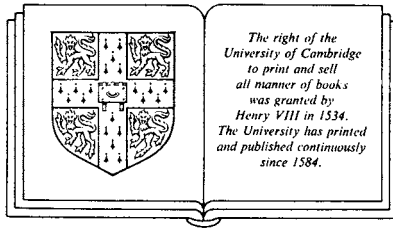


Gramsci and the history of dialectical thought

MAURICE A. FINOCCHIARO
UNIVERSITY OF NEVADA, LAS VEGAS



CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE

NEW YORK NEW ROCHELLE MELBOURNE SYDNEY

Published by the Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP
32 East 57th Street, New York, NY 10022, USA
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

© Cambridge University Press 1988

First published 1988

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Finocchiaro, Maurice A., 1942–

Gramsci and the history of dialectical thought / Maurice A.
Finocchiaro.

p. cm.

Bibliography: p.

ISBN 0-521-36096-X

1. Gramsci, Antonio, 1891–1937. I. Title.
B3630.G674F56 1988 88–3789
195 – dc19

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Finocchiaro, Maurice A.

Gramsci and the history of dialectical
thought.

1. Italian philosophy. Gramsci, Antonio –
Critical studies
I. Title
195

ISBN 0 521 36096 X

Contents

<i>Preface and acknowledgments</i>	page ix
INTRODUCTION: AN APPROACH TO GRAMSCI	1
<i>Chapter 1</i>	
GRAMSCI'S CROCEAN CRITIQUE OF CROCE'S PHILOSOPHY	
Croce and Marxism	8
Marxism and theology	11
Marxism as a philosophy	18
History and politics	20
Criticism and dialectic	25
<i>Chapter 2</i>	
CROCE AND THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF CRITICISM	
Croce, critic par excellence	28
The general problem of criticism	29
Toward a general theory of critical understanding	33
The criticism of philosophical theories	36
The methodological conception of philosophy	40
Historicism	44
Literary criticism for logicians	47
Toward an aesthetics of logic	50
Theory versus practice in criticism	57
<i>Chapter 3</i>	
GRAMSCI'S METHODOLOGICAL CRITICISM OF BUKHARIN'S SOCIOLOGY	
Bukharin and Marxism	68
Pedagogical criticism	69
	72

Contents

Philosophical criticism	75
Methodological criticism	76
Marxist-rhetorical criticism	86
Philosophy of praxis	88

Chapter 4

BUKHARIN AND THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF SCIENCE

Philosophical and political import of Bukharin's sociology	94
Criticism of Gramsci	96
Criticism of Lukács	100
Mechanism and sociology in Bukharin	104
Dialectic in Bukharin	116

Chapter 5

GRAMSCI'S DIALECTICAL INTERPRETATION OF MACHIAVELLI'S POLITICS

Machiavelli's politics	123
A concept of politics	125
The problem of dialectical politics	133
	141

Chapter 6

GRAMSCI'S POLITICAL TRANSLATION OF HEGELIAN-MARXIAN DIALECTIC

Dialectic and classical European culture	147
Logic and dialectic	149
"Dialectical materialism"	155
The "dialectic of nature"	158
Dialectic and centralization	159
Dialectic and revolution	162
Dialectic and reformism	163
The "dialectic of distincts"	166
Two Gramscian concepts of dialectic	176
	179

Chapter 7

HEGEL AND THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF DIALECTIC

The dialectic and its interpreters	181
Defining the dialectic: negative versus positive dialectic	182
The history of the dialectic: subjective versus objective dialectic	192
	194

Contents

The dialectic of philosophy: metaphilosophy versus dialectical theory	197
The dialectic of dialectic: laws of thought versus determinations of reflections	211
Hegel's and Gramsci's dialectic	228
<i>Chapter 8</i>	
GRAMSCI AND THE EVALUATION OF MARXISM	231
The problem of the evaluation of Marxism	231
Marxism and method in Gramsci's criticism	233
The synthesis of theory and practice	238
CONCLUSION: DIALECTICAL METHODOLOGY AND TEXTUAL CRITICISM	243
Dialectical methodology: historical examples	244
The hermeneutics of negative evaluation	245
<i>Appendix: Concordance of critical edition and English translations</i>	249
<i>Notes</i>	254
<i>Bibliography</i>	292
<i>Index</i>	305

Introduction: An approach to Gramsci

The interpretation of Antonio Gramsci's Prison Notebooks has been compared to the deciphering of a hieroglyphic,¹ and the comparison is particularly apt now that the critical edition of this work is available.² A second major interpretative difficulty arises because the work is pervaded by the views of, and by references to, Benedetto Croce, so much so that it is no exaggeration to say, with E. J. Hobsbawm, that "the Notebooks are in one sense a long, half-rebellious, half-admiring dialogue with this intellectual father figure."³ Since Croce's own views, especially those related to Marxism, are extremely obscure and excessively liable to misinterpretation,⁴ the result is a compounding of the problem.

One way out of these difficulties involves adopting certain suggestions made by Gramsci himself: "If you want to study . . . a world view that has never been systematically expounded by its founder . . . it is necessary as a preliminary to do a detailed philological work conducted with the greatest scruple for exactness, scientific honesty, intellectual sincerity, and absence of preconception and apriorism or *partis pris*."⁵ This means something like burying oneself in Gramsci's notes, and, as much as one can, collating and grouping them on internal evidence; such activity is now made possible by the critical edition and addresses itself primarily to the first difficulty I mentioned.

Another suggestion deals with the second interpretative difficulty and involves essentially a distinction between method or approach and substantive theses.⁶ Continuing the thought just quoted, Gramsci adds that "the search for the leitmotif, the rhythm of thinking as it develops, must be more important than the casual single claims and separate aphorisms."⁷ Applying this statement to the Crocean background of Gramsci's views, we find it is of paramount importance to learn and understand the spirit animating

Gramsci and the history of dialectical thought

Croce's work: Such a leitmotif is the theory and practice of criticism.⁸ We would thus expect a critical approach to be the leitmotif underlying Gramsci's thought.

The plausibility and potential fruitfulness of this suggestion are attested by Gramsci's own confession, in a letter dated December 15, 1930, that "all my intellectual development has been of a polemical sort . . . ordinarily it is necessary to place myself from a dialogical or dialectical point of view, otherwise I do not feel any intellectual stimulus."⁹ Moreover, he was convinced that such a critical approach is both a theoretical consequence of his historicism and a practical requirement for the effective communication of new doctrines that have not yet become part of popular belief; in fact, we find him arguing that such doctrines "must be expressed and diffused with a 'polemical' attitude; otherwise they would be a 'utopia,' since they would appear as individual 'whim' or good for a conventicle; on the other hand, 'historicism' cannot conceive itself as expressible in an apodictic and sermonlike style, and it must create a new stylistic taste."¹⁰

Combining an emphasis on Gramsci's critical approach and a scrupulous philological analysis of text, I will concentrate on those notes that contain explicit critiques and whose topics are most frequent. Thus I will begin by collecting and systematizing Gramsci's notes on Croce, on Bukharin, and on Machiavelli.

Besides these hermeneutical and philological reasons for such an approach, the following substantive, theoretical, and historiographical considerations are also relevant. If, as I said, the Notebooks have been labeled a hieroglyphic, the secondary literature on Gramsci is a veritable labyrinth.¹¹ It contains, nevertheless, three threads that may be used to find one's way.

The area of greatest concern has been, of course, Gramsci's politics, which is examined in order to understand or to criticize his role in the history of Italian communism. His was an undeniably significant role, not only while he was actively engaged in the foundation and leadership of the Italian Communist Party but even after his arrest in 1926 and during a ten-year ordeal in prison, and *especially* after his death in 1937, which was easily and effectively mythologized by the party's postwar leader, Palmiro Togliatti. Gramsci's politics has also interested Marxist activists of various persuasions, either because they see his early career (especially the years 1917-20) as a model of revolutionary purity and zeal or because they see his later thought in prison as laying the theoretical foundations for a democratic model of socialist revolution in West-

Introduction: An approach to Gramsci

ern industrial societies. Now, there is a connection between Gramsci's politics and Machiavelli: Gramsci usually discusses his thoughts on more directly political topics under the explicit label of either "Machiavelli" or "The Modern Prince."

In recent years Gramsci has attracted increasing attention for his approach to the problem of the nature and status of religion. At present this is perhaps the most vigorous field of Gramsci studies.¹² From this point of view he is seen as a religious reformer who tried to set the foundations for a new lay, nontranscendent, nontheological religion, alternative and superior to Catholicism. Hence many authors of these works, though not all, are Catholics who see Gramscism as a threat, and thus as an enemy to be studied and understood in order to be effectively combated. Polemics aside, and despite the fact that Gramsci's concern with religion has been a well-kept secret (the first pioneering book was Hugues Portelli's *Gramsci et la question religieuse* in 1974), one can no longer reasonably doubt the centrality, depth, and persistence of Gramsci's interest in the religious question. The connection between his religious views and his critique of Croce might have been surmised from Gramsci's well-known statement in the August 17, 1931, letter to his sister-in-law. Referring to himself and to many other intellectuals of the time of his formative period, he says: "We belonged in whole or in part to the movement of intellectual and moral reform promoted in Italy by Benedetto Croce, whose first point was this, that modern man can and must live without religion, meaning without revealed or positive or mythological religion."¹³ The connection might also have been inferred from Gramsci's well-known thesis about the difference between Marxism and Catholicism:

The position of the philosophy of praxis is the antithesis of the Catholic one. The philosophy of praxis does not tend to leave the "simple" in their primitive philosophy of common sense, but tends rather to lead them to a higher conception of life. If it affirms the need for contact between intellectuals and simple, it is not in order to restrict scientific activity and preserve unity at the low level of the masses, but precisely in order to construct an intellectual-moral bloc that can make politically possible the intellectual progress of the masses and not only of small intellectual groups.¹⁴

To infer the connection, however, one would have also needed to know that Croce's philosophy was meant as an alternative not only to revealed religion but also to Marxism. At any rate, we are now able to go beyond surmises and suspicions because a detailed ex-

Gramsci and the history of dialectical thought

amination of Gramsci's explicit notes on Croce shows that the religious problem is their main underlying issue.¹⁵

The thinnest thread in the labyrinth of secondary literature on Gramsci is what may be called the "lay" or "laicist" approach emphasizing his concern with developing a science of politics, history, and society. In a sense this is the approach in Croce's own first judgment on Gramsci, expressed in 1947 after the publication of the *Letters from Prison*: "As a man of thought he was one of us, one of those who, in the first decades of the century in Italy, were bent upon acquiring a historical and philosophical mind able to cope with present problems."¹⁶ It is a pity that Croce not only did not develop this interpretation, but soon changed his mind, declaring that Gramsci's central aim was to found a new political party and to defend the interests of a social class, and that his thought was merely instrumental to this aim.¹⁷ It seems that after Croce's first impression he had come to accept the Togliattian interpretation of Gramsci, which in the late 1940s was being publicized and elaborated with greater and greater determination. This was the view of Gramsci as the "head of the Italian working class,"¹⁸ and of the *Prison Notebooks* as the "echo of the struggles of preceding years"¹⁹ and the "continuation of these struggles,"²⁰ a view that soon acquired hegemony and that corresponds to the first approach to Gramsci that I mentioned. It is ironic that whereas Croce moved from the view of Gramsci as a man of thought to a view of him as a party man, Togliatti moved in the opposite direction; in fact, in his last judgment on Gramsci, just before he died in 1964, Togliatti found the occasion to say:

It has been completely right and natural for us to regard Gramsci's life as an integral part of the life of our party, of its political investigations and elaborations, of its struggles, of its sacrifices. I hope that this view has not reduced the personality of our comrade, or given it a wrong emphasis, such as to fail to include and explain all its aspects and its real essence. . . . One thing is sure, that today . . . it seemed to me that the very person of Antonio Gramsci should be placed in a more living light that transcends the historical vicissitudes of our party. . . . Antonio Gramsci is the critical conscience of a century of history in our country.²¹

Ironies and great personalities aside, the view of Gramsci as a man of science has been the one to which social scientists have been naturally attracted, when they have been able to overcome the initial barrier posed by the politicized interpretation.²² The lay interpretation is also suggested by Gramsci's explicit declaration in a letter

Introduction: An approach to Gramsci

from prison that he wanted to undertake a project of study for eternity,²³ and by one of the most characteristic and frequent phrases we find in the Notebooks, namely, "the art and science of politics." This is not the place to mention and criticize the confusions and misunderstandings that abound in regard to the "laicist" and "scientific" interpretation of Gramsci. Suffice it to say that, however tenuously, this hermeneutical tendency exists in the secondary literature, and that the present volume attempts to address some of the same concerns by taking seriously Gramsci's critique of Bukharin, which emphasizes the questions of the meaning of the concept of "science" and of the nature of the scientific method.

It is more important at this juncture to repeat the point mentioned earlier: that the understanding of Gramsci's notes on Croce, Bukharin, and Machiavelli is extremely significant. Philologically, the notes reflect crucial themes of the content of the Notebooks; methodologically, they promise to give us an insight into Gramsci's critical-dialogical manner of thinking; historiographically, they can put us in touch with the enormous amount of secondary literature and thus provide some orientation in that labyrinth; and theoretically, they will acquaint us with Gramsci's views of religion, science, and politics. It is equally important at this point to introduce a distinction and to discuss a feature of the present approach that may be seen either as a limitation or as an indication of its fruitfulness in generating new research problems. The religious, scientific, and political questions that will arise will be primarily conceptual, in the sense that what will be most directly relevant will be the fundamental meaning that these notions have. That is, we will not be concerned, except indirectly and secondarily, to articulate and criticize the content and substance of Gramsci's religious views, his scientific theories, and his political doctrines. Such details are best worked out *after* we know what he means by religion, science, and politics. This order of inquiry is especially important in a "hieroglyphic" work like the Notebooks, since there is a great deal of indeterminacy, if not arbitrariness, in grouping the many notes that were neither labeled nor collected by Gramsci himself. Once we have his conceptual framework, we can use his concepts to help us find more order in the Notebooks and to construct accounts that have a more real basis for claiming to be his own *religious* views, his own *social science*, his own *political* doctrines.

Finally, a word should be said about my concentration on the Prison Notebooks, which may be viewed either as a limitation or as the foundation for a sounder understanding of Gramsci's whole

Gramsci and the history of dialectical thought

life. First, it should be noted that one underlying problem is the understanding and evaluation of Marxism, and certainly nothing is wrong with examining a particular work to determine what solutions, if any, it provides. The question might arise, if at all, about the propriety of so much emphasis on Gramsci to the exclusion of other authors, say, Karl Popper, Leszek Kolakowski, and Sidney Hook, to mention just a few.²⁴ Such a query would be the mirror image of the one that could be formulated from Gramsci's side: How can one reconstruct the Notebooks without giving a reconstruction of the rest of his life? That this question could, with equal justice, be reversed provides the key to the answer: Is it proper to give an account of Gramsci's life and ignore completely, or give minimal attention to, the Notebooks, as is done so often in historical works that concentrate on Gramsci's active political life?

I would justify my limitation to the Notebooks as follows: First, given the mountains of historical studies of his political life, and the paucity of analytical textual reconstructions of the Notebooks, my emphasis is a good corrective to the prevailing situation; in a sense it corresponds to the call that was launched, at the time of the publication of the critical edition in 1975, for a theoretical restoration, now that the philological restoration had been supplied. Second, the elaboration of such an analytical-theoretical reconstruction does not presuppose that it would be the end of the story, because obviously there is no reason why it should not be incorporated into a historical account at a later stage. Nor is it committed to the existence of a radical break in Gramsci's life between his pre-prison and his post-arrest phases, by contrast to an alleged continuity; in accordance with Gramsci's own conception of the dialectic, elaborated in Chapter 6, I would say that the proper thing to do would be to search for those elements that represent breaks *and* for those that represent continuity; this would be part of the full historical account, which should be based on an already given theoretical reconstruction. Fourth, it is true that the historical method, which is unobjectionable per se, would favor an approach where earlier phases are examined and reconstructed before later developments. In the case of Gramsci, however, this aspect of the historical approach has been carried to an extreme, and consequently his mature period is made to recede farther and farther into the distance.²⁵ This conflicts both with the requirement of balance (mentioned in the first point above) and with another aspect of the historical method, which would favor, other things being equal, that later stages of a person's life, being more mature than

Introduction: An approach to Gramsci

earlier ones, should be given more attention. Fifth, it would be both un-Gramscian and incorrect to portray Gramsci as a pure intellectual whose ideas were derived merely from those of previous thinkers, without taking into account the social, political, and economic conditions in which he lived; but there is no reason why a reconstruction of Gramsci's thought should necessarily lead to this distortion, any more than the examination of such conditions must necessarily lead to irrelevance, that is, to leaving them unconnected to thought.²⁶

On this last point, three clarifications are useful. One is that, before searching for the origin, be it "material" or "intellectual," for a given thought, we must obviously know and understand *what* the thought *is*. The second is that when we examine Gramsci's critique of Croce, Bukharin, and Machiavelli, our *primary* aim is to determine *what* Gramsci's thought *is* rather than where it originated from, since, as noted, the critical-polemical nature of his thinking renders it necessary to introduce the ideas of those other authors for the mere identification of his thought. The third point to notice is that the intellectualist distortion (or materialist lack of integration, as the case may be) would be a problem at the level of the full historical account, rather than at the level of analytical reconstruction we are dealing with.

Last, concentration on the Notebooks, despite its relative rarity, now corresponds to an emerging tradition or trend,²⁷ which may be taken to constitute a fourth kind of approach to Gramsci. Although distinctive, this approach does not exclude but overlaps with the three hermeneutical threads mentioned earlier. We are thus in a position to add to argument authority and tradition, in justification of the approach pursued in this volume.