e di lotta sociale.

Una rappresentazione per certi aspetti simili di questo connubio tra sentimento religioso e passione politica la ritroviamo in un brano tratto dal romanzo *I Fratelli Rupe* di Leonida Rèpaci, autore ben noto a Gramsci e che troviamo citato nel §24 del *Quaderno 1* insieme ad altri narratori italiani nelle cui opere è possibile rintracciare elementi (per la maggior parte in negativo) inerenti al folklore legato alla cultura delle classi popolari. All'inizio del capitolo VIII l'autore ci offre un interessante affresco del paese e della realtà meridionale che fa da sfondo all'opera. Scrive Rèpaci:

²² G. Liguori, 2016, *cit.*, p. 96.

Sarmùra è un singolare paese. Crede in Dio e nella rivoluzione sociale con pari fervore. Il Natale è per esso come il Primo Maggio [...]. Le chiese sono piene di fedeli tra i quali primeggiano i più ardenti e fattivi compagni della sezione socialista, di cui Mariano Rupe è segretario [...]. Mariano e Cino han tentato di fare opera di chiarificazione tra i “compagni”, spiegando l’intimo meccanismo dell’illusione religiosa in base ad argomenti pratici e filosofici. Non son riusciti a impedire che quando l’uragano col suo corteo di fulmini batte sulla rocca di Sarmùra come un incudine diabolica, quando il trabaccolo lotta contro le onde per raggiungere la riva dove l’aspetta a braccia tese una piccola folla umana trepidante [...]: in simili frangenti non son riusciti a impedire che l’umile terrazzano o pescatore di Sarmùra, indifeso contro le cecità della sorte, ricorra a Dio, e lo vada a supplicare nelle Chiese, [...] chiedendogli il miracolo che l’Onnipotente concederà se e quando lo riterrà tempestivo e giusto. Mariano e Cino han finito con l’adattarsi per necessità di cose a quell’alleanza di Gesù con Marx, all’addentellato del “Sermone della Montagna” col “Capitale”. Han ceduto sulla questione sostanziale e si son limitati a mettere in guardia i “compagni” e i simpatizzanti contro i tranelli della sacristia. Raccomandazione rimasta lettera morta.²³

I protagonisti del romanzo, e in particolare Mariano Rupe segretario della sezione socialista, si trovano di fronte ad una strana combinazione che riesce a metter insieme religione e socialismo. Nonostante l’azione pedagogica i contadini meridionali di Sarmùra, al pari di molti contadini reali, restano prigionieri di una mentalità che non riesce a scindere due realtà che, secondo Rèpaci, si presentano come sostanzialmente inconciliabili come religione e socialismo. La commistione di alcuni principi di questi due mondi rende anzi evidente la forza esercitata dalla cultura popolare e del suo potere assimilativo.

Dall’esposizione di questi fatti si evince come la sorta dei gruppi subalterni debba, per conoscere una sostanziale e concreta rivoluzione, andare incontro ad una profonda opera di rivoluzione culturale ad opera di un partito o di un gruppo politico che si faccia carico effettivamente e concretamente della loro sorte. Lo stato di subalternità delle masse popolari e contadini italiane, come abbiamo visto, affonda proprio le sue radici storiche nel mancato coinvolgimento politico negli avvenimenti del Risorgimento. La mancanza di una rappresentanza politica, seppur parziale, ha fatto sì che queste masse subissero passivamente il giogo delle classi dirigenti, mantenendo di fatto il proprio stato di inferiorità e minorità.

²³ L. Rèpaci, 1933, pp. 104-106.

L'unico soggetto, agli occhi di Gramsci, in grado di farsi carico di questo problema, nel tentativo di trovarne una soluzione, è il Partito Comunista, l'unico in grado di porre sullo stesso piano, eliminando ogni sorta di differenza, gli interessi dei due gruppi subalterni per eccellenza: contadini e operai. Soltanto l'alleanza tra queste due parti della stessa classe (il proletariato) può effettivamente porre fine allo stato di subalternità della maggior parte degli sfruttati. Attraverso la sua azione educatrice il Partito può effettivamente portare questa massa di lavoratori a prendere coscienza della propria condizione di subalternità e indicarle la strategia migliore per porvi fine.

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The Nostrums of Common Sense

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The Nostrums of Common Sense

Abstract

This article provides a Marxist analysis of the concept of 'common sense'. It traces the evolution of this concept – through various philosophers from Aristotle to Thomas Paine – in order to throw light on Gramsci's own radical mobilization of the notion of 'common sense' as a mode of thought, and the role it plays in his broader philo-sophical system of class consciousness and hegemony. The piece seeks to both appreciate the revolutionary aspects of Gramsci's analysis of 'common sense' but also to draw attention to some of its limitations. Building on this, the final part examines the way in which 'common sense' as a concept has been mobilized – contra Gramsci – by the ruling classes of our own epoch; how it becomes a key component in the 'political correctness gone mad' narrative and a way, therefore, of justifying some of the most reactionary initiatives – from the xenophobia which feeds anti-immigrant bigotry to the neoliberal austerity measures which have flayed the living standards of those at the bottom in order to enshrine the wealth of those at the top.

Keywords

Gramsci, common sense, Marxism, dialectics, political correctness, Enlightenment

The Nostrums of Common Sense

Tony McKenna

It is difficult to escape the notion of “common sense” in today’s political discourse. It is, generally speaking, considered to be a positive quality, and it is something which not only attaches itself to individuals, but also to whole peoples. It can inhere as an aspect of someone you know, a friend or member of the family, but it can also be used to describe the collective character of a nation. As an English man, of a certain age and generation, I am well used to characterizations of my nationality expressed in terms of ‘good common sense’ and that all important ‘stiff-upper lip’.

Images of the dutiful and commonsensical English shopkeeper organizing the books or the stoical and down-to-earth housewife managing the finances of the home have been employed by the media and politicians *ad-infinitum* in order to lend succour to certain political and ideological projects. Think, for example, of Margaret Thatcher’s neoliberal mandate to radically reshape the UK economy being framed in terms of a dutiful homemaker trying to balance household bills. As I write, there is an eerie silence in the street outside my window; the Coronavirus crisis has sent people scurrying for cover, and now the majority of us are confined to our homes for the majority of time. A depressing, and at times oppressive situation; but, our media assures us, we will come through this, and why? Because “our national character is all about common sense and buckling down”.¹

But despite its ubiquity, pinning the notion down is no easy task. As Peter Thomas points out, “common sense” has different lineages in different “linguistic registers and cultural systems” – there is, for example, “no clear correspondence between the Italian and English terms”.² For the English, it might be said to imply something more than someone who is simply practical, someone who is good with their hands – good at fixing things etc. And yet, at the

¹ John Humphrys, “The Crisis : Should the Government Be Listening More to Us?”, YouGov, April 17 2020:

<https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/articles-reports/2020/04/17/crisis-should-government-be-listening-more-us>.

² Peter D. Thomas, *The Gramscian Moment*, Chicago, Haymarket Books 2010, p. 16, note 61.

same time it also suggests something less than a coherent and conscious set of ethics; a person, one feels, can be good or bad, and yet still have a great deal of common sense. Do women have more of it than men? Is it something innate or is it something you can learn? Having had my head in the clouds for the last few decades, having concocted one hair-brained scheme after the next, is it possible that – under the right influence or tuition – I might attain a better level of common sense? These questions are not easy to answer. There is an ephemeral quality to the concept; as soon as you seize upon it, it slips away like so much sand through the fingers.

And yet most of us do feel we have a handle on what common sense is. Even if we can't explain it, even if we can't express it as a precisely delineated logical definition. It is something which resembles Justice Porter Stewart's definition of pornography; I might not be able to intelligibly define it, argued the venerable judge, "but I know it when I see it". With this, the judge himself was perhaps engaged in an act of common-sensical thinking. The problem, however, is at once apparent; the definition of pornography is often an elastic one – there are places in the world, for instance, where a woman exposing her leg in a market place would be considered the very height of pornographic obscenity. The concept itself is exposed to the changes and pressures wrought by social circumstance and historical time. And something similar is true in the case of "common sense".

In her *Common Sense: A Political History*, Sophia Rosenfeld finds that the concept first emerged as "a technical term of Aristotelian science".³ In Aristotle's work, *De Anima*, the great philosopher of antiquity would argue that the "common-sense" is in fact something akin to a sixth-sense; specifically, it is the means by which the other five senses are able to interact. The eyesight allows us to perceive the purple colour of that particular flower, while the nose might allow us to take in the sweetness of its fragrance; but another sense entirely is required in order to distinguish between the 'purple colour' and the 'sweet fragrance' – to be able to experience these sensations as discrete and separate phenomenon while at the same time to allow us to recognize that the purple colour and the pleasant smell are both properties of the same

³ Sophia Rosenfeld, *Common Sense: A Political History*, Cambridge (MA). Harvard University Press 2011, p. 4.

object, i.e. the flower. Not only humans, but also animals must have some means, some faculty, “some one thing”⁴ by which sensations might be both distinguished and compared. Common sense then, for Aristotle, is in some way the unifying pre-condition for consciousness itself.

Of course, this is very far from the way we understand it today. In Roman times, however, the concept becomes something more recognizable to us. Whereas Aristotle had treated common sense as a technical facet which allows for the physical possibility of consciousness, the Romans tend to treat it more in the manner of a metaphysical set of beliefs which had a clear ethical component. It was used to describe those beliefs which were in some way formed in the crucible of collective, social life. According to Toni Vogel Carey, the Roman concept of *sensus communis* is to be understood through philosophers and statesman such as Cicero who saw it ‘as the shared, often unspoken values and beliefs of a community.’⁵

This was important because *sensus communis* was not something consciously articulated, developed by the most sophisticated philosophers in terms of a rational and systematic set of ethical precepts; rather it was something unconscious, something ‘unspoken’, formed in and through the practical activities of the mass of people as they went about creating the foundations for Roman society – building the viaducts, bridges and colosseums, fighting in the wars, praying in the temples, haggling in the markets and rioting in the cities; the political and cultural processes which were taking place all the time and from which arose the values and sensibilities of the Roman collective. Common sense, therefore, was not something you could glean from the most refined of teachers but only something you might discover in the midst and furore of vast swathes of people as they came together in the broader community. C. S. Lewis, for instance, wrote of the Roman scholar and educator Quintilian that he felt “it is better to send a boy to school than to have a private tutor for him at home; for if he is kept away from the herd (“congressus”) how will he ever learn that *sensus* which we call *communis*?”⁶

⁴ Aristotle, *De Anima*, Column 427a: <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/soul.html>.

⁵ Toni Vogel Carey, ‘The Life & Death of Common Sense’, *Philosophy Now*, 2015: https://philosophynow.org/issues/110/The_Life_and_Death_of_Common_Sense.

⁶ C. S. Lewis, *Studies in Words*, London, Cambridge University Press 1960, p. 146.

So it is clear that the Roman concept of common sense involves certain sensibilities which were in some way pre-rational and intuitive, and also had a strong democratic impetus, i.e. they arose in and through the life of the broader community. At the same time we have to remember that this was not just *any community*; Quintillian was waxing lyrical at the time when Rome had entered its most glorious phase of expansion and empire, the famous *pax Romana*. When Roman patrician philosophers talk about the shared ethical sensibilities of the Roman collective, they are also talking about a culture whose boundaries have been delineated in precise opposition to the regions, kingdoms, tribes, villages and polities which had been subsumed as part and parcel of the Roman imperial project. Consequently the community standard which Roman common sense embodies often takes on a rather superior and elitist tinge; Scott Philip Segrest, for instance, argues that for Cicero common sense implied “elegant manners”,⁷ while C.S Lewis suggests that, for Horace, “the man who talks to you when you obviously don’t want to talk lacks *communis sensus*”.⁸ In other words, common sense, for the Romans, seems to have been a somewhat paradoxical thing; on the one hand, it was said to issue from the lives of the broader majority of people – but at the same time had a certain patrician inflection – i.e. it was bound up with notions of social superiority and upper-class etiquette; for the Romans, common sense might (loosely) be translated into what the British mean today when they talk about someone having “breeding”.

In the modern era some of the same contradictions abide. At its outset, Descartes introduces a set of claims about common sense which are knotty and problematic, but highly intriguing. On the one hand, he talks about common sense as being the faculty which helped mediate between the body with the mind ; for this reason he located it as something at work in his ‘penal gland’, that infamous *deus ex machina* of Cartesian dualism. But over and above this almost Aristotelian conception, he also brought to the fore another type of common sense understanding which the philosopher labelled ‘*bon sens*’ or good sense. For Schaeffer, Cartesian “good sense” represents a return to elements in the Roman stoical tradition, it

⁷ Scott Philip Segrest, *America and the Political Philosophy of Common Sense*, Columbia, University of Missouri Press 2010, p. 27.

⁸ C. S. Lewis, *Studies in Words*, *cit.*, p.146-7.

was something which emanated from the masses, and it was tied to the ability to navigate life on a practical level – good sense was at the same time “practical judgment”.⁹ But such a conception stood as a potential anomaly within the Cartesian system itself; remember that, for Descartes, truth in its purest and most powerful form was conveyed by the “clear and distinct ideas” which existed as an a priori fact which had been imprinted on the human mind by an all-powerful deity. A-priori universality formed the very foundation of Cartesian rationalism; but notions of a common sense which developed in and through the experience of the majority of people in the course of practical social life smacked of a certain empiricist dimension which Descartes’ philosophy implacably opposed.

Future versions of ‘common sense’ evolved very much with this contradiction in mind. Descartes may have been one of the first of the modern era to evolve a conception of “common sense” which was tied to the practical life of the majority, but such a conception was very swiftly weaponized, very quickly trained on the philosopher who had authored it. Francis Bacon had argued against metaphysical speculation, bringing to the fore the role of empirical science – the reading of physical reality from a series of experimental steps. For him, therefore, common sense was a kind of counterpart in ordinary life to what the Renaissance scientist was able to achieve in and through experimentation; i.e. the perceptions and inclinations of common sense were developed out of the actually existing empirical reality which people encounter in and through sense perception. Common sense did not rise to the level of the type of scientific induction which Bacon himself helped develop, that is true; but it nevertheless proceeded from the correct premises – i.e. the empirical reality itself and not the chimeras cast by the fleeting phantom-like operations of the ephemeral rationalist mind.

And this contradiction assumed explicitly political dimensions too. Common sense increasingly became associated with a down-to-earth type empiricism which could be opposed to an elevated and esoteric rationalism that had become the intellectual property of a superior and lofty elite. As F. L. van Holthoon would argue, references to common sense could be mobilized against the *Anciens Régimes* which were associated with more elitist philosophical

⁹ John D. Schaeffer, *Sensus Communis: Vico, Rhetoric, and the Limits of Relativism*, Durham and London, Duke University Press 1990, p. 69.

leanings – Queen Christina, for instance, had famously patronized Descartes and even invited him to the Swedish Court. Bishop Berkeley would go on to write how Enlightenment itself requires a “revolt from metaphysical notions to the plain dictates of nature and common sense”.¹⁰ Of course Berkeley’s statement is problematic – not least for the fact that his own brand of empiricism eventually yielded the most unadulterated and extreme form of idealism, but also because Cartesian universalism and the method of doubt – the scepticism which gave life to it – provided a powerful impetus to Enlightenment thought.

But the overall point stands; a certain philosophical conception of common sense – which adopted the universalism of Enlightenment thought while at the same time locating the source for that universalism not in the pristine and generic rationality of the individual ego but in the swell and practical life of the mass of the population – could become a philosophical conception with extremely radical dimensions. In jettisoning the “metaphysical baggage”, in providing a form of Enlightenment universalism which proceeded from empirical grounds, such a universalism could then be tied to the radical life and rebellious energies of the masses as a whole at the level of their day-to-day existence. And in an epoch where it was essential for the most revolutionary representatives of the bourgeoisie to be able to pull the masses into the revolt against the forms of aristocracy and kingship which buttressed the old order – the reconfiguration of common sense thinking according to a radical paradigm was one which allowed a broader social collective to assert its rights and hegemony against the tyranny of individual and arbitrary power.

The apotheosis of this approach arrived with Tom Paine’s *Common Sense*. A pamphlet which was written at the outset of the American Revolution and War of Independence, it is often credited with helping the vacillating rebels move from a position of compromise and toward one of total rebellion and complete severance with the British Crown. For this reason, *Common Sense* is thought to have been a significant influence on the Declaration of Independence. In the pamphlet Paine combines Enlightenment universalism – ideas about the inherent equality of all men framed in terms of a

¹⁰ George B. Berkeley, *George Berkeley: Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous*, London and New York, Routledge 2016, p. 58.

series of natural rights – with the kind of plain-speaking proselytizing which had come out of the radical traditions of lay-preaching Protestantism (and his own religious background in Quakerism). The insidious and corrupting nature of kingship, and the yearning of the average citizen to the rights of liberty, property and the pursuit of happiness – the intellectual case for all of this is laid bare in and through “simple facts, plain arguments, and common sense”.¹¹

By framing his rhetoric in just such a way, Paine not only wanted to argue that the common sense thinking which arose from the average citizen in the course of his practical life had a radical component which was inherently anti-tyranny and tended toward the type of Enlightenment thought which worked to secure the legal rights and protections that pertained to just such a life. In fusing common sense thought with a radical set of Enlightenment political ideals, Paine was reaching out beyond a purely theoretical compass; he was simultaneously fusing the broader life of a layer of the masses with the explicit goals of a radical section of the American bourgeoisie and their struggle to free themselves from the dominion of the British crown. He was, to put it in the political idiom of the modern day, helping forge the basis for a mass movement. In the same vein, if the key to radical empowerment lay with a broader section of the population, then the King, by virtue of his isolation and privilege – his abstraction from the larger human realm – was by nature particularly ill-suited to realize a conception of the needs of society at large. Consequently, he, the King, was in no position to dictate how society should be run:

There is something exceedingly ridiculous in the composition of monarchy; it first excludes a man from the means of information, yet empowers him to act in cases where the highest judgment is required. The state of a king shuts him from the world, yet the business of a king requires him to know it thoroughly; wherefore the different parts, by unnaturally opposing and destroying each other, prove the whole character to be absurd and useless.¹²

¹¹ Thomas Paine, *Common Sense*, ‘Thoughts on the Present State of American Affairs’, US History.org: <https://www.ushistory.org/paine/commonsense/sense4.htm>

¹² Thomas Paine, *Common Sense*, ‘Of the Origin and Design of Government in General, with Concise Remarks on the English Constitution’, US History.org: <https://www.ushistory.org/paine/commonsense/sense2.htm>.

Paine went on to give concrete examples of exactly how kingship had functioned in the past; to throw into relief the contrast between the realities of monarchy which were fused with conquest and dominion and the exhortations against tyranny which Paine was able to pick out (it must be said rather selectively) from the Bible, a book he seems to have known incredibly well. He relentlessly honed in on specific historical abuses by monarchs:

no man in his senses can say that their claim under William the Conqueror is a very honourable one. A French bastard landing with an armed Banditti and establishing himself king of England against the consent of the natives, is in plain terms a very paltry rascally original. It certainly hath no divinity in it.¹³

Thus Paine was able to demystify the principle of monarchy, the irrationality of hereditary rule, the threat of tyranny and violence which, of necessity, underpins it – and in so doing Paine was able to strip George III of his divinely mandated aura; he was able to reveal him in plain and simple common sense terms as the “Royal Brute of Britain”, and thereby provide vital impetus to the movement which was developing against him.¹⁴

However, the radicals of American Independence did not hold a monopoly on the concept of common sense. Indeed conservatives and reactionaries endeavoured to mobilise it for their own ends; James Chalmers, for instance, produced a riposte to *Common Sense* which was released just a year after Paine’s influential pamphlet. Chalmers titled his rebuke *Plain Truth* – and it was about occupying the same ground which Paine himself had staked out. Chalmers preceded from the same essential premise arguing that

the rich and high born are not the monopolisers of wisdom and virtue; on the contrary, these qualities are more often to be found among the middling class in every country, who... in reality become better acquainted with the true interests of the society in which they live.¹⁵

¹³ Thomas Paine, *Common Sense*, ‘Of Monarchy and Hereditary Succession’, US History.org: <https://www.ushistory.org/paine/commonsense/sense3.htm>.

¹⁴ It is worth noting that Paine himself very much saw his tract in this way; he renounced his copyright so that *Common Sense* might be read as widely as possible, and indeed it was, from London to Vienna to Moscow.

¹⁵ James Chalmers, ‘Excerpts from Plain Truth’, Alpha History: <https://alphahistory.com/americanrevolution/plain-truth-1776/>

The broader majority here is delicately and diplomatically framed by the notion of ‘the middling class’ which no doubt excluded slaves, native Americans, women and the poorest, property-less whites – but the underlying logic is the same; i.e. those who are acquainted with the practical life of the economy on the ground, the merchants, farmers, fisherman, storeowners, carpenters and so on – these people are invested with a certain unconscious but practical wisdom which allows them to see through the mire of convoluted political rhetoric and to understand the issues of their day in essence.

But Chalmers’ deployment of common sense thinking led to very different conclusions from those of Paine. For him, Paine’s conclusion that common sense demanded a violent schism, a break with the mother country was mere “quackery”. In actual fact, in his high-falutin and rather abstract attack on the notion of monarchy itself, Paine had lost sight of the immediate practical details which made a symbiotic connection between King and Country an absolutely vital one:

There are many advantages of our connection with Britain; It will cause us to avoid the horrors and misfortune of war. Paine surely forgets that when we are independent, we cannot trade with Europe because the treaties are made under England’s name.¹⁶

For Chalmers, common sense was all about compromise; indeed what made the British political apparatus so effective was that it provided an exercise in moderation in which all the component powers provide checks and balances against all others: “The British government is a beautiful system because it is ruled by the king, the upper class, and the people...our constitution is a compound of Monarchy, Aristocracy, and Democracy”.¹⁷ Paine’s notion of common sense wasn’t actually common sensical at all – in threatening to do away with the King and the aristocracy and in absolutizing the ‘democratic’ element in politics thereby, his thinking had lurched into dangerous extremism; in the desire to explode “America’s” colony status, his thought had assumed an idealistic

¹⁶ James Chalmers, ‘Selected Paragraphs from Plain Truth’, Baltimore County History Labs Program:

https://www.umbc.edu/che/tahlessons/pdf/historylabs/Should_the_Colo_student:RS08.pdf

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

and abstract gloss which blurred and obscured the practical realities and everyday needs of the thirteen colonies themselves.

The way in which the concept of “common sense” could be mobilized for different political causes became something of a mainstay in American politics; the same thing happened during the prosecution of the American Civil War. On the one hand, Abraham Lincoln, sitting by the fire in his log cabin, rocking back and forth in his old chair, ruminating over an open book on his lap – could be portrayed as the very epitome of home-spun, common sense wisdom; but at the same time the Confederacy could depict the anti-slavery position of the North as the endeavour of an industrial and cosmopolitan elite determined to impose its particular brand of modernity on a rural economy which had operated in a time-honoured fashion for centuries according to the rhythms of the land and the passing of the seasons. In this particular ideological vision it was the denizens of the great slave estates (and I don’t mean the slaves) who became bastions of a stoical, common sense tradition, and it was no doubt a common sense proposition, as clear as day, to resist with everything they had the undermining and abnegation of a system of slavery on which their culture and way of life was premised.

In these cases we have two conflicting claims to the truth of “common sense” which, ultimately, arise from very different and conflicting political and social interests. In these cases both sides purport to hold the “one true version” of what common sense thinking really is. But it was the great innovation of the brilliant Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, writing in the early part of the twentieth century, to recognise that “common sense” could be mobilized in multiple ways according to various social interests because it itself wasn’t “one thing”, that “there does not exist only one common sense”.¹⁸ In addition, for Gramsci, any common sense thought was inherently political – that is to say, it carried latent within it a certain conception of the world and the way in which it was organized. For Gramsci, thought provides a “totality of determined notions and concepts” which themselves arise, in the last analysis, from the “social groups” and “social elements” which have come to fruition at the level of historical being. The nexus of all

¹⁸ Gramsci, *The Modern Prince and Other Writings*, New York, International Publishers 1957, ed. and trans. L. Marks, p. 60; see also *SPN* p. 325: “there is not just one common sense”.

thought is merely the totalized “system of beliefs, superstitions, opinions” – which mediate human beings with the social forms they encounter at the level of historical being in its entirety. However, a given individual doesn’t simply encounter “thought” as a complete and fully furnished totality. In the first instance, the individual experiences thought in a “disjointed and episodic way”, “seeing things and acting” in the world based on the fragmented conceptions which are inherited from those social forms or groups which mediate his or her particular existence. Such conceptions might, for instance, have their “origins in the parish and the ‘intellectual activity’ of the local priest or aging patriarch whose wisdom is law, or in the little old woman who has inherited the lore of the witches or the minor intellectual soured by his own stupidity”.¹⁹

Such “conceptions of the world” which come to constitute one’s self-consciousness, which provide a way of ‘seeing things’ and which becomes the premise of ‘acting’, of living one’s own life – for Gramsci, inhere in every self-consciousness from that of a five-year-old child to that of an Aristotle. For this reason, “everyone is a philosopher”. But while, some “conceptions of the world” are immediate and “mechanically imposed by the external environment ... by one of the many social groups in which everyone is automatically involved from the moment of his entry into the conscious world” – over time it becomes possible to “work out consciously and critically one’s own conception of the world...be one’s own guide, refusing to accept passively and supinely from outside the moulding of one’s personality”. It becomes possible to supersede those fragmented and partial conceptions in order to see the world in terms of a totalized and “coherent unity”, the product of the “historical process to date” and in so doing take a conscious, rational and “active part in the creation of the history of the world”.²⁰

For Gramsci, common sense was a “conception of the world” which was still very much immediate and fragmented and, in the tradition of some of the Roman stoics and later thinkers such as Vico, he argued that common sense was in some way pre-rational.

¹⁹ The phrases quoted in this paragraph are all from the same source in the *Notebooks*: Q11§12 and its Note I, *Quaderni del carcere* (henceforward *QdC*), ed. V. Gerratana, Torino, Einaudi 1975 pp. 1375-6; and, in English, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci* (henceforward *SPN*) London, Lawrence and Wishart and New York, International Publishers 1971, ed. and trans. Q. Hoare and G. Nowell-Smith, and subsequent reprints, pp. 323-4.

²⁰ Again in this paragraph we cite the same source: *QdC* pp. 1375-6 and *SPN* pp. 323-4.

In this way Gramsci is able to distinguish between common sense and philosophy. While a commonsensical conception of the world involves thoughts which arise from the “confused and dispersed characteristics of a generic thought of a certain epoch and a certain popular environment”²¹ involves those thoughts about the world which have been intellectualized consciously, which have been raised up in the light of a “reasoned” and systematic body of thought for the explicit ends of providing a coherent “political” description of the nature of reality – “in philosophy the characteristics of the individual elaboration of a thought are especially prominent”.²² But the nub lies in this; the philosophies which are raised to the level of self-conscious rationality in any particular epoch – the gains of such philosophies in their outlines, their fundamentals, are often gradually disseminated such that they are absorbed implicitly and in some ways uncritically into the collective consciousness of the following age as commonsensical sensibilities and perspectives.

Consider the example Gramsci provides – the popular phrase, that of ‘looking at things philosophically’. This, says Gramsci, contains a series of implicit assumptions and a powerful argument about the underlying rationality of the world and its development: it provides “the invitation to reflection, to explain to oneself that what is happening is at bottom rational and that it should be faced up to as such, concentrating on one’s own rational powers and not letting oneself be dragged along by instinctive and violent impulses”.²³ In the common sense exhortation to “look at things philosophically” – is distilled elements of philosophy inherited from the past; the famous dictum of Hegel’s at once comes to mind: “what is rational is actual and what is actual is rational” – but “to look at things philosophically” also has the aroma of Roman Stoicism, the wise man who, according to Seneca, in some way escapes the necessities the objective world inflicts upon him, by rationally understanding them and thus willing their inevitability: “He escapes necessity because he wills what necessity is going to

²¹ Gramsci, *QdC* Q11§12, p. 1382. Here in English we quote the translation included in *The Modern Prince and Other Writings*, *cit.*, p. 64, footnote; alternative translation in *SPN*, *cit.*, p. 330, footnote. [Gramsci encloses the entire passage which contains these words between parentheses in this extended argument of his - editorial note]

²² *loc. cit.*

²³ *ibid.*, p. 62.

force upon him.”²⁴ In other words, the simple and gentle rejoinder to “look at things philosophically” which can be uttered almost unthinkingly as a way to encourage calmness and stepping back from a situation – is in some sense inconceivable had it not been for the flowing of philosophy in the time of the first century Roman Empire or the culmination of classical German philosophy in early-nineteenth century Heidelberg.

“Common sense” for Gramsci involves an explicitly historical dimension; that is to say, it involves the accumulated debris of previous epochs of thought recycled into semi-conscious and intuitive feelings about the way in which reality is structured and how it behaves. Of course, if it is the case that the self-conscious modes and systems of “philosophy” which depict the spirit and realities of a particular epoch can be transformed into a more intuitive and pre-rational set of sensibilities in the next; then the obverse also applies. The common sense thought of any given age can itself be converted from a set of implicit, pre-rational assumptions to something which can attain the self-conscious clarity and critical awareness of philosophy. Indeed the way in which this occurs falls under Gramsci’s notion of “translatibility”, i.e. “[t]he philosophy of praxis ‘absorbs’ the subjective conception of reality (idealism) into the theory of the superstructures; it absorbs and explains it historically”.²⁵

For Gramsci, a class which successfully builds its hegemony – that is, its ability to ideologically justify its claims to power and ascendancy – is a class whose intellectuals are able to locate those commonsensical propositions within the complex and contradictory morass of popular consciousness – and tease into rational self-awareness those propositions which best facilitate its own class ends, pulling sections of the masses who hold such propositions into alignment with its own struggle. More generally, the “organic intellectuals” as Gramsci terms them, are those who are called into being along with the development of a new social

²⁴ Seneca, ‘Asthma’, *The Art of the Personal Essay*, ed. Phillip Lopate, New York, Anchor Books 1995, p. 9.

²⁵ Antonio Gramsci cited in Stephen Shapiro and Neil Lazarus, *Translatibility, Combined Unevenness, and World Literature in Antonio Gramsci*, “Mediations” – *Journal of the Marxist Literary Group* Volume 32, No. 1 Fall 2018: https://mediationsjournal.org/articles/gramsci-world-literature#endref_94. (*QdC* Q10II§6II, p. 1244; in English *Further Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. D. Boothman, London, Lawrence and Wishart, and Minneapolis, Minnesota University Press 1995, p. 306.)

class and are able to give it “homogeneity and an awareness of its own function not only in the economic but also in the social and philosophical fields”;²⁶ on this basis, the organic intellectuals aspire to mobilize and advance the interests of said class.

Different classes, therefore, mediate different ‘common sense’ conceptions as part of their historical development, and for this reason, organic intellectuals endeavour to actualize and mobilize different strands of common sense for often opposing class interests. It is true that the phrase ‘look at things philosophically’ contains the germs of a radical conception of reality which in some way intuits the rational necessity behind historical development (albeit at the level of the individual destiny), but at the same time the same formulation also contains the seed of a certain passivity – a lulling and reactionary mandate to bow before the blows you receive, to accept the status quo and the powers-that-be, to submit to injustice meekly and gently with the knowledge that no other world is possible. For Gramsci there were many different versions of common sense, precisely because they were ideological fragments generated by the living movement of classes with opposing and sometimes violently clashing social interests. A class which aspires to political and economic power or a class which seeks to maintain it must, according to Gramsci, not simply exert itself through economic and political coercion but propagate its own values and norms such that other elements and social layers experience these as immutable and unchanging elements in the nature of reality itself. Gramsci describes this process as “hegemonic”, and class struggle more broadly as “a struggle of political ‘hegemonies’ and of opposing directions”.²⁷ Part of achieving ‘hegemony’ means allowing the values which enshrine the power of a particular class to appear to the majority of the population as ‘commonsensical propositions’ which most people take for granted. For example, in the epoch which is dominated by a financial bourgeoisie and a philosophy of economic individualism it might well be a commonsensical proposition not to stop for strangers on the road because they will probably end up robbing you, simply for the ‘fact’ that human beings are inherently selfish and self-interested.

²⁶ *QdC* Q12§1, p. 1513; in English *SPN*, *cit.*, p. 5.

²⁷ *QdC*, Q11§12, p. 1385; in English *SPN*, p.333.

So the formation of a type of new type of ‘common sense’ which operates to normalize certain implicit justifications for the dominance of a particular ruling class or, in the same vein, the claims of a particular class aspiring to power – is a key part of establishing hegemony. The ruling class has, if you like, its own form of common sense to draw upon, just as the oppressed and the exploited have theirs – “every social stratum has its own common sense”²⁸ and these are manifested in the broader “struggle of ‘political hegemonies’”.

But while different strands of common sense do reflect and mediate different class interests, I don’t think it is accurate to say that the ruling class has its own form of common sense in the way that Gramsci believes. To elaborate. Part of the power of common sense thinking – identified from the Roman Stoics onwards is that it develops as part and parcel of the “crowd”, the “herd”, the “mass” – it is incubated in the life-forces of the broader population.²⁹ In the modern world, just as in ancient Rome, there is a stark division between the direct producers who create and recreate the immediate physical means by which all live, and the intellectual wing of society whose freedom from such direct forms of production allows them to study, to specialize, to philosophize as part and parcel of a professional paid project, to form the think tanks which so often support so much of the ruling class policy, to become the professional TV personalities who appear presenting programmes on nature and art, to spend years in the universities and laboratories developing the scientific know-how which will eventually be applied in order to better develop the technology which the direct producers mobilize as part of their labour process.

As Marx describes it,³⁰ there develops a schism, an “antithesis between mental and physical labor” whereby those who are responsible for direct production are often reduced to the level of automatons, persons who carry out physical, repetitive labour

²⁸ *QdC*, Q1§65 p. 76 (in English *PN* Vol. 1, p. 173), cited in Kate Crehan, *Gramsci’s Common Sense: Inequality and Its Narratives*, Durham and London, Duke University Press 2016, opening epigraph of book: https://www.amazon.co.uk/Gramscis-Common-Sense-Inequality-Narratives/dp/0822362198/ref=tmm_hrd_title_0?_encoding=UTF8&qid=&sr=

²⁹ This, of course, tallies with Gramsci’s description of “common sense” emerging from the lived experience of subaltern groups, even though Gramsci does not restrict “common sense” to them in isolation.

³⁰ Karl Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, Marx-Engels Archive: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1875/gotha/ch01.htm>

without simultaneously possessing the knowledge of the science and technology which underpins that labour. For their part, those technicians and engineers, the professional philosophers and social scientists who develop their knowledge in a condition of abstraction, separated irrevocably from the forces and powers which engage with economic reproduction on a day-to-day basis – often form conceptions of the world which are isolated from the social realities on the ground.

Gramsci famously talks about the “subaltern” which is a somewhat disputed concept. I think he means by this, fundamentally, the proletariat (he is after all a Marxist) but also all the other exploited layers or oppressed groups which the proletariat must attract to its banner if it is to successfully challenge for power and achieve its own hegemony. In a lucid and persuasive piece, David Arnold argues that the term “subaltern” can be regarded a “convenient shorthand for a variety of subordinate classes – industrial workers, peasants, labourers, artisans, shepherds and so forth”.³¹

These groups are, in the main,³² also the direct producers; i.e. those who produce the material means by which society is able to sustain. And so it is in keeping with the Gramscian notion of “common sense” that the “common sense” which issues out of the subaltern groups is in some way bound up with the way in which they labour and the direct, practical character of that labour as something which, ultimately, produces and reproduces the means of social existence. One may be doing some form of unskilled, manual labour, may not have a degree in philosophy or engineering, but one learns very quickly – intuitively and on the ground – what to do in order to avoid an electrical shock from a faulty piece of machinery; one may not have trained as a doctor, but one soon develops the first hand practical knowledge of the best thing to do when a fellow worker suffers a burn.

³¹ David Arnold (1984) *Gramsci and peasant subalternity in India*, “The Journal of Peasant Studies”, 11(4), 155-177, DOI: 10.1080/03066158408438246

³² This division of labour between the manual and the mental does not exhaust Gramsci’s conception of the split between the direct members of a class and its intellectuals, for he does introduce mediating and mixed categories like that of “the technicians” who are “closely bound” to the group of entrepreneurs through the role that is “organic” to capital which they play (*QdC*, Q4§49, p. 475; in English *Prison Notebooks* Vol. 2 (hereafter *PN*), ed. and trans. J. A. Buttigieg, New York, Columbia University Press 1996, pp. 199 *et seq.*; second draft text in Q12§1, cf. above.)

The direct producers in their encounter with production and their experiences as a “subaltern” style underclass often develop this kind of practical knowledge – and this can provide the framework for a broader form of thinking; an intuitive sense of savvy, a wry conception of the world and how it functions at the level of its fundamental mechanics. Those who are locked in the ivory towers of higher education and are abstracted from the life and the swell of the masses often lack any real awareness of the grinding processes by which the engine of society turns over – they lack the ability to achieve simple, practical tasks like changing a lightbulb or a tyre – and their world view is inherently idealistic for the same reason; they have not had to go through the experiences and tribulations of ordinary people which might help ground and sober them.

What is more common sensical, for instance, than the notion of someone addressing their lack of formal education by saying they have passed through ‘the university of life’? It expresses in an immediate and intuitive form something fundamental about the division of labour, the antithesis which Marx describes between “mental and physical labor” – and thus it contains a powerful and radical truth about the underlying political and social contradictions which are latent in our society. At the same time, that same phrase also contains a germ of the reactionary – it can incite workers to disregard the intellectual sphere in a self-satisfied way; it occludes the understanding that the working class must win its way through to an intellectual awareness of the revolutionary nature of its own historical process – and that this has to be done in dialogue with the most able leaders and intellectuals – the “organic intellectuals”, in Gramsci’s own words. Indeed the way common sense conceptions of the world can be fetishized becomes the object of Gramsci’s criticism of Henri de Man, whom, Gramsci argues, “empirically [...] counterposes to Marxism” “common sense”, “falling into the position of somebody who, after discovering folklore, witchcraft, etc., are tenaciously entwined in the psychology of specific popular strata, believed that he had ‘transcended’ modern science”.³³

And yet, while Gramsci acknowledges that it is important not to absolutize the ‘spontaneous’ conceptions of the world which arise from the masses at the expense of any systematic philosophy of

³³ *QdC*, Q3§48, p. 328; in English *SPN*, *cit.*, p.197, and alternatively *PN* Vol. 2, *cit.*, p. 49.

praxis – Gramsci also acknowledges that “every ‘spontaneous’ movement contains rudimentary elements of conscious leadership, of discipline”³⁴ and that these must be cultivated in the process by which a more systematic and totalizing conception can be formed as a pre-requisite for collective political action – i.e. the basis on which a class becomes “for itself”.³⁵

It seems that we encounter this kind of thing repeatedly with common sense statements, just as Gramsci points out – that they contain within themselves a duality – elements of the radical and the reactionary at work within the same proposition. But why is this the case? I think, in line with the tradition of the Roman Stoics onward, that common sense does indeed arise in the life forces of the population but at the same time it cannot reflect clearly and coherently a revolutionary perspective. Workers can develop common sense understandings and conceptions of the world, in the last analysis, through their encounter with production and the problems that arise from the practical issues which develop in the context of productive and direct labour.

So, for example, builders building a house might become well versed through practical experience in all the ways to avoid getting injured (especially if the business they work for isn’t unionized), or they might become adept at using the minimal materials in the most efficient way so they might leave the job an hour early. Or a householder who has never had a formal education in business or maths, but becomes skilled at rationalizing numbers and anticipating financial outcomes precisely because s/he has had to hone her/his experience and manage the finances in such a way that s/he can continue to put food on the table. It is this ability ‘to think on one’s feet’ which develops out of the encounter with immediate practical realities, which is then used to form broader ‘philosophical’ conceptions and generalizations about the world at large.

But what is vital to recognize is that such conceptions arise from the awareness which is cultivated in and through the achievement of practical tasks which have, generally speaking, isolated and individualized ends. The householder learns to balance the books in the interests of themselves and their individual family unit; the builder endeavours to work more efficiently or frugally in order to

³⁴ *QdC*, Q3§48, p. 329; in English *SPN*, p.197, and alternatively *PN* Vol. 2, *cit.*, p. 49.

³⁵ *QdC*, Q3§48, p. 328; in English *SPN*, *cit.*, p.196, and alternatively *PN* Vol. 2, *cit.*, p. 49.

get off a little earlier, to create a bit more free time outside work. Common sense forms of thinking then arise in the life of the masses as a whole – they grow out of proletarian, petite bourgeois and domestic labour more generally – but they grow out of the way in which this particular labourer or worker or householder is compelled to engage with the practical necessities of the objective world from the purview of his or her individual aims in isolation. So from the start, common sense thinking is marked by two essential characteristics: one, it is immediate, intuitive and pre-rational – it emerges organically and semi-consciously from the awareness of strategies one uses to deal with practical necessities; two, it is a form of thinking which can often work within the framework of the isolated ends of a pure individuality – even if it arises from the productive life of the masses more broadly.

Because common sense is a form of thought which nearly always operates on a purely individualistic basis, here is where its reactionary potentials inhere. Consider the example we have cited several times already. The case of the commonsensical housewife shrewdly and frugally managing the household finances. In the 1980s Thatcher used this image as a metaphor for the economy more broadly as part and parcel of justifying her neoliberal programme. In the 2010s, the Conservative coalition government drew upon something similar to support their own brand of austerity economics. The argument went as follows: the essentials of the national economic policy were simple – just like any ordinary household you had incomings and outgoings; the thing to do was make sure that you didn't borrow money outside your means.

In reality, however, any national economy is a considerably more complex and paradoxical affair. If a single household decides to cut back on its spending by 15%, such a reduction won't affect the external incomes of any of the household members. If a government cuts the national budget by the same amount, employment and/or wages fall in the public sector, which means that those self-same people – nurses, police, teachers – end up spending less in the economy more generally, thereby harming businesses which are not directly under the auspices of government investment. The so-called 'multiplier' effect means, all things being equal, such cuts can, ultimately, result in the type of reduction in Gross Domestic Product which comes from a decrease in demand, and therefore the

government itself finds the overall pool of taxable income very much reduced. Cutting down household spending, won't reduce the wages of those employed outside the house; but by "cutting its spending the government also ends up reducing its own income".³⁶ Or to say the same, a reduction of spending on the household level can have precisely the opposite effect of a reduction of spending on the level of the economy as a whole. This is because of the way in which the broader categories of the state, state workers, the private sector and consumers more broadly are fused in social and symbiotic relationships of investment, consumption, waged-labour and taxation.

Applying the metaphor of a householder managing domestic finances to the national economy as a whole, therefore, allows the complex and contradictory network of social and class relationships which underwrite the economy to be reimagined as a zero sum paradigm of a generic amount of money coming in and money going out. This, in turn, in turn, allows the state to rationalize measures of austerity – slashing to the state expenditure and social welfare – as coming under the rubric of the good commonsensical need to be careful with one's finances in the most simple and practical of fashions. In the 2008 case, what was, in fact, an act of vast social redistribution from the bottom upwards – i.e. the slashing of social welfare and harder taxation policies against the poor majority in order to relieve the debt burden of high-finance – becomes transfigured into a purely individual tale of a government, having fallen on hard times, trying to be that bit more careful with the purse strings and needing to balance the books.

When the economic issue is understood according to common sense thinking it takes on a generic and individualized aspect which obliterates the social and class contradictions it evolves out of. This provides a very powerful aid in rationalizing the predatory economic policy on the part of a ruling class. For not only is the aspect of class exploitation occluded by the sense that this is a simple, practical measure which is working in terms of a society (reconfigured as an individual) with a single and unified set of interests – but also the elite politicians and spin doctors who have to 'sell' the policy can do so by claiming that the thinking behind it

³⁶ Frank Van Lerven, Andrew Jackson, 'A Government is not a Household', New Economics Foundation 26th October 2018: <https://neweconomics.org/2018/10/a-government-is-not-a-household>.

is operating according to the undeniable dictates of a simple and practical common sense which members of the broader population employ every day of their lives. In this way, the ruling class endeavours to fuse its immediate political and economic goals with the life of the populace, more generally hegemonizing them in alignment with its own particular ends.

It is worth noting how often the ruling class mobilizes attitudes of common sense in its favour in these ways. After the 2008 economic crisis which was caused by the unbridled casino capitalism of the elite sections of high finance, wealth-ridden investment banker Nigel Farage helped to shift focus from the wheeling and dealing of his stock market friends in and through a xenophobic narrative which sought to demonize the poorest immigrants, to see in them the source of the lack of housing, an underfunded and oversubscribed NHS, and the lack of decently paid jobs. The antipathy toward the immigrants inevitably had a strong racist tenor, mainly directed against East Europeans and Muslims, but what was interesting about such reactionary political interventions is that they were also justified according to the language of common sense.

One of the reasons for this is because common sense thinking allowed the immigration question to be located as a purely practical issue, another zero-sum paradigm, which would allow the odious Farage to disavow some of the more noxious and toxically racist sensibilities of his UKIP/Brexit/Reform UK parties where and when necessary. The country could be described in purely quantitative terms, as having only so much space, and only so many jobs; the question of limiting the people who were flowing in, therefore, could be posed as a purely logistical one rather than one which carried particular ethical or racial implications.

Once more, posing a complex social issue in a purely commonsensical fashion – i.e. i.e. conceptions of the world which arise in a spontaneous, immediate and semi-intuitive way – often means treating it in a purely individualized aspect which essentially obliterates the string of social factors at work behind the scenes. The amount of resources a society has to draw upon is never simply a static and unmoving quantity; in fact if a public health service is under strain it is often because the government is encouraging developments in the private sector health industry, if there is not

sufficient housing available, it is often because wealthy landlords are allowing numbers of properties to sit fallow, and if poor immigrants are working for pittance amounts it is often because the government has failed to introduce a decent minimum wage. And in reality, despite all the spiel about poorer immigrants draining jobs and resources in and through their increasing numbers, the effects that mass immigration actually has on a nation are nearly always contrary to common sense thinking. Indeed the immigrants from the 10 poorer countries, such as Poland, Estonia and Hungary who had joined the EU in 2004, and who had migrated to Britain in the ten years which followed – actually contributed significantly more to the UK economy than they had taken out in benefits. Five billion pounds more to be exact.³⁷

But in condensing all these complex political issues down, and projecting them onto a zero-sum paradigm of a set amount of resources vs a set amount of people – not only do we shift the political focus from the social elements at the top to those at the bottom, not only do we alleviate the parasitical role of high finance in terms of setting the basis for the financial crash, but we also manage to smuggle in what is a racist discourse demonizing the most vulnerable in and through the dispassionate and pragmatic mobilization of something called common sense; as Nigel Farage has it: “Getting immigration right isn't racist, it is common sense!”³⁸ In and through the prism of common sense conceptions of the world can become transformed from an organic whole in which various social and class interests are at work from behind the scenes, locked into conflicting relationships of antagonism and exploitation – to a purely individualized entity with a single and shared set of interests which can be quantified and adjudicated in an immediate and pragmatic fashion. In other words, issues which are a consequence of social and class exploitation become reconfigured as purely logistical concerns on the part of a society which is now conceived as a purely uniform entity.

³⁷ Editorial, *What have the immigrants ever done for us?*, “The Economist” 8 November 2014: <https://www.economist.com/britain/2014/11/08/what-have-the-immigrants-ever-done-for-us>.

³⁸ Nigel Farage cited in Cyrus Engineer, *Farage hits back – ‘Getting immigration right isn't racist, it is COMMON SENSE’*, “The Express” 11 July 2016: <https://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/688020/nigel-farage-immigration-racist-lbc>.

To return to Gramsci then. I agree with his analysis of common-sense as something which often inherits elements of ‘philosophy’ from previous epochs and absorbs their precepts into its own body of thought on an organic and unconscious basis. I also agree with his analysis of common sense as a form of thinking which is nurtured in the womb of the collective so to speak, which arises on the part of the population in the broadest sense of the word. But I part ways with him when he argues that ‘every social stratum has its own common sense’. I think it is more accurate to say that common sense often develops within the direct producers and those who facilitate the reproduction of domestic life – but that the ruling class appropriates common sense modes of thinking which arise from the subaltern classes in order to mobilize them in terms of its own interests. I think one might argue that when it comes to “common sense” conceptions the ruling class achieves what might be called in Gramsci-speak a type of “passive revolution”, that is to say it instrumentalizes such conceptions ‘from above’ in order to preserve its own hegemony. And while I think Gramsci is correct to say that common sense thinking is pre-rational, and that it possesses both reactionary and revolutionary aspects, he does not go to the heart of the matter here; he does not sufficiently explain how and why common sense conceptions of the world carry both the revolutionary and reactionary moment. It is correct to argue that the radical aspect comes from the fact that common sense conceptions of the world often arise through the practical life of those tied most directly to the means of production and its corollary in the domestic sphere. However, Gramsci doesn’t recognize that the reactionary aspect comes from the fact that such conceptions often tend to express the lives of those same social layers in a purely individualized fashion: a method of thinking which, when applied to broader political problems, more often than not neutralizes their social roots – the forms of social and class exploitation which set the basis of them – in favour of a purely individual and pragmatic paradigm.

Because of this I am, I must confess, far more pessimistic than Gramsci when it comes to the possibility of achieving what he hopes to do; that is, to convert “common sense” into “good sense” – to actualize the radical components of common sense thinking, drawing them into a self-conscious and rational revolutionary

schema. Perhaps it is because, in my own time, people like Nigel Farage – but also the ruling class consensus more broadly – have managed to mobilize common sense conceptions so successfully and so adroitly in their own favour. Common sense plays a part in what is one of the most fundamental constructions of ruling class hegemony and it works in tandem with another fundamentally important concept, that of ‘political correctness’. Political correctness involves the essentially Nietzschean inversion that those who are most oppressed, most exploited, are actually those who have managed to sneakily accrue real political influence and power from behind the scenes. A sense of ‘political correctness’ is precisely what allows them to achieve this; so, for example, a common narrative runs as follows – more and more immigrants are given access to houses and jobs³⁹ at the expense of ‘indigenous’ workers because a ‘liberal elite’ is working to create a political climate in which this is commonplace in and through the creation of ‘politically correct’ laws and forms of behaviour. ‘Political correctness’ here works as an antipode to ‘common sense’. The ‘liberal elite’ want open borders, they want to allow as many immigrants in as possible simply because they have the luxury of righteousness; their elite jobs won’t be affected and if the public health system is overwhelmed by foreigners – they themselves can rely on private means. The person on the ground, however – the ordinary Joe going about his or her daily life – understands (so the argument goes) that the influx of immigrants provides an existential threat to their economic and cultural existence – and they understand this from a clear, common sense point of view which does not require any rational interrogation of the deeper political and social forces at work in society at large. They understand it pre-rationally as a given fact which grows from the nature of their immediate and direct ‘experience’ – and thus it doesn’t matter what the boffins or the intellectuals or all those people who are divorced from ‘the real world’ actually think, precisely because the understanding of such people is, by virtue of their social position, bereft of plain, ordinary common sense.

³⁹ Mail on Line Reporter, *Half of new homes built in Britain the next five years will go to migrants*, “The Daily Mail” 5 February 2017: <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-4192506/UK-needs-new-home-five-minutes-house-migrants.html>.

So here we see how common sense becomes a vital component in helping to construct a Nietzschean vision of the world in which the most vulnerable and the most exploited – immigrants working for low wages often doing jobs nobody else wants to do – are transfigured into a sinister social power which is gradually relieving the ‘ordinary’ (read white) people who are in some way ‘indigenous’ to the country of their economic and cultural benefits. Furthermore, they, the immigrants, are able to achieve this because there is a complicit layer – the liberal intelligentsia – who are all the time working to help cultivate “immigrants’ rights” because their elitism disqualifies them from the ordinary experiences of the everyday reality and allows them to think in purely politically correct terms. And how do we become aware of such a social situation? Well, we have access to it through using the good common-sensical thinking which arises from the direct and immediate nature of individual experience. For this reason, such thinking cannot be refuted by appeals to statistics or scientifically orientated facts about what, precisely, immigrants earn, the levels of public housing they actually have access to, or the number of their representatives who actually manage to hold positions in the corridors of power.

These things don’t matter because this type of common sense thinking is explicitly irrational – that is, it fetishes the intuitive immediacy of ‘direct experience’ over and against the more laborious and rational endeavour to discover and describe the fundamental social and political agencies which are at work behind the scenes. The common sense narrative ‘cannot’ be refuted by rational argument precisely because it has not been evoked by rational argument. Anybody who has ever tried to counter these kind of anti-immigrant views with statistical examples of why they don’t hold has almost certainly had the experience of this; the rationality and logic of your arguments can be sarcastically dismissed by the fact that to ‘intellectualize’ such issues is to remain indifferent or unaware of the actual ‘ordinary’ people on the ground who feel the deleterious effects of mass-immigration in the marrow of their bones and on a day-to-day basis.

Of course, the Nietzschean-style conclusions which are bolstered by this type of thinking do not truly mediate the interests of ordinary people but rather are advertized and promoted most vividly by the ruling classes, appearing in all the most rabidly right-

wing papers which are invariably owned by multi-millionaire press barons. Papers which constantly mobilize notions of common sense against a ‘nannying welfare state’ – a welfare state which, for example, wants to provide workers with protections for ‘health and safety’ without realizing that this is to spend a lot of money on nothing, because anyone who is involved in a trade has the simple common-sense to ‘think on their feet’ and doesn’t need to be smothered in the type of bureaucratic red-tape and ridiculous rules which will hinder them from better doing their job.⁴⁰ In practice, of course, such a common sense view inevitably helps the position of bosses who then have to spend less kitting their workers out safely.

Or the ‘ridiculously’ politically correct laws which liberal politicians are ‘compelled’ into enacting by ‘militant feminists’, laws which police gender relationships in the work place so that it is no longer possible for people to initiate romantic relationships based on a general common-sensical understanding of physical boundaries, and instead men become absolutely terrified of being sued by a female colleague just for the fact of having looked at her the wrong way. In practice, of course, militating against the nearly always inadequate laws which address sexual harassment in the work place provides a means to inscribe the power of wealthy, typically male bosses against their junior and less powerful underlings, while also pressing against those movements which are trying to provide victims with voices such as Metoo.⁴¹

In these times, therefore, common sense has been deployed incredibly effectively by the ruling class as a strategy to attack workers’ rights, the emancipation of women, the legal protections of migrants, , the status of Muslims and minorities more generally, whilst furiously defending the interests of financial elites and the most privileged sectors of society – in that same moment common sense conceptions of the world allow such claims to be presented in terms of the ‘everyman or woman’ and his or her practical struggle by way of an ordinary existence which is increasingly stifled and menaced by a liberal elite and the forces of political correctness.

⁴⁰ Richard O’Hagan, *Common sense would cost a lot less than ‘health and safety’ rules*, “The Daily Mail” 26 August 2009: <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-1209162/Common-sense-cost-lot-farcical-health-safety-rules.html>.

⁴¹ Jathan Janove, J.D, *During #MeToo Movement, Replace Avoidance with Common Sense*, “The Society for Human Resource Management” 6 May 2019: <https://www.shrm.org/about-shrm/Pages/default.aspx>.

Common sense and Political Correctness here provide the antipodes, antithetical concepts which work to structure a vision of the world which operates according to a Nietzschean-like inversion whereby the interests of the powerful are presented as those of the powerless, and the rights of the powerless are to be crushed in the name of individual freedom and the struggle against elites.

For this reason, I cannot concur with Gramsci's strategy of trying to mobilize conceptions on the part of the working class and its satellites – because, in our day and age, trying to tease out the radical elements in common sense thinking (which no doubt exist) is conceding too much; helping to equip people with a train of thought and a way of thinking which neatly dovetails with the emotive, irrational and individualistic means by which the powerful are able to prosecute their interests in and through a plebeian motif, an aura of ordinariness. But it is about more than this. The harnessing of common sense conceptions for social transformation probably reached its pinnacle with Tom Paine's pamphlet and the way in which its sentiments were able to help fuse a broader mass movement for American independence. But one should also note that the American Revolution of 1775-83 was probably the least radical and thorough-going of any of the great modern revolutions. In essence it was a political revolution, that is to say, in the words of the late, great Marxist historian Neil Davidson, it was a struggle "for control of the state, involving factions of the existing ruling class, which leave fundamental social and economic structures intact".⁴²

It was not an event which touched the socio-economic structures of society and resulted in a fundamental transformation of them – as the later American Civil War would do in abolishing the slave mode of production in the American South. The essential social forms remained unmolested and intact – what happened was that a very visible foreign power which had become increasingly parasitical in terms of its tax demands was jettisoned from its political and economic control of the thirteen colonies. The modes of exploitation which the British employed against the colonists were naked and visible for the eye to see, the lack of political rights which the colonists had and the debt burdens they were accruing were as clear

⁴² Neil Davidson, *How Revolutionary were the Bourgeois Revolutions?*, Chicago, Haymarket Books 2012, p. 494.

as day, and thus the change (the revolution) the bourgeoisie wanted to affect could be presented according to the clear immediacies of common sense and its capacity to pose social problems in a highly individual and isolated manner; i.e. in terms of the oppression of a youthful 'nation' by an ancient and tyrannical monarchy.

But once we come to the issue of proletarian emancipation in our own time, we discover that the ends of the revolution cannot be convincingly articulated in a common-sense fashion. That is partly to do with the fact that the proletarian revolution is a 'social revolution' in the most profound sense; it involves a transformation of society which goes to the very roots, and such a 'social revolution'⁴³ can only be conceived of by a rational understanding of the underlying social relationships which it seeks to transform at the most essential level. In the case of the proletarian revolution this involves the way in which the class of capitalists are able to appropriate some portion of proletarian labour in terms of profit and set into motion capital reproduction.

But the ability of proletarian labour to yield this 'surplus value' to be appropriated by the bourgeoisie is premised on the fact that the commodity 'labour power' is able to attain a value over and above the socially necessary labour-time required to bring it to market and which determines its market value therein. In other words, the value of labour power is both equal to itself, in terms of producing the value which is necessary for its own continued reproduction – and is greater than itself in terms of being able to self-generate a value over and above its price as a commodity which can be absorbed as profit. This is a profoundly dialectical contradiction – on it the whole edifice of revolutionary Marxism rests; i.e. the practical necessity for the proletariat to take control of the means of production on a democratic and collective basis can only be adduced from a precise theoretical and philosophical awareness of how the bourgeoisie is able to appropriate a portion of surplus labour from the proletariat, how capital itself is labour power in a veiled and alienated guise; and how – as the estranged product of an excess of proletarian labour – capital can and must be brought under the auspices of proletarian power in and through a revolutionary unfolding.

⁴³ Actually on reflection, this is not the case for the majority of social revolutions in history, but truly and profoundly does apply to the proletarian revolution.

But common-sense understanding in its immediacy and irrationality can never penetrate the true secret of the labour power-capital relationship because such a relationship can only appear to the purview of common sense in a reified guise, i. e. it appears in a purely individual guise by which a particular company or capitalist agrees on a purely subjective basis to pay a particular type of worker a particular wage. The common sense point-of-view might, on occasion, encourage the worker to clamour for a higher wage, in order to better serve the needs of his or her individual family unit which have arisen in the context of their particular and practical existence – but precisely because of its immediate and individualistic tenor common sense understanding can never pierce the nature of labour as a general and abstract social phenomenon which manifests in the guise of labour power; it can never, therefore, bring to light the process by which a portion of labour power is extracted by the bourgeoisie, and consequently, it can never apprehend the revolutionary necessity which inheres in the proletariat by virtue of its social-historic position vis-à-vis the processes of production. One is tempted to call to mind Lenin’s conception of ‘trade union consciousness’ in which workers feel the necessity to ‘combine in unions’ in order to seek the type of “labour legislation”⁴⁴ which would lead to better wages and working conditions but which leaves the capital – waged-labour relationship in its fundamental form untouched. Is Lenin’s conception of “trade union consciousness” an example of a Gramscian common sense conception of the world? Arguably, yes, in as much as, for Lenin, “trade union consciousness” is part of the “spontaneous awakening”⁴⁵ of working class consciousness in its earliest, immediate and unsystematic form; while for Gramsci too common sense conceptions of the world are also an expression of the “‘spontaneous’ feelings of the masses ... ‘Spontaneous’ in the sense that they are not the result of any systematic educational activity on the part of an already conscious leading group, but have been formed through everyday experience illuminated by ‘common sense’”.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ V. I Lenin, *What Is To Be Done?* “The Spontaneity of the Masses and the Consciousness of the Social-Democrats”, Marxist Internet Archive: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1901/witbd/ii.htm>

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *QdC*, Q3§48 p. 331; in English *SPN*, *cit.*, pp.198-9 and alternatively *PN* Vol. 2, *cit.*, p. 51.

In other words, even the most radical form of common sense conception applied to the fundamental question of class exploitation in our present day only leads to reformist conclusions; it can never point beyond them toward a fundamentally revolutionary transformation, and is unable, therefore, to touch on the possibility of an authentic and society-wide emancipation. And because common sense cannot by its very nature apprehend the underlying relation of exploitation which structures the capitalist social world, it cannot adequately comprehend many of the peripheral issues which arise from the social contradiction which opens up between capital and labour power; rather it can only interpret economic crises, housing shortages, political strategies of austerity and so on, on the basis of an immediate and pragmatic irrationalism which most fundamentally poses these issues in abstract and profoundly individualized terms.

I don't say that this can never have any radical benefits; it is good common sense, for example, to say that rich people with ten houses might give some of those up at a time when there is a housing crisis; but more generally speaking the 'logic' of common sense most regularly works to obscure the network of social relationships which is concealed beneath the surface of social reality, instead personalizing and individualizing them in terms of a rather robust and pragmatic form of moralism. In our own day, I think that the narrowing capacity of more progressive social agencies to translate "common sense" into "good sense" in the characteristic Gramscian mode is expressed not only by the fact that the ruling class have so effectively hitched common sense to their own ideological project – but, relatedly, even though Gramsci identified correctly the pre-rational essence of common sense and its component of spontaneity, he did not sufficiently draw attention to the fact of its individualized and isolated character and the inability it has to conceive of the most fundamental problems we are faced by as being social phenomena which require social solutions – something which is particularly important when one is dealing with a capitalist set of social relations which inevitably assume a profoundly reified appearance.

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Common Sense / Senso comune: Gramsci Dictionary

Guido Liguori

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Common Sense / Senso comune: Gramsci Dictionary

Abstract

This is an abstract of the entry on "Common sense" (translated into English) published in the Dizionario gramsciano (Gramsci Dictionary). There exist more than one "common senses" distinguishable by area, social stratum and period, continually enriched with scientific notions, and standing in-between folklore and the philosophy of the scholars. It is a "disorderly aggregate of philosophical conceptions" in which "whatever one likes" may be found. It must be subjected to critique, since it is often connotated by the various forms of conservatism. It is a social group's most wide-spread and often implicit ideology, and dialectically related to philosophy, meaning that a social group that aligns itself with the subalterns must enter into a dialectical relation with common sense in a mutually transformative way. Differently from Bukharin's approach, the critique of common sense, Gramsci states, must be one of the starting points for a compendium of Marxism: forcing the introduction of new truths into common sense is proof of its capacity for expansion. At stake is the transformation of the subalterns' conception of the world, by and through launching a struggle for hegemony involving a new common sense, culture and philosophy which, together, form a mass ideology which rendering politically possible the intellectual progress of the mass.

Keywords

Common sense, coherence, folklore, ideology, philosophy, Manzoni, Sorel

Common Sense / Senso comune: Gramsci Dictionary

Guido Liguori

The expression “common sense” appears both in the list of main subject matters that opens Notebook 1 and in the list found at the beginning of Notebook 8, linked in both cases to “folklore”. As early as Q1§65 Gramsci is explicit in his view that there exist more than one “common senses”, distinguishable according to their social connotation and geographical area. But he also uses the expression with a non-positive connotation: he writes that

every social stratum has its own “common sense” which is ultimately the most widespread conception of life and morals [...] Common sense is not something rigid and static; rather, it changes continuously, enriched by scientific notions and philosophical opinions which have entered into common usage. “Common sense” is the folklore of “philosophy” and stands midway between real “folklore” (that is, as it is understood) and the philosophy, the science, the economics of the scholars. “Common sense” creates the folklore of the future, that is a more or less rigidified phase of a certain time and place (Q1§65, Gerratana, Critical Edition p. 76; *PN* Vol.1 p. 173).¹

From this passage one deduces that: a) “every social stratum has its own ‘common sense’” and therefore in a society there exist different common senses; b) common sense is defined as “the most widespread conception of life and morals” within a given social stratum; c) common sense derives from the sedimentation left behind by previous philosophical currents; d) common sense is in continuous modification (and therefore different common senses follow one another over time).

Common sense appears as a variant of the concept of ideology, understood in Gramsci’s terms as a conception of the world. It is the conception of the world of a social stratum, often characterized

¹ References to the *Notebooks* followed by paragraph and page numbers are to the Critical Edition of the *Quaderni del carcere (QdC)*, ed. Valentino Gerratana, Torino, Einaudi 1975. *PN* refers to the planned but now interrupted integral translation into English of the *Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Joseph A. Buttigieg, New York, Columbia University Press Vol. 1 (1992), Vol. 2 (1996) and Vol. 3 (2007). *SPN* refers to *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, London, Lawrence and Wishart 1971.

as the moment of passive reception compared to the active elaboration of the intellectual-leadership group of the social group itself. In so far as it is passive, common sense undergoes a delay and also elementary moments of elaboration. But the fact that “every social stratum has its own ‘common sense’” excludes the case that it may be defined as the qualitatively lowest level of a conception of the world. In general, what is being dealt with is the most widespread and often implicit ideology of a social group, of a minimal level. As such, common sense is related dialectically to philosophy, i.e. with the higher segment of ideology, belonging to the leading groups of the various social groups. Equally with this, a political force that aligns itself with the subalterns must install a dialectical relation with common sense, in order that common sense should be and is transformed, up to reaching a new common sense, necessary in the context of the struggle for hegemony.

In Q3§48 of (*QdC*, pp. 328-32; *PN* Vol. 2, pp. 48-52), dedicated to examining the spontaneity-leadership nexus with explicit reference to the *Ordine Nuovo* group, Gramsci brings into play the importance of the element of popular spontaneity, albeit as an element that has to be educated. He writes that at the time of *Ordine Nuovo*,

this element of ‘spontaneity’ was not neglected, much less disdained: it was *educated*, it was given a direction, it was cleansed of everything extraneous that could contaminate it, in order to unify it by means of modern theory but in a living, historically effective manner (Q3§48, p. 330; *PN* Vol. 2, p. 50 or *SPN* p. 198),

i. e. by means of Marxism. Here, common sense is posed in relation with “the ‘spontaneous’ sentiments of the masses” formed precisely “through everyday experience in the light of ‘common sense’”. But above all a “‘quantitative’ difference, of degree not of quality” is asserted between philosophy and “common sense”, since Gramsci recalls that “Kant considered it important for his philosophical theories to be in agreement with common sense; the same is true of Croce” (Q3§48, p. 331; *PN* Vol. 2, p. 51 or *SPN* p. 199).

It must not however be forgotten that for Gramsci common sense has precise weak points, including ones of a logical type. The “distortions” in its “way of thinking” have to be corrected, among other things because they are bound up with the “philosophy of the man in the street” formed by “oratory and declamation” (Q4§18, p.

439; *PN* Vol. 2, p. 160). Still more negative is the judgment on common sense in relation to the subject of the “objective existence of reality” (Q4§41, pp. 466-7; *PN* Vol. 2, p. 189), which Gramsci considers “the most important question concerning science”, but which for common sense “does not even exist”. Such certainties enter into common sense “essentially [from] religion” [...] from Christianity” (*loc. cit.*). Here common sense for Gramsci is a backward vision of the world, both because it is conditioned by religious ideology, which denies immanence, and because it does not accept the new aspects represented by science: it is a pre-modern view of the world. Gramsci often also connotes common sense with conservatism: it “is led to believe that what exists today has always existed” (Q6§78, p. 745; *PN* Vol. 3, p. 58). In the *Notebooks*, the mainly negative assessments and annotations regarding this category – often with the adjective “vulgar” appended – seem clearly to prevail over the positive ones.

Gramsci criticizes Croce for “continuously flirting with the ‘common sense’ and ‘good sense’ of the people” (Q7§1, p. 853; *PN* Vol. 3, p. 156). In Notebook 8 the reflection on common sense undergoes its maximum expansion, taking its cue from comparing Bukharin’s theories with those of Croce and Gentile. We read for example that

Croce often seems to take pleasure in the fact that certain philosophical propositions are shared by common sense, but what does that mean in concrete terms? But what can this mean concretely? In order to prove that “all men are philosophers” there is no need to resort to common sense in this way. Common sense is a disorderly aggregate of philosophical conceptions in which one can find whatever one likes. (Q8§173, pp. 1045-6; *PN* Vol. 3, pp. 334)

And again, a little further on, “Gentile talks of an ahistorical ‘human nature’, and of the ‘truth of common sense’, as if one couldn’t find whatever one wanted in ‘common sense’ and as if there were just one immutable, eternal ‘common sense’” (Q8§175, p. 1047; *PN* Vol. 3, p. 336). It seems to Gramsci that Croce and Gentile link up *tactically* and *instrumentally* to common sense because they want the subalterns to continue to remain such. In the redraft of the last note quoted from, Gramsci adds a consideration that represents a balanced equilibrium of his reasoning, starting from the recognition that

what has been said [up to now] does not mean there are no truths in common sense. It means rather that common sense is an ambiguous, contradictory and multiform concept, and that to refer to common sense as a confirmation of truth is a non-sense. It is possible to state correctly that a certain truth has become part of common sense in order to indicate that it has spread beyond the confines of intellectual groups [...] because common sense is crudely neophobe and conservative, so that to have succeeded in forcing the introduction of a new truth is a proof that the truth in question has exceptional evidence and capacity for expansion (Q11§13, pp. 1399-1400; *SPN*, p. 423).

Gramsci argues that, since one can find everything there, in common sense, too, there are elements of truth. It is certainly important to note that a thesis has become common sense, above all for those who want to create a *new* common sense, even if common sense is linked to an image of an ideology of neophobia, prejudicially opposed to new factors and therefore conservative.

In Q8, on the basis of his assessment of common sense, Gramsci engages in a sharp confrontation with Bukharin. Regarding the dialectic he had already accused Bukharin's *Popular Manual*² of having "really capitulated before common sense and vulgar thought" (Q7§29, p. 877; *PN* Vol. 3, p. 179 or *SPN* p. 435). Now he adds that

a work like the *Popular Manual*, that is aimed at a community of readers who are not professional intellectuals, should have as its point of departure an analysis and a critique of the philosophy of common sense, which is the "philosophy of non-philosophers", in other words the conception of the world *acritically* absorbed from the various social environments in which the moral individuality of the average person is developed. Common sense is not a single conception, identical in time and space. It is the "folklore" of philosophy, and like folklore it appears in countless forms. The fundamental characteristics of common sense consist in its being a disjointed, incoherent, and inconsequential conception of the world, that matches the character of the multitudes whose philosophy it is (Q8§173, p. 1045; *PN* Vol. 3, p. 333, or *SPN* p. 419).

Gramsci emphasizes in the first place his own definition of common sense as a "philosophy", albeit "of the non-philosophers", as a "conception of the world", as the "'folklore' of philosophy": an *n*th confirmation of that conceptual family in which Gramsci's concept of ideology is articulated. But Gramsci adjectivizes "common sense" and the links in the conceptual chain of reference that

² N. I. Bukharin, *The Theory of Historical Materialism. A Popular Manual of Marxist Sociology*, first published in English by Allen & Unwin, London 1926; more recent edition *Historical Materialism: A System of Sociology*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press 1969.

are nearest to it, yet again in an extremely critical way: “acritically absorbed”, syncretic, “incoherent”, “inconsequential”. Going on in the note, Gramsci adds that “historically, the formation of a homogeneous social group is accompanied by the development of a ‘homogeneous’ – that is systematic – philosophy, in opposition to common sense” (*ibid.*).

What is at stake is the conception of the world of the subalterns, which must be transformed or replaced by launching a hegemonic challenge. Marx, too, who had alluded to the “fixed popular opinion” – Gramsci argues – implicitly asserts “the need for ‘new popular beliefs’, that is, for a new ‘common sense’ and thus for a new culture, a new philosophy” (Q8§175, p. 1047; *PN* Vol. 3, p. 336)³. Ideology is a material force in given situations: one is dealing with the production of “a new philosophy” which, in defeating existing common sense, becomes a mass ideology, a new common sense. If the indication of the goal – overcoming common sense – is clear, it must not be forgotten that “the conception of the world that is widespread among the popular masses in a historical period” (Q8§213, p. 1071; *PN* Vol. 3, p. 360) cannot be something that is totally negative:

It is a matter therefore of starting with a philosophy which already enjoys or could enjoy a certain diffusion because it is connected to and implicit in practical life, and elaborating it so that it becomes a renewed common sense possessing the coherence and the sinew of individual philosophies. But this can only happen if the demands of cultural contact with the ‘simple’ are continually felt (Q11§12, pp. 1382-3; *SPN*, p. 330, footnote).

There returns here the assertion of the need for contact with the “simple” people, the politico-philosophical programme starting from *Ordine Nuovo* and going on to the *Notebooks*: “the position of the philosophy of praxis is the antithesis of the catholic” since “the philosophy of praxis does not tend to leave the ‘simple’ in their primitive philosophy of common sense, but rather to lead them to a higher conception of life”. The aim is “to construct an intellectual-moral bloc which can make politically possible the intellectual progress of the mass and not only of small intellectual groups” (Q11§12, p. 1384-5; *SPN* pp. 332-3).

³ [This wording is reused by Gramsci in the argument of Q11§13, *SPN* p. 424 – trans. note.]

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“Good sense” in the twenty-first century

Robert P. Jackson

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“Good sense” in the twenty-first century

Abstract

This is the abstract of a review in English by Robert P. Jackson of the book by Kate Crehan, Gramsci's Common Sense. Inequality and its Narratives (Durham, Duke University Press 2016).

Keywords

Common sense, intellectuals, subalternity, Adam Smith, Tea Party, Occupy Wall Street

‘Good sense’ in the twenty-first century

Robert P. Jackson

1. Introduction

In *Gramsci’s Common Sense* (Durham: Duke, 2016), Kate Crehan, Professor Emerita of Anthropology at the College of Staten Island and the Graduate Center, CUNY, deftly explores three key Gramscian concepts (subalternity, intellectuals, and ‘common sense’ [*senso comune*]) and employs them to explain the ways in which different forms of structural inequality are produced (and reproduced) in society. In her previous writings, such as *Gramsci, Culture and Anthropology* (London: Pluto 2002; in Italian *Gramsci, Cultura e Antropologia*, Lecce: Argo 2010), Crehan proposed that the Anglophone anthropological tradition and its notion of ‘culture’, understood broadly as a way of life, has much to gain from a renewed engagement with Gramsci’s thought. In particular, her work has highlighted that the significance of the concept of “culture” in the *Prison Notebooks* emerges from the fact that culture is “one of the major ways the inequalities of class are lived on a day-to-day basis” (p. x). Building on these substantial reflections on culture and power, *Gramsci’s Common Sense* insightfully illuminates the complexities of Gramsci’s inclusive understanding of class. Crehan not only situates a Gramscian conception of class far from the economic reductionism commonly ascribed to Marxist thinkers (as a means to dismiss them), but also maps the “terrain of class” in Gramsci’s writings through his articulation of the above-mentioned constellation of concepts (p. xi).

Crehan divides the book into two parts. In the first section, three chapters reconstruct the ‘broad contours’ of this trio of concepts (subalternity, intellectuals, and “common sense”) in the *Notebooks* (p. 10). The fourth chapter suggests that Gramsci’s analytical approach expresses a “dialogical relationship” between subalterns and intellectuals, linking the lived experience of inequality and the “political narratives that articulate that experience” (p. xii). Thus, Crehan contends that Gramsci allows us to make sense of the gap between the actuality of people’s circumstances and their explanation or narrative for understanding these circumstances. In the

second section, Crehan moves beyond the ambit of Gramsci's framework, using his conceptual apparatus to analyse three distinct case studies. The first of these surveys a range of literature concerning the political economist Adam Smith. Crehan moves beyond the prevailing caricature of Smith as the prophet of *laissez-faire* market fundamentalism, situating his life and work in the context of the Scottish Enlightenment. Crehan appraises Smith's contribution as an "organic intellectual" of the rising bourgeoisie, mapping out the ensemble of relations of which we can read him as a personification (p. 83).

Moving from the past to the present, Crehan then explores two recent socio-political phenomena, the right-wing populist Tea Party project and the anti-corporate Occupy Wall Street (OWS) movement. While emerging from opposing ends of the political spectrum, Crehan argues that we can understand both of these cases as efforts to remould contemporary "common sense" in the United States. She reads the achievements of these movements in terms of their capacity to create or popularise certain political narratives. On the one hand, Crehan analyses the Tea Party's narrative as a variant of the capitalist worldview, encouraged and promoted by wealthy corporate interests, while also resonating viscerally with the fears and anxieties of grassroots supporters. On the other, she argues that the narrative of OWS, epitomized by the slogan "We are the 99 percent!", represents the embryonic beginnings of an alternative to the prevailing hegemony, one that challenges inequality and exploitation by weaving together submerged elements of "good sense" arising out of the experiences of subaltern groups.

Being alert to the need, proposed by Gramsci himself, to search for the *Leitmotiv* and the "rhythm of the thought" in an author's work, Crehan resists the temptation to provide simplified definitions of Gramscian terms. Exhibiting and analysing passages from Gramsci's writings, she also intervenes in a variety of theoretical debates, engaging with the thought of twentieth-century thinkers, including Hannah Arendt, Pierre Bourdieu, Edward Said, and Gayatri Spivak (as well as Michel Foucault, Ranajit Guha, Julien Benda, and James Scott). Counterposing Gramsci's ideas to the works of these figures enables Crehan to develop further the distinctiveness of Gramsci's thought, and to highlight its enduring

fertility for confronting the crisis of modernity. Stressing that Gramsci's reflections in the *Notebooks* are not simply a 'template' to be reproduced mechanically, Crehan draws on his writings as a resource to inform her case studies. She argues in the conclusion that Gramsci's thought can act as a "guide" for progressive political engagement in the twenty-first century (p. 198).

One of the book's key themes is Gramsci's understanding of the relationship between knowledge and opinion, and the passage from one to the other. Crehan draws on the *Notebooks* for an account of the formation of popular opinions, not from a disinterested standpoint, but from an engaged concern to explain their relationship to social transformation. She explores the emergence of genuinely new ways of understanding the world, and the ways in which those new understandings can become a material force that radically challenges the status quo (p. 188). At the same time, she points out that the tectonic processes that form the "self-evident truths" of "common sense" have often led intellectuals towards a position of disdain for the "effects of opinion", e.g. Foucault (p. ix). Contrary to this, for Crehan, Gramsci's conception involves "an epistemological claim" that new understandings emerge from knowledge fundamentally born out of the experience of subalternity (p. 39). However, if this inchoate knowledge is to translate into a new conception of the world, a dialogue is required between subaltern groups and the organic intellectuals that emerge from their ranks. For Crehan, this dialogue can only be successful if it grasps the multifaceted character of the structural inequalities (involving class, gender, race and ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, etc.) in the existing hegemonic order, and their entanglement with the "complex relations between subaltern experience and political narratives" (p. 185).

2. *Subalternity, Intellectuals, 'Common Sense'*

Crehan begins her discussion of Gramscian thought with the concept of subalternity, at first overlooked and subsequently much misunderstood in the Anglophone literature on Gramsci. Pointing towards the problematic tendency to treat this concept simply as a code word, "a euphemism for *proletariat*" (p. 14), Crehan underlines the heterogeneity of subalternity, which "refers to a relation of subordination to some other group, or a subordinate location within an

overarching institution such as the state” (p. 185). For Crehan, Gramsci shares with anthropology an attentiveness to subaltern voices. While it is one of the strengths of that discipline to be concerned with “genuinely listening” to the “native’s point of view” (p. 13), Crehan stresses that Gramsci is not concerned with the mapping and conservation of these perspectives. Rather, Gramsci’s project involves the translation of subaltern experiences into effective political narratives for the purpose of social transformation.

Crehan contrasts the complexity of Gramsci’s “double attitude” to subaltern agency with two opposing accounts developed by Spivak and Scott (pp. 11-14, 59-62). For Spivak, famously, the subaltern voice is radically mute, and her work explores, in particular, the silencing of female subalterns in the Global South. Thus, Spivak criticizes Northern theorists that claim to speak on behalf of subaltern groups. Scott, in his *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (New Haven: Yale 1990), insists that, despite the fearful silence of subalterns in the presence of “power-holders”, articulate subaltern criticisms of power can be detected in the “hidden transcripts” produced by subaltern groups (p. 13). Contrary to Spivak, Gramsci affirms the capacity of subaltern groups to generate collective oppositional narratives. Indeed, for Crehan, subaltern experiences are “the ultimate source of all genuinely new narratives” (*ibid.*). At the same time, Scott’s account of “hidden transcripts” underestimates the fragmentation characteristic of the subaltern condition. In comparison, Gramsci recognises the more or less incoherent nature of subaltern narratives, always disaggregated in relation to the existing hegemony.

Crehan then turns to consider Gramsci’s conception of the nature and role of intellectuals. She frames her exposition of the “organic intellectual” in distinction to Said’s use of the concept in his 1993 Reith Lectures, published as *Representations of the Intellectual* (New York: Pantheon 1994). For Crehan, Said misrepresents the “organic intellectual” as a simple technician that produces instrumental knowledge for a political or commercial end (p. 25). Said contrasts this unfavourably with a vision, inspired by Benda, of the universal intellectual, a principled individual, independent of particular interests, motivated by eternal emancipatory values, and locked in a moral struggle to speak truth to power. Crehan shows that, whereas Said focuses on the individual character of the intellectual,

Gramsci emphasises the collective relations between intellectuals and the processes of knowledge production and distribution. While Said is attendant on the vocation of the intellectual, and the particular skillset that she possesses, for Gramsci what is of primary importance is the role that intellectuals play in society, as the “form in which the knowledge generated out of the lived experience of a social group [...] achieves coherence and authority” (pp. 29-30). Crehan thus highlights Gramsci’s contestation of the ingrained and seductive notion of the lofty intellectual floating above the struggles between social groups. Crehan roots this account in a substantive reading of Gramsci’s distinctions between organic and traditional intellectuals, coherence and incoherence, and between knowledge, understanding and feeling. Central to Crehan’s account, of historical blocs and the relations between intellectuals and classes in Gramsci’s thought, is the “dialogical” relationship between “raw, inchoate experience” and its transformation by organic intellectuals into “articulate coherent narratives” in the course of the emergence of these intellectuals themselves (p. 36).

In the third chapter, Crehan engages with Sophia Rosenfeld’s *Common Sense: A Political History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard 2011), which identifies the eponymous term as having two main intertwined strands of historical meaning, signifying, on the one hand, a “basic human faculty” that allows us to make everyday judgements, and, on the other, “widely shared and seemingly self-evident conclusions” (p. 45). Identifying Gramsci’s conception of “common sense” predominantly with the latter, Crehan notes that “common sense” concerns primarily the “content of popular knowledge” (p. 46). She distinguishes Gramsci’s concept on this point from Bourdieu’s notion of “habitus”, which resembles a faculty with its reference “to the cognitive structures or dispositions that generate that knowledge” (*ibid.*). Returning to the *Notebooks*, Crehan criticises Rosenfeld’s account of Gramsci, arguing that it overlooks the “doubleness” of Gramsci’s attitude to “common sense”, in which there is a “complicated dialectical relationship” between elements of “good sense” among the masses and the “developed and coherent political philosophies” of intellectuals (p. 48). Thus, while Crehan points out the seriousness with which Gramsci treats “common sense”, due to its deep roots in subaltern experience, these are regarded as no more than the “rough and

jagged” beginnings of a new world (Q11§12, p. 1395; *SPN*, p. 343). Crehan contrasts Gramsci’s conception of “common sense” with Arendt’s advice that scholars show a “humble” deference to “popular understanding” (p. 50). Failure to do so, for Arendt, threatens our ability to live together in a common world, through a “breakdown of our common-inherited wisdom”, which tends in turn to produce totalitarian societies (*ibid.*). Contrary to this notion of “common sense” as a unitary and reliable source of truth, for Gramsci, it is an “ambiguous, contradictory and multi-form concept” (Q11§13, p. 1399; *SPN*, p. 423). Thus, Crehan emphasises Gramsci’s antipathy towards any romanticization of this “inherently unreliable” product of a “fractured world”, outlining his understanding of social transformation as a process that brings forth “a new common sense and a new culture” (p. 53).

In chapter four, Crehan draws together her readings of subalternity, intellectuals, and “common sense”, illuminating the relationships between these concepts with Gramsci’s reflections on the themes of language, folklore, and popular literature. At the same time, Crehan vividly illustrates the experience of subalternity using contemporary examples. For example, she discusses the visual art of Cindy Sherman that explores the social narratives presented to women by a male-dominated popular culture (p. 61). Crehan again highlights Gramsci’s “double attitude” toward subaltern “knowledge”, this time instantiated through language. She elaborates Gramsci’s approach to regional dialects, valorizing them as emotionally and imaginatively rich modes of expression, while also criticizing their intellectual limitations and parochialism in comparison to national languages (pp. 62-6). Crehan further develops this complexity in a rich account of Gramsci’s notion of folklore, as an archive of subaltern conceptions of reality, and its relation to ‘common sense’ (pp. 67-9). Finally, Crehan expounds Gramsci’s critical appreciation of the serial novel, demonstrating the significance of popular literature for “discovering shared subaltern conceptions of the world” (p. 70).

3. Three Case Studies

In the second section of the book, Crehan places her exposition of Gramsci’s ideas in dialogue with three case studies, “each illustrative of an aspect of the passage from incoherent common

sense [...] to coherent political narratives” (p. 77). The first of these investigates the way in which a class elaborates, alongside itself, its own organic intellectuals. Crehan identifies, with historical hindsight, Adam Smith as emblematic of the organic intellectuals of the rising bourgeoisie. In so doing, Crehan reads Smith’s *Wealth of Nations* not, as it is often regarded, as a guidebook of “universal truths” about capitalism (p. 95), but, situated in its historical context, as his contribution to the Scottish Enlightenment. Crehan begins with an account of the economic, institutional and political factors that conditioned this explosion of collective inquiry, and the search for a “new Science of Man” that it heralded (p. 100). Crehan traces the emergence of new types of “knower” and “knowledge” during this period, displacing the earlier models of the “Christian philosopher” and the “gentleman-scholar” with the “scientist as expert” characteristic of modern industrial specialization (p. 91).

This reading reveals Smith to be not only an “advocate of free-trade”, but also a passionate opponent of “injustice and inequity”, promoting a vision of “opulence” for all (pp. 101, 104). Crehan emphasises the traumatic impact of Scotland’s subaltern relation to England on the genesis of the *Wealth of Nations* (p. 85), which Smith himself understood as a “violent attack” on the British commercial system (p. 102). Recounting the largely posthumous disputes over the meaning of Smith’s work, Crehan follows the path by which it came to provide an “organizing vision”, a universal narrative, for the emerging bourgeoisie (p. 116). The early association of Smith’s ideas about political liberty with seditious support for the French Revolution was revised later to present a more conservative picture of his work, detaching *laissez faire* economics from his sympathies with the “lower orders” (p. 113). The differing fortunes of these bifurcated elements of Smith’s intellectual legacy neatly frame Crehan’s subsequent discussion of two contemporary and opposing case studies, the Tea Party and Occupy Wall Street movements.

Crehan’s analysis of the reshaping of politics in the United States by the Tea Party movement has taken on an increased significance since the publication of the book. In view of the Trump presidency, her study of the Tea Party phenomenon is a timely reminder of the wider shifts in “common sense” that enabled his rise to power. Crehan traces the protracted historical tendencies that “incubated” this movement, beginning with nascent opposition to the post-war

New Deal consensus, through the conservative backlash against radical politics in the 1960s, and leading to increased corporate support for right-wing think tanks and foundations during and beyond the “so-called Reagan revolution” (p. 122). Crehan complements her account of these intellectual attempts to formulate a conservative agenda of “free enterprise, limited government, individual freedom, and [...] American values” (p. 127), with more recent initiatives to ground these policies in a grassroots movement that aims to move the Republican party and US discourse to the right.

Crehan recounts the moment in 2009, in the aftermath of the financial crisis, when these efforts caught a nerve, articulating the sentiments of those hostile to the new Obama administration. For some in the Democratic establishment, the Tea Party represented a populism without popular support. They questioned the authenticity of the grassroots of this movement. While outlining the elite Republican and corporate interests that shaped the Tea Party’s anti-tax, pro-business narrative “from above”, Crehan also draws on empirical studies, such as Theda Skocpol and Vanessa Williamson’s *The Tea Party* (Oxford, OUP 2012), to detail the very real and visceral popular anger that this movement was able to channel. Contrary to dismissive characterizations of the Tea Party as “Astroturf” populism, Crehan argues that we should understand it as a movement shaped by lobbyists on behalf of wealthy interests, but also animated by support “from below”. The loss of control experienced by many of those “left behind” by the neoliberal economy resonated with the (frequently racialized) “common sense” discourse that distinguished between productive “makers” and undeserving “takers” (p. 139). Despite its radical imagery, the Tea Party narrative, for Crehan, does not challenge but reinforces the existing hegemony, representing merely one variant of the dominant assumptions that constitute the capitalist worldview.

For a genuine alternative to the status quo, Crehan suggests that we must look for examples of “the first stirrings of the kind of new common sense for which Gramsci called” (p. 146). In the final case study, she locates elements of this “good sense” in a different response to the economic crisis, the Occupy Wall Street movement. Crehan examines the process by which the lived experience of inequality in the twenty-first century, marked by unemployment, rising debt, lack of healthcare, and disillusion with the ‘American

Dream', coalesced in 2011 around the slogan, "We are the 99 percent". She relates the impact of international events, such as the uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa and the Spanish *Indignados/as*, on a growing sense in the US of an economic and political system that was failing "the many". For Crehan, the example of OWS illustrates the difficulties that confront any new political narrative that goes "against the grain" of the prevailing order, since hegemony is "woven into the very fabric of the institutions and practices of everyday life" (p. 181). Thus, she investigates the ways in which embryonic conceptions of the world must struggle for spaces in which to develop.

Crehan explores the interaction between then relatively novel forms of digital organizing, using social media to communicate and to articulate personal experiences, and the tactic of "General Assemblies' occupying public spaces, which became a focal point for expressing discontent. Her discussion of the principles of horizontalism (consensus building, lack of hierarchy) animating OWS's strategy draws a balance sheet of the innovations and limits of this prefigurative politics (p. 182). On the positive side, she concludes that OWS's immediate "flash" of action created a ferment of "common sense" that was able to renew submerged elements of "good sense" (p. 147). At the same time, OWS was unable, and indeed did not attempt, to translate this "outbreak of the imagination" into wider forms of leadership and organization capable of sustaining a challenge to the dominant narrative (p. 160). Despite the relatively brief duration of OWS's physical occupation of New York's Zuccotti Park and its lack of clear demands, Crehan points to its success in "changing the conversation" regarding inequality, and views this as part of a wider "war of position" to transform the political landscape (p. 176). Crehan documents the surprisingly strong influence of OWS on mainstream politics in the United States, drawing (qualified) support from senior Democratic figures and even influencing the rhetoric of then-president Obama (*ibid.*). The subsequent growth in support for egalitarian and socialist ideas, affirmed by prominent figures such as Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, appears to corroborate further Crehan's argument that OWS marked an important staging point, alongside social movements like Black Lives Matter and #MeToo, in a wider 'cultural battle to transform the popular "mentality"' (p. 183).

4. Reading Gramsci Today

Crehan's reconstruction of the "multilayered richness" of Gramscian concepts like subalternity refrains from providing "easy answers" or "sound bite" versions of his thought (p. 14). Using these concepts to analyse different case studies, while also anchoring Gramsci's writings in their own historical context, Crehan demonstrates their enduring relevance for an understanding of contemporary political realities. The confrontations staged between Gramsci and other twentieth-century thinkers are illuminating, although in places the results might have had greater effectiveness with a more robust reconstruction of the opposing thinker's position. Thus, we might ask whether Gramsci would in fact have been "equally dismissive" of Arendt's deference to "common sense" as he was of Gentile's celebration of it (p. 51). Repurposing arguments in this way across different historical contexts places a high burden on mediating between the respective projects and circumstances of these thinkers.

Crehan bases her reconstruction of Gramsci's thought on a close reading of his texts. However, there are examples where her selection of terminology would benefit from further justification. Thus, while the concept of political "narrative" plays a central explanatory role in Crehan's interpretation, it appears relatively infrequently in Gramsci's own writings (usually in a critical context, e.g. regarding Benedetto Croce's historical "narratives" in Q10I§9, p. 1227; *SPN* p. 119). Crehan deploys this concept in senses often related to Gramsci's development of the notion of the political "myth". Indeed, it could have been informative for Crehan to draw her concept of "narrative" into dialogue with Gramsci's creative use of the "Sorelian myth", understood as a 'body of images' (Q13§1, p. 1555; *SPN* p. 126), given the contrasting (but dialectically related) theoretical frames arising from the terms narrative and image. Similarly, it would be of interest to explore what is at stake in Crehan's emphasis on the notion of "lived experience", and how it relates to Gramsci's notion of "praxis" (conscious action) in relation to the passivity of the subaltern groups.

Crehan's investigation of the Tea Party phenomenon is notable for its powerful discussion of the worldview of its rank-and-file supporters, who conceive themselves as patriotic tax-payers engaged in a revolt against tyrannical federal government and a

freeloading “other”, parasitic on the economy, and often characterized along racial lines (p. 134, 139). An important factor that might have contributed to Crehan’s explanation of this racialization of the “other” is the mainstreaming of hostile and racist discourse towards Islam and Muslims in the US in the wake of the 9/11 attacks and the “War on Terror”. Indeed, there may also have been scope to compare the non-contingent nature of racism within the Tea Party narrative with Gramsci’s own struggle against the racialized ideology of intellectuals in Italy, articulated in the Notebooks under the rubric of “Lorianism” (e.g. in Q1§25, *PN* Vol. 1, pp. 114-6). However, these are, evidently, minor quibbles in relation to the overall import of this book.

Gramsci’s Common Sense achieves the substantial feat of combining a sophisticated reading of Gramsci’s views on class, inequality, and “popular opinion” with an accessible style that presupposes no prior knowledge of his writings. In the book, Crehan applies this rich and rigorous interpretation of Gramscian concepts to analyse contemporary examples of the transformation of “common sense”. With the deepening crises of the neoliberal order in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic, and the continued global growth of far-right and authoritarian forces, Crehan’s studies of the recent dynamics of “common sense” are not only insightful scholarship, but also ought to inform the “progressive” perspectives of today’s engaged intellectuals. Crehan has already received much-deserved recognition for this work as co-winner of the Giuseppe Sormani International Prize for best monograph on Gramsci in 2017. However, this important study of Gramsci, bringing the fertility of his thought into dialogue with our own times, warrants an even wider audience.

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From Catastrophe to Crisis: Francesca Antonini's Caesarism and Bonapartism in Gramsci

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From Catastrophe to Crisis: Francesca Antonini's Caesarism and Bonapartism in Gramsci

Abstract

This is the abstract of a review by Roberto Dainotto of the book by Francesca Antonini, *Caesarism and Bonapartism in Gramsci. Hegemony and the Crisis of Modernity* (Leiden and Boston, Brill 2020).

Keywords

Caesarism, Bonapartism, feuilleton, catastrophic equilibrium, charismatic leadership, crisis

From Catastrophe to Crisis: Francesca Antonini's Caesarism and Bonapartism in Gramsci: Hegemony and the Crisis of Modernity

Roberto Dainotto

In 1977, at the heyday of Italy's great wave of conjectures regarding the coming revolution, Franco De Felice had proposed an untimely meditation concerning the relevance of Gramsci's thought for political theory: it lay not in what Gramsci had to say regarding an imminent overthrow of the capitalist system, but rather in his analysis of capitalism's own tactics aimed at "the halting of the fundamental organic struggle, and hence the transcendence of the catastrophic phase" (Q9§136, p. 1198; in English, Gramsci 1971, p. 221).¹ After all, only by first understanding, with Gramsci, "the general tactics of the bourgeoisie in danger" — De Felice contended by quoting from the Lyon theses of 1926 — could a revolutionary movement devise successful tactics and a realistic theory of transition (De Felice 1977, p. 2009).

It has become since then an acquisition of Gramscian studies that the *Prison Notebooks* are in fact an attempt to propose a revolutionary alternative to the all-too-optimistic analyses of capitalist crises predicated, *ab origine*, on "the resurgence of economism in the international Communist movement in the late 1920s, with resulting 'Third-Period' catastrophism" (Thomas 2009: 140). Based on the "false assumptions [of] the imminent collapse of capitalism, and of the beginning of a world revolutionary crisis (understood as 'economic catastrophism')" (Coutinho 2012: 95-6), such theories, argued in the Communist International and to all appearances confirmed by the Wall Street crash of 1929 (to which many more would follow), had left communists and proletarians

¹ De Felice's comments: "what seems to me more important is the repercussion of this anti-catastrophism, namely the recognition of the possibility of development on the part of the capitalist social formation as a response to the crisis" (De Felice 1977: 207). [In the English translation of the passage quoted from the *Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci's original "superamento" would be more literally translated as "supersession" rather than "transcendence" – edit. note.]

alike utterly unprepared to understand and withstand the *longue durée* (Burgio 2014: 187) of capitalism's resilience in the face of crises – the perduring hold, that is to say, of its “hegemony protected by the armour of coercion” (Q6§88, p. 764; in English Gramsci 1971 p. 263, or Gramsci 2007 p. 75). Theoretically speaking, revolutionary catastrophism had completely missed “the fundamental point” of Marx's *Preface to the Critique of Political Economy* – namely, that “[a] social order does not perish until all the productive forces for which it still has room have been developed” (Q11§22, p. 1422; in English, Gramsci 1971 p. 432). In practical terms, it had left a revolutionary movement, at the closing of the revolutionary *biennio rosso* (Liguori 2021), ill-equipped to hold its own in a lengthy “war of position whose representative – both practical (for Italy) and ideological (for Europe) – is fascism” (Q10I§9, p. 1229; in English, Gramsci 1971, p. 120).

Against this background, the *Notebooks* did and can still offer a veritable taxonomy of concepts through which the resilience of capitalism vis à vis any crisis can be explained: “passive revolution,” “organic crisis,” “Americanism and Fordism,” fascism, “trench war,” and “war of position” have accordingly all received their share of attention as concepts through which it is possible to comprehend capitalism's ability to transform a crisis, in Gramsci's oxymoronic phrasing, into “a situation in which the forces in conflict balance each other in a catastrophic manner” (Q13§27, p. 1619; in English, Gramsci 1971, p. 219). Surprisingly little notice, however, has been given to the twin concepts from which many of the reflections on the “catastrophic balance” seem to unfold – namely, Caesarism and Bonapartism; which is to say the tactics whereby the bourgeoisie, when in ultimate danger, has customarily attempted to solve “a historico-political situation characterised by an equilibrium of forces heading towards catastrophe” through the intervention of a “great personality” tasked with the “arbitration” of the conflict at hand (*loc. cit.*).

Francesca Antonini can therefore rightfully claim, in *Caesarism and Bonapartism in Gramsci: Hegemony and the Crisis of Modernity* (Antonini 2020), that her new book “aims to fill a gap” (p. ix). That is not to say that Caesarism and Bonapartism had previously met with complete scholarly disinterest: the hints left by Luisa Mangoni in the Seventies regarding the centrality of those concepts in

Gramsci's understanding of fascism (Mangoni 1976; Mangoni 1979), along with the revival of authoritarian leaderships all around the world (from Berlusconi to Bolsonaro, the list would leave Leporello breathless), have gathered increased and timely interest in Gramsci's notes on the "Caesarist personality" (Burgio 2007; Fontana 2004; Cospito 2011; Santoro 2012). What has been missing until the publication of Antonini's book, however, is a sustained – should we say "organic" – diachronic analysis of the genesis of Caesarism and Bonapartism in the pre-prison and prison writings, combined with a synchronic, historicist understanding of the specific valences that those same concepts acquire for Gramsci in specific historical situations and specific political conjunctures.

Caesarism and Bonapartism in Gramsci begins in fact from the presuppositions, which Gramsci himself would have shared, that concepts such as Caesarism and Bonapartism are not metaphysical propositions, nor are they "generated through 'parthenogenesis'" (Q6§64, p. 733; in English Gramsci 1985, p. 107 or Gramsci 2007 p. 47); they develop mutate and grow, rather, in their continuous dialectical encounter with the ever-changing reality that they strive to comprehend:

If, in the perennial flux of events, it is necessary to establish concepts without which reality cannot be understood, it is also necessary, in fact it is indispensable, to establish and remember that reality in motion and the concept of reality, though they may be logically distinct, must be conceived historically as an inseparable unit. Otherwise there happens what is happening to Croce, that history becomes a formal history, a history of concepts, and in the last analysis a history of the intellectuals (Q10II§1, p. 1241; in English Gramsci 1995, p. 370).

Coherent with this assumption, Antonini's book opens with a series of five chapters historicizing the concepts of Caesarism and Bonapartism "from Marx to Gramsci" (pp. 1-14) vis à vis the "flux of events" they were set to describe. Beyond the archival reconstruction of the origin of the debate, these chapters soon prove to be an invaluable tool for scholars of Gramsci (including the present reviewer) who have long wondered: "which Marx did Gramsci read? When? And how?" (p. 11). Through a most scrupulous research in archives, printers' catalogues, and Gramsci's own library preserved at the Gramsci Institute in Rome, Antonini does not only reiterate the centrality of the *Preface to the Critique of*

Political Economy, the *Theses on Feurbach*, *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, and *The Civil War in France* in Gramsci's own Marxist canon, but also establishes the translations and editions of those texts at his disposal (pp. 11-12).

Of these four texts, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Napoleon Bonaparte* is unsurprisingly the one that has the most direct bearing on the topic at hand – but only in a surprisingly complex, problematic way that Antonini carefully reconstructs for her reader. It was written in part in response to Pierre-Joseph Proudhon's rather cavalier use of "Caesarism," understood by him as an "alternative to non-government and anarchy, as well as the only possibility of producing a revolutionary situation" (p. 2). Proudhon's explanation of modern phenomena – stock market speculation, for instance, as "economic Caesarism" in *Le manuel du spéculateur à la bourse* – by making anachronistic recourse to a term from Roman history was for Marx, cited by Antonini, the mere concocting of some "superficial historical analogy" (p. 4). For Marx, on the contrary, Caesarism and Bonapartism had to be restored to their "historical dimension": the former, to classical antiquity, and the latter to the historical phase stretching from the July Revolution (1830) to the birth of the Second Empire of Napoleon III (1852).

Despite the letter of Marx's own writings, however, "[i]n the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the Caesarist-Bonapartist model spread widely among Marxist intellectuals, who adopted it as a means of political polemic in the day-to-day debate but also as a tool for historical interpretation"; it stood for a trans-historical model of "top-down intervention conceived of as an instrument of momentary neutralisation of [class] conflict, and also as a tool to preserve the existing order" (p. 7). The relevance of this tension between Marx and "Marxist intellectuals" becomes apparent in the following pages (pp. 61-72), which bear a hefty methodological value for Gramscian studies. By making an exemplary use of Gramsci's pre-prison writing – the kind of work sadly hindered by the lack of proper translations of these important documents in many languages, including English – Antonini traces back to Gramsci's early journalistic writings the sort of "antidogmatic approach" that will eventually provide Gramsci with "the conceptual tools to elaborate his original philosophy of praxis while in prison" (p. 14).

It is in fact in the pre-prison writings that Caesarism and Bonapartism appear for the first time in Gramsci's *oeuvre* – only seldom, to be sure, but dramatically posing already a central preoccupation of the later *Notebooks*: the dialectical necessity, that is to say, to understand a given historical reality through pre-existing concepts, which then ought to be, in turn, “translated” (Boothman 2004) into the specific historical situation. Written in the urgency of the political struggle, the pre-prison writings certainly deploy those concepts more for their “provocative and evocative character rather than for the sake of a concrete historico-political analysis” (p. 16). However, as Antonini convincingly maintains, “although Gramsci defines Bonapartism as an ‘approximate political term’, this is not completely true. Bonapartism, in Marx’s usage, but also in [...] Gramsci, is a well-defined concept, circumscribed in its content and used with a specific purpose” (p. 27) – and the same ought to be argued for the term “Caesarism” as well. This is true not only in the narrow sense that those terms do not prevent Gramsci from accounting for specific historico-political processes such as “the Italian parliamentary elections of May 1921” (p. 15), the later fascist *coup* (p. 17), or even the “Bonapartistic tradition of the PSI” (p. 20); more significantly, the use of seeming anachronisms such as “Caesarism” and “Bonapartism” to comprehend much later dynamics hints already at a central Gramscian concept – that of “organic crisis” – that will be “very significant in the future development of his thought” (p. 53).

Simply put, modernity (hence the subtitle of this book) is constituted for Gramsci by an unprecedented and protracted crisis that is “organic to the highest degree” (p. 156). Stretching from the Second Empire of Napoleon III (and, in Italy, the coeval *Risorgimento*) to the fascist *ventennio*, such a crisis comprises one long historical period which has not yet come to an end. The bourgeois system, throughout this entire period, has been undergoing a long-lasting “crisis of authority” (pp. 155-158): its leadership remains unacknowledged by a large swath of society, which revolts – in the barricades of Paris in 1871, as in the occupation of Turin’s factories between 1918 and 1919. However, while the crisis of feudalism had been brought to an end with the revolution of 1789, the “modern” crisis of has not yet been overcome: the bourgeoisie has been successful in preserving its authority, albeit in crisis, by making

recourse to military means (the repression of the Commune and fascist *squadristo* alike), *coups* (Louis Napoleon Bonaparte's and Mussolini's), and the general subversion or suspension of liberal parliamentary rule – by adopting, in short, “Bonapartist” solutions.

While a system in crisis has thus prevented its own collapse, no alternative to it has managed to conquer a position of sufficient strength to replace it. A catastrophic balance of forces is what has ensued. As Antonini sums it up:

Gramsci mentions [...] the ‘deadly equilibrium’ [...] the ‘static equilibrium of the conflicting forces’ and [...] the ‘interregnum’ due to the fact that ‘the old is dying and the new cannot be born’, and thus ‘morbid phenomena of the most varied kind come to pass’. Even if very synthetically, the double metaphor [...] highlights the salient aspects of Gramsci's conception: the polarisation of the socio-political scenario and the (apparent) ‘immobilism’ that characterises it (p. 112).

A distinct merit of *Caesarism and Bonapartism in Gramsci* is, in this context, its framing of Gramsci's writings on the “organic crisis” as a critical balance that “involves at the same time the structural and the superstructural dimension,” and that manifests itself not only at the economic, but also, and besides politics, at the very cultural level. Entering into a fruitful dialogue with the re-evaluation by recent scholarship of Gramsci's attention to literature (Gatto 2016; Desogus et al. 2018; Descendre 2021), Antonini makes here a brilliant use of Gramsci's early writings on the *feuilleton* to argue for the Romantic roots of a certain conception of the political (pp. 15-35): “Caesar” and “Bonaparte” are to be understood, in other words, as *figurae* (to borrow here Auerbach's diction), developments of concepts that “may grow into a historical situation” (Auerbach 1944: 76) to give intelligible shape to it.

What these concepts shape for Gramsci as for Antonini is precisely a provisional solution to a perduring “crisis of modernity” that keeps manifesting itself “in growing political ungovernability” (p. 156). Because, if Caesarism and Bonapartism can prevent the immediate collapse of a system, they cannot, on the other hand, resolve, once and for good, the very root causes that sustain the crisis – a crisis that therefore remains unsolvable by modernity's own “structure,” which is to say, the development of capitalism. The crisis is determined, to put it in different words, by the very internal contradiction that is and has to remain “organic” to

bourgeois capitalism itself. Q8§2 nails the reasons for the permanence of this crisis “to the highest degree” on its head: on the one hand, “[t]he bourgeois class poses itself as an organism in continuous movement, capable of absorbing the whole of society, assimilating it to its own cultural and economic level”; on the other, there is a structural limit – the accumulation of private property and capital – beyond which a large part of society cannot be assimilated at the economic level any more: the “process comes to a halt, and the conception of the State as pure force is returned to, etc. The bourgeois class is ‘saturated’: it not only does not expand – it starts to disintegrate; it not only does not assimilate new elements, it loses part of itself” (Q8§2, p. 937; in English Gramsci 1971, p. 260, or Gramsci 2007, p. 234). It is precisely the “organicity” of this crisis to the capitalist system – its being constitutive of its existence and development – that therefore makes it permanent. Until a new social force will have acquired enough strength to overcome the crisis and solve its causal contradiction in a new and revolutionary social order, the bourgeoisie, facing the constant risk of losing its hegemonic hold on the rest of society, is forced to return to certain tactics with some regularity (Frosini 2010: 201). The alternation between periods of formal democracy and periods of fascism, between consent and coercion, is one such tactic. Another is the rhythmic return to forms of Bonapartism – “a generic form of authoritarianism” (p. 27) often “connected with a military model” (p. 81) and realized in “a well-developed bureaucratic apparatus” (p. 95) – or of Caesarism – id est, “charismatic leadership” (pp. 105-110). These forms, in themselves incapable of “overcoming the organic crisis of modernity,” open for the bourgeoisie in crisis the possibility for a “molecular transformation of society, which postpones its catastrophic collapse” (p. 118).

Needless to say, as political forms concocted by a class at times hegemonic and at times merely dominant, and as tactical solutions to specific, if recurring, historical situations “represented by the ‘balance of class forces’” in which neither grouping can fully establish its leadership (p. 37), both Bonapartism and Caesarism end up describing, for Gramsci, political formations born in opposition to capitalism as well (Francioni 2020). While Bonapartism thus becomes a “profitable way to stigmatize the distance between leaders and led, as far as it concerns the working class” (p.

27), also “a ‘Caesarism without a Caesar’ will be imagined by Gramsci to describe politics in impersonal mass societies” (p. 110) – a “charismatic” Party imagined through the *figura* of a collective Modern Prince. In both cases, it becomes clearly apparent in Antonini’s exemplary readings how complex is Gramsci’s handling and evaluation of these concepts: potentially “progressive” in specific historico-political conjunctures (pp. 114-20), Bonapartism and Caesarism run in others the risk of “developing totalitarian characteristics” (p. 194). Such an “attention to the historical, concrete forms of Caesarism in their potential diversity,” concludes Antonini, make of Gramsci “one of the richest inheritors of Marx’s legacy” (p. 202); and of Antonini’s book, we would like to conclude as well, one of the richest inheritors of a scholarly and political tradition culminating in Gramsci – one for which “the terms ‘catastrophe’ and ‘catastrophic’ no longer have a specific strategic meaning” (p. 112) in the *longue durée* of the crisis of modernity.

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Alle origini della Questione Meridionale: Nazione e mezzogiorno di Giacomo Tarascio

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Alle origini della Questione Meridionale: Nazione e mezzogiorno di Giacomo Tarascio

Abstract

This is the abstract of a review in Italian by Gianni Fresu of the book by Giacomo Tarascio, *Nazione e mezzogiorno*. (Roma, Ediesse 2016).

Keywords

Southern Question, moderates, Action Party, subaltern groups, religion, social blocs

Alle origini della questione meridionale

Gianni Fresu

Nazione e Mezzogiorno (Roma, Ediesse 2020, 200 pagine), che riprende la tesi di dottorato dell'autore, Giacomo Tarascio, si occupa delle contraddizioni nel Sud della penisola prima, durante e dopo il Risorgimento, rintracciando nei suoi processi di modernizzazione passiva le origini della "questione meridionale". Nel descrivere sia l'intricato intreccio di trame egemoniche e di dominio interne alle classi dirigenti, sia le dinamiche insorgenti dei gruppi subalterni meridionali, Giacomo Tarascio fa ampio ed efficace ricorso alle categorie gramsciane e alle loro traduzioni concettuali nel filone di ricerche dei *Postcolonial studies*. Si tratta di un lavoro a nostro avviso assai utile, spinto dalla necessità di rinnovare gli studi sulla questione meridionale, su cui vengono innestate alcune chiavi di lettura che si rivelano utili anche per leggere i processi di assoggettamento coloniale e modernizzazione passiva di altre parti del mondo.

All'interno del discorso trattato, tuttavia, sarebbe stato probabilmente opportuno inserire qualche riferimento (anche sintetico) alla questione sarda, importante anzitutto nel processo di definizione della questione meridionale nel quadro delle riflessioni del principale autore di riferimento in questo libro, Antonio Gramsci. Tra il 1720 e il 1850 la Sardegna è stata per i Savoia e le classi dirigenti sardo-piemontesi un grande laboratorio nel quale vengono sperimentate le forme di egemonia e di dominio che si riproporranno dopo l'Unità nella relazione diseguale tra regioni settentrionali e meridionali. Prima e dopo il Risorgimento, la *questione sarda* fu archiviata come problema di ordine pubblico e il banditismo considerato la causa del sottosviluppo, non l'effetto. Questo ordine di ragionamenti trovò un sostegno pseudo-scientifico con lo sviluppo dell'antropologia criminale e della sociologia positivista, per le quali le cause della criminalità andavano ricercate in una sorta di tara congenita, biologico-razziale, del popolo sardo¹.

¹ «Ed ecco come il temperamento regionale dei sardi in generale e dei pastori della Zona delinquente in special modo, coincide con molte caratteristiche del delinquente, dell'omicida e

La dinamica della modernizzazione sarda nei termini di una rivoluzione passiva, a partire dalla trasformazione del suo regime fondiario nel corso del XIX secolo², costituisce un primo importantissimo caso di colonialismo interno³ che, sotto diversi aspetti, anche nelle forme di radicale insorgenza generate e duramente represses, anticipa le caratteristiche essenziali della questione meridionale italiana⁴.

Questi temi, sistematicamente presenti in tutta l'elaborazione politica e nell'analisi della società italiana di Gramsci, sono lo snodo problematico attorno al quale si riassumono le contraddizioni del processo di unificazione nazionale e le modalità distorte di sviluppo economico e sociale del Paese. Approfondendo tutto ciò, attraverso un'elaborazione durata anni, Gramsci giunge a definire alcune delle sue categorie più importanti e studiate a livello internazionale, come "egemonia", "intellettuali" e "gruppi subalterni", ritenute oggi essenziali per decifrare le relazioni internazionali di dominio coloniale⁵.

del selvaggio. Ciò insegna che un tale temperamento è terreno adatto alla formazione dell'omicida, mentre non lo sarebbe ad es. il temperamento piemontese, ove tante coincidenze tra temperamento regionale e caratteristiche psicologiche dell'omicida non esistono», A. Niceforo, *La delinquenza in Sardegna*, Cagliari, Edizioni della Torre 1977, p. 31 (prima edizione 1897).

² Come ha ben sintetizzato Birocchi, forse lo studioso che con maggior rigore e serietà scientifica ha affrontato questi temi, «il trionfo della proprietà in Sardegna coincise con l'affermarsi di una borghesia non solo priva di quegli orizzonti universalistici che altrove l'avevano portata alla testa del movimento riformatore, ma legata a mentalità clientelari e a pratiche suggerite da interessi estremamente ristretti»: I. Birocchi, *Per la storia della proprietà perfetta in Sardegna. Provvedimenti normativi, orientamenti di governo e ruolo delle forze sociali dal 1839 al 1851*, Giuffrè, Milano, 1982, pp. 446, 447.

³ G. Angioni, *Rapporti di produzione e cultura subalterna: contadini in Sardegna*, Edes, Cagliari, 1982, p. 55.

⁴ Per maggiori approfondimenti rimandiamo a una monografia nella quale ci siamo occupati diffusamente della contraddittoria transizione alla modernità della Sardegna e dei conflitti da essa generata attraverso un lavoro di archivio e di analisi storico-sociale e politica che ha fatto ampio ricorso alle categorie di Antonio Gramsci: G. Fresu, *La prima bardana. Modernizzazione e conflitto nella Sardegna dell'Ottocento*, CUEC, Cagliari, 2011.

⁵ Tra le tante declinazioni internazionali del pensiero di Gramsci, le analisi sui rapporti di sfruttamento semicoloniale tra Nord e Sud nella storia d'Italia, quelle sui subalterni e la funzione degli intellettuali negli assetti di dominio ed egemonia, sono ad esempio sistematicamente utilizzate per rileggere le vicende della storia coloniale del Brasile e comprendere le grandi contraddizioni sociali e culturali ancora oggi qui presenti. In proposito si potrebbe citare una bibliografia estremamente ampia e diversificata, ci limitiamo a richiamare qua un lavoro di particolare importanza per l'analisi del ruolo degli intellettuali nei processi di modernizzazione passiva del Brasile, realizzato dal principale protagonista della diffusione e traduzione degli scritti Gramsciani in questo Paese, Carlos Nelson Coutinho, *Cultura e sociedade no Brasil. Ensaio sobre idéias e formas*. DP&A editora, Rio de Janeiro, 2000.

L'Ottocento è un secolo di svolta per la storia d'Italia, non solo per i processi politici che preparano e conducono in porto un evento tanto complesso e difficile a realizzarsi come l'Unità, ma anche perché in esso si determinano significative tensioni dialettiche destinate ad avere importanti riflessi anche sulla storia del Novecento. Non solo nel saggio del 1926 (A. Gramsci, *Alcuni temi della questione meridionale*, Editori Riuniti, Roma, 1990) e in numerosi articoli che lo precedono, ma negli stessi *Quaderni*, il tema dei rapporti tra Settentrione e Meridione, alla luce della polarizzazione antagonista tra città e campagna, è assolutamente centrale e viene indagato in una prospettiva storica che investe in pieno le dinamiche del Risorgimento italiano e la funzione degli intellettuali come ceti.

Negli ultimi decenni, le note sulla *Questione meridionale* e l'indagine sui gruppi subalterni hanno suscitato grande attenzione a livello internazionale nell'ambito dei cosiddetti *studi post-coloniali* e dei *Subaltern Studies*. Al di là di alcuni usi eccessivamente disinvolti propri in questo filone di studi, l'esigenza di dare carne e ossa alla *filosofia della praxis*, contestualizzandone categorie e concezioni in riferimento a realtà nazionali storicamente determinate, è del tutto coerente con lo spirito dell'opera di Gramsci e con la sua aspirazione a evitare l'astrattezza e la genericità delle affermazioni ideologiche. L'estensione creativa ed eterodossa del lascito teorico di Gramsci, in campi di applicazione così diversificati e non sempre coerenti, è una possibilità immanente alla struttura del suo ragionamento, sempre problematicamente proteso verso lo studio degli elementi peculiari di ogni specifica formazione culturale e insieme interessato alla grande questione concettuale della "traducibilità" dei linguaggi filosofici. A partire dal concetto di "storicamente determinato", e da ciò che hegelianamente potremmo definire "seconda natura", Gramsci si serve ripetutamente di categorie analitiche classiche della geografia nella sua analisi dei processi egemonici e delle relazioni di dominio a livello internazionale. Tutto questo, è bene sottolinearlo, senza però mai abbandonare il terreno concettuale del marxismo, dunque sempre a partire dalla centralità della contraddizione capitale/lavoro tanto nella metropoli capitalistica quanto nella "periferia" coloniale.

Come scrive Tarascio, «l'incontro con il postcolonialismo» si è determinato all'interno di un «discorso riguardante il Sud globale», ponendo in connessione i tradizionali studi meridionalistici con i

grandi temi legati alla questione coloniale. Ciò avrebbe favorito uno sviluppo nuovo delle analisi sul Meridione grazie al quale è stato possibile affrontare nuovamente e in maniera meno statica la storia dei suoi gruppi subalterni, troppo frettolosamente catalogata attraverso interpretazioni univoche e unilaterali. Insieme a questi benefici, tuttavia, Tarascio segnala anche alcune criticità, «dovute a un impreciso uso dell'apparato analitico della storia dei colonialismi, nel quale la storia del Mezzogiorno viene incastrata in prospettive a volte fuorvianti»⁶. In questo discorso, inevitabilmente, si tiene a ridimensionare la questione della continuità dei rapporti di sfruttamento prima e dopo l'Unità, insieme allo stretto intreccio tra «crisi strutturale del Regno delle Due Sicilie e ruolo delle classi dirigenti dominanti». Facendo tesoro della lezione di Gramsci, scrive Tarascio, le tracce di colonialismo andrebbero ricercate nei processi di edificazione del nuovo Stato dentro un intreccio di interessi tra classi dominanti settentrionali e meridionali, cementati dal protezionismo e dal reciproco accordo su cui si è strutturato il nuovo blocco storico unitario.

Gramsci fu sempre «nettamente contrario al protezionismo»⁷: non casualmente il suo primo formale atto di partecipazione politica fu proprio l'adesione al Gruppo sardo della Lega anti-protezionista di Attilio Deffenu nel 1913⁸. Come chiarito anche nelle pagine del volume qui recensito, dietro al protezionismo l'intellettuale sardo intravedeva la moneta di scambio e il fondamento organico su cui si reggeva il «blocco storico» garante dell'ordine sociale tradizionale, con tutte le sue forme insane di dominio e sfruttamento della miseria agraria. Gli equilibri passivi e conservatori dell'Italia, dall'Unità sino al fascismo, si basavano proprio su questa «santa alleanza» parassitaria tra la borghesia industriale del Nord e i proprietari terrieri del Sud responsabili del drenaggio permanente di quote enormi di ricchezza, sottratta al Paese per sostenere intere stratificazioni di classi improduttive. Nelle note dei *Quaderni su Americanismo e Fordismo*, Gramsci

⁶ G. Tarascio, *Nazione e Mezzogiorno*, Ediesse, Roma, 2020, p. 12.

⁷ P. Bonetti *Gramsci e il liberalismo italiano del Novecento*, in *Gramsci e il Novecento* (a cura di) G. Vacca, Volume primo, Carocci, Roma, 1999, p. 129.

⁸ «Caro Deffenu, ti ho già indirizzato da parecchio un vaglia di 2,00 lire quota di adesione al Gruppo sardo della Lega antiprotezionista». A. Gramsci, 28 settembre 1913, *Epistolario, Volume 1 (gennaio 1906-dicembre 1922)*, Edizione Nazionale degli scritti di Antonio Gramsci, Treccani, Roma, 2009, p. 143.

rintraccia l'essenza della società meridionale nella sopravvivenza di classi generate dalla ricchezza e complessità della storia passata, che hanno lasciato stratificazioni di sedimentazioni passive attraverso i fenomeni di saturazione e fossilizzazione del personale statale e degli intellettuali, del clero e della proprietà terriera, del commercio di rapina e dell'esercito⁹. Il compromesso tra industriali e agrari, consolidato grazie al protezionismo in difesa delle rispettive produzioni, attribuiva alle masse lavoratrici del Mezzogiorno la stessa posizione delle popolazioni coloniali; per esse il Nord industrializzato era come la metropoli capitalistica per la colonia; le classi dirigenti del Sud (grandi proprietari e media borghesia) svolgevano la stessa funzione delle categorie sociali delle colonie alleate con i coloni per mantenere la massa del popolo soggetta al proprio sfruttamento. Tuttavia, nella prospettiva storica, questo sistema di compromesso si rivelò inefficace perché si risolse in un ostacolo tanto allo sviluppo dell'economia industriale, quanto di quella agraria. Ciò ha determinato in diverse fasi livelli molto acuti di lotta tra le classi e quindi una pressione sempre più forte ed autoritaria dello Stato sulle masse.

L'egemonia del Nord sul Sud avrebbe potuto assolvere una funzione positiva e progressiva se l'industrialismo si fosse posto l'obiettivo di ampliare la sua base di nuovi quadri, incorporando, non dominando, le nuove zone economiche assimilate. In tal senso l'egemonia del Nord sarebbe stata espressione di «una lotta tra il vecchio e il nuovo, tra il progressivo e l'arretrato, tra il più produttivo e il meno produttivo»¹⁰. Una dinamica di questo tipo avrebbe potuto innescare o favorire una rivoluzione economica di carattere realmente nazionale.

Al contrario il dominio realizzato non ebbe carattere inclusivo, ossia finalizzato a far venir meno quella distinzione, ma «permanente», «perpetu[o]», nel senso che si reggeva su un'idea di sviluppo diseguale tale da rendere la debolezza del Sud un fattore indeterminato nel tempo, funzionale alla crescita industriale del Nord, come se il primo fosse una appendice coloniale del secondo. Questo vincolo organico, fortificato dall'alleanza innaturale del blocco storico, impedì la dialettica (caratteristica delle forme classiche di

⁹ A. Gramsci, *Quaderni del carcere*, Q22§2, Einaudi, Torino, 1975, p. 2141.

¹⁰ A. Gramsci, *Quaderni del carcere*, Q1§149, p. 131.

sviluppo capitalistico) tra due classi portatrici di interessi differenti quando non contrapposti. In Gran Bretagna, per esempio, dalla competizione tra industriali e agrari si è originata anche la storia dei partiti e quella parlamentare¹¹. In Italia non esisteva la rotazione su base parlamentare, la formazione delle classi dirigenti avveniva per assorbimento e cooptazione fiduciaria, tramite il trasformismo, di singole personalità negli equilibri passivi del blocco storico¹². Ciò per Gramsci accadde con i democratici mazziniani, durante e dopo il Risorgimento, quindi si ripeté con i riformisti, il mondo cattolico e infine con il fascismo¹³. Alle più gravi crisi del giovane Stato unitario (governo Crispi, crisi di fine secolo, ingresso nella Prima guerra mondiale, avvento del fascismo) si rispose anzitutto con soluzioni extra o antiparlamentari. Senza il protezionismo, dunque, non si spiega la questione meridionale, e nemmeno la funzione storica del fascismo, strettamente connessa alla necessità di garantire la sopravvivenza di due classi parassitarie e improduttive altrimenti destinate ad essere spazzate via dallo sviluppo capitalistico: la piccola borghesia e gli agrari, vera base sociale del movimento di Mussolini¹⁴.

Tra gli strumenti analitici utilizzati nel volume, un posto di assoluta centralità spetta al concetto di “rivoluzione passiva”, di cui Tarascio spiega con estrema precisione tanto la genesi concettuale in Cuoco quanto le differenze di utilizzo nell’appropriazione di Croce. Questo lavoro di ricostruzione filologica e teoretica, spesso trascurato negli studi postcoloniali e subalterni, fornisce una più che solida base al lavoro recensito.

¹¹ A. Gramsci, “La funzione sociale del Partito nazionalista”, in *Scritti giovanili 1914-1918*, Einaudi, Torino, 1975, p. 158-159.

¹² A. Gramsci, *La situazione italiana e i compiti del PCI*, in *La costruzione del Partito comunista 1923-1926*, Einaudi, Torino, 1978, p. 489.

¹³ A. Gramsci, lettera alla cognata, Tania, del 6 giugno 1932 in *Lettere dal carcere*, Einaudi, Torino, 2020, p. 799.

¹⁴ «Lo Stato [fascista] crea nuovi redditi, cioè promuove le vecchie forme di accumulazione parassitaria del risparmio e tende a creare dei quadri chiusi sociali. In realtà finora l’indirizzo corporativo ha funzionato per sostenere posizioni pericolanti di classi medie, non per eliminare queste e sta sempre più diventando, per gli interessi costituiti che sorgono dalla vecchia base, una macchina di conservazione dell’esistente così come è e non una molla di propulsione. Perché? Perché l’indirizzo corporativo è anche in dipendenza della disoccupazione: difende agli occupati un certo minimo di vita che, se fosse libera la concorrenza, crollerebbe anch’esso, provocando gravi rivolgimenti sociali; e crea occupazioni di nuovo tipo, organizzativo e non produttivo, ai disoccupati delle classi medie»: *Quaderni del carcere*, Q22§8, pp. 2157-8.

Di estremo interesse è anche il secondo capitolo, che interpreta le radici della questione meridionale illustrando le vicende del Mezzogiorno nel suo contraddittorio e accidentato processo di transizione dal regime feudale alla modernità della “proprietà perfetta”, nel periodo compreso tra l’età napoleonica e la restaurazione borbonica. Il lungo cammino di transizione dal feudalesimo al modo di produzione capitalistico, l’affermarsi della proprietà fondiaria individuale e, con essa, il formarsi di un cosiddetto capitale originario, fanno parte del grande movimento storico-economico sviluppatosi in Europa (a partire dall’Inghilterra per concludersi in Russia) nell’arco di quattro secoli secondo modalità molto diverse tra loro in ragione del periodo storico e delle peculiarità nazionali prese in esame.

All’interno di questo quadro, Tarascio affronta in profondità e con chiarezza il tema dei subalterni rurali nel Mezzogiorno preunitario in rapporto alla dialettica tra borghesia urbana e ceti possidenti della proprietà rurale. Un contesto non riducibile a semplificazioni interpretative, reso disomogeneo da forme di insorgenza sociale come le lotte contadine in difesa degli usi civici sulla terra e dalle complicazioni del quadro politico e sociale che conducono al sanfedismo e al brigantaggio. La Restaurazione, in un quadro di grave crisi sociale e nel pieno divampare delle «lotte di potere delle élites», coincise con una durissima repressione il cui movente principale non era «la difesa della proprietà o dell’ordine pubblico, ma la paura che il brigantaggio si saldasse alla Carboneria»¹⁵. Un insieme di concause rendevano esplosiva la situazione del Mezzogiorno alla vigilia del Risorgimento, ma più di ogni altra cosa, pesava il fallimento dei processi riformatori con i quali si voleva innescare la modernizzazione delle campagne:

Nonostante le trasformazioni nelle campagne meridionali la rendita rimaneva il fine ultimo della terra, confine dove si arrestava qualsiasi innovazione in quanto l’utilizzo di lavoratori salariati, l’acquisto di macchine e le concimazioni intaccavano l’accumulo dei patrimoni padronali. L’organizzazione della produzione e delle proprietà agricole trovavano così la loro importanza non esclusivamente nello sviluppo economico, ma anche nella gestione della vita sociale dei gruppi subalterni¹⁶.

¹⁵ G. Tarascio, *Nazione e Mezzogiorno*, op. cit., p. 67.

¹⁶ *Ivi*, p. 84.

È nel groviglio di queste contraddizioni che si determina la dialettica tra moderati e democratici per l'egemonia del processo risorgimentale che l'autore affronta riprendendo e sviluppando i termini essenziali delle note sul Risorgimento di Gramsci. All'interno di questa dinamica generale, Tarascio tratteggia il ruolo di una figura paradigmatica come Giuseppe La Farina (1815-1863), «uno degli esempi più marcati del passaggio dal radicalismo alla politica moderata», che esemplifica alla perfezione «la capacità di manovra del gruppo guidato da Cavour»¹⁷.

Ma la parte del libro che sicuramente consideriamo più interessante è quella rappresentata dal quarto capitolo, intitolato *Insorgenze meridionali*, nel quale l'autore mette a frutto l'interazione tra le categorie di Gramsci e gli sviluppi concettuali degli studi postcoloniali e subalterni. Probabilmente, nella trattazione del ribellismo endemico e disorganico delle masse contadine, così come nell'analisi dei fenomeni del brigantaggio e del banditismo, sarebbe stato necessario fare affidamento a una maggiore varietà di autori e bibliografia¹⁸, tuttavia Tarascio ha il merito di riaffrontare e problematizzare questioni complesse troppo spesso ridotte e semplificate come “guerra al brigantaggio”. In questo modo, sottolinea l'autore, si è finito per comprimere l'indagine sulle istanze contadine «nella dicotomia tra la reazione banditesca e una deterministica questione sociale», così come furono trascurate le molteplici sfaccettature che riguardavano «il brigantaggio e il ribellismo preunitario richiamando solo il sanfedismo come nesso fra mezzi della reazione clericoborbonica»¹⁹.

Il Risorgimento, dispiegatosi nel Mezzogiorno al «culmine di una storia di rivolte», tradì le speranze di sviluppo democratico suscitate. Se i democratici fornirono un impulso decisivo al processo risorgimentale, conducendo forzatamente l'esitante mondo dei moderati sul terreno dell'azione risorgimentale, il successo dell'azione democratica non poté fare a meno della saggezza e capacità di attrazione egemonica dei moderati di Cavour, in grado di garantire un inquadramento statale e conservatore alle conquiste

¹⁷ *Ivi*, p. 102.

¹⁸ Tra i tanti materiali su questa materia ci limitiamo a ricordare l'imprescindibile volume E. J. Hobsbawm, *I banditi. Il banditismo sociale nell'età moderna*, Torino, Einaudi 2002 (nell'originale *Primitive Rebels*, Manchester, Manchester University Press 1959).

¹⁹ *Ivi*, p. 109.

della piazza. Ecco così, scrive De Ruggiero, spiegato l'apparente paradosso per cui l'Italia, fatta dai cosiddetti democratici, è organizzata anche contro di essi dai partiti d'ordine²⁰.

Il timore suscitato dal popolo condizionò dunque la formazione dello Stato italiano unitario. Essa fu portata a compimento senza che le masse vi prendessero minimamente parte, avvenne lontano da loro, contro di loro. Tale circostanza sarebbe stata determinante per l'intera vita del nuovo Stato, dalla sua fondazione fino ai giorni nostri²¹.

Tra le cause della mancata «rivoluzione liberale» nel Risorgimento, Gobetti segnalò la dimensione romantica e letteraria dell'aspirazione unitaria, che trovò la sua espressione più conseguente nelle astratte “metafisiche” del mazzinianesimo, contraddistinto da un apostolato moralista e nebuloso, in grado di fare presa negli ambienti degli esuli italiani, ma incapace di mobilitare le grandi masse popolari. La dottrina di Mazzini, nata da frammenti ideologici provenienti dai movimenti di idee europei, si riduceva per Gobetti a una riforma religiosa attenuata, destinata a restare impopolare e a confondere la propaganda con la rivoluzione, la riforma politica con la demagogia. All'opposto di questa astrattezza dottrinarica, tipica del movimento democratico guidato da Mazzini, il liberalismo piemontese era invece composto da quadri dirigenti educati dalla loro formazione economica alla concretezza politica²².

Il Mezzogiorno, al centro delle investigazioni di Tarascio, rappresenta il principale terreno di lotta egemonica in cui si determina la sostanziale sconfitta delle prospettive democratiche e il configurarsi del nuovo Stato unitario come una «rivoluzione-restaurazione» o «rivoluzione passiva»²³.

La mancata soluzione delle contraddizioni, nella dialettica storica tra “vecchio” e “nuovo” di cui parla Gramsci²⁴, non solo condannò il Sud a rimanere incatenato nel suo passato, ma rese il dominio delle sue vecchie classi dominanti ancora più saldo. Il superamento

²⁰ G. De Ruggiero, *Storia del liberalismo europeo*, Bari-Roma, Laterza 2003, p. 335 (prima edizione 1925).

²¹ *Ivi*, p. 9.

²² P. Gobetti, *La rivoluzione liberale. Saggio sulla lotta politica in Italia*, Torino, Einaudi 1974, pp. 9-14 (prima edizione 1924).

²³ A. Gramsci, *Quaderni del carcere*, op. cit., p. 1324-1327.

²⁴ *Ivi*, p. 131-2.

del feudalesimo, oltre a non determinare il definitivo superamento dello sfruttamento bestiale della miseria contadina, tolse alle comunità rurali anche i tradizionali mezzi di sussistenza comunitaria legata ai vecchi usi civici, imponendo una nuova configurazione conservatrice degli assetti di potere ancora più “organica” e “molecolare” dei tradizionali equilibri passivi tra le classi. L’insieme di tali contraddizioni non poteva che generare un conflitto radicale, profondo e comunque politico, sebbene reso contraddittorio e frammentario dalla natura disgregata, episodica e amorfa dei gruppi subalterni rurali. Un’attività che non riuscì a superare la dimensione del ribellismo endemico ed a trovare centralizzazione politica per il costante intervento interdittorio e di eterodirezione da parte di gruppi di potere vecchi e nuovi pronti a sfruttare il malessere sociale popolare a proprio vantaggio. Solo i democratici avrebbero potuto dare una sponda a quelle istanze, incanalandole e centralizzandole politicamente attorno a una proposta di riforma agraria, ma il Partito d’Azione temeva il ribellismo contadino quanto e forse più degli stessi moderati, guardandosi bene dal porsi alla testa delle sue rivendicazioni come invece seppero fare i giacobini in Francia.

Di quest’insufficienza del Partito d’Azione, timoroso e riluttante a coinvolgere realmente le masse popolari nel processo risorgimentale, diede conto in più riprese anche lo stesso Karl Marx che in un articolo comparso sul *New York Daily Tribune* nell’aprile 1853 scrisse:

Ora, è un gran progresso per il Partito mazziniano l’essersi finalmente convinto che, persino nel caso di insurrezioni nazionali contro il dispotismo straniero, esistono quelle che si è soliti chiamare differenze di classe, e che nei moti rivoluzionari, ai giorni nostri, non è alle classi superiori che si deve guardare. Forse i mazziniani faranno un altro passo avanti e arriveranno a capire che devono occuparsi seriamente delle condizioni materiali della popolazione delle campagne se vogliono che il loro Dio e Popolo abbia un’eco. (...) le condizioni materiali in cui si trova la maggior parte della popolazione rurale l’hanno resa se non reazionaria almeno indifferente alla lotta nazionale d’Italia²⁵.

In un successivo articolo dell’11 maggio 1858, *Mazzini e Napoleone*, Marx rimprovera i mazziniani di restare totalmente ripiegati sulle forme politiche dello Stato (Repubblica contro

²⁵ K. Marx, F. Engels, *Sul Risorgimento italiano*, Roma, Editori Riuniti 1959, p. 109.

Monarchia), senza degnare di uno sguardo l'organizzazione sociale su cui poggia la superstruttura politica:

fieri del loro falso idealismo, essi hanno considerato al di sotto della loro dignità il prender coscienza della realtà economica. Niente è più facile che essere idealisti per conto d'altri. Un uomo rimpinzato può farsi beffe del materialismo degli affamati che chiedono un volgare pezzo di pane invece di idee sublimi. I triumviri della Repubblica romana del 1848, che lasciarono i contadini della Campagna romana in uno stato di schiavitù più esasperante di quello dei loro antenati della Roma imperiale, non ci pensavano due volte quando si trattava di dissertare sulla degradazione della mentalità rurale²⁶.

La strategia mazziniana si riduceva all'azione agitatoria e cospirativa, al colpo di piazza dei "volontari della nazione", senza però poggiare – a differenza dei movimenti democratici in Germania, Inghilterra, Francia – su alcuna classe sociale storica concreta.

In assenza di prospettive politiche empaticamente connesse alla loro lotta di emancipazione, a quelle masse condannate alla disgregazione sociale della subalternità non rimase che la strada disperata del conflitto o quella dell'abdicazione, dunque dell'esodo transoceanico.

Addentrando in questo coacervo di contraddizioni storiche, l'autore ha provato a configurare uno «spazio autonomo dei gruppi subalterni» meridionali. Un mondo denso di sfaccettature, data l'insistenza di interazioni egemoniche e rapporti di dominio contrastanti, che trovano un minimo comune denominatore nell'esigenza di "passivizzazione delle masse popolari", di cui anche il nuovo Stato liberale diviene strumento. Le ambizioni etiche del nuovo Stato educatore, impegnato a creare un nuovo conformismo capace di unificare le classi dirigenti e irreggimentare i gruppi subalterni, in modo da impedirne l'irruzione nello scenario politico e sociale, hanno dunque contribuito anche a uniformare il giudizio storico sui fenomeni di insorgenza meridionale.

Su questa sentenza, scrive Tarascio, «ha pesato sin dall'inizio il giudizio storico di sanfedismo» divenuto canone di interpretazione storiografica funzionale a quei propositi di rivoluzione passiva di cui anche gli intellettuali (grandi, intermedi e piccoli) erano parte

²⁶ *Ivi*, p. 142.

integrante²⁷. In polemica con le tentazioni riduzioniste, *Nazione e Mezzogiorno* pone l'esigenza di una ricerca tesa a configurare l'esistenza di «momenti di iniziativa autonoma» dei gruppi subalterni meridionali, rintracciando nella dimensione politica del loro essere sociale «fini, codici e consuetudini» propri²⁸. Tenendo fede all'invocazione gramsciana alla redazione di una storia dei subalterni, il libro qui recensito non astraе dalla realtà storica in cui quei gruppi sociali erano immersi; al contrario ne tiene conto evitando facili meccanicismi deterministici e mitizzanti, e tentando di dare seguito all'esortazione che Gramsci rivolge allo «storico integrale»: cogliere il valore inestimabile di «ogni traccia di iniziativa autonoma da parte dei gruppi subalterni»²⁹, che, proprio perché episodica e disgregata, risulta molto più difficile da rinvenire rispetto a quella delle classi dirigenti, al contrario ben documentata ed esemplificata dalla storia dei loro Stati.

²⁷ Aldo De Jaco, in un classico delle pubblicazioni critiche su questo argomento, mostrò e documentò la strumentalità politica e la finalità conservatrice di tale giudizio: «fu il brigantaggio meridionale un episodio di reazione legitimista paragonabile alla rivolta della Vandea nel periodo della Rivoluzione francese? È questo il tema del dibattito che circola nei rari saggi d'un qualche valore scritti intorno al cinquantenario dell'Unità e del resto anche negli anni stessi delle reazioni sia da parte dei fautori dell'Unità (...) sia da parte dei cronisti *borboniani* che invece vedevano nei briganti risorgere la Vandea con tutte le sue glorie legitimiste». *Il brigantaggio meridionale. Cronaca inedita dell'Unità d'Italia*, A. De Jaco (a cura di), Editori Riuniti, Roma, 1979, p. 15.

²⁸ G. Tarascio, *Nazione e Mezzogiorno*, *op. cit.*, p. 178.

²⁹ *Quaderni del carcere*, *cit.*, Q25§2, p. 2284.

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At the Origins of the Southern Question: Giacomo Tarascio's *Nazione e Mezzogiorno*

Abstract

This is the abstract of a review in English by Gianni Fresu of the book by Giacomo Tarascio, *Nazione e mezzogiorno*. (Roma, Ediesse 2016).

Keywords

Southern Question, moderates, Action Party, subaltern groups, religion, social blocs

At the origins of the Southern Question

Gianni Fresu

In *Nazione e Mezzogiorno (Nation and South)*, a 200 page volume published in Rome by Ediesse in 2020), Giacomo Tarascio continues the subject of his doctoral thesis, which deals with the contradictions of the South of Italy before, during and after the Risorgimento, retracing the origins of the “southern question” through its processes of passive modernization. In his description both of the intricate intertwinings of hegemony and domination within the ruling classes, and of the insurgent dynamics of the southern subaltern groups, Tarascio has ample and effective recourse to Gramscian categories and to their conceptual translations found in postcolonial studies research. In my view, this is a very useful undertaking, driven by the need to renew the studies of the southern question, on to which are the author grafts a number of readings, shown to be useful for the interpretation of the processes of colonial subjection and passive modernization elsewhere in the world.

Within the argument dealt with, however, it would probably have been of use to introduce some – albeit succinct – reference to the Sardinian question, of importance above all in the process of definition of the southern question in the framework of the reflections of Antonio Gramsci, the book’s main author of reference. Between 1720 and 1850, Sardinia was for the Savoy monarchy and the Sardinian-Piedmontese ruling classes a great laboratory in which they tried out the forms of hegemony and domination that they would then repropose after unity of the nation in the unequal relation between the northern and the southern regions. Before and after the Risorgimento, the *Sardinian question* was regarded as a problem of public order, and banditry was considered the cause of underdevelopment, not an effect. These reasonings found pseudo-scientific support with the development of criminal anthropology and positivist sociology, for which the

cause of criminality was to be sought in a sort of congenital, biological-racial defect in the Sardinian people.¹

The dynamics of Sardinian modernization in the terms of a passive revolution, beginning with the transformation of its land property regime in the course of the nineteenth century,² constitutes a first very important case of domestic colonialism³ which, in different ways, including the forms of radical insurgency generated and harshly repressed, anticipates the essential characteristics of the Italian southern question.⁴

These questions, systematically present in Gramsci's whole political elaboration and analysis of Italian society, constitute the focal point of the problematic around which are condensed the contradictions of the process of national unification and the distorted modes of economic and social development of the country. In a detailed examination lasting years, Gramsci arrived at a definition of some of his most important categories, now studied on a world level, such as "hegemony", "intellectuals" and "subaltern groups" and regarded today as essential for deciphering the international relationships of colonial domination.⁵

¹ "And here we see how the regional temperament of the Sardinians in general and the shepherds of the delinquent Zone in particular coincides with many characteristics of the delinquent, of the murderer, of the savage. This teaches us that this temperament is a suitable terrain for the formation of the murderer, while, for example, the Piedmontese temperament does not give rise to this, where so many coincidences between regional temperament and psychological characteristics do not exist": A. Niceforo, *La delinquenza in Sardegna (Delinquency in Sardinia)*, reprinted Cagliari, Edizioni della Torre 1977, p. 31 (first edition 1897).

² As has been very effectively summed up by Birocchi, perhaps the scholar who has dealt with these questions with the greatest rigour and seriousness, "the triumph of property in Sardinia coincided with the rise of a bourgeoisie not only lacking in those universalistic horizons that elsewhere had brought it to the head of a reform movement, but a bourgeoisie also bound to client mentalities and to practices suggested by extremely limited interests": I. Birocchi, *Per la storia della proprietà perfetta in Sardegna. Provvedimenti normativi, orientamenti di governo e ruolo delle forze sociali dal 1839 al 1851 (Towards a History of Perfect Property in Sardinia. Normative Provisions, Government Orientations and the Role of Social Forces from 1839 to 1851)*, Milan, Giuffrè 1982, pp. 446 and 447.

³ G. Angioni, *Rapporti di produzione e cultura subalterna: contadini in Sardegna (Relations of Production and Subaltern Culture: Peasants in Sardinia)*, Cagliari, Edes 1982, p. 55.

⁴ For in-depth reference we refer readers to a monograph in which we dealt in detail with contradictory transition to modernity of Sardinia and the conflicts generated by them, through archive and socio-historical and political analysis work that had ample recourse to the categories of Antonio Gramsci: G. Fresu, *La prima bardana. Modernizzazione e conflitto nella Sardegna dell'Ottocento (The First Livestock Rustling. Modernization and Conflict in Nineteenth-Century Sardinia)*, Cagliari, Cucc 2011.

⁵ Among the many international declinations of Gramsci's thought, the analyses regarding the relationships of semi-colonial exploitation between North and South in the history of Italy, those regarding the subalterns and the role of the intellectuals in the set-ups of domination and

The nineteenth century represented a turning point for the history of Italy because of the political processes that prepared and led successfully to a complex and difficult event, such as was the realization of the unity of the country; but additionally, significant dialectical tensions also came into play, which were to have important repercussions for the history of the twentieth century. Not only in his 1926 essay *Some Aspects of the Southern Question*⁶ and in numerous articles that preceded it, but also in the *Notebooks* themselves, the subject of the relations between North and South takes on – in the light of the antagonistic polarization between city and countryside – an absolutely central position and is investigated in a historical perspective that takes fully into account the dynamics of the Italian Risorgimento and the role of the intellectuals as a grouping.

Over the last few decades the notes on the *Southern Question* and the investigation into the subaltern groups have aroused great attention at the international level in the fields of Postcolonial Studies and Subaltern Studies. Beyond some excessively free uses in these studies, the need to put flesh and bone on to the philosophy of praxis, and contextualize its categories and conceptions in historically determinate national realities, is totally coherent with the spirit of Gramsci's work and with its aspiration to avoid abstraction and the generic nature of ideological assertions. The creative and heterodox extension of Gramsci's theoretical heritage in such different and not always coherent fields of application, is a possibility immanent within the structure of its reasoning. It is a reasoning which always reaches problematically towards the study of the particular elements of each specific cultural formation and ensemble interested in the great conceptual question of the "translatability" of philosophical languages. Starting from the concept of "historically determinate" and from what we may, following Hegel,

hegemony, are for example systematically used to re-interpret events in the colonial history of Brazil and to understand the great social and cultural contradictions still present there today. On this subject, an extremely wide and diversified bibliography may be quoted, but we here limit ourselves to recalling a work of particular importance for the analysis of the role of intellectuals in the processes of the passive modernization of Brazil, realized by the main person responsible for the translation and diffusion of Gramsci's writings in that country, namely Carlos Nelson Coutinho. This work is his *Cultura e sociedade no Brasil. Ensaio sobre idéias e formas* (*Culture and Society in Brazil. Essays on Ideas and Forms*), Rio de Janeiro, DP&A editora 2000.

⁶ *Alcuni temi della questione meridionale*, Rome, Editori Riuniti 1990 (in English *Some Aspects of the Southern Question* in *Selections from Political Writings 1921-1926*, ed. and trans. Q. Hoare, London, Lawrence and Wishart 1978: henceforward *SPW*).

define as “second nature”, Gramsci makes repeated use of classical analytical categories of geography in his analysis of hegemonic processes and the relations of domination at the international level. All this, it should be underlined, is done without ever leaving the conceptual terrain of Marxism, and therefore always beginning with the centrality of the capital/labour contradiction in the capitalist metropolis as much as in the colonial “periphery”.

As Tarascio writes, “the encounter with postcolonialism” has been determined within a “discourse regarding the South of the world”, putting traditional southern studies in contact with the great themes inherent in the colonial question. The outcome would be a new development of the analysis of the South thanks to which the possibility is offered of confronting anew – and less statically – the history of its subaltern groups, often too hastily catalogued through unilateral and cut-and-dried interpretations. Together with these benefits, however, Tarascio indicates a number of other critical factors, “due to an imprecise use of the analytical apparatus of the history of colonialisms, in which the history of the South is imprisoned in at times misleading perspectives”.⁷ In this discourse, inevitably, insistence is placed on cutting down in size the question of the continuity of the relations of exploitation before and after Unification of the country, together with the close intertwining between “structural crisis of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies and the role of the dominant leading classes”. Taking heed of the lesson of Gramsci, Tarascio writes, the traces of colonialism should be sought in the processes of the construction of the new State inside an interweaving of interests between the northern and southern dominant classes, cemented by protectionism and by the reciprocal agreement on which the new unitary historical bloc was structured.

Gramsci was always “sharply opposed to protectionism”.⁸ It was not by chance that his first formal act of participation in politics was when in 1913 he joined the Sardinian group of the Anti-Protectionist League of Attilio Deffenu.⁹ As clarified in the pages of

⁷ G. Tarascio, *Nazione e Mezzogiorno*, cit., p. 12.

⁸ P. Bonetti, *Gramsci e il liberalismo italiano del Novecento*, in *Gramsci e il Novecento (Gramsci and the Twentieth Century)*, G. Vacca (ed.), Vol. 1, Roma, Carocci 1999, p. 129.

⁹ “Dear Deffenu, I have already sent you ... quite some time ago at that, a money order for 2.00 lire as membership fee for the Sardinian group of the Anti-Protectionist League”: A. Gramsci, 28 September 1913, *Epistolario (Correspondence), Volume 1 (gennaio 1906-dicembre 1922)*, National Edition of the Writings of Antonio Gramsci, Roma, Treccani 2009, p. 143. See in English *The Pre-Prison Letters 1908-1926. A Great and Terrible World*, ed. and trans. D. Boothman,

the volume under review, behind protectionism the Sardinian intellectual glimpsed the exchange mechanism and organic basis supporting the “historical bloc” that guaranteed the traditional social order, with all its unhealthy forms of domination and exploitation of rural poverty. Italy’s passive and conservative equilibria, from Unity of the country up to fascism, were based precisely on this parasitic “holy alliance” between the industrial bourgeoisie of the North and the southern landowners responsible for permanently draining off enormous shares of wealth, subtracted from the country in order to maintain entire stratifications of non-productive classes. In his paragraphs in the *Notebooks on Americanism and Fordism*, Gramsci traces the essence of southern society in the survival of classes generated by the wealth and complexity of past history, which left stratifications of passive sedimentations through phenomena of the saturation and fossilization of the State personnel and of the intellectuals, of the clergy and of landowners, of piratical commerce and of the army.¹⁰ The compromise between industrialists and landowners, consolidated thanks to the protectionism that defended their respective productions, attributed to the working masses of the South the same position as the colonial populations. For them the industrialized North was like the metropolis was for the colony, the ruling classes of the South (the big landowners and the middle bourgeoisie) fulfilled the same role as the social categories of the colonies, allied with the *colons* coming from the metropolis, in order to keep the mass of the people subject to their exploitation. However, in a historical perspective, this compromise system showed itself to be ineffectual since it broke against an obstacle represented as much by the development of the industrial economy as by the agrarian one. In different phases, this gave rise to levels of very sharp struggle between the classes involved and hence to an ever stronger and more authoritarian pressure that the State exerted on the masses.

The hegemony of the North over the South could have assumed a positive and progressive function if industrialism had posed itself

London, Lawrence and Wishart 2014, p. 89, and equivalent volumes in other languages for translations of the same letter. Taking account of the original text of the letter, the English wording is here modified as compared with that of the *Great and Terrible World* volume.

¹⁰ A. Gramsci, *Quaderni del carcere*, Notebook 22, paragraph 2, Einaudi, Torino 1975, p. 2141. For the passage in English see *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (henceforward *SPN*), ed. and trans. Q. Hoare and G. Nowell-Smith, London, Lawrence and Wishart 1971, p. 281.

the aim of broadening its base by taking on new personnel, incorporating but not dominating the new economic zones that it assimilated. In this sense the hegemony of the North would have been the expression of a “struggle between the old and the new, between progress and backwardness, between the more productive and the less productive”.¹¹ A dynamic of this type would have been able to unleash or promote an economic revolution of a truly national nature.

Instead of this, the domination realized did not have an inclusive nature, in other words one aimed at abolishing that distinction, but a “permanent”, “perpetual” nature in the sense that it based itself on an idea of unequal development such as to make the weakness of the South a factor that did not have limits in time and was functional to the industrial growth of the North, as if the former was a colonial appendix of the latter. This organic constraint, fortified by the unnatural alliance of the historical bloc, hindered the dialectic (characteristic of the classical forms of capitalist development) between the two classes that were bearers of different, when not contraposed, interests. In Great Britain, for example, it was the competition between the industrialists and the landowners that gave rise to the history of the parties and parliamentary history.¹² In Italy rotation on a parliamentary basis did not exist, the formation of the ruling classes took place by absorption and the cooptation, on the basis of confidence through transformism, of single personalities within the passive equilibria of the historical bloc.¹³ For Gramsci this was the case of Mazzini’s democrats during and after the Risorgimento, then repeated with the reformists, the catholic world and finally with fascism.¹⁴ To the most serious crises of the new unitary State (the Crispi government, the end-of-century crisis, the entry into World War I, the advent of fascism) the answer was above all given by extra- or anti-parliamentary solutions.

¹¹ A. Gramsci, *Quaderni del carcere, cit.*, Q1§149, p. 131. In English, *Prison Notebooks* (henceforward PN), Vol. 1, ed. and trans. J. A. Buttigieg and A. Callari, New York. Columbia University Press 1992, p. 228.

¹² A. Gramsci, *La funzione sociale del Partito nazionalista (The Social Role of the Nationalist Party)*, in *Scritti giovanili 1914-1918*, Torino, Einaudi 1975, p. 158-9.

¹³ A. Gramsci, *La situazione italiana e i compiti del PCI (The Italian Situation and the Tasks of the PCI)*, in *La costruzione del Partito comunista 1923-1926*, Torino, Einaudi 1978, p. 489. In English, *SPW, cit.*, pp. 341-2 *et seq.*

¹⁴ A. Gramsci, letter to his sister-in-law Tat'jana of 6 June 1932, *Lettere dal carcere*, Torino, Einaudi 2020, p. 799. In English, *Letters from Prison*, Vol. 2, ed. F. Rosengarten and trans. R. Rosenthal, New York, Columbia University Press, pp. 181-2.

Without protectionism, then, one can explain neither the southern question, nor the historical role of fascism, closely bound up – as it was – with the needs to guarantee the survival of two parasitic and non-productive classes otherwise destined to be swept aside by capitalist development: the petty bourgeoisie and the landowners, the real social base of Mussolini’s movement.¹⁵

Amongst the analytical tools used in the volume, pride of place is taken by “passive revolution”; for this, Tarascio is extremely precise as much in his explanation of its conceptual genesis in Vincenzo Cuoco as in the differences characterizing Croce’s utilization in his appropriation of the term. This exercise of philological and theoretical reconstruction, often overlooked in postcolonial and subaltern studies, provides a more than solid base for his book.

The second chapter is also of exceptional interest. Here the author interprets the root of the southern question by illustrating the events of the South in its contradictory and accident-prone process of transition from the feudal regime to the modernity of “perfect property”, in the period between the Napoleonic era and the restoration of the Bourbon monarchy. The long path of transition from feudalism to the capitalist mode of production, the assertion of individual landed property and, with it, the accumulation of so-called primitive capital, form part of the great historico-economic movement that developed in Europe (starting in Britain and concluding in Russia) over a period of four centuries in their very different ways, according to the historical period and the national particularities taken into consideration.

Within this framework, Tarascio deals in depth and with clarity with the question of the rural subalterns in the pre-unitary South in relation to the dialectic between urban bourgeoisie and the strata of rural landowners. This is a context that cannot easily be reduced to interpretative simplifications, made non-homogeneous by forms of

¹⁵ “the [fascist] State is creating *rentiers*, that is to say it is promoting the old forms of parasitic accumulation of savings and tending to create closed social formations. In reality the corporative trend has operated to shore up crumbling positions of the middle classes and not to eliminate them, and is becoming, because of the vested interests that arise from the old foundations, more and more a machinery to preserve the existing order just as it is rather than a propulsive force. Why is this? Because the corporative trend is also dependent on unemployment. It defends for the employed a certain minimum standard which, if there were free competition, would likewise collapse and thus provoke serious social disturbances; and it creates new forms of employment, organisational and not productive, for the unemployed of the middle classes”, *Quaderni del carcere, cit.*, Q22§6, pp. 2157-8; in English *SPN, cit.*, pp. 293-4.

social insurgency such as peasant struggles in defence of common uses of the land and by the complications of the political and social set-up that led to Sanfedismo¹⁶ and brigandage. The Restoration, against a background of grave social crisis and in the full heat of the “power struggles of the élites”, coincided with an extremely harsh repression whose mainspring was not the “defence of property or of public order, but the fear that brigandage would be welded to the *Carbonari*”.¹⁷ An ensemble of concomitant causes made the situation in the South explosive on the eve of the Risorgimento, but the most serious burden was the failure of the reform processes which should have given rise to the modernization of the countryside:

Despite the transformations in the countryside in the South, unearned income remained the final goal of the land, the limit where any innovation whatsoever in the use of wage-labour was halted; the purchase of machinery and of fertilizer was an attack on the process of accumulation of the owners’ wealth. The importance of the organization of production and of agricultural property was thus located not exclusively in economic development but in the management of social life of the subaltern groups.¹⁸

Here the author confronts the tangled knot of these contradictions by taking up and developing the essential terms of Gramsci’s notes on the Risorgimento. And this knot is precisely where the dialectic between moderates and democrats is determined, a dialectic whose stake was hegemony in the Risorgimental process. Within this dynamic Tarascio traces out the role of the paradigmatic figure represented by Giuseppe La Farina (1815-1863), “one of the most noteworthy examples of the passage from radicalism to a moderate policy”, who exemplified to perfection “the capability of manoeuvre of the group led by Cavour”.¹⁹

But the part of the book which in our view is certainly of greatest interest is the fourth chapter, entitled *Insorgenze meridionali* (*Southern Insurgencies*), in which the author introduces a fruitful interplay between Gramsci’s categories and the conceptual developments of

¹⁶ [Cf. for example the explanation of *Sanfedismo* by Hoare and Nowell-Smith (*SPN, cit.*, note p. 92): “a movement in support of the Bourbons among the lumpen-proletariat” led by people such as Cardinal Fabrizio Ruffo, who created the “Esercito della Santa Fede” (“the Army of the Holy Faith”); the upshot was the defeat of the short-lived Neapolitan Republic of 1799: trans. note.]

¹⁷ G. Tarascio, *Nazione e Mezzogiorno, cit.*, p. 67.

¹⁸ *Ivi*, p. 84.

¹⁹ *Ivi*, p. 102.

postcolonial and subaltern studies. In dealing with the primitive and endemic rebellion of the peasant masses, as also in the analysis of brigandage, it would probably have been necessary to include a greater number of authors and a wider bibliography.²⁰ That said, Tarascio's merit is that of having confronted afresh and problematized complex questions that too often have been reduced and simplified to a "war on brigandage". In this way, the author underlines, one ends up by compressing the investigation into peasant demands "into the dichotomy between bandit reaction and a deterministic social question", just as the multiple facets were ignored that regarded "brigandage and pre-unitary rebellion by calling into play only *Sanfedismo* as the linkage between the means used by clerico-Bourbon reaction".²¹

As it had evolved in the Mezzogiorno at the "climax of a history of revolts", the Risorgimento betrayed the hopes of democratic development that it had aroused. If a decisive impetus to the Risorgimental process was provided by the democrats, in forcibly leading the hesitant world of the moderates onto the terrain of Risorgimental action, the success of this action of the democrats could not have done without the wisdom and capacity of Cavour, able to guarantee a conservative and State outcome to the conquests obtained on the streets. It is in this way, writes De Ruggiero, that we explain the apparent paradox by which Italy, created by the so-called democrats, found itself organized against them by the parties of order.²²

The fear aroused by the people therefore conditioned the formation of the Italian unitary State. It was carried to completion without the masses' having taken part even minimally, and took place far from them and against them. This circumstance would be determinant for the entire life of the new State, from its foundation up to the present time.²³

Among the causes of the lack of a "liberal revolution", Piero Gobetti indicated the romantic and literary dimension of the

²⁰ Among the many publications on this subject, here we limit ourselves to recalling Eric Hobsbawm's indispensable *Primitive Rebels*, Manchester, Manchester University Press 1959, translated into Italian as *I banditi. Il banditismo sociale nell'età moderna*, Torino, Einaudi 2002.

²¹ *Ivi*, p. 109.

²² G. De Ruggiero, *Storia del liberalismo europeo*, Bari-Roma, Laterza 2003, p. 335 of the Italian edition (first Italian edition 1925); in English, Guido De Ruggiero, *History of European Liberalism*, trans. R. G. Collingwood, Oxford, Oxford University Press 1927.

²³ Italian 2003 edition, p. 9 (our translation).

aspiration to unity, which found its expression in the abstract “metaphysics” of the Mazzinian position, defined by its moralistic and nebulous mission, able as it was to obtain a hold in Italian exile circles, but unable to mobilize the great popular masses. Mazzini’s doctrine, born of ideological fragments taken from movements of European ideas, was reduced, in Gobetti’s view, to an attenuated religious reform, destined to remain unpopular and to confuse propaganda with revolution, demagogy with political reform. As against this doctrinaire abstraction, typical of the democratic movement led by Mazzini, Piedmontese liberalism was composed of leaders educated by their economic training to a sense of political concreteness.²⁴

The Mezzogiorno, at the centre of Tarascio’s enquiry, represented the main terrain of hegemonic struggle which sanctioned the essential defeat of democratic perspectives and the configuration of the new unitary State as a “revolution-restoration” or “passive revolution”.²⁵

The failure, of which Gramsci speaks,²⁶ to resolve the contradictions between “old” and “new” in the historical dialectic did not only condemn the South to remain chained to its past but led to an even firmer domination of its ruling classes. The supersession of feudalism, other than not bringing about the definitive supersession of the bestial exploitation of peasant poverty, took away from the rural community even the traditional means of community subsistence bound to old common usages, by imposing a new conservative configuration consisting of still more “organic” and “molecular” power arrangements of the traditional passive equilibria existing between classes. These contradictions taken in their entirety could not but give rise to a radical, profound and in any case political conflict, albeit made contradictory and disjointed by the fragmentary, episodic and amorphous nature of the rural subaltern groups. This was an activity that did not succeed in overcoming the dimension of endemic rebellionism and find a political centralization through the constant prohibitory intervention and external direction by old and new power groups ready to exploit to the their

²⁴ P. Gobetti, *La rivoluzione liberale. Saggio sulla lotta politica in Italia (The Liberal Revolution. Essay on the Political Struggle in Italy)* Torino, Einaudi 1974, pp. 9-14 (first edition 1924).

²⁵ A. Gramsci, *Quaderni del carcere*, Q10II§41XIV, p. 1324-7; in English *Further Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. D. Boothman, London, Lawrence and Wishart 1995, pp. 373-6.

²⁶ Q1§149, p. 131-2, *cit.*; in English *PN, cit.* Vol. 1, p. 228.

own advantage the popular social malaise. Only the democrats could have been able to provide a sounding board for those demands, channeling them and centralizing them politically around a proposal for agrarian reform, but the Action Party was as much, and more, afraid of peasant rebellionism as the moderates themselves and, unlike the French Jacobins, shied away from putting themselves at the head of peasant demands.

The Action Party, fearful and reluctant to really involve the popular masses in the Risorgimento process, demonstrated this insufficiency on various occasions. Evidence of this is given by Karl Marx in an article of his that appeared in the *New York Daily Tribune* in April 1853:

Now, it is a great progress of the Mazzini party to have at last convinced themselves that, even in the case of national insurrections against foreign despotism, there exists such a thing as class-distinctions, and that it is not the upper classes which must be looked to for a revolutionary movement in modern times. Perhaps they will go a step further and come to the understanding that they have to seriously occupy themselves with the material condition of the Italian country population, if they expect to find an echo to their “*Dio e popolo.*” On a future occasion I intend to dwell on the material circumstances in which by far the greater portion of the rural inhabitants of that country are placed, and which have made them till now, if not reactionary, at least indifferent to the national struggle of Italy.²⁷

In a subsequent article, *Mazzini and Napoleon*, published on 11 May 1858, Marx criticizes the Mazzinians for having totally fallen back on the political forms of the State (Republic against Monarchy). They had remained there without deigning to look at the social organization on which their political superstructure had rested:

Boasting of a false idealism, they have considered it beneath their dignity to become acquainted with economical realities. Nothing is easier than to be an idealist on behalf of other people. A surfeited man may easily sneer at the materialism of hungry people asking for vulgar bread instead of sublime ideas. The Triumvirs of the Roman Republic of 1848, leaving the peasants of the

²⁷ Article *Kossuth and Mazzini — Intrigues of the Prussian Government—Austro - Prussian Commercial Treaty—“The Times” and the Refugees*, datelined 18 March 1853 and published 4 April 1853 in the *New York Daily Tribune*. Marx’s original English is here reproduced from Karl Marx Friedrich Engels *Gesamtausgabe (MEGA)*, ed. Institute of Marxism-Leninism of the Central Committee of the CPSU and of the Central Committee of the SED, Erste Abteilung (Band 12), Berlin, Dietz Verlag 1984, p. 63.

Campagna in a state of slavery more exasperating than that of their ancestors of the times of imperial Rome, were quite welcome to descant on the degraded state of the rural mind.²⁸

Mazzini's strategy reduced to agitational and conspirational activity, bringing on to the streets the "mass volunteers", without however – unlike the democratic movements in Germany, Britain and France – basing itself on any concrete historical social class.

In the absence of political perspectives empathetically linked to their struggle for liberation, to these masses condemned to social disintegration there remained no other paths than the desperate one of conflict, or alternatively that of abdication, and consequently transatlantic emigration.

By entering into this mass of historical contradictions, the author has attempted to configure an "autonomous space of the subaltern groups" of the South. This world is rich in different facets, given the insistence of hegemonic interactions and contrasting relationships of domination, which find their least common denominator in the need for the "passivization of the popular masses", for which the new liberal State also became the instrument. The ethical ambitions of the new educative State, committed to creating a new conformism capable of unifying the ruling classes and of regimenting the subaltern groups, so as to block their irruption on to the political and social scene, thus also contributed to make the historical judgment on the phenomena of southern insurgency a uniform one.

On this sentence, Tarascio writes, "right from the start there weighed the historical judgment of *Sanfedismo*" which became the historiographical canon of interpretation functional to those proposals of passive revolution of which the intellectuals (great, intermediate and small) were an integral part.²⁹ In polemic with

²⁸ Written 30 March 1858 and published, unsigned, in the *New York Daily Tribune* 11 May 1858. Source: Marxists Internet Archive (www.marxists.org) transcribed from *Marx-Engels Collected Works* Vol. 58, Moscow, Progress Publishers 1980, pp. 485-9.

²⁹ Aldo De Jaco, in a classic of critical publications on this subject, demonstrated and documented the political instrumentality and conservative aims of such a judgment: "was southern brigandage an episode of legitimist reaction comparable to the *Vendée* revolt during the period of the French revolution? This is the argument that was circulating in the rare essays of some value written around the fiftieth anniversary of Italian Unity and moreover also in the very years of the reaction both on the part of the supporters of Unity (...) and on the part of the pro-Bourbon writers who instead saw in the brigands the resurgence of the *Vendée* with all its legitimist glories": *Il brigantaggio meridionale. Cronaca inedita dell'Unità d'Italia (Southern Brigandage. An Unpublished Chronicle of the Unity of Italy)*, ed. A. De Jaco, Roma, Editori Riuniti 1979, p. 15.

reductionist tendencies, *Nazione e Mezzogiorno* poses the need for a research aimed at configuring the existence “moments of autonomous initiative” of the southern subalterns, retracing in the political dimension of their social being their own “goals, codes, and habits”.³⁰ Holding firm with Gramsci’s invocation to write a history of the subalterns, the volume here under review does not abstract from the historical reality in which those groups were immersed but, on the contrary, takes this into account by avoiding facile deterministic and myth-creating mechanisms, and by attempting to follow Gramsci’s exhortation to the “integral historian”. As he writes, every “trace of autonomous initiative by subaltern groups” must be considered of “inestimable value”³¹ and precisely because such initiatives are fragmented and episodic, they turn out to be the most difficult to find as compared with the history of the ruling classes which – as opposed to this – is well documented and exemplified by the history of their States.

³⁰ G. Tarascio, *Nazione e Mezzogiorno*, *cit.*, p. 178.

³¹ *Quaderni del carcere*, *cit.*, Q25§2, p. 2284; in English *PN*, Vol. 2 (New York: Columbia University Press 1996), *cit.*, p. 21 for the first draft of this passage (Q3§14) while, for the second draft of Notebook 25, see Antonio Gramsci: *Subaltern Social Groups. A Critical Edition of Prison Notebook 25*, ed. and trans. J. A. Buttigieg and M. E. Green, New York, Columbia University Press 2021, p. 44.

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The New Edition of Gramsci's Lettere dal carcere

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The New Edition of Gramsci's Lettere dal carcere

Abstract

This is the abstract of a review by Derek Boothman of the new edition of Antonio Gramsci's Lettere dal carcere, (Torino, Einaudi 2020).

Keywords

Prison, relations with family, health, relations with party, attempts to reduce sentence, coded messages, new documentation

The New Edition of Gramsci's Lettere dal carcere (Prison Letters)

Derek Boothman

1. Introduction.

2020 saw the publication of a new edition of Gramsci's *Lettere dal carcere (Prison Letters)*, commissioned by the Einaudi publishing house, the main and "official" publishers of Gramsci's writings since the very first edition of the *Lettere* back in 1947. This 1947 publication, a landmark edition and the first ever collection of Gramsci's writings in volume form, was published on the tenth anniversary of his death and gained the posthumous award of the most prestigious literary prize in Italy, the *Premio Viareggio*. Over the course of the decades since the first edition, much work has been done, not only to find unpublished letters, but to better understand their whole background and integrate everything into Gramsci's complex personal, political and cultural biography. The publication, under the editorship of Francesco Giasi, director of the Gramsci Foundation in Rome, is now the fifth major one in Italian, together with all their various reprints.

The new edition contains 489 letters and, occasionally, telegrams; some letters have gone astray probably irretrievably, their loss being evident from the gaps in the otherwise regular weekly sequence of letters to various members of Gramsci's family in Sardinia or to his wife in Russia. In addition to the main text, the appendices contain another twenty two documents written by Gramsci to various prison and legal authorities, three of them published here for the first time, although one had been known in draft form (see *Quaderni del carcere*, pp. 2375-6). The last appendix contains Gramsci's request, less than a fortnight before he died, to be reunited with his wife and family in the Soviet Union (p. 1208 of the 2020 edition). As compared with previous volumes, the total number of documents in the 2020 edition is 511, of which twelve are published here in volume form for the very first time; some others included are half-hidden

away in other volumes¹ and not found in editions of the *Prison Letters* as such. The new edition, naturally, contains some corrections to letters where, e.g., people had been wrongly identified, and also corrected dates of some letters, most of the corrections dating to the last period of Gramsci's life, when he was writing mainly to his wife and children in Moscow.

The introduction to the volume and a series of notes form a critical apparatus that helps guide the reader through the various stages of the letters, at times their interconnections and, certainly, their political implications, some of which of course are still open to interpretation. There is by now a wide-ranging secondary literature regarding Gramsci's prison years, of varying quality; the choice was made for this volume not to make any explicit reference to these publications, except in the case of the exchanges of letters among those to whom Gramsci himself wrote. For the purposes of this review, occasional reference will however be made some of the serious and non-tendentious secondary literature. Here we shall limit ourselves to just a few of the main aspects of the prison years that emerge through a reading of the letters.

Quite a number of different major themes appear in the volume, often intertwined. We have the letters to his sister-in-law, Tat'jana (Tanja) Schucht and, by transmission through her to his wife Julija (Jul'ka) and to their two sons, Delio and Giuliano; or through her to his direct Sardinian relatives, or again through her to Piero Sraffa and thence to the PCI leaders, meaning mainly Togliatti; letters containing information about his health and state of mind; letters regarding his or others' attempts to obtain if not freedom, at least some easing of conditions. What ought not to be overlooked is the link-up between the *Prison Letters* and the *Prison Notebooks (Quaderni)* and the highly coded political messages contained in the letters, for which the critical apparatus of the editor, Francesco Giasi, is of inestimable help. Giasi with his team of co-workers have done an excellent job in their annotation to the text, supplementing it with additional information in order to make many facets much more easily understandable to all readers, specialist and non-specialist.

¹ E.g. *Antonio Gramsci – Tatiana Schucht, Lettere 1926-1935*, ed. Aldo Natoli and Chiara Daniele, Einaudi, Torino 1997, a volume amounting to over 1500 pages, and the far less voluminous collection of Piero Sraffa's *Lettere a Tania per Gramsci*, ed. Valentino Gerratana, Roma, Editori Riuniti, 1991.

2. *The First Impact of the “Lettere dal carcere”*

The number of letters (218) contained in the first edition is less than half that of the new edition. The reasons for the incomplete nature of the 1947 edition are easy to identify. Due to the immediate post-war political climate within official communism, including the Italian Communist Party, the editors group expunged any mention, however minor, of the name of Amadeo Bordiga or very occasional mentions of publications by Trotsky. More strange than this was the absence of reference or letters to Piero Sraffa, who became Gramsci's main financial support and intellectual interlocutor in the prison years, though at the time still relatively unknown to a wider public. Both Sraffa and Bordiga do find their place in the much-enlarged 1965 edition, edited by two legendary figures in Gramsci scholarship, Elsa Fubini and Sergio Caprioglio;² in the meantime (1961), it may be added, Sraffa had been awarded the Söderström Gold Medal for the history of economics, which, at the end of that decade, became the “Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences”.³ Then, apart from the difficulties in locating letters, some of them – to family members – were still considered by them to be too close to personal susceptibilities to be published so soon after Gramsci's death. In particular cases, they were also, indeed, too critical of actions by members of the family. In other cases there were banal omissions, due merely to what are in effect post-scripts adding little to the substance of the main part of a letter.

At the time of publication of the *Lettere*, a key event in Italian intellectual circles was the speech made on the tenth anniversary of Gramsci's death by Luigi Russo, the director of Pisa's “Scuola Normale”.⁴ After having read not only the *Prison Letters* but also the

² On the 1965 edition and then other letters published in the 1970s and, after Jul'ka's death in 1980, for yet more letters made available by Giuliano, Antonio's younger son, see esp. pp. XXXIII-XLIV of the *Introduction*; cf. also Francisco (Paco) Fernández Buey, *Reading Gramsci*, Leiden and Boston, Brill 2014 and its paperback edition (Chicago, Haymarket 2015), pp. 6-7. Further additional letters are found in the 1988 (Einaudi) edition and, due to the research of Frank Rosengarten, in the 1994 Columbia University Press English-language edition, the new letters in which were then included in the 1996 (Sellerio) Italian edition.

³ Popularly but not officially recognized as a Nobel Prize; it was launched in 1968 on the initiative of the Swedish central bank, and is awarded in the same ceremony as the Nobel Prizes defined in Alfred Nobel's will.

⁴ Now most easily available as *Scoperta di Gramsci* in *Gramsci Ritrovato 1937-1947*, ed. Enzo Santarelli, Abramo, Catanzaro, 1991, pp. 225-40; originally *Antonio Gramsci e l'educazione democratica in Italia*, “Belfagor”, II, 15 July 1947.

Notebooks (a typescript of which he had received before publication), Russo asserted that “Antonio Gramsci belongs not only to the Communist Party, he belongs to European thought”. In his commemorative speech Russo included ample extracts from Gramsci’s letters to Tanja on Croce’s *History of Europe* and, secondarily his *History of Italy*. During the period of Gramsci’s imprisonment, as was the agreement, Gramsci’s sister-in-law Tat’jana (Tanja)⁵ copied these letters to her, and sent them to Piero Sraffa, whose comments she in reply transcribed, with some unimportant variations, and included in her letter to Gramsci of 5 July 1932. Sraffa was of the opinion that

The nexus of the matters discussed, and the fragments, taken all together, constitute a radical critique of the book. Where [Gramsci] speaks of the historical role of the intellectuals, I recognized a concept that, in embryonic forms, I had already read in an essay where Croce and Fortunato were characterized as the keystones of the Southern system. And despite the fact that it is not developed fully, I have also understood the question of cultural hegemony.⁶

Sraffa is here clearly referring to the famous essay published as *Alcuni temi della questione meridionale* (*Some Aspects of the Southern Question*), published in “Stato Operaio” shortly after Gramsci’s arrest. And as regards its political and cultural aspect Gramsci’s short series of letters, interrupted by the prison censorship, occupies a key position in how his thought came into the public domain, through republication in Italian just after his death in 1937 and again in a new series of “Stato Operaio” published by the Italian communists in New York during the Second World War;⁷ on the basis of this American publication, the letters on Croce found their way in translation into English in the New York-based “Science and Society” journal in 1946.

The ground had to some extent been prepared for the public reception of Gramsci not just through these publications, but for

⁵ In this review we will normally use the current ISO standard for transcription from the Cyrillic alphabet (e.g. Tat’jana and Tanja rather than Tatiana and Tania; and Jul’ka for Gramsci’s wife, transcribed by him as Iulka when he does not use the Italian form Giulia); otherwise for historical figures we use what are the standard forms in English, e.g. “Trotsky” rather than the ISO “Trockij”.

⁶ Piero Sraffa, *Lettere a Tania per Gramsci*, cit., p. 72 (letter of 21 June 1932); see also *Antonio Gramsci – Tatiana Schucht, Lettere*, cit., p. 1041.

⁷ Cf. Editor’s *Introduction* to the 2020 edition, pp. XIX-XX.

example, through military units named after him in the Garibaldi Brigade in the Spanish Civil War and then in the partisan struggle in Italy; however, not many people in Italy, and even fewer abroad, knew his name.

After World War II, the picture that emerged initially was that of a martyr to fascism. The letters that Gramsci wrote, like those of other political prisoners, had of course to be subject to strict self-censorship with no mention of politics. “Coded” messages, some still exceptionally difficult to decipher, are indeed present, but the nearest thing to comments on everyday events is the series of letters to Gramsci’s sister-in-law, Tat’jana (Tanja), to aid her in a supposed review of hers of the work of Benedetto Croce, Italy’s leading moral philosopher and literary critic.

Croce’s review of the *Lettere dal carcere* was framed differently from Russo’s, and notwithstanding Gramsci’s criticism of him in the volume, Croce was generous in his assessment:

the book [...] also belongs to those who are politically of another side or on the opposite side, and belongs to them for a double reason: for the reverence and affection that is shown for all those who held the dignity of man high and accepted dangers and persecutions and sufferings and death for an ideal, and this is what Antonio Gramsci did with strength, serenity and simplicity, such that these letters from prison give rise to horror and internal revolt against the regime that oppressed and suppressed him; — and because as a thinker he was one of ours (“egli fu dei nostri”).⁸

In Croce’s review what strikes the reader is the phrase at the end: “egli fu dei nostri” (literally, “he was [one] of ours”, or less literally “he was on our side”). As is often the case, one may ask who actually is being referred to by the first person plural “ours”? Some have interpreted this tribute of Croce’s as indicating the attempt to put Gramsci on a pedestal as a great thinker, like others mentioned in the review and “rewarded” in Naples with a statue (Thomas Aquinas, Tommaso Campanella, Giordano Bruno and Giambattista Vico), while at the same time removing him from the arena of class struggle. But as Gramsci wrote in 1917, several years before his imprisonment, in explaining his aversion to indifference “living means taking sides. Those who really live cannot help being a citizen and a partisan”. In the *Prison Notebooks* he criticizes those

⁸ B. Croce, “Quaderni della ‘Critica’” (8), July 1947, pp. 86-8.

intellectuals “who conceive of themselves as embodying the thesis and antithesis and thus as elaborators of the synthesis” (Q10ISummary, §6, p. 1208),⁹ analogous to Croce’s operation in his review of the *Letters*.

One aspect that may come as a surprise to some readers is the relative freedom of the first letters, written during Gramsci’s brief period with other detainees on the island of Ustica, off the coast of Sicily, and then when he was in the San Vittore prison in Milan, still awaiting trial, from where he was able to write even to fellow party members such as Giuseppe Berti. This freedom is due to the fact that, although arrested, he had not been tried and was still therefore a detainee and technically not yet a political *prisoner* as such. It is in this period before the trial in late May-early June 1928 that we now have access to a certain number of things either hitherto unpublished, or published not in the *Prison Letters*, in Italian or in translation, but elsewhere, in particular in Gramsci’s correspondence with his sister-in-law Tanja (see note 6, above). A few of these are not so much letters as either a telegram (sent slightly late for Tanja’s name-day) or picture postcards from Ustica with various new year, birthday, or name-day greetings. A later telegram is also published for the first time, informing Tanja that he was to be sent, a few weeks after his sentencing, to a prison, which turned out to be the one in Turi di Bari, a “hospital prison” for chronically ill inmates.

The volume includes other unpublished material, notably two letters to his mother dating to spring 1929, which mention Gramsci’s niece Edmea (Mea).¹⁰ These letters were kept within the family, though known through them to various people in what may be termed “Gramscian circles”, but not printed while Mea was still alive. In the first of these (8 April), Antonio tells his mother how one day in 1921 a group of people entered his office at the *Ordine Nuovo* journal, demanding that he “make amends” for having seduced and made pregnant the daughter of their family, Rina; the father of the child (Edmea, at that time “still very little and not yet walking”) was in fact Antonio’s brother Gennaro (Nannaro), then employed on the financial side of the paper. Other factors entered

⁹ English translation in *Further Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. D. Boothman, London, Lawrence and Wishart 1995, p. 329

¹⁰ Another unpublished one, to his brother Gennaro, written on 30 June 1930 and therefore falling between the three talks that they had in summer 1930, comes from the Russian State Archive for Socio-Political History (RGASPI).

the case, with claims repeated in newspapers that Antonio took part in orgies and was a cocaine addict. The threatening behaviour of the family group induced Gennaro to go around Turin in disguise, albeit a not very convincing one. But, returning to the time of the 1929 letter, Gennaro had by then legally recognized Mea as his, and she had been adopted by the Gramsci family in Ghilarza. Rina was now married to another person, but the whereabouts of Gennaro were rather uncertain until Tat'jana managed to locate him in Belgium (unpublished letter, again from Antonio to his mother, 6 May 1992) and was promising to write soon. On a number of occasions Antonio shows his interest and worries about Mea's intellectual development, here asking that an Italian dictionary be sent to her. Elsewhere he is critical both of her spelling mistakes (though capable of correction "with a little attention": see his letter to his mother, again unpublished, of 14 July 1929).

More importantly than these criticisms of a young child, still learning, are some of his comments on language itself. In an earlier letter to his sister Teresina (26 March 1927), he wrote that for him "it was a mistake [...] not to have allow Edmea to speak freely in Sardinian as a little girl. This harmed her intellectual development" and expressed the hope that Teresina's son Franco would be allowed to speak Sardinian, which is "not a dialect, but a language in itself, even though it does not have a great literature [...] it is a good thing to for children to learn several languages":¹¹ a thing he probably had in mind here is what he wrote explicitly later on in the *Notebooks*, namely "every language is an integral conception of the world": when the language issue is posed, so too is that of the reorganization "cultural hegemony" (Q29§3, p. 2346).¹² This attention to language is just one instance of link-ups between the *Letters* and his other writings, most of all the *Notebooks*. In this specific example, however, it calls to mind his student period, and his involvement with his historical linguistics (glottology) professor, Matteo Bartoli, in finding the pronunciation or meaning of a number of words in Sardinian dialects.¹³

¹¹ Cf. for the English translation quoted here *Letters from Prison*, ed. F. Rosengarten and trans. R. Rosenthal, New York. Columbia University Press, 1994, Vol. 1, p. 89.

¹² In English, *Selections From Cultural Writings* (1985), ed. D. Forgacs and G. Nowell-Smith and trans. W. Q. Boelhower, p. 184.

¹³ Letter or postcards of 3 January 1912 (to his father), and 24 November 1912 and 26 March 1913 (to Teresina) in A. Gramsci, *Lettere 1908-1926*, A.A. Santucci (ed.), Torino, Einaudi 1992,

3. *Unsuccessful Attempts at Gaining Freedom.*

Gramsci's relations with his family was not always easy. Carlo in particular comes in for criticism for what Antonio regarded as a clumsy and counter-productive attempt to obtain his freedom. Other people, including Tanja, were not exempt from criticism on this front either; it should be said that Antonio, understandably, was hypersensitive – but not always right – on this subject. As an example of attempts that fell through, we may take Antonio's letter to Tat'jana of 5 December 1932, with the editorial footnotes. Here, in relation to a decree on a remission and partial amnesty, Carlo had delayed until too late to follow instructions given him; by inform Sraffa in time, it might have been possible, through Sraffa's uncle, the President of the Court of Appeal (Cassation), to influence the parliamentary passage of the decree through the introduction of some clause favourable to political prisoners such as Gramsci. Tat'jana, too, was taken to task not only by Antonio but by Sraffa, for which see the latter's letter of 7 February 1933.¹⁴ Attempts of a different type were also undertaken, such as a possible exchange of prisoners, involving priests arrested in the Soviet Union. Tanja mentioned this possibility to the new Soviet ambassador to Italy, Vladimir Potëmkin,¹⁵ adding that Gramsci thought it sure that the Vatican could provide some assistance. Potëmkin did not know why Gramsci was so sure and said that "the plan does not seem very practical to me"; nevertheless he considered it his duty to inform Pjatnickij at the head of the Comintern secretariat (26 September 1933), and the latter apparently did not exclude the plan's feasibility (p. 1028; see *Communist Party Archives* 495-019-113

pp. 61-2, 71 and 76 respectively, and in translation in other languages in selections of the pre-prison letters. See also in the National Edition of Gramsci's Writings *Epistolario. I gennaio 1906-dicembre 1922*, Roma, Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana 2009, pp. 90-1, 118 and 125 respectively. The results of the requests then saw the light of day in the authoritative romance etymological dictionary (*Romanisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch*), compiled by Wilhelm Meyer-Lübke, the person with whom Bartoli had studied: cf. Giancarlo Schirru, *Antonio Gramsci studente di linguistica* in "Studi storici", LII, 2011, pp. 925-73, esp. here pp. 955-6.

¹⁴ This is partially included in editorial footnote 4 to Gramsci's letter of 5 December 1932. For the whole question, see Piero Sraffa, *Lettere a Tanja per Gramsci, cit.*, pp. 100-1 (letter of 19 December 1932) and 108-12 (letter of 7 February 1933).

¹⁵ Potëmkin's importance may be gauged by the fact that he later became the Soviet Ambassador in France before then becoming First Deputy Foreign Minister under Maksim Litvinov. He was acting in this instance however as "a real bureaucrat" according to Piero Sraffa (letter to Tanja of 17 September 1932: see *Lettere a Tanja per Gramsci, cit.*, p. 86.

for the correspondence in Russian between the two of them).¹⁶ A similar, and vain, attempt at an exchange had been made in 1927 involving Nikolaj Krestinskij, the Soviet ambassador to Berlin, Maksim Litvinov, the Soviet deputy Foreign Minister (from 1930 to 1939 Foreign Minister), and Eugenio Pacelli, the apostolic nuncio in Berlin later to become later Pope Pius XII (see pp. LXXXII-LXXXIII); and shortly after Gramsci's sentencing there was mooted the possibility of an appeal by General Umberto Nobile who, on an expedition to the North Pole, had to be rescued in the Arctic Ocean by a Soviet icebreaker. Other attempts are not to be excluded.¹⁷

Potëmkin also sent the Comintern secretariat in his 26 September letter the Russian translation of the certificate on Gramsci's health after the medical examination made by Prof. Uberto Arcangeli in March of that year. On the basis of that certificate, in November of that year Gramsci was transferred to a prison-approved clinic by the sea in Formia, and two years later transferred to the Quisisana clinic in Rome. The publication of the certificate by the French communist daily *L'Humanité* (8 May 1933), followed up the next day by an explanation that "this declaration was sent [to the paper] by Antonio's wife" was, in Togliatti's words "a gross error, since it may have as a consequence the break-down of relations between Antonio and his wife and lead to other persecutions".¹⁸ That apart, dozens of protest meetings were being held all over France in a campaign for Gramsci's release.

Mention should here be made of the mistrust expressed by Tanja of the Italian communists' attempts to obtain Gramsci's freedom, and the fact that the prisoner insisted that no attempt be made without his consent and involvement. This matter went back to the "infamous letter", dated 10 February 1928 and written by Ruggero Grieco¹⁹ as if from Moscow (although in actual fact he was in Basel at the time). The letter (reproduced in its entirety as note 3 to

¹⁶ Only a short time, earlier however, according to note 6 (p. 1009) to Antonio's letter to Tanja of 10 July 1933, on the basis of several talks he had with her as from February that year, he had "not considered unrealistic Gramsci's projects". The matter perhaps requires further investigation.

¹⁷ Possibly at the end of 1928 or beginning of 1929: cf. Sraffa, *Lettere a Tanja per Gramsci, cit.*, p. 211, and even earlier in 1928 in exchange for a spy (cf. note 11, p. 942) to Gramsci's letter to Tat'jana of 13 February 1933.

¹⁸ Togliatti, writing from Paris under the pseudonym Italo Montanari, to Piero Sraffa (24 May 1933); letter now in the Sraffa Papers at Trinity College, Cambridge.

¹⁹ Grieco, a member of the Party leadership and expert on agrarian questions, had advised Gramsci on sections of *Some Aspects of the Southern Question*.

Antonio's letter to Jul'ka of 30 April 1928) was taken very badly by Gramsci and thought it was a reason why he had been condemned to a long sentence. Opinions differ on whether the letter was written with the approval of the Party leadership in exile or not.²⁰ However, analogous letters from Grieco to two other leaders, Mauro Scoccimarro and Umberto Terracini, in their prison, did not arouse their opposition; in addition the trade union leader, Giovanni Roveda, who did not receive the letter, got exactly the same long sentence as Gramsci.²¹

Among other things the letter's contents referred to the situation inside the Bolshevik Party, and also commented on developments on the international front (Germany, France, India, China). During the interrogation process before the trial, the examining magistrate, Enrico Macis, told Gramsci that the letter showed that there were "friends" of Gramsci on the outside, who wanted him to remain in prison a long time. This managed to cause doubts in Gramsci's mind, in part because Macis put himself forward as a Sard wanting genuinely to help a fellow-Sard; events in Macis's life however showed him to be a highly ambiguous and untrustworthy character. Gramsci remained of the view that the letter had damaged him, as had a campaign the previous autumn in which an article by Alfonso Leonetti had been published in *International Press Correspondence* (24 September 1927, French edition) to the effect that Gramsci was dying of hunger; this was not true, but publication of the article could have led to harmful repercussions. All this happened at a time, like the later attempt mentioned above, when there seemed a possibility, however remote, of a prisoner exchange. The various campaigns and unsuccessful attempts at obtaining his freedom left Gramsci, and even more so members of his Russian family, mistrustful for a long time of the Italian communist leadership though – despite allegations in the low-level polemics of various academics over the last few years – no evidence has come forward of malign intentions and in the end good relationships were re-established between the members of Gramsci's Russian family, Tanja perhaps excepted, and the Italian party leadership. A further

²⁰ See for example Ruggero Giacomini, *Il giudice e il prigioniero*, Roma, Castelvecchi 2014, p. 112, who points to the possible action of an agent provocateur then in Basel, while Giuseppe Vacca, *Vita e Pensieri di Antonio Gramsci*, Torino, Einaudi 2012, p. 354, is of the opinion that Grieco had the approval of the party leadership in exile.

²¹ Cf. Ruggero Giacomini, *cit.*, p. 104.

element of mistrust was the idea, lodged in Gramsci's mind, that the people who sentenced him belonged to "a much vaster organization" than the Special Tribunal, implying here leaders of both the Italian party and the International; in his view, Jul'ka was "unconsciously" among these "sentencers" but there was also "a series of less unconscious people" (letter of 27 February 1933 to Tanja, p. 949 and note 5 on p. 951; in English see *Letters from Prison*, Vol. 2, *cit.*, p. 276). Tanja cleared up with him the matter of Jul'ka in a letter of hers a fortnight later: these considerations of his "have nothing to do with, and do not refer to, her" (see the same note 5, p. 951). Gramsci however felt that he was subject to a double imprisonment, if not even a treble one due to his isolation from his family.

4. *Gramsci, the Proposal for a "Costituente": Coded Messages and the Line of the Comintern.*

A major political event in the early years of Gramsci's imprisonment, while he was still in the prison of Turi di Bari, was the turn in the Communist International policy, approved at its Sixth Congress in 1928 and in the following Enlarged Executives (Plenums) of the International. This switch from the United Front policy – with all its difficulties and interpretations – initiated at the Third Congress, then consolidated at the Fourth Congress (1922), attended by Gramsci, and the Fifth Congress (1924) and the following Fifth Plenum (1925, again with Gramsci's participation), led to an acrimonious rupture among the prisoners. The new policy, that of "class against class" saw the socialists and social democrats as a major stumbling block on the road to a proletarian revolution. Gramsci was in a minority in maintaining that intermediate steps involving alliances were necessary, and so – maintaining party discipline – suspended the talks in the prison courtyard among the prisoners to allow time for them to think, as well as not to run risks of being accused of fractional activity. His brother Gennaro was dispatched by the party leadership to sound out his views. In order not to compromise his brother, Gennaro reported back to the party leadership that Antonio supported the new line. However, this was hardly the case.

In their necessarily coded conversation, held in the presence of a prison guard, and reported in the note on pp. 478-9 to Antonio's

letter to Tat'jana of 16 June 1930, differences emerged in the perspective for future developments.

Gennaro had to convey to his brother the consequences within the Italian Party of the new Comintern policy, which foresaw the imminent collapse of the capitalist system. In what seems a quite easily decipherable exchange (though apparently a surprise to the PCI leadership until Giuseppe Fiori's 1966 biography of Gramsci,²² with its translations into other languages), to Antonio's question of "when do you think we shall see each other in freedom?", Gennaro answered that "given the international situation and especially the Italian crisis, I don't think it will be long". Antonio rebutted "You're mistaken, in its general lines I am informed of everything because the many reviews that I read [...] report all the salient facts of what is happening in the world, but I do not think that the end is so close at hand. Instead, I would say to you that we have still seen nothing, the worst is yet to come".²³ This was one of the only two occasions in the three talks between Antonio and Gennaro when Antonio let his real political thoughts be known, the other being the question of "cigarettes from outside" (see below). It cannot have gone unnoticed by Togliatti in particular, that the longer term perspective envisaged by Antonio was totally contrary to the view accepted by the Sixth Comintern Congress, according to which the collapse of the capitalist system, succeeded by a proletarian revolution was imminent. This perspective had not in any case convinced Togliatti and in opposition to it, while remaining loyal to the majority position, he had been fighting for some sort of realistic estimate of the balance of forces.²⁴ Indeed, as Alex Höbel notes, in a meeting of the Comintern's Latin American secretariat immediately after this congress of the International, Togliatti emphasized the "need to maintain a 'dual perspective' and 'partial political demands' such as the republican Assembly",²⁵ a position

²² See Francesco Giasi's introduction, p. XXXVIII.

²³ See G. Vacca and A. Rossi, *Gramsci tra Mussolini e Stalin*, Roma, Fazi 2007, p. 210, which reports these words taken from Gennaro's report to the party leadership, p. 209-17, here the authors quote from the "reserved" part of the report (pp. 214-7).

²⁴ Cf. Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes. The Short Twentieth Century. 1914-1991*, London, Michael Joseph, p. 104 and note: "in 1933 Moscow insisted that the Italian communist leader P. Togliatti withdraw the suggestion that, perhaps, social-democracy was not the primary danger, at least in Italy". Cf. also G. Vacca, *Le lezioni del fascismo*, introduction to P. Togliatti, *Sul fascismo*, Roma and Bari, Laterza 2004, pp. XLII-LII.

²⁵ Alexander Höbel, *I quaderni del carcere, la rivoluzione in occidente e la cultura politica del PCI*, Roma, Edizioni Nuova Cultura 2008, pp. 125-42, here p. 126..

very similar to the one outlined by Gramsci in his talks with the other communist inmates, to the positions outlined by Antonio to Gennaro, and to the positions approved at Third (Lyon) Congress of the Italian Party in February 1926 before Gramsci's arrest.

Antonio emphasized his position in the third and last talk that the brothers had (19 July 1930), in the presence of a prison warden with notebook at hand to jot down any suspicious phrases. Nevertheless, Gennaro reported that Antonio had told him "we have not yet reached the worst" adding that "whatever may happen, I do not think I have lived in vain". And in an exchange that might be open to different interpretations, but which ostensibly regarded the prison ban on having cigarettes sent "from outside"²⁶ ("dal-*l'esterno*"), Gennaro suggested that "you can even not smoke". To this Antonio retorted that it was a case of "either smoking a cigarette or banging one's head against a wall". This may be open to different interpretations. Gennaro for example went on in his report to the party centre to say that "it is well-known that Italy is making munitions for Germany and that almost certainly is getting ready to do so for Russia, given that not without a reason a Russian commission is visiting Italian military workshops" (footnote 5, p. 485, to Antonio's letter to Tat'jana of 14 July 1930; see also Vacca and Rossi, *cit.*, p. 215). An alternative reading might be that the phrase about cigarettes "from outside" might refer instead to the positions held by a body outside Italy, namely the Comintern. From his stay in Moscow in 1922-23 Antonio's position had been to heed carefully the line adopted internationally but adapt it to national circumstances. Could the need to smoke cigarettes mean the need to take into consideration the line of the International, however strategically mistaken it was at this time, or oppose it outright (thereby "banging one's head against a wall")? This interpretation is of course only a hypothesis advanced by the current writer, but does fit in with Gramsci's own position and the one adopted very cautiously, as was his style, by Togliatti.

The longer term envisaged by Gramsci had as a consequence the need for a "Costituente" (Constituent Assembly) of anti-fascist forces, as he had been outlining in the series of conversations with

²⁶ This ban had been imposed presumably to prevent hidden messages on the cigarette papers, but prisoners were allowed loose tobacco, for which on one occasion Gramsci asked for a tobacco pouch to be sent him.

fellow political prisoners, then confirmed by Athos Lisa when in 1933 Lisa, now freed under the terms of an amnesty, could make a report to the foreign centre of the Italian party in Paris. Other ex-prisoners were later to add to what is known about these views of Gramsci's.²⁷ This stance of Gramsci's *may* be seen as a fore-runner of the policies adopted at the Seventh Comintern Congress (1935), but extrapolations are hazardous and – as we know from the experience of the Italian Communist Party in particular – interpretations of any given line may vary.

A follow-up to the visit by Gennaro is contained in a letter of Antonio's to his brother Carlo, dated 25 August 1930, acknowledging receipt of one letter from Gennaro, wondering whether another had gone astray, and asking Carlo to check. Carlo replied (note 1, p. 499) that Gennaro had not, on his return to Belgium, found any of the leaders (ostensibly of a firm dealing with the importation of Sardinian cheese, but meaning the Party leaders in exile in Paris). The import-export business was not going well, which might mean, metaphorically, the transmission of information but it might possibly be a reference to another eventual exchange of prisoners.²⁸ In this regard, see also the note to the letter of Antonio to Carlo of 26 January 1931 (pp. 546-7) and its accompanying note citing a letter in which Carlo says he has told their mother about the "crisis of the 'dairy industry' in Sardinia"; rather than an exchange of information, it was a prisoner exchange that lay close to Peppina Marcias's heart. It should be borne in mind that the dairy sector is also mentioned in Antonio's letters to Carlo of 3 December 1928 and 22 March 1929, apparently in its literal meaning though it may also have had a coded meaning.

What remains even more a mystery is how to decipher the meaning of Piero Sraffa's apparent dealings in the "trade of dates" and the identification, linked to this, of the "London house that, through the port of Genoa, at the end of 1926 or beginning of 1927, received 600 cases of dates". In order not to have "to pay customs duty, the insurance policy was written so as to have it seen that in the case of a collapse of the Italian house the goods would be

²⁷ The most complete testimonies are found in the volumes *Gramsci vivo* (ed. Mimma Paulesu Quercioli [Teresina's grand-daughter] Milano, Feltrinelli 1977) and *Gramsci raccontato* (ed. Cesare Bermani, Roma, Edizioni Associate 1987, with audio cassette); the contents of both are summarized in Giacomini, *cit.*, chapter 22 ("Le lezioni di Turi"), pp. 223-37.

²⁸ There is however no other reference to this around 1930.

returned to the sender. The shipping was made after the Pesaro speech”, i.e. Mussolini’s speech there on 28 August 1928 regarding the stability of the lira, a date just after the trial and sentencing of the communist leaders, who were all arrested under warrants issued towards the end of 1926 or, in the case of the last one, on 20 February 1927.²⁹ The lines here are quoted from Tanja’s report of 13-17 April 1929, reproduced in part as footnote 9, pp. 362-3, to the letter her from Antonio of 22 April 1929;³⁰ any reply or comment from Sraffa has been lost. Tanja considered the information important enough to tell her brother-in-law that on 19 April in her last meeting with Sraffa “the date trade gives a lot to think about”; Gennaro substitutes bananas for dates, mentioning in his private (“reserved”) report for Togliatti “the affair of the bananas which arrived in Genoa, at first lost and then found again” (see the same footnote, which among the subjects mentioned here also includes Gennaro’s suggestion that a new step “should be taken in his favour”, given the “highly precarious” nature of “his conditions of health”).

The reference *might* – but only “might” – be to Terracini’s legal appeal (which has not come to light and is probably now lost)³¹ of 14 June 1928, less than two weeks after the sentencing of the accused, made by Terracini (born in Genoa). He made another four appeals on behalf of the prisoners between autumn 1929 and spring 1931, as well as a request to the Head of Government in December 1932,³² but the only one where the calendar dates fit is 14 June 1928. The matter is open to further clarification.

5. Antonio and Jul’ka.

Antonio’s relation with Jul’ka had its ups and downs. At the beginning of 1930 (10 February), for example, he wrote her a letter that in Tanja’s opinion “was not a letter”; it did not meet with Jul’ka’s approval and even less so her father’s, For Apollon Schucht, it was “really a dissertation, an article, but it not a letter”: he commented there was “no other way” that Gramsci could find

²⁹ Domenico Zucàro, *Antonio Gramsci a S. Vittore per l’istruttoria del “processone”*, in “Il Movimento di Liberazione in Italia”, IV (1952) pp. 3-16, here p. 5.

³⁰ The full report is reproduced in *Antonio Gramsci – Tatiana Schucht, Lettere, cit.*, Appendix 1, Document 4, pp. 1428-44, here p. 1443; alternatively *Lettere a Tania per Gramsci*, pp. 213-23, here p. 221.

³¹ Cf. Leonardo P. D’Alessandro *I dirigenti comunisti davanti al Tribunale speciale*, “Studi storici” 50 (2), 481-553, 2009, here p. 517.

³² Note 3, p. 414, to Antonio’s letter to Tat’jana of 4 November 1929.

to write (Apollon's comments, cited in a note on p. 440 and then conveyed by Tanja in a letter to Antonio). Gramsci's apparent coldness of tone may be explained by the infrequency of Jul'ka's letters and their brevity, though as was explained by Nilde Perilli, a friend of both Tanja and Jul'ka and also the former's landlady in Rome, Jul'ka "has never written a letter more than a page long", although it may be seen from the essays – equally brief – that she had to write in Italian "every word was weighed". What Antonio did not for some time realize was the seriousness of his wife's health problems, exemplified by the facts that she had been in a sanatorium and on some occasions had fainted or in any case lost consciousness (Tanja's information in her letter to Gramsci of 16 October 1930, quoted in note 2 to his reply letter to her of 20 October 1930). By 1931, the relations between Antonio and Jul'ka had, fortunately, been repaired: he then became rather apologetic in tone, much more understanding of his wife's problems, including the psychological ones, and was happy that a new phase was opening in their relationship: see, e.g., his letters to Jul'ka of 13 January, 9 February, 18 May and 1 June 1931). There is in these letters a renewed interest shown for their children's development, initially for Delio in particular but then, increasingly, also for his younger son, Giuliano, whom, it must be remembered, Antonio had seen only in photographs.

This involvement in their life comes even more to the fore in Antonio's last letters, written in the last few months from the Formia clinic and then from the Quisisana clinic in Rome, to which he was transferred in August 1935. The Rome letters are relatively few in number (partly for his increasingly serious state of health and also given that Tanja was at hand in Rome) and exclusively to his wife and sons in Moscow. Special attention has been paid by the editor to the dating of these letters, not always accurate in previous editions. The lack of letters to Ghilarza is partially due to the fact that the mother, Peppina, had died in 1932, a fact kept hidden from Antonio, but as he wrote to Jul'ka in October 1936: "Did you believe that, even in 1932, I did not sense that my poor mother had died?" (p. 1124).³³ Tanja, it seems, was the main channel for communicating with Ghilarza (cf. note 5 to the same October 1936 letter to Jul'ka).

³³ In English, *Letters from Prison, cit.*, Vol. 2, p. 373.

The letters from the Rome clinic, written under immensely difficult circumstances are very touching in their tenderness. This time, it is Antonio who asks Jul'ka to come to Italy. In a letter of 14 December 1935, we find him writing: "you have always been one of the essential elements of my life" and that she would do "something magnificent by coming to Italy from all points of view", for him and also for her own health "which perhaps would be brought to normal once and for all". This final period is marked by letters to his two sons, Delio (Del'ko), a passion of whom at this time was animals, and Giuliano (Julik), interested in music and later a professor of music at the Conservatory in Moscow. And it is in the last phrase of the very last letter that Antonio asks his younger son "who are you taking violin lessons with?"

6. By Way of a Conclusion

Since the previous editions of the 1980s and 1990s, much work has been done – world-wide – on Gramsci, his concepts and their applications. This volume is an essential addition to our knowledge, not least through the critical editorial apparatus which, through the information contained and through a very conscientious work of referencing and cross-referencing guides us through the last ten years, the prison years, of Gramsci's life. Francesco Giasi and his team are to be highly commended for their meticulous and painstaking work not only in making all the known letters available but putting them in their historical context.

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Note sugli Autori / Notes on Contributors

Abstract

This is the abstract in English of the Notes on contributors / note sugli autori for the International Gramsci Journal 4(2), no. 14, 2021

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