

Gramsci's 'Non-contemporaneity'

Reflections on Peter Thomas's The Gramscian Moment

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Abstract

Peter D. Thomas's book *The Gramscian Moment: Philosophy, Hegemony and Marxism* draws us to reflect on a point that Gramsci's interpreters have often neglected: the particular structure of the *Prison Notebooks*, i.e., the ways in which the text was constituted and, dependent on that, the fundamental methodological criteria for its interpretation. Thomas's book is a consummate synthesis between the deep and detailed study of the *Notebooks* text and the need to reconstruct some order within; between close historical-philosophical assessment and theoretical proposal within contemporary Marxist (and para-Marxist) debate. Consequently, this book confronts us – as Gramsci's present-day readers – with a task that no-one can face alone, but that is nonetheless extraordinarily urgent: the task of intervening in the debate within the post-modern and post-Marxist Left so that the link between Marxism and philosophy is resumed, starting out from Gramsci himself. In short: a revival of Marx through Gramsci, through – in turn – a return of the philosophy of praxis as Marxism for our own day.

Keywords

Gramsci – philosophy of praxis – hegemony – Marxism

1 Marxism and Philosophy

Peter D. Thomas's book draws us to reflect on a point that Gramsci's interpreters have often neglected: the particular structure of the *Prison Notebooks*,¹

1 The critical edition of Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* (Gramsci 1975) is quoted as Q (notebook number) + § (paragraph number).

i.e., the ways in which the text was constituted and, dependent on that, the fundamental methodological criteria for its interpretation. We must say right away that Thomas's book is very well founded on this terrain: in my opinion it is a consummate synthesis between the deep and detailed study of the text (that Thomas knows as few others do) and the need to reconstruct some order within it; between close historical-philosophical assessment and theoretical proposal within present-day Marxist (and para-Marxist) debate. Consequently, this book confronts us – as Gramsci's present-day readers – with a task that no-one can face alone, but that is nonetheless urgent: the task of intervening in the debate within the post-modern Left so that the link between Marxism and philosophy is resumed, starting out from Gramsci himself: which (as Thomas shows) means above all the capacity of thinking politics as mass politics and philosophy as a political fact, always; and of therefore assuming, *qua* Marxists, always the responsibility of keeping these two facts together to attain to a praxis of philosophy that – as Gramsci says about Marx (and Thomas constantly repeats in his essay, as a sort of motto) – renews 'from head to toe the whole way of conceiving philosophy itself',² turning it into a real act of liberation for groups of real men and women. In short: a revival of Marx through Gramsci, through – in turn – a return of the philosophy of praxis as Marxism for our own day.

2 Anderson and Althusser

But before starting to discuss the contents of the book, allow me a brief word on its structure. The first two chapters are dedicated to Althusser's critique of Gramsci's 'absolute historicism' in *Reading Capital*, and to Perry Anderson's essay about *The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci*. For an Italian reader like myself, the subject of the second chapter is quite an odd choice, though fully understandable within the anglophone community. Anderson's text, published in 1977³ and translated into Italian the following year,⁴ was dismantled and proved erroneous from its very premises in 1984 by Gianni Francioni⁵ in an essay which proved a turning-point for later readings of Gramsci.

I would like to consider briefly the methodology adopted by Francioni in his criticism of Anderson's book, precisely because it is not just another point

2 Q11, §27; Gramsci 1975, p. 1436.

3 Anderson 1977.

4 Anderson 1978.

5 Francioni 1984.

of view regarding the same object, founded on different but equally legitimate premises. In fact, Francioni's starting-point is not a different 'interpretation' of the concept of hegemony, but a methodological discussion of how, in a text such as the *Notebooks*, one can arrive at any interpretation, and at Anderson's interpretation in particular.

Given the singular structure of the *Notebooks*, to start – as Anderson does – from a passage written at the beginning of 1930 and to define it as a point of arrival for Gramsci's reflections about hegemony, and to mention two further passages, written respectively in October 1930 and June 1932, as a first and second step in the elaboration of the subject, and all this because the existence of first and second drafts of the same texts is ignored by Anderson, shows basic shortcomings that exclude from the very beginning the possibility of attaining any credible results.

The alternative reconstruction, proposed by Francioni on the basis of an approach that respects and reflects the structure and dynamics of the text, proposes a concept of hegemony free from 'antinomies', but characterised by a permanent tension both political and theoretical. It should be from those methodological premises available to anyone – since they are a common patrimony of textual critique and not hiding in some theoretical *shibboleth* – that any other reconstruction, no matter whether alternative and polemical, will have to be proposed.

This is why Anderson's reading has no credibility among Gramsci scholars in contemporary Italy and no-one quotes him or recalls him today. But that is not the case, evidently, in Great Britain or the anglophone world in general, where whoever intends to talk about Gramsci *en marxiste* feels obliged to refer to that book, as a critical warning against the presence, in the *Notebooks*, of the dangerous trend of taking one's distance from the Leninist perspective.⁶ To reconstruct the concept of hegemony (in the framework of the above-mentioned theoretical proposal) Thomas has to pass through Anderson, even if it is just to show (resorting to Francioni's essay) that it is a completely false reconstruction. In short, this chapter could have been avoided, were the anglophone

6 To avoid any misunderstanding, it must be said that the outcome of Francioni's work is not a weakening of the link with Lenin: on the contrary, that link comes out strengthened since he – texts in hand – shows that Gramsci intends his notion of hegemony to be the current form of the (Jacobin and Leninist) 'permanent revolution'. Cf. Francioni 1984, p. 212 (see also pp. 158, 160, 174–5).

world not so impermeable to contributions in other languages (which, since we are discussing an Italian author like Gramsci, seems quite bizarre).⁷

The presence of Althusser (Chapter 2) requires, on the other hand, a theoretical argument that has to do with the substance itself of Thomas's approach. In fact, the attack on Gramsci to be found in *Reading Capital* is an episode of the, at the time, lively theoretical discussion in the context of Marxism, the effects of which persist to this day. Following what has been defined (by André Tsel) as the 'last great theoretical debate of Marxism',⁸ the issue of a Marxist or post-Marxist philosophy has been channelled into a model of unitary and invariable 'philosophy' identified with the 'Theory' proposed by Althusser⁹ in the very moment that he refused the Gramscian concept of philosophy.¹⁰ On the other hand, the presentation of Gramsci within the anglophone world – thanks to Stuart Hall and Ernesto Laclau *in primis* – has taken paths external to philosophy.¹¹ The operation, strategically embedded in the 'current moment' that Thomas proposes (and proposes to us) to start is, first of all, to remove the obstacle of the Althusserian moment in Marxist philosophy so as to make the renewal of a Marxist philosophical model inspired by Gramsci possible.

This 'removal', however, does not exhaust itself in the first chapter, but recurs throughout the book. And in fact (this is a second element to be attentively considered) the critique of Althusser is not external: Thomas discusses from within many of the assets of *Reading Capital* and *For Marx*,¹² and explains and, in certain ways, justifies as conjunctural stances even those that he does not share (such as theoretical antihumanism).¹³

7 To the English-speaking reader who wants to become acquainted with the state of the art in Gramscian studies (updated to 2007), thus avoiding the embarrassment of 'rediscovering' sliced bread, I suggest the consultation of Giasi (ed.) 2008. This book gathers together the proceedings of a conference held in Bari and Turi, 13–15 December 2007, and it would certainly deserve an extensive and detailed critical review (a selection has been recently translated into Portuguese: Aggio, Henriques and Vacca (eds.) 2010). In English, see at least Vacca 2011.

8 Thomas 2009, pp. XIX, 8–12.

9 Cf. Thomas 2009, p. 445.

10 Cf. Frosini 2006.

11 Thomas 2009, p. 11.

12 Much less sympathy is shown for the late 'materialism of the encounter', defined by Thomas 2009, pp. 389–90, as a paradoxical restatement of the self-evident and transparent subject (the encounter would assume in fact that function of the 'author' that has been withdrawn from human beings).

13 Cf. Thomas 2009, pp. 387–8.

It is as if Gramsci could come back and talk again today only if we both removed the Althusserian position and assumed it as an immanent starting-point. The author of *For Marx* and *Reading Capital* is played against other Althusserians, exactly as Gramsci is played against Althusser. In this way a basic affinity is found:¹⁴ historical time, moment, politics, ideology, subject. Already in the initial move of the French philosopher there is a relationship with Gramsci that cannot be reduced to the alternative between acceptance and denial.

3 1932: The Turning-Point

From the 'Althusserian moment' to the 'Gramscian moment'. In both cases, thinking can return to running at full capacity only if both are re-immersed in the historical conjuncture in which they articulated their own thesis. The Gramscian moment, the 'gesture' accomplished by Gramsci, is 'the astounding *annus mirabilis* of 1932',¹⁵ or more precisely 'the distance taken between those two moments – between 1931 and 1932, between the description of hegemony as a "metaphysical event" and the discovery of a type of hegemony that would be a "philosophical fact"'.¹⁶ Thomas sees here a split, a tension resulting from a discovery. The first text, of 1931,¹⁷ would still reflect the idea that there is a dimension – the metaphysical one – within which Lenin's theoretical and practical contribution would register a novelty.

This idea seems no longer valid in the second text, written in 1932,¹⁸ where we find a difference of *status* between philosophy-hegemony on the one side, and philosophy as such on the other. The philosophical gesture accomplished by Gramsci would then be that 'the practice of proletarian hegemony presupposes, requires and produces a new conception of philosophy as such'.¹⁹

After a chapter dedicated to the structure and chronology of the text (where the best Gramscian philology, from Gerratana to Francioni,²⁰ is reviewed and

14 The affinity that only real antagonists can have: 'Gramsci was Althusser's perpetual agonist' (Thomas 2009, p. 32).

15 Thomas 2009, p. XIX.

16 Thomas 2009, p. 39.

17 Q7, §35; Gramsci 1975, p. 886.

18 Q10 II, §12; Gramsci 1975, p. 1250.

19 Thomas 2009, p. 38.

20 One of the few contributions missing here is the study of the structure of the *Notebooks* as an unfinished work by Raul Mordenti (Mordenti 1996).

evaluated) the book is divided into two parts of three chapters, respectively dedicated to the integral state and to the philosophy of praxis. The founding thesis is that in 1932 (that is, when launching the first group of special notebooks, 10 and 11 above all)²¹ Gramsci gives to his research a thrust that leads him to shape neatly the somehow vague need from which he started in 1929. This neat shape consists in synthesising in the concept of ‘hegemony’ the question of power and the question of truth.

On the one hand, then, there is the equilibrium between force and consensus as the political effect of state power, and at the same time power as a ‘condensation’²² of the organisation of the social forces in civil society: in sum, the integral state (as the hegemonic apparatus) as immanent to the dialectics of the forces conflicting in society and, at the same time, as a way to articulate and control them,²³ and therefore – lastly – as an instance necessarily superimposed on a conflict that nonetheless cannot avoid expressing it.²⁴ On the other hand, there is the identity or rather the ‘identification’ of theory and praxis as a historical fact,²⁵ that redefines the theory – even when it is presented as sheer speculation – as immanent to the praxis.²⁶ There is therefore the philosophy of praxis as a new kind of philosophy, because it is able to reflect in its own concept the political nature of philosophy (of any philosophy) and, on this basis, to criticise theoretically and practically every other philosophical position. ‘Just as Gramsci’s analysis of the capitalist state as a hegemonic relation led him to propose the possibility of a self-regulation of a (civil) society that had dispensed with the need for a spiritual unification in the political, so Gramsci’s analysis of human (relations of) knowledge as the theoretical form of hegemonic relations of force leads him to suggest the possibility of a relation of knowledge that can acknowledge its eminently practical status, thus dispensing with its compensatory need to unify the diverse in a speculative fashion.’²⁷

21 The first group of special notebooks consists of Notebook 10 (on Benedetto Croce), 11 (on the philosophy of praxis), 12 (on intellectuals and school) and 13 (on Machiavelli).

22 In Poulantzas’s sense (cf. Thomas 2009, p. 193).

23 Cf. Thomas 2009, pp. 226–7.

24 Behind this position there is Gramsci’s complex reading – very well reconstructed by Thomas – of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right* (cf. Thomas 2009, pp. 173–80).

25 Cf. Thomas 2009, pp. 382–3. ‘The identity of theory and praxis is a critical act, by means of which practice is demonstrated to be rational and necessary or theory to be realistic and rational’ (Q15, §22; Gramsci 1975, p. 1780). This paragraph is examined in depth and evaluated in an original manner by Thomas 2009, pp. 363–5, 380–3.

26 Cf. Thomas 2009, pp. 358, 363.

27 Thomas 2009, p. 383.

The thread running through the whole reconstruction should now be clear: in the *Notebooks* there is a retrieval of Marx's very early critique of the 'heaven' of politics in the name of the concreteness of social relationships. But what in Marx appears under the spotlight of alienation, in Gramsci falls under a completely different light: the 'secret' of the state is the material plot of hegemonic processes; the real content of philosophy is 'the effectiveness of human relations of knowledge';²⁸ the content of ideology is the translation into persuasion-faith and action-constitution of truth. Where Marx has unveiled a speculative abyss, Gramsci proceeds to reconstruct, but in doing so he takes care (and on this point Thomas continually insists) to distinguish the point of view of the proletariat from the point of view of the bourgeoisie.²⁹ Power must be thought/founded anew on a different basis under every single aspect, there can be no continuity between the two worlds. We are dealing with a reading squarely opposed to all those attempts to present Gramsci as a moderate harmless Marxist; a reading that retrieves, at least as its inspiration, a whole body of critique of Stalinism that can be traced back to the beginnings of the Third International.

4 Gramsci and Stalin

On this point I would express some caution. It is well known that Gramsci was a supporter of a method of political work, and of a conception of the relationship between leading roles and real movement that diverged objectively from the one established in Moscow after Lenin's death. This is testified already in the letter written to the CPSU in 1926 on behalf of the politburo of the Italian Communist Party.³⁰ But I would not go so far as to say that it gives evidence of Gramsci's opposition to 'Stalin's purges',³¹ since up to that year there had been no 'purges',³² and in 1926 Stalin's power was far from being consolidated.

28 Q10 II, §6; Gramsci 1975, p. 1245.

29 'The proletarian point of view' as decisive for the 'orientation' of historical materialism is a subject in the work of the Italian Marxist Antonio Labriola. Thomas, a rare example outside Italy (with the exception of France), gives due weight to the Gramsci-Labriola link, retrieving here the best Italian research tradition (starting with Valentino Gerratana and Eugenio Garin).

30 On this point, see Daniele and Vacca (eds.) 1999, a text missing from the bibliography (Thomas 2009, p. 219, n. 48, quotes the Gramsci-Togliatti correspondence).

31 Thomas 2009, p. 219, n. 48.

32 Thomas is probably referring here to the expulsions from the party and from the USSR, such as Trotsky's in 1929, but it would be better to confine the term 'purges' to the already established meaning in the debate on USSR history.

The ‘purges’ in the party in the late 20s and the first half of the 30s ended with expulsions, whereas the ‘trials’ were held later, in 1936 and 1937, and – as Paolo Spriano has written, citing Piero Sraffa – ‘about them . . . Gramsci refrained from taking a position. At most, he did not agree, in principle, that confessions could be used as evidence against the accused.’³³

This circumstance allows us to put the entire episode in the correct light. In fact, when he put to Sraffa in 1936 or 1937 the considerations mentioned above, Gramsci used an explicit reference to some of his reflections on the metaphors Marx used explaining his method in the *Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859). Referring to Marx’s statement that a historical time, as well as an individual, cannot be judged by what its protagonists say of themselves, Gramsci points out that this historiographic conception derives from the revolution in penal law that led to the rejection of torture as a means to extract confessions from the defendants, and to assigning more weight to objective evidence.³⁴ This observation indicates – among other things – a relationship with the *Enlightenment* (which does not mean bourgeois individualism, but democracy and democratic method) that Marxism and Communism, in Gramsci’s opinion, cannot renounce.

On the other hand, we must keep in mind that this opinion is expressed by Gramsci in 1936 or 1937, when he had already interrupted the work on his *Notebooks*, and the USSR had entered politically a quite new phase in comparison with 1930–5. And even at this moment he – as Sraffa reports – ‘refrained from taking a position’. Gramsci’s explicit attitude while in prison is far from that ‘of opposition’: besides, what Gramsci experienced in the political conversations of 1929–30 with his Communist comrades in Turi led him to assume a prudent attitude in order not to disrupt his relationship with the Italian Communist Party and not to embarrass it before the Comintern. An explicit criticism of Stalinist ‘bureaucratism’³⁵ would have meant immediate expulsion from the PCI, and this would have put Gramsci in the same situation which Boris Souvarine had found himself (they had probably met in Moscow in 1922–3, and Souvarine was expelled as a Trotskyist from the French Communist Party in 1924).

It is no coincidence that Gramsci criticised with unusual snappiness Souvarine’s attitude in Q7, §43:³⁶ ‘it seems to me that he has no understanding of Marxism. . . Critique (a superficial one) made from the point of view

33 Spriano 1988, pp. 72–3.

34 Cf. Q1, §113; Gramsci 1975, pp. 100–1, and Q8, §207; Gramsci 1975, p. 1065.

35 Thomas 2009, pp. 231–2.

36 Gramsci 1975, pp. 891–2.

of the intellectual (of the bog-standard intellectual). Souvarine appears to be a 'bog-standard intellectual' not because of the nature of his criticism *in se*. In his discussion of the nature of the political party Gramsci raises a similar objection to Bordiga's leadership of the PCI, in particular where Gramsci opposes bureaucratic to democratic centralism.³⁷ Souvarine is defined as a 'bog-standard intellectual' because the critique he makes of the USSR is located by him deliberately outside the Comintern. As a consequence, this critique assumes an entirely different meaning, which Gramsci describes as 'bureaucratic', so turning against Souvarine the fundamental criticism (bureaucratic degeneration) that the latter had raised against the Comintern and the USSR: 'and his approach could be really defined "bureaucratic"'.³⁸ A joint consideration of Gramsci's critique of Souvarine and of Bordiga reveals that 'bureaucratic' does not mean, in this case, lacking in (real) democracy, but rather lacking in realism: an attitude which stems from an erroneous determination of the relationship between theory and praxis.

Gramsci's attitude towards the struggle between Trotsky and Stalin is therefore complex and cannot be reduced to a clear-cut alternative. The reasons for this complexity are theoretical, political, strategic and tactical, and only by taking into account all of these dimensions, and their interaction in different moments (from 1929 to 1935), can we understand the position Gramsci assumed and the one he would have assumed if he had managed to move to Moscow (an emigration petition, written by Piero Sraffa, in which Gramsci requests 'to be allowed to reunite with his wife' can be dated to 18 April 1937).³⁹

Of this attitude we have an example in Q14, §77 of March 1935, where Gramsci writes on political breaks that end up in judicial trials (a mention of 'espionage' brings to mind the 1930 trial against the 'industrial party', but hovering in the background is Trotsky's expulsion, which Gramsci comments on favourably in the preceding note, Q14, §§74 & 76). Here Gramsci justifies the fact that 'after the break with the deserter or betrayer a lot of misdeeds "are discovered" which before were apparently ignored' as the culmination of 'a long process, whose last act is only then revealed to the public'. And he adds that during the struggle "forbearance" is simulated, in order to show that the break was really necessary and unavoidable', and this, in turn, 'shows how the party membership is believed to be important, and how the resolving decision is made only when enough is enough'.⁴⁰

37 Cf. Cospito 2011, pp. 228–44.

38 Q7, §43; Gramsci 1975, p. 891.

39 Spriano 1988, p. 160 (cf. also pp. 83–4).

40 Q14, §77; Gramsci 1975, p. 1745.

In the system of evidence and accusations we must see then the development of complex political processes that cannot be reduced to the struggle of good against evil, or the powerful against the persecuted (which certainly does not exclude the possibility that Gramsci, once freed, would have taken a clear position). Not to consider this complexity, and to reduce Gramsci to a 'critic of Stalinism', is a perfect anachronism, reflecting more a political controversy of our time than the needs of a serious political and historical consideration of Communism in the age of Stalin.

5 Gramsci and Trotsky (and Bukharin)

It is on this point, I think, that Thomas makes bigger concessions to the dispute, which today looks ever more like an academic exercise, between Stalin and Trotsky. This argument is often approached superficially and with partisan spirit, maintaining that when Gramsci speaks about Trotsky, he means in fact to speak about Stalin⁴¹ – and when he speaks about Stalin in terms of approval, as in Q14, §68, one may wonder: whom does he actually mean? An 'interpretation' that cannot be applied to every single case is not worthy of the name.

To give the whole question more solid foundations, it is necessary to recall some facts. First of all, we know that the terminology chosen by Gramsci in the notebooks and in the letters is often allusive and elusive: actually, every day he risked having the notebooks confiscated,⁴² and, as his sister-in-law Tatjana related after his death to Antonio's wife Julija, he was convinced that it would happen immediately after his release.⁴³ Tatjana adds that Gramsci 'managed to keep them [the notebooks] by writing in Aesopian language',⁴⁴ that is, hiding their real political content under a veil of historical and cultural investigations in order to circumvent the censorship in prison.⁴⁵

The *Notebooks* can be considered – and this is the second fact we have to recall – a political work hidden under a 'literary' veil. Their functionality to the

41 See for example Saccarelli 2008, pp. 82ff., where the main bibliography on this topic is summarised.

42 Cf. Francioni 1992, p. 731, note.

43 Tatiana Schucht to Julija Schucht, 5 May 1937, quoted in Vacca 2012, p. 324 (the letter is preserved in the Archive of the Fondazione Istituto Gramsci, Rome, Carte G. Schucht, *Corrispondenza 1937*).

44 Ibidem.

45 The expression 'Aesopian language' is usual in Russian culture and language. It stems from the attempts made by Russian writers to circumvent censorship since the time of Peter the Great. Cf. Loseff 1984, especially Chapter 1.

development of a strategy for the Communist Party is confirmed by the fact that, as Giuseppe Vacca has now shown extensively,⁴⁶ in his correspondence Gramsci used a series of 'codes' with the aim of remaining in contact with Togliatti and the PCI. This gave him the opportunity to make Togliatti aware of the main conclusion to which Gramsci had come.

Thirdly, instead of following the *idola theatri* (i.e., instead of focusing on the Gramsci-Trotsky relationship through the lens of an outworn dispute), we should rather observe the objective analogy between the way Gramsci treats Bukharin and the way he speaks of Trotsky. Both of them had been excluded from the Bolshevik leadership, and both of them had developed theories whose fortune transcended the personal destiny of their authors. This is evident in the case of Bukharin, whose *Theory of Historical Materialism* provided some important ideas for dialectical materialism, but also for Trotsky, at least if – as Gramsci contends – 'in one way or another [he] can be considered the political theorist of frontal attack in a period in which it only leads to defeats',⁴⁷ an idea that has to be compared to the Comintern's 'social-fascism' and 'third period' strategy during the years 1928 to 1933 (the text I quote was written in August 1931).⁴⁸

Nevertheless, what is proposed here is anything but an allegorical reading of the *Notebooks*. Gramsci focuses on clusters of ideas, not on footnotes, and what he writes is not intended to be a justification of anything, but an open and structurally-unfinished first draft of a yet-to-be-written collective strategy. In sum, in criticising both Bukharin and Trotsky, Gramsci – while reaffirming his loyalty to the leadership of the Comintern – intervened on a much wider front, regardless of the distinctions among fractions to focus on real political processes and on their corresponding theoretical and strategic elaborations. This explains also, in my opinion, Gramsci's imprecision both about Bukharin's book,⁴⁹ and the elements of Trotsky's thought and action. In both cases, Gramsci's critique turns out to be particularly 'out of focus', as if he were concentrating not on that particular subject but, at the same time, also on something else.

It is certainly not the case (to limit ourselves to Trotsky) that we can explain the complex relationship between the two (as Thomas does, following the

46 Vacca 2012.

47 Q6, §138; Gramsci 1975, pp. 801–2.

48 On Gramsci's analysis of Fascism, see Vacca 2004, pp. XIX–XXIV, XXVII–XXXI, LII, LX–LXI, CIII–CXIV.

49 See Mastroianni 1982 and 1984.

indications of Frank Rosengarten)⁵⁰ by resorting to psychological reasons linked to the critique by Trotsky that Gramsci had suffered in 1923. Indeed, rather than insisting on objective analogies existing between Gramsci and Trotsky ('yet the connection is there', writes Rosengarten)⁵¹ one should consider the 'distortion factor' in the 'focus', that is, the wider picture which I referred to above.

Fourthly and finally, it must be observed that a reading of the *Notebooks* will have to consider what Gramsci writes assuming both his personal honesty and his knowledge of the texts to which he refers. In this light, some aspects merit far greater attention, for example the appearance of the critique of the theory of permanent revolution linked to the retrieval of the assessment of the role of peasants in building up hegemony and, on this basis, the appearance of the concept of a 'national bloc' as the starting-point for any new approach to internationalism;⁵² or the 'armies of labour', recalled by Gramsci as a ruling element of Trotsky's political method;⁵³ or lastly the chronological link between the elaboration of the concept of 'war of position', the political discussions in Turi, and the profiling of Trotsky (together with Rosa Luxemburg) as the theorist of the 'war of manoeuvre', that is, of direct attack.

It is evident that Gramsci is referring here to the controversy unleashed by the publication of Trotsky's series of articles on *The New Course* and *The Lessons of October*, between the end of 1923 and October 1924. With this reference in mind, the notion of 'war of manoeuvre' acquires a specific meaning. It does not mean the immediate link between economy and politics (and catastrophism), but a specific conception of 'time' as a set of rhythms that at a certain moment undergo a unification and a contraction, dislocating qualitatively the struggle-front.

50 Cf. Thomas 2009, p. 206, n. 21; and p. 219, n. 48. Cf. Rosengarten 1984–5, p. 79: '... the grudging and half-disparaging manner that characterizes most of [Gramsci's] references to Trotsky in the *Notebooks*'.

51 Rosengarten 1984–5, p. 79. And see Thomas 2009, p. 206, n. 21: 'The terms of their [Gramsci's and Trotsky's] analyses are remarkably similar and complementary, in a fitting sense: while Trotsky provides a more detailed analysis of the weakness implicit in the state's omnipotence in the East (as both apparatus and "political society"), Gramsci's concepts of "civil society" and "hegemonic apparatus" provide a more sophisticated theoretical paradigm for grasping the implications for revolutionary strategy of what Trotsky described as the "heaviest reserves" of the bourgeoisie in the West'. See also, for a similar attitude: Bianchi 2008, pp. 216–51; Morton 2007, pp. 40, 65–6.

52 Q1, §44; Gramsci 1975, p. 54.

53 Q4, §52; Gramsci 1975, p. 489.

Notwithstanding multiple adjustments, Trotsky's position was, in the mid-20s and the early 30s, dominated by this conception of time. In fact even when he maintains the importance of a differentiated assessment of the West, of the democratic struggles, of long-period politics, there is in Trotsky the idea that all this is a 'retreat' functional to reaching the decisive moment (the real 'advance') in which struggle cannot be but 'war of manoeuvre' (to take up this comparison between war and politics, even if its explanatory and heuristic capabilities are, in my opinion, very insufficient). The plurality of times in Trotsky is a synonym of uneven development, and consequently the task of democratic struggles is above all that of putting this picture together, if the revolution is to be international.⁵⁴ It is not for me to say (Thomas does it very well, and I shall come back to it) how, on the other hand, Gramsci's temporality is structurally, irreducibly plural, that is, it cannot be reduced to the expression of a ruling line within which the decisive event should take place as a 'miraculous electrocution'.⁵⁵

And how can we ignore, finally, the link between this issue and the diverse, if not opposite, conception of the national/international relationship?⁵⁶ The real, dramatic problem is how to think of internationalism after the catastrophe of the war and after the defeat of 1921, when all hope of a rapid propagation of the revolution in Europe is lost. These are problems that must be considered both as interrelated, but also as autonomous issues. The first contains a theoretical question the importance of which is almost impossible to overstate. To say that 'Gramsci's perspective... remained fundamentally internationalist in character'⁵⁷ is at the same time redundant (it is the starting-point of any Communist) and insufficient (the classical concept of internationalism is no longer enough). If we take Q14, §68,⁵⁸ the text containing the comparison between Trotsky and Stalin, we can see that the starting-point for Gramsci is the notion of "'national" relation' as the unique and unrepeatable condensation of a national and an international 'moment'. Only the conception of the 'national' as the specific condensation of national and international could

54 On all this, see Rapone 1978, pp. 251–322.

55 Q7, §10; Gramsci 1975, p. 859.

56 Bianchi 2008, pp. 245, 251, correctly records the inverse relation of national and international moments in Gramsci and Trotsky. Nonetheless, he reduces it to a mere question of predominance, whereas it should be regarded as the signal of a different conception of space and time, which also involves a different conception of internationalism and nationality.

57 Thomas 2009, p. 217.

58 Gramsci 1975, pp. 1728–30.

provide the basis for a realistic reformulation of proletarian internationalism. All this leads one to the assessment that, in the given situation, Gramsci agreed in essence with Stalin's⁵⁹ policy of 'nationalisation' of the Communist Party and tried to repeat it in Italy (the notion of 'people nation', which is the Italian transliteration of the Russian 'narodny', is a clear signal in this direction).⁶⁰

6 Truth and Hegemony

Going back to a closer consideration of the book, I must say that I subscribe completely to its philosophical part, except for some irrelevant details. Thomas is very courageous in defending the idea that all the philosophical research contained in the *Notebooks* 'could be regarded as an extended and multifaceted meditation upon . . . the second of the *Theses on Feuerbach*'.⁶¹ This is not a *boutade*: he is right⁶² both in this, and when he maintains that without taking into account the philosophy of praxis nothing can be grasped concerning hegemony and the integral state, and that without considering Gramsci's political *animus* nothing can be understood about the *Notebooks* in general. The part of the analysis in which the interweaving of philosophy, politics and history proves most convincing is perhaps the reconstruction of the kind of temporality implemented in the *Notebooks*.⁶³ It is a plural temporality, where plurality does not mean postmodern disconnection, but immanent critique of the modern notion of time as unified and stationarily (inertially) progressive; a critique intended to restore time both with its character vertically fractured in relations of domination and its horizontal complexity, as a 'set' of real differences, that cannot be idealistically subsumed within a unitary narrative development.

Now, in the way Thomas sets the question, I think there is a primacy of the dialectical relation of domination over the spatial difference, in the sense that the plurality of time is an effect of the 'unequal' organisation of the capitalistic relations on a world scale:

59 And not only Stalin's. See Schirru 2009 on the national-popular [*narodny*] approach of the Bolsheviks to language policy in the founding years of the USSR (1922–4).

60 In fact it can be regarded as a 'sovietism' (Schirru 2009, p. 253).

61 Thomas 2009, p. 308. And see also Thomas 2009, p. 448.

62 I would only add that – as Gramsci himself writes – the philosophy of praxis is contained in the tendency that leads from the *Theses on Feuerbach* to *The Poverty of Philosophy*. Thomas's book misses the confrontation with the later text, which would have allowed much more depth to the discussion of the 'equation' (p. 361) established by Gramsci: 'the philosophy of praxis = Hegel + David Ricardo' (Q10 II, §10; Gramsci 1975, p. 1247).

63 See already Thomas 2006.

the non-contemporaneity of the present in Gramsci is a function and symptomatic index of the struggle between classes. The present, as the time of class struggle, is necessarily and essentially 'out of joint', fractured by the differential times of different class projects. In this conception, difference rather than unity is primary.⁶⁴

So that we could say (in some continuity with the spatial approach of Gramscian linguistics) that 'on an international level, the hegemonic relationships between different nations consign some social formations to the past "times" of others'.⁶⁵

So would communism be then the equalisation of all times and the constitution, finally, of a unitary time? Can this thesis (a classic one: the end of the prehistory of mankind) be maintained in the light of the theory of hegemony? Yes, if by hegemony we mean an organisation of power that can be, strictly speaking, only 'proletarian'.⁶⁶ On another front, in the era of passive revolution there is only 'coercive' consensus;⁶⁷ the passive revolution is, in short, the age of imperialism.⁶⁸ In fact, as an implicit assumption, the theory of imperialism and in particular that of combined and uneven development circulates in the book as a general framework that explains the complex and contradictory '“essential” unity' which is imposed 'on the disparity of different national historical experiences'.⁶⁹ According to this approach, Gramsci accepted the theory of uneven and combined development in *Some Aspects of the Southern Question* (1926) and while in prison he 'continued this line of research, intensifying its presuppositions and placing it at the forefront of his concerns'.⁷⁰

However, it seems to me that this should be expressed in a slightly different way, both conceptually and historically. On a conceptual level, the notion of passive revolution contains two inseparable elements: Gramsci speaks of '“progressive restorations” or “revolutions-restorations” or . . . even “passive revolutions”';⁷¹

64 Thomas 2009, p. 285. The time is 'out of joint': in the book there is a strategic use of Derrida, and I say 'strategic' to point to Thomas's (clearly outlined even if not declared) intention to 'play off' the critical and materialist elements of Derrida's thought (see the resort to the notion of 'supplement' (in Thomas 2009, p. 423 *et passim*)) against the deconstructionist trend.

65 Thomas 2009, p. 285.

66 See Thomas 2009, p. 222, the critical confrontation with Gerratana.

67 Cf. Thomas 2009, pp. 145 and 165.

68 Cf. Thomas 2009, p. 147.

69 Thomas 2009, p. 285.

70 Thomas 2009, p. 408. The same presupposition is behind Morton 2007.

71 Q8, §25; Gramsci 1975, p. 957.

meaning that both aspects must be thought in their reality (and not following the scheme: apparent revolution/real reaction). For phenomena that do not reach the level of real 'progressiveness' which alone makes possible the re-establishment of consensus (and not its sheer manipulation) and therefore of hegemony, Gramsci uses other expressions, such as 'economic-corporative regression'.⁷²

Historically, on the other hand, things could be described as follows: a passive revolution is, in the international space, the 'backlash' of revolutionary accelerations that have politically demonstrated the limits of a given hegemonic order and have multiplied the struggle for its replacement. As such, the whole nineteenth century is a repercussion of 1789: a long passive revolution punctuated by insights of the conflict 'in ever longer waves'.⁷³ The war of 1914 and the revolution of 1917⁷⁴ opened a new phase of passive backlash, the 'progressive' effects of which were, as Gramsci wrote his *Notebooks*, soon to be felt: from the Planism present also in the Fascist regimes to the new industrialism, or the various forms of 'bio-power'.⁷⁵

Asserting all this does not mean reducing passive revolution to another name for 'every complex time of historical developments',⁷⁶ but exactly the opposite: it implies assuming it as a strategy capable of regenerating the combination of consensus-development, giving new impetus to the conquest of hegemony. To say that this consensus is extorted, based on deception, or on domination, does not help us one bit in understanding the power of the bourgeois-capitalist strategy, that is, of its truth-constituting power. Unless (but I do not think that Thomas claims this) the dichotomy bourgeoisie/proletariat is pushed to the point of denying this ability to the former as a matter of principle – after a certain date: but would that not be falling into a sort of 'stadialism'?

If this is not the case, we must confess not only that bourgeois hegemony is still possible, but that it shapes the overall concept of hegemony outlined in the *Prison Notebooks*. So my argument is that Thomas's reduction of hegemony

72 This does not exclude at all the possibility that a process of passive revolution might also rely on local phenomena of economic-corporative regression.

73 Q4, §38; Gramsci 1975, p. 456.

74 What kind of relationship does Gramsci establish between these two events? Do they belong to the same level of reality? Which one, according to Gramsci, includes conceptually the other in the analysis of the present time? It is a question worthy of further consideration.

75 We can add, referring to the period after 1945, the deployment of the welfare state and the experimentation with international regulatory mechanisms against the anarchy of the market.

76 Q15, §62; Gramsci 1975, p. 1827.

to its proletarian version fails to grasp the peculiarity of Gramsci's research. In fact, it is impossible to differentiate bourgeois from proletarian praxis as truth-constituting, and therefore bourgeois from proletarian hegemony, unless we make the stadial presupposition that the bourgeoisie has lost, at a certain moment, its ability to produce hegemony. If, in order to escape this difficulty, we assume that the bourgeoisie was never able to produce hegemony, and that every bourgeois hegemony is a form of deception and domination, it becomes impossible to distinguish between different forms of bourgeois power.

All these difficulties can be solved only if bourgeois hegemony – and passive revolution as its current version – is conceived as a form of hegemony that, although partial in its social extension, is intensively a fully structured example of truth-constitution.

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