

PHILOSOPHY OF PRAXIS IN ANTONIO GRAMSCI'S WORK

FILOSOFIA DA PRÁTICA NA OBRA DE ANTONIO GRAMSCI

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Abstract: Whilst in the midst of crisis-ridden politics in its various forms that have developed since Modernity, this essay attempts to demonstrate that Antonio Gramsci's analysis is not out of date at its core but indicates what still has to be fulfilled. It still remains true if we have in common the idea of the need for solidarity and sharing for that political animal that is the human being, beyond what makes us different. Those who can provide an important contribution to culture and therefore to society, the intellectuals, have the task of deconstructively criticising the concepts of the world that no longer have a progressive impulse but tend towards the conservation of an exclusive status quo. Their role is to advance theoretically and to direct their own and their collective actions towards a real historical process that leads dialectically to a situation of formal and substantive justice. Gramsci was himself first and foremost a politician directed towards staunchly holding together theory and praxis at the cost of his very life.

Keywords: philosophy, praxis, dialectic, history, intellectuals, politics

Resumo: Enquanto em meio à política assolada pela crise em suas várias formas que se desenvolveram desde a Modernidade, este ensaio tenta demonstrar que a análise de Antonio Gramsci não está desatualizada em sua essência, mas indica o que ainda precisa ser cumprido. Ainda permanece verdadeiro se tivermos em comum a idéia da necessidade de solidariedade e compartilhamento para aquele animal político que é o ser humano, além do que nos diferencia. Aqueles que podem fornecer uma contribuição importante para a cultura e, portanto, para a sociedade, os intelectuais, têm a tarefa de criticar desconstrutivamente os conceitos de mundo que não mais têm um impulso progressivo, mas tendem à conservação de um status quo exclusivo. Seu papel é avançar teoricamente e direcionar suas próprias ações e coletivas em direção a um processo histórico real que conduz dialeticamente a uma situação de justiça formal e substantiva. Gramsci era ele mesmo, antes de tudo, um político voltado para a firme convicção da teoria e da prática, à custa de sua própria vida.

Palavras-chave: filosofia, prática, dialética, história, intelectuais, política

The theoretical activity and the practical activity in Antonio Gramsci's work are so intensely intertwined as to be united, starting from his own person and existence, and precisely for this reason they take on that dynamism that belongs to life, which is a continual creation and revolution, invention and innovation, an open dialectical movement. His

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intellectual being, a modern man of culture and philosopher, is not distinguished by the commitment in action with a search for coherence unknown to most, but which even so proves evident and clear as a beacon that illuminates the dark nights of mankind with a strong and irrepressible light and remains a reference tower at daybreak.

Thus also today we return to the legacy of Gramsci's thought, and in particular to the writings produced in the cell of a fascist prison, in solitude and in the uncertainty of the future, between the doubts of the mind and the suffering of a body weakened by hardship and persecution. Within those writings, which the author was unable to review and edit personally, and therefore are to be considered provisional, we search for indications to bring life to, and to direct profitably, the meaning and the manner of the relationship between the role of intellectuals and the function and the organisation of the culture in society starting from modernity, a relationship which is now central for the human material history.

For Gramsci, ever since his youth², the human being is a historical creation and not nature, and has gradually acquired awareness of his own individual and collective value and has thought about the possibility of living differently from the values imposed by minorities. This gradual awareness was initially formed thanks to the considerations of the few and subsequently it spread to the whole of a social class, like an epidemic, and it allowed reasons and methodologies to be identified that are useful to pass from situations of enslavement to rebellion and finally to social reconstruction.

Real changes occur when those who seek to resolve daily problems according to their economic and political advantage convince themselves that the keystone of social situations is solidarity with those who find themselves in common difficult situations, though with different shades and motivations. This can occur if there is a cultural change, if culture is not interpreted as encyclopaedic knowledge to be exhibited in society, but becomes self-awareness, the gaining of consciousness of oneself, the organising and discipline of one's inner self. In this way one can come to understand one's position and historical function, one's duties and rights.

Those who can give a strong contribution to culture and therefore to society, the intellectuals, have the task to criticise de-constructively the conceptions of the world that no longer have progressive thrust but that tend towards conserving an excluding status quo. They have the role of foreseeing theoretically and directing their own actions and collective actions

2 Cf. Gramsci Antonio, *Cronache torinesi. 1913-1917* ("Turin Chronicles"), edited by Caprioglio S., Torino: Einaudi, 1980, pp. 100-101.

towards a real historic process that leads dialectically to a situation of formal and substantial justice.

Indeed, in Gramsci's opinion, it was necessary to analyse and criticise the dominant ideologies so as to be able to effect consciously a constructive political project which, to be such, could not fail to take an interest in permeating the culture of the time and encouraging aggregation; that is what even today it would be necessary to see in a philosophy that wants to be realised in the search for the common good, that is, in politics. This will to connect, in approaching problems of real history, a scientific method and a constructive action towards the resolution, or in any case the improvement, of living conditions for all, in particular for the lowest, is the sense and the meaning of returning to Gramsci's works as a source of inspiration. These works in their essence remain always truthful if one is united by the idea of the need for solidarity and for sharing, through that political animal that man is, the need for unity beyond everything that makes us different. Gramsci himself was first and foremost a politician who, at the cost of his own life, aimed to keep theory and praxis together faithfully.

We might say that, along with Kant, he was one of those witnesses to the factuality of freedom in a world where the necessary law of conflict for individual survival is in force, one of those witnesses of an astonishing moral elevation albeit in the misery of human beings. Even in conditions of persecution and suffering he was able to keep his faith in the reason of the human genus alive and in *Quaderni dal carcere*³ (*The Prison Notebooks*) he wrote that thinking belongs to man and this intrinsic characteristic leads every individual to be a philosopher and, for this reason, he stated that a man cannot be defined non-intellectual because “non-intellectuals do not exist”⁴.

There is no human activity from which every form of intellectual participation can be excluded: *homo faber* cannot be separated from *homo sapiens*. Each man, finally, outside his professional activity, carries on some form of intellectual activity, that is, he is a ‘philosopher’, an artist, a man of taste, he participates in a particular conception of the world, has a conscious line of moral conduct, and therefore contributes to sustain a conception of the world or to modify it, that is, to bring into being new modes of thought.⁵

Differences of degree can certainly be noticed, not qualitative but quantitative differences.

3 Cf. Id., *Quaderni del carcere (The Prison Notebooks)*, Critical edition by the *Istituto Gramsci*, edited by Gerratana V., Torino: Einaudi, 1975¹- 2014⁴, vol. II, pp. 1342-1343.

4 Cf. Id., *Quaderni del carcere (The Prison Notebooks)*, vol. III, pp. 1550-1551.

5 *Ibidem*, the translation is ours.

The professional or technical philosopher does not only 'think' with greater logical rigour, with greater coherence, with more systematic sense than do other men, but he knows the entire history of thought. In other words, he is capable of accounting for the development of thought up to his own day⁶.

He is a specialist thinker, as the scientist who specialises in his discipline, but having made them too similar has created a caricatured figure of the philosopher, because the latter should be intrinsically near to other men, more than that which occurs for specialists of the various sciences. Philosophers should, therefore, be the first to be conscious that they carry out a function, a role in history, that they can influence, transform and innovate the conceptions of the world, the relative rules of conduct, practical activity⁷. Everyone can, however, be permeated by philosophy, by overcoming basic and savage passions and by understanding the rationality and necessity inherent in history. Furthermore, in the Gramsci's perspective, as in the Marxian point of view, this awareness must not lead to being subjected to history but to managing such processes and making them emancipatory.

The culture of an age is, indeed, determined by those ruling groups that know how to guide all the theoretical elaborations of the intellectuals together with the people's needs: "history and philosophy are in this sense indivisible: they form a 'bloc'."⁸ This phenomenon is in reality a political and practical one, the fruit of the struggle between what is considered rational and what is considered irrational in a given historical moment that is necessarily ongoing and -Gramsci asserts - in modern history the protagonists of this 'bloc', the subjects of history, have become the masses. Thus also the term "particular" can no longer indicate only individual interest because the "individual" is not the biological individual but is the social group from the historical-political point of view. "Only the struggle, with its outcome, and not even its immediate outcome, but rather the one expressed in a permanent victory, will decide what is rational or irrational, what is 'worthy' of triumphing because it continues, in its own way, and transcends the past"⁹.

Even the elevated intellectual "must democratise himself, be more actual"¹⁰, must come out of his ivory tower of consolidated traditions and take into account the active role and the direct participation of ever greater masses in social events. If he wants to continue to

6 Id., *Quaderni del carcere (The Prison Notebooks)*, vol. II, pp. 1342-1343, the translation is ours.

7 Cf. *Ibidem*, pp. 1255-1259.

8 *Ibidem*, p. 1255, the translation is ours.

9 *Ibidem*, p. 690, the translation is ours.

10 *Ibidem*, p. 689, the translation is ours.

guide the paths of evolution of culture, the theorist cannot avoid “plunging into practical life” and “becoming and organiser of the practical aspects of culture”, having a clear awareness of the key role that the cultural moment performs in collective practical activity. In this regard Gramsci wrote:

Every historical act can only be performed by ‘collective man’, and this presupposes the attainment of a ‘cultural-social’ unity through which a multiplicity of dispersed wills, with heterogeneous aims, are welded together with a single aim, on the basis of an (equal) and common conception of the world (general and particular, operating in transitory bursts – in emotional ways – or permanently, where the intellectual base is so well-rooted, assimilated and experienced that it can become passion). Since this is the way things happen, the importance of the general question of language comes to light, that is, the question of collectively attaining a single cultural ‘climate’¹¹.

These considerations enlighten and give a direction also to the modern doctrine and pedagogical and educational practice on the whole, where the educational act has become an active relationship which is built on the basis of mode of reciprocity in relations between teacher and pupil. This mode, on closer inspection, is not limited to the experiences that occur in school and university environments but concerns the whole society, it involves every individual in the relationship with other individuals, the intellectual classes in the relationship with the non-intellectual classes, the rulers with the ruled, the élites and the disciples, the managers and the managed, the vanguards and the followers. Thus, on a national level, but also on an international and world level, in the various civilisations the relationship of “hegemony” in Gramsci's opinion takes on the characteristics of a pedagogical relationship.

The philosopher, as every human being who measures himself actively against the cultural environment surrounding him, finds himself face to face with a “teacher” inasmuch as, in setting him limits, he compels him to perform a continual and vital self-criticism in the proceeding of the praxis, of the “human sensitive activity”. Human beings are, of course, the product of the environment and education, but every environment is modified in interaction and all forms of humanity are part of this dynamic of intersected influences.

The very question of truth is essentially a practical rather than a theoretical one, otherwise it would remain a purely school-type question since it is “in practical activity that man must demonstrate the truth, that is, the reality and the power, the earthly character of his

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 1331, the translation is ours.

thought”¹² and it is in the praxis that a significant truth for communities occurs and is transformed. The view that the search for theoretical truth is realised in history and is essentially history, the concept of philosophy as the history of philosophy and therefore history, are elements that Gramsci has in common with Benedetto Croce, with whom he inwardly established a dialogue and an intellectual debate since his education but from whom he distanced himself the more he approached Marx.

He met radical differences with the positivist positions, among which that of Roberto Ardigò¹³, whom he strongly criticised defining him as a “lukewarm democrat” who reduced the new mass movements to a sort of vulgar utilitarianism. So, too, did he stress that to reduce the philosophy of praxis to sociology leads to a sort of crystallisation of materialism reducing the concept of the world to a “mechanical formula which gives the impression of holding the whole of history in the palm of its hand”¹⁴. He did not deny, however, that building empirical compilations of practical observations opens up to a more in-depth understanding. Indeed, he recognised the methodological importance that the particular facts be observed, verified and clarified in their individuality. In this regard he noted, “one cannot exclude the practical utility of isolating certain more general 'laws of tendency' corresponding in the political field to the laws of statistics or to the law of large numbers”¹⁵ and which are at the basis of the progress of many natural sciences. Indeed, he was progressively more and more convinced of the now inescapably complementary aspect that the sciences fulfilled in modern and contemporary culture, as the exchange of letters from prison also testifies.

Karl Marx's historical materialism became one of the areas of interest that engaged him the most both in investigating and in searching for an evolution of the Marxian concept itself, sharing its structural assertions but attempting to dialectize them further in order to bring them nearer to the vital movement of history. In social production, human beings become part of specific and necessary production relations corresponding to a degree of development of material forces. The whole of these relationships together forms society's economic structure which is its real basis upon which the legal, political, cultural and religious superstructure is established. The social being determines men's conscience whereas the conscience of an individual can do little to influence the way of being social other than bearing a testimony having the meaning of a vanguard for the history of the defeated. In

12 Id., *Quaderni del carcere (The Prison Notebooks)*, vol. III, p. 2355, the translation is ours.

13 Cf. Id., *Quaderni del carcere (The Prison Notebooks)*, vol. I, pp. 427-430 and vol III, pp. 1850-54.

14 Id., *Quaderni del carcere (The Prison Notebooks)*, vol. II, p. 1428, the translation is ours.

15 *Ibidem*, p. 1429, the translation is ours.

historical dialectics at a certain degree of development the emerging material production forces enter into contradiction with production relations, that is, with the property relations in which they had been more or less organically inserted. Thus, what before was functional to the development of production forces is transformed into an obstacle and this affects the superstructure, which, in turn, seeks a new equilibrium with the economic mutation by subverting itself.

These mutations are scientifically observable beginning with the contradictions of material life, with the type of conflict that exists between production forces and production relations, with their causes and their development trends. A social formation is transformed if it is no longer at all functional to the emerging production forces which become majority, as there is strong resistance of the old social structures, the will to maintain the status quo by those who enjoy its privileges, by the élite of a historical period. Each structural change is not immediate, neither is arriving at the moment of the revolution immediate: it is necessary to realise it collectively over time.

According to Marx, great social revolutions, which lead to a transformation of economic structure such as to entail what might be defined as a passage from one era to another in the history of mankind, are realised where “the material conditions for its solution are already present or at least in the course of formation”¹⁶. Gramsci wanted to proceed with Marx in the direction of the accomplishment of the critique of Hegelian dialectics according to the course charted by his left wing pupils, that is, one of openness and emancipation. This entailed in this exponent the search for differentiating the position of the Marxian materialistic historicism from the fatalistic concepts of history, be they of providentialist, positivist or naturalistic origin. For these reasons he focused on the role of the subjective will of self from which the comparison with otherness and with the group begins in order to make a collective will in class consciousness. Considering this theoretical and practical, we could even say existential, tension, his references in the “Ordine Nuovo” (“New Order”) articles and in the letters from prison to the “pessimism of the intelligence” and the “optimism of the will” can be better understood for fulfilling the philosophy of praxis, which is political action.

The “problem of the relationship between structures and superstructures”¹⁷ was interpreted by Gramsci according to the outlines indicated by Marx, and thus he felt a faithful pupil of the supporting core of the master's philosophy and reflected that the concept of

16 Id., *Quaderni del carcere (The Prison Notebooks)*, vol. III, p. 2359, a passage translated from Marx's preface, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859).

17 *Ibidem*, p. 1578, the translation is ours.

“orthodoxy” with respect to Marxian texts “must be renewed and brought back to its authentic origins”¹⁸. Indeed, orthodoxy must be sought, according to this Marxist, exactly in the “philosophy of the praxis” because it “contains in itself all the fundamental elements needed to construct a total and integral conception of the world, a total philosophy and theory of natural science, and not only that but everything that is needed to give life to an integral practical organisation of society, that is, to become a total integral civilisation”¹⁹. It is truly revolutionary with respect to the old world. It is the transformation of such a world. It is the identity of history and philosophy²⁰, a “completely new” and “original” way of conceiving philosophy²¹. Thus, as regards the expression “historical materialism”, Gramsci asserted that greater weight had been given to the second word whereas it would be necessary to give it to the first word in that “Marx is essentially a 'historicist'”²².

Lying at the centre, the philosophy of the praxis, regarding this conception of the world and life, maintains, indeed, that “every 'truth' believed to be eternal and absolute has had practical origins and has represented a ‘provisional’ value”²³ and this interpretation, in order to be consistent, cannot fail to be applicable to this very philosophy. Of course Gramsci, being the politician that he was, recognised that this double judgement of reason could be harmful for “those convictions that are necessary for action”. However, if we renounce the depth of this analysis and the related critical awareness we fall back into those ideological forms which the very philosophy of praxis connotes with “a judgement of disvalue” both as “science of ideas” and as system of ideas”, in that in their claim to unconditional validity they lack abstractness, they stiffen and inevitably tend to conservation more than to guiding change, and therefore act in some way as a “superstructure”²⁴. The philosopher of praxis, in order effectively to be such, in its role as guide cannot fail to search for a balance between these problematic elements directly in political action, in the search for a common good, keeping theory and praxis joined dialectically in the heart of history.

Embracing Marx's considerations about the fact that a theory that penetrates through the masses can be transformed into a material force²⁵, he returned to considering the relationship between structure and superstructure and precisely by virtue of the real dialectical

18 Id., *Quaderni del carcere (The Prison Notebooks)*, vol. II, p. 1434, the translation is ours.

19 *Ibidem*, the translation is ours.

20 Cf. *Ibidem*, p. 1241.

21 Cf. Id., *Quaderni del carcere (The Prison Notebooks)*, vol. I, p. 433.

22 *Ibidem*, the translation is ours.

23 Id., *Quaderni del carcere (The Prison Notebooks)*, vol. II, p. 1489, the translation is ours.

24 Cf. *Ibidem*, p. 1491.

25 Cf. *Ibidem*, p. 869.

process which regards them he saw in it a greater biunique reciprocity than other Marxist writings of his time, whilst recognising the structure as the key element for forming ideologies and conditions of social relationships²⁶. Gramsci focused on the power of ideologies as a means of mass dominion if they are combined with a persuasive communicative form and certainly the historical situation in Italy at that time already bore witness to the veracity of his thoughts.

He considered it important, however, to obtain consensus so as to realise his personal Marxist view of the world and he considered it an essential but a long and difficult task. To this end he warned of the Illuminist-type mistake to think that “a clear, widely-spread idea” would penetrate in minds with the same characteristics of clarity in that “the ability of a professional intellectual to combine skilfully induction and deduction, to generalise” and to adapt a criterion to the new conditions is not always a matter of “common sense”, which is instead more prone to favour the passionate and explosive illusion to the critical spirit. An education/informative activity is, therefore, necessary performed patiently and systematically in repetition by identifying the right communication channels through an analysis of society: “to find the real identity under the apparent differentiation and contradiction and to find the substantial diversity under the apparent identity. This is the most essential quality of the critic of the ideas and of the historian of social development”²⁷. Gramsci asserted that there is, however, a fundamental difference between the philosophy of the praxis and the other forms of philosophy or politics insofar as:

it is not the instrument of government of the dominant groups in order to gain the consent of and exercise hegemony over the subaltern classes; it is the expression of these subaltern classes who want to educate themselves in the art of government and who have an interest in knowing all truths, even the unpleasant ones, and in avoiding the (impossible) deceptions of the upper class and – even more – their own. The critique of the ideologies, in the philosophy of praxis, involves the ensemble of the superstructures and affirms their rapid transience in that they tend to hide reality, namely struggle and contradiction, even when they are ‘formally’ dialectical (like Croce’s philosophy), in other words they deploy a speculative and conceptual dialectic and do not see the dialectic in historical becoming itself²⁸.

The de-constructivist phase, an activity of unhinging the old and sterile economic-social relationships, that awaits the new political subject of the modern and contemporary age,

26 Cf. *Ibidem*, pp. 1051-1052.

27 Id., *Quaderni del carcere (The Prison Notebooks)*, vol. I, pp. 33-34, the translation is ours.

28 Id., *Quaderni del carcere (The Prison Notebooks)*, vol. II, p. 1320, the translation is ours

the “collective man”, does not prove to be any less demanding than the constructivist phase and both require “the reaching of a 'cultural and social' unity”, which made evident for Gramsci the centrality of the “cultural moment” in collective practical activity²⁹.

The description of the traits of the politician/philosopher whom Gramsci identified in Notebook 13, entitled *Notes on the Politics of Machiavelli*, is brief and eloquent: he has the task of stimulating and creating but starting from effectual reality and not from the “murky emptiness” of his desiderata.

Applying one's will to the creation of a new equilibrium among the forces which really exist and are operative - basing oneself on the particular force which one believes to be progressive and strengthening it to help it to victory - one still moves on the terrain of effectual reality, but does so in order to dominate and transcend it (or to contribute to this). What 'ought to be' is therefore concrete; indeed it is the only realistic and historicist interpretation of reality, it alone is history in the making and philosophy in the making, it alone is politics.³⁰

Equally significant is the idea arising from reading the pages about Machiavelli that the “modern prince” can no longer be an individual but must be an organism that makes of its specialisations a unity in the sharing of a political project which sees in solidarity the aim and methodology of the action. For Gramsci this organism was the political party and today, in total crisis of this composition of political forces, his analysis does not appear to a careful observer to be outdated in its essence but rather it indicates what actually is still to be accomplished. They are words that are full of meaning, the legacy of a philosopher of the praxis, the “creator” and the “inspirer” of new directions beyond the deadlock of a barren and ancient status quo.

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²⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 1330-1331, the translation is ours.

³⁰ Id., *Quaderni del carcere (The Prison Notebooks)*, vol. III, p. 1578, the translation is ours.

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