

A Gramsci Renaissance?

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In this article, some recent pedagogical studies about Gramsci's philosophy of praxis will be analyzed. Starting from these studies, the author argues for the possibility of reading the contemporaneity through Gramscian lens. In particular, he puts forward the hypothesis of using category of passive revolution to decipher the neoliberal reforms of the (Italian) school system.

Keywords: Marxism, Gramsci, Pedagogy, Passive Revolution, Hegemony.

Un ritorno a Gramsci?

Dopo avere per sommi capi ricostruito le fasi dell'apogeo e del declino del gramscismo in pedagogia, il testo sonda l'ipotesi dell'emergenza, negli ultimi decenni, di una sorta di Gramsci renaissance. In tal senso, sono approfonditi alcuni studi relativamente recenti sull'intellettuale sardo e trattati alcuni possibili usi pedagogici delle categorie gramsciane funzionali a decifrare criticamente la contemporaneità contrassegnata dall'egemonia del neoliberalismo.

Parole-chiave: marxismo, Gramsci, pedagogia, rivoluzione passiva, egemonia.

Introduction

This contribution attempts a synthetic reconstruction of the events within Italian pedagogic Marxism (the line stemming from Gramsci in particular) bringing out the crisis of the 1980s, which went hand in hand with the claim by neoliberalism of its regime of truth. This was a time when Gramsci seemed almost disappear from scientific debate, only then to reappear in the decades that followed on. This renewed interest in Gramsci is not manifested only in the ways of a return to a *classic*, but appears, further, to be oriented towards identifying instruments for deciphering the present, to shed doubt on the order of the current hegemonic discourse, to rethink a model of the subject that, beginning from the *Notebooks*, is defined as an “inventory” (Gramsci 1975: Q11I§12, p. 1376; *SPN* p. 324)¹ of the social relations of which that subject is “at the hub” and is able to “create [its] personality” and to modify that personality, thereby to “modify the *ensemble* of these relations” (Gramsci 1975: Q10II§54, p. 1345; *SPN*, p. 352). It is superfluous to recall the importance, for neoliberal governmentality of the production of subjectivity that internalizes the *competitive resources* of an undertaking. Hence the education sector is central to the task, and not by chance is involved in a permanent reformism, understandable as part of the neoliberal project: “to demultiply the model [...] of supply and demand, the investment-profit model, in order to make it into a model of social relations and of existence itself, a form of relation of the individual with him/herself” (Foucault, 2005, p. 196), in other words an atmosphere that this latter ends up (must end up) by breathing – moreover, as Deleuze wrote, “the undertaking is a soul, a gas” (Deleuze, 2000, p. 236).

¹ We use accepted abbreviations – notebook and paragraph number of the *Prison Notebooks* followed by page number of the Gerratana (1975) critical edition of the *Quaderni* del carcere, Turin, Einaudi. Standard English translations are used where possible: *SPN* is used to designate *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Q. Hoare and G. Nowell-Smith, London, Lawrence and Wishart and New York, International Publishers, 1971 and subsequent reprints (available on line with the same page numbers as the paper edition); *PN* (*Prison Notebooks*) is the projected integral translation by the late Joseph A. Buttigieg of the Gerratana edition, 3 Vols, New York, Columbia University Press, 1992, 1996 and 2007 respectively; *FSPN* is *Further Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. D. Boothman, London, Lawrence and Wishart and Minneapolis, Minnesota University Press, 1995, repr. New Delhi, Aakar Books, 2014. *LfP* is Frank Rosengarten’s edition (trans. R. Rosenthal) of the *Letters from Prison*, New York, Columbia University Press.

Having said this, it perhaps goes to extremes to argue that the Gramsci Renaissance that one can see in very different parts of the world, and in disparate disciplinary fields (from international relations to *Cultural Studies*), has fully involved the pedagogic discourse in Italy. At the same time, it is beyond doubt that the studies we deal with here – which by no means exhaust the range of recent research around Gramsci’s reflections on the school and education² – are relaunching the possibility of a more widespread use of his writings. Such a use may take on board acquisitions connected with the work of the *National Edition of Gramsci’s Writings* (currently underway).

High point and fall

In Italy pedagogic Marxism has for the most part been configured as the attempt to draw out models and perspectives from the pages of Gramsci which, at the end of the 1960s and beginning of the 70s, came up with important results (Urbani, 1967; Manacorda, 1970; Broccoli, 1972). These however appear dated in some ways due both to the historico-political transformations that have intervened – here one may think of Mario Manacorda’s hermeneutic organic relation to the strategy of the PCI – and to the development of philological-critical approaches following on the publication of Gerratana’s 1975 *Critical Edition* of the Notebooks. This was followed by the “archeological” work done on them by Gianni Francioni, beginning with his *Officina Gramsciana (Gramsci’s Workshop)*, a source of the *National Edition*, and it is not unimportant to recall the trenchant judgment passed by Broccoli on the Gerratana edition, ungenerously defined as “unreadable” (Broccoli, 1984, p. 35). In the pedagogic sphere the last noteworthy publication of the 1970s on Gramsci is the monograph by Dario Ragazzini (1976), which came out at a stage when, on the one hand, Gramsci studies in Italy – not only in the area of pedagogy – were at a height while, on the other, they were heading into a phase of deep gloom. After the international conference at Florence in 1977 (Ferri, 1979) and the debate that took place in the pages of *Mondoperaio* in 1976, regarding the compatibility between hegemony, democracy and pluralism and the (encumbering) nature of the intellectual

² To name just a few, see Pagano, 2013; Benedetti-Coccoli, 2018; Santarone, 2019; Ausilio, 2019; Saragnese, 2019.

legacy of Gramsci (and of Lenin) for Enrico Berlinguer's Italian Communist Party, interest in Gramsci waned drastically. It is not that praiseworthy studies on him were suddenly lacking, rather that he stopped being an "essential place of meeting and conflict for whoever wanted to measure [...] up to the burning questions of political theory and culture" (Liguori, 2012, p. 273), and likewise ceased to be the author of reference for reasoning on the school, education and training. Moreover, at this same level there began to be a change in the very definition of the epistemic framework of the *factors comprising the pedagogic discourse*, with the progressive marginalization of the politico-ideological *vector* (Cambi, 1986) of this self-same *discourse*.

In the 1980s the state of the pedagogic discourse on Gramsci was not, then, the healthiest. Certainly, it must not be forgotten that there were the precious monographs of Monasta who, taking as reference the Gerratana edition, criticized the way in which the prison writings had been put into circulation in Italian culture, and sought to restore a more authentic Gramsci (1985). It cannot however be said that this position gained significant acceptance, since in this phase the habit still continued of using the Platone-Togliatti edition (six volumes, thematic in their choice of material, published between 1948 and 1951).

A relational theory of personality

The end of the 1980s would appear to sanction the death of Gramscianism in pedagogy, so much so that in 1994, Franco Cambi published – against the stream – a text which invited his public to reflect on the legacy of Marxism in pedagogy, without intentions of liquidationism. Faced with the unhappy outcome of "actually existing socialism" and of the less than rare examples of dogmatic rigidity, this heritage in Cambi's view ought to have been placed "outside Marxism in the strict sense" (1994, p. ix). And, among the classics of this tradition, Gramsci would be the easiest to recover due to the compatibility (and affinity) of his theoretical practice with the mechanism of democracy. And on account of this Cambi invited his audience to:

re-read Gramsci as author of a re-foundation of Marxism within contemporary society [...] and that in it he reactivates the perspectives of a transformation in an emancipatory sense, redefining the very confines

of the keywords of Marxism [...] and of its overall strategy, making it pass from revolution (as a tearing away, as a gesture) to education having its basis in a socio-political and cultural pedagogy [...]. It is certain that readings of a historicist Gramsci or [...] of Gramsci as a pupil [...] of Lenin can no longer be held: the centre of gravity of the thought of the *Prison Notebooks* lies outside these 'isms' (*ivi*, pp. 32-33).

Without going into detail into Cambi's considerations, the presence of scholars who have taken up the challenge of a renewal of interest in Gramsci has to be brought to the fore. On this question, in 2002 Ragazzini proposed an organic reflection on the possibility of tracing, amongst the pleats of the prison writings, a theory of personality (or at least a programme of research on the subject). Its characteristics would be found in the socio-relational depiction of the human – for Gramsci man is the “process of his actions” (Q11§54, p. 1344; *SPN* p. 351) and “the child's consciousness [...] reflects the sector of civil society in which the child participates” (Q12§2, p. 1542: *SPN* p. 35) – in the idea according to which “the formation of man” would depend on “a multiple aggregation [...] of agents and of events that are intentional and also go beyond the intentional” (Ragazzini, 2002, p. 21), in the presence of the dialectic “inside the subjects themselves as aspects of their histories and their social relations” (*ivi*, p. 9). In Ragazzini's view, “two lines of thematic and theoretical attention” are to be found in the *Notebooks*: one relates to “social macro-problems” and the other to “individual micro-problems” (*ivi*, p. 15), the two being connected by the ‘precipitation of social phenomena in single occurrences’ and by the ‘accumulation’ of those “single phenomena in social occurrences” (*ivi*, p. 19). This movement would explain the choice made by the prisoner to make use of the same categories to deal with intra-psychic phenomena, i.e., to shed light on questions of a political nature. If one thinks of the concept of historical bloc, which in one paragraph becomes the cypher for man himself: “Man is to be conceived as an historical bloc of [...] subjective elements and of mass and objective or material elements with which the individual is in an active relationship² (Q10§48, p. 1338: *SPN*, p. 360). To further illuminate this research programme, Ragazzini dedicates space to the lemma *molecular* – a frequently occurring term in the *Notebooks* – bringing out a relational semantic characteristic, standing for processes which through the accumulation of modifications overflow their context” (from the individual to the social and/or the social to the individual) “and produce effects”

that are often to be observed after the processes themselves (Ragazzini, 2002, pp. 36-37).

As well as their descriptive dimension, according to Ragazzini there is even to be found in Gramsci a perspective-project, shown in the habit of depicting the personality by means of Marxist categories originally directed towards defining the sense and strategic horizon of historical materialism. In particular, the idea of this latter (reformulated by Gramsci during his imprisonment as the philosophy of praxis) is differentiated from other ideological systems by the fact of being conscious of contradictions, of being aware of representing one of their “elements” (Q10II§62, p.1487: *SPN* pp. 404-5) and of being involved in their resolution. It is translated into the hypothesis that the subject itself is contradictory and that to construct a personality means acquiring an awareness of the diachronic and synchronic tensions that intersect it. And all this comes on top of Gramsci’s evocation of a person who installs with the environment around and therefore with others “active and conscious” relations (Q10II§54, p. 1345: *SPN* p. 352), a clear “relocation [...] within the thematic of the individual” of “Marx’s gloss on the necessity of a philosophy that changes the world” (Ragazzini, 2002, pp. 44-5). The tension in this perspective would, in conclusion, find plastic representation in a letter to his partner, Julia (Jul’ka), in which in the course of discussing the education of their two sons he calls to mind the figure of a modern Leonardo who has “became a mass-man collective man while nevertheless maintaining his strong personality and originality as an individual” (Gramsci, 2020, p. 824; *LfP*, Vol. II, p. 195).

Ragazzini’s book, quoted and the object of discussion even outside the field of pedagogy, has ended up by becoming the jumping-off point for further studies. One may think of the work of Chiara Meta who, not neglecting the category of the molecular (Meta, 2021, p. 156), underlines the presence of an “original theory of the personality not without its pedagogic values” (Meta, 2019a, p. 7), insisting on the importance in Gramsci of sources stemming from pragmatism through the “refusal” therein of a “classical metaphysics and of a philosophical existentialism of Cartesian origins” (Meta, 2019b, p. 688).

Among other things, it should be recalled that the themes of personality and of molecular transformations today appear central. One of the main politico-pedagogic questions regards indeed the neoliberal processes of subjectivation, in other words the manufacture of *competent* producers able to learn

how to learn, and possessing requisites, not closely linked to a specific area of work. This might explain the spread of didactic politics centered on expertise and ever more interested in soft skills, namely the production of personality.

Towards a Pedagogic Use of Gramsci

In his 2017 book on Gramsci, *Oltre la subaltermit  (Beyond Subalternity)*, Massimo Baldacci proposes reading Gramsci’s point of view as immanent to the development of the philosophy of praxis. In other words, he sees “Gramsci’s pedagogy as the inner side of the philosophy of praxis, or as this entire philosophy conceived from the perspective of this pedagogic side” (Baldacci, 2017, p. 9), the particularity of which lies in placing itself in antithesis as compared with common sense. Through an intellectual and moral reform, the modification of common sense, while starting off from the self-same common sense, by attempting at “innovating and making ‘critical’ an already existing activity” (Q11§12, p. 1383: *SPN* p. 383) and – as one may read in this same paragraph of the *Notebooks* – developing its rational elements, would not constitute a “pedagogic correlate deduced from a philosophical position”, but a “need [...] intrinsic to this position, which is as pedagogic as it is philosophical, according to a relationship of mutual translatability (rather than of a one-way deducibility)” (Baldacci, 2017, p 170). Relying on the idea of *translatability* as analyzed in Section V of *Notebook 11*, Baldacci arrives in fact at relativizing the hypothesis (not infrequent in the literature), of Gramsci’s subsumption of pedagogy to politics, consequently making the former subaltern to the latter, and clarifying how in the *Notebooks* the pedagogic is given as “translation of the philosophy of praxis” in relation to the consideration of education on a level with “a form of praxis” related to the “real transformation of the subject” (Baldacci, 2017, p. 181). This reading is not so much functional to obtaining a mere exegetic gain, as to a pedagogic use of Gramsci’s writings, aimed at orienting oneself in the present and confronting a number of fundamental theoretical nodes such as the theory-praxis nexus. It is not by chance that in a publication of 2016 Baldacci: a) sees praxis as an “active relationship with reality” having “a nature of full immanence” (Baldacci 2016a, p. 49) and it is immanence more than materialism that connotes Gramsci’s Marxism; b) that for defining it he sets off from a quotation from the second Wittgenstein, whose reflections, according to the proposed

and widely debated reconstruction by among others Sen (2003) could be connected with the reflections at that same time by Gramsci, through the mediation of Sraffa; c) that as his “selected locus” (Baldacci, 2016a, p. 47) Gramsci chooses the *Theses on Feuerbach*, the main source for his reform of historical materialism; d) that he calls social reality “objectivized praxis” (*ivi*, p. 50) along the lines of Gramsci’s translation of the Theses in Notebook 7, where *umwählzende Praxis* is rendered with the expression “overthrowing of praxis”³ (Gramsci, 1975, p. 2356; Gramsci 2007b, p. 744), allowing it to be understood that reality is the praxis which education overturns by adopting a dialectically antithetic position. No less Gramscian, so to speak, seems Baldacci’s intervention in 2020, in which he explains how his detailed engagement with the preparation of his volume on Gramsci had led him to revise the positions expressed in his *Trattato di pedagogia generale* (Baldacci, 2012), appropriate for deciphering the relation between theoretical research and empirical research, but not for rendering precise the theory-practice nexus. Hence the formulation of a complementary perspective, alternative to and in debt to the positions developed by Wittgenstein in the *Philosophical Investigations*, in the awareness however of the absence in them of the “political dimension” of language, meaning the absence of the fact that the “form of life in which the interweaving between linguistic praxis and social praxis is rooted” is “traversed by [...] dynamics of power” (Baldacci, 2020, note 14, p. 38), by struggles for hegemony.

Baldacci has moreover made use of the concepts of the philosophy of praxis in order to problematize the dominant narratives regarding the structuring of the educational system. Thus, to describe the general framework in which they take place (have taken place), he has – certainly – had recourse to readings such as those of Boltanski and Chiapello or Dardot and Laval, clarifying however how these readings have to find their “systematization and validity within the concept of hegemony, adopting which” their “unilateral nature” would be overcome (Baldacci, 2017, p. 256). Hegemony would, then,

³ On the basis of Engels’ version of the *Theses on Feuerbach*, in Italian Gramsci uses ‘rovesciamento della praxis’, literally the ‘overthrow of praxis’, with slight variants in the standard English translations of the passages where the phrase occurs in the *Notebooks* (cf. Q8§182, Q10II§33, Q10II§41XII, Q11§14: cf. *PN* Vol. III, p. 744; *FSPN*, pp. 395, 430; *SPN*, p. 437 respectively). Marx’s original version, which speaks instead of ‘revolutionary praxis’, was first published in German and Russian by the Institute of Marxism-Leninism in 1924, when Gramsci had already left Moscow [trans. note].

constitute one of the keys for deciphering the contemporary situation. From this stems the proposal to consider neoliberalism in the terms of a “hegemonic form” that “incorporates a ‘pedagogic’ project of the transformation of man” (*ivi*, p. 258), exactly as happened with Fordism which, in Gramscian fashion, did not constitute just a new mode of production of goods, but even of life: “an anthropological mutation” (Orsomarso, 2007, p. 239).

Baldacci’s volume on Gramsci concludes with the evocation of a possible encounter between him and Dewey, functional to working out educational practices directed to the assertion of a radical model of democracy. Even before 2017, reflecting in particular on the meeting between the philosophy of praxis and United States pragmatism – so as to extract a “methodological lesson” (Baldacci, 2013, p. 61) at the same time as bearing in mind the differences between these two intellectuals on the subject of conformation (Baldacci, 2014, pp. 33-34) – Baldacci had developed an *idea of the school* as incubator not only of human capital but also of “human development” (2016b), intended therefore to form both the producer and the citizen, and had developed a critique of the *corporative drift* of the educational system setting off from the (Gramscian) concept of hegemonic apparatus (Baldacci, 2014, p. 126; 2015). This theme, namely the Gramsci-Dewey relationship – which is actually not a new one but has been dealt with by Siciliani de Cumis (1978), Semeraro (2008), Martinez (2014), Meta (2010; 2019c) – does not seem to have exhausted its potentialities, even if we take a number of more recent studies into consideration. These authors, working on Gramscian sources have provided original genealogies, as in the case of research by Giuliano Guzzone, who has shown how the recourse in the *Notebooks* to the “locution ‘instrumental value’” is linked to the reading of an article of Guido De Ruggiero’s on Dewey, published in *La Critica* in September 1931 (Guzzone, 2019).

Neoliberalism as a Hegemonic Form

Finally, it is not without its use to devote a few words to possible lines of research that begin from Gramsci in order to understand the current situation and interpret neoliberalism.

Observing affairs through a Gramscian lens, one can now say with Baldacci that neoliberalism becomes decipherable as a *hegemonic and ideological*

form which, through *apparatuses* that sediment and root it in *common sense*, contribute to forging the enterprise as subject for ever (and exclusively) engaged in accumulating and attributing value to its own human capital. This *form* may (perhaps) be interpreted by bringing in the concept of *passive revolution* – a “*heuristic formula*” that in Gramsci functions “as an organizational perspective” (Thomas, 2021, p. 163). This could fulfil the same role for those who intend to put under a critical magnifying glass the current tools of the government of the social sphere and the reformist processes that have attacked the educational system by injecting into it the axioms of *New Public Management*, axioms which not only do not attenuate control over the protagonists in education, but multiply them (above all not just in bureaucratic terms), increasing a policing activity “in the wide sense” (Gramsci, 1975, Q13§27, p. 1620; *SPN*, p. 221) only to be immediately in contradiction with the “rhetoric [...] regarding the top-down management” (Fisher, 2017, p. 88) of (public and private) institutions. In a text dating to May 1932 contained in the Third Series of the *Notes on Philosophy* Gramsci asks whether fascism should not be considered “the form of ‘passive revolution’ specific to the 20th century” as liberalism was “the form of ‘passive revolution’ specific to the 19th century” (Gramsci, 1975, Q8§236, p. 1089; *PN*, Vol. III, p. 378). And might it be plausible to see in neoliberalism the passive revolution of the present era – without glossing over the fact that we are dealing with a passive revolution without any of the characteristics of the nineteenth-century one (which “accompan[ied] the bourgeoisie to power without a Jacobin Terror”)? And plausible to see it without a number of the characteristics of the nineteenth-century passive revolution (created in Europe to “stop another class from taking power”) through the limited nature of “its attempts to include and innovate” (Frosini, 2019, pp. 46-48) and through the scantiness of its “relatively ‘progressive’ content” (Gramsci, 1975, Q14§23, p. 1681; *SPN* p, 223)? Again in the paragraph just cited from the Third Series of the *Notes on Philosophy* Gramsci suggests juxtaposing the passive revolution question to “what, in political terms, one might call ‘war of position’” (Gramsci, 1975, Q8§236, p. 1089; *PN*, Vol. III, p. 378). This invites one to think of a possible “active revolution” (Francioni, 1984, p. 215) in the form of a *war of position* that aims at deconstructing the compactness of the enemy troops, of conquering their trenches, of occupying the “fortresses” of civil society (Gramsci, 1975, Q7§16, p. 866; *PN* Vol. III, p. 168 and, alternatively, *SPN*, p. 238). Not, in point of fact, a “low-intensity struggle” (Frosini, 2016, p.

142) but a “siege” that is a “reciprocal one” (Gramsci, 1975, Q6§138, p. 802; *PN* Vol. III, p. 109 and, alternatively *SPN*, p. 239) which sometimes requires totalitarian solutions (not in the sense given the word by Hannah Arendt). Moreover the granitic quality of neoliberalism (as every other *hegemonic form*) depends on the capacity to disarticulate competing hegemonic articulations through the attempt, always a reversible one given the “impossibility of any closure of the social” (Laclau-Mouffe, 1985, p. 136), to suture this latter: in other words to “politically ‘totalize’ the social space” (Frosini, 2016, p. 139), and to guarantee in the long term the “‘impossibility’ of internal disintegration” (Gramsci, 1975, Q6§138, p. 802; *PN* Vol. III, p. 109 and, alternatively *SPN*, p. 239) of the front that for the moment is dominant. To this end, and as happens to any *hegemonic form*, neoliberalism furnishes itself with *référentiels* (or cognitive-normative frameworks) that are functional to instituting a “space of sense that allows one to ‘see the world’”, ordering and orienting that vision (and the actions correlated with it) “in a certain direction” (Vaira, 2011, p. 68), and often adopts formulas that explain the existent as the unavoidable result of the flow of historicity. And in this sense what Gramsci states (Gramsci, 1975, Q15§36, p. 1790; *FSPN* pp. 380-82) regarding one of Croce’s end-notes to an article of 1933 (*The World is Moving Towards ...*) – taken to task in Notebook 15 but capable of being assimilated – can equally be said as regards Margaret Thatcher’s claim that “There is no alternative”: here Croce is taken as the ideologue of passive revolution. We are dealing in both cases with rhetorical formulas having the role of *empty signifiers*, of *nodal points* that arrest the flow of differences and partially “fix the meaning of a signifying chain” (Laclau-Mouffe, 1985, p. 112), that organize discursiveness by contributing to the assertion of an ideology, understood in Gramsci’s terms as a *conception of the world* and not (or not only) as a *false consciousness*. Indeed, in giving an original reading of the 1859 *Preface* Gramsci attributes to Marx the idea that “men acquire consciousness of their tasks on the terrain of ideology” (Gramsci, 2017, p. 68) thereby detaching himself from the “epistemological difference in level between bring and consciousness” (Frosini, 2010, p. 178) proposed in the *Preface*.

In conclusion: the “material structure of ideology” (Gramsci, 2017, p. 490) – a “transitory and provisional formulation” (Francioni, 1984, p. 179, note 64) substituted during the course of the prison writings by the expression *hegemonic apparatus* and by similar formulas – would be one of the dimensions in which the *war of position* is condensed, and thus the formulation

should be considered a battle ground. The reason for which the discourse on education and the keywords through which the object of enquiry and of pedagogic project is determined would be assumed as the concept-subjects appropriate at the same time to *mobilize* and *control* the singularities (and therefore the collectivity). This in Frosini's view would be the "modern functioning" of the post-Jacobin "hegemonic dialectic" mapped out in the *Notebooks* (Frosini, 2016, p. 133), and would constitute the expressions of historicity (and of its contradictions), not politically neutral propositions. We would, then, be dealing with the relativization and problematization of their assumption of scientificity. One of the contributions that a point of view prompted by the philosophy of praxis can offer to contemporary reflections in education lies in this: that of bringing back the lexis used by the formative protagonists, as much as by intellectuals specialized in the theoretical practices of the language of pedagogy, to the horizon of the sense of struggle and hegemonic activities.

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