RECLAIMING GRAMSCI: A BRIEF SURVEY
OF CURRENT AND POTENTIAL USES OF THE WORK
OF ANTONIO GRAMSCI

The scope of this article is to outline some recent uses of Antonio Gramsci in order to stress that there has been a distancing of his works from the context that produced them and to propose some possibilities through which the Sardinian intellectual may regain some currency in that same context. It is interesting that Antonio Gramsci is mostly considered passé in Italy; at least he is not viewed as a useful tool for contemporary critiques. This negligence of Gramsci's work goes hand in hand with a neglect of the Southern Question that was such an integral part of his political commitment.

I will state outright that Italian unification, when viewed through historical and literary records, through coincidental colonial activities in Africa, and with the always helpful aid of hindsight, is to be considered nothing more than an annexation of colonial status of the southern part of the peninsula. This is by no means a novel view, but it gains in significance given recent claims by the northern separationist Leagues which, by a rather amazing slight-of-hand, have again brought the Southern Question into focus and simultaneously erased 120 or so years of history to describe the North as a colonized region.

The cultural processes that may have led to this inversion offer fertile ground for a Gramscian reading of the Italian nation 68 years since his writing of The Southern Question in 1925. The extant North/South fault that plagues Italian nationhood, and the related phenomenon of emigration are part and parcel of the Question.

The writings of Antonio Gramsci have come to form a body of reference for what has come to be known as “cultural studies,” apparently a product of British stamp, in which the names of Stuart Hall, Dick Hebdige, the Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies of the University of Birmingham, and the Open University figure strongly, but one that I believe can be extended back through Gramsci to Giambattista Vico.

In his book From Class Struggle to the Politics of Pleasure, David Harris treats the “effects of Gramscianism on British cultural studies,” making it obvious that, far from establishing a homogeneous and strongly situated school, Gramscianism is as varied as the individuals who adhere to it. Harris suggests that Gramscians are defined merely by their distant references to a selected use of Gramsci’s works. As far as American Gramscians such as Lawrence Grossberg are concerned, Harris is particularly dismissive by
observing that their “relation to Gramsci is carried largely by a kind of ‘hall of fame’ approach, where Gramsci is merely a founding father of radical work” (28).

Though Harris’s judgment betrays a not untypical European arrogance vis-à-vis American scholarship, it is somewhat correct. Leafing through the various anthologies and journals that specialize in cultural studies one is often struck by observations of obvious Gramscian provenance, and yet one is hard pressed to find any footnote or index notation of their origins. The reason for this is, in my experience, that Gramsci is only partially available in English and that most of these undocumented references represent ideas that have come to circulate either as anonymous concepts or under the name of those who first introduced them into the cultural studies sphere.

My title proposes a project of reclamation, by which I only mean to restore the signature to what has been rendered anonymous, a task that is being aided by Joseph Buttigieg’s translation in progress of the Prison Notebooks (forthcoming from Columbia University Press). Restoration of the signature obviously means a recontextualization of Gramsci’s writings, a matter of deep importance given that the matters considered to be of utmost significance in Gramsci’s works by the cultural studies crowd are relative to cultural specificity. Gramsci addressed those matters from the point of view of a culturally diverse Italian national, relating a situation that can be said to still be somewhat unresolved to this day.

The specificity of this most important aspect of Gramscian thought is the very element that is extracted and left unconsidered. As examples of this oversight I will offer two brief notations that illustrate the ignorance surrounding the issue of Italian cultural diversity. The first is Stuart Hall’s essay “Gramsci’s Relevance for the Study of Race and Ethnicity.”

Gramsci did not write about race, ethnicity or racism in their contemporary meanings and manifestations. Nor did he analyze in depth the colonial experience or imperialism, out of which so many of the characteristic “racist” experiences and relationships in the modern world have developed. His principle preoccupation was with his native Italy.(8)

In this statement, Stuart Hall demonstrates a common ignorance of the fact that the Southern Question is, whether rightly or wrongly, also a question of race, ethnicity, and colonialism. This is how the ground upon which North/South differences have been historically constructed; they are elements without which the Southern Question would be an insignificant buzzword.

The second example is from Lata Mani’s essay “Cultural Theory, Colonial Texts: Reading Eyewitness Accounts of Widow Burning,” in Lawrence Grossberg’s Cultural Studies (1992) (392). In the introductory pages of her study, Mani warns her audience of what she takes to be problematic developments in the field:
We need to think critically about currently fashionable terms like post-coloniality, asking for whom this term most resonates, and who would resist it and why. Finally, there is the attempt to transpose the notion of the subaltern which emerged to address particular analytical problems in Indian historiography (Guha, 1982), into a more generalized subject position or political location. (394)

All in all, a valid complaint. Yet, if we consider Mani’s attitude it also indicates that what is at stake for her is a legitimacy of terminological use that is, in this case, obviously associated strictly with the Indian Subaltern Studies Collective. Claims such as this, as with Gayatri Spivak’s statement that “it is hard for us to think of a genuine subaltern in the First World,” have defined the field of cultural studies chiefly in binary terms of white/color or first-world/third-world oppositions and in questions of authenticity that tend to erase the very cultural diversity these critics pretend to champion.

Lata Mani’s complaint is specifically centered around the use of the term “subaltern.” Her claim to exclusivity betrays a blindness to, and erasure of, the use of the term in its Gramscian implications, which ironically is how it first came to be used by the Indian Subaltern Studies Group. By restoring Gramsci’s subaltern and colonial aspects as they concern the discourse of the Italian nation, Southern Italians may today find the instruments to finally come to a fuller understanding of that specific national situation and the migrant masses that left it behind.

RESISTING GRAMSCI

The popularity and usefulness of Gramsci in cultural studies, however, touches a nerve with Marxists. So-called “post-Marxists” (namely Gramscians) move under accusations of reformism and voguish preoccupations. Chris Harman’s Gramsci versus Reformism outlines “distortions” of Gramscian thought since the author’s death. In a contorted exercise, Harman follows Togliatti’s censoring of Gramsci to conform to the PCI party line of the period; he then professes that, because of the initial censorship, distortions took place when the PCI broke with Moscow and into its Euro-communism era.

Since “in 1926 the fascist state snatched him away from any contact with the masses,” Harman finds that “without direct personal experience Gramsci was unable to grasp the concrete interrelation between the economic situation and the political reaction to it of individuals.” The same “was not true of Marx who from exile could write the 18th Brumaire, or of Trotsky who from confinement in Turkey could write profoundly about daily developments in Berlin” (27). Because Harman’s analysis requires strict adherence to economics, he finds ample ground on which to discount
Gramsci’s writings and in the end can only say that “whatever their insights they do not have the greatness of the finest works of Marx, Lenin or Trotsky” (28).

Norman Geras’s *Discourses of Extremity* (1990) provides another critique aimed at what he defines as “post-marxist extravagances.” With the aim to oppose “the pressures of intellectual fashion and reaction,” Geras concentrates on the work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, who have based much of their work on re-elaborations of Gramscian thought (particularly on the concept of hegemony in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*).

And so, at this point we must consider the meaning of Gramscianism as post-marxism. If Gramscian thought may be regarded as post-marxist, it is due only to its decontextualization. Harris’s view (following Geras) that “post-marxism diffuses and dilutes ‘politics’ to mean almost any antagonism, of the kind which arises wherever there are rival discourses: arguments between neighbours on the one hand, or, equally, the politics of ‘slavery, apartheid, concentration camps’ on the other” (34) is to be questioned. Rather than post-marxist, in situations such as that of Southern Italy it would be more correct to speak of a pre-marxist stage in which no political ideology has gained the trust of the population. What holds true in many situations is a working strategy that provides the opportunity for political antagonism through smaller and more concentrated unions, such as the ones Harris quotes. The rub comes, for critics such as Harris and Geras, when concepts like *class* and *proletarian revolution* are not used as sole determining categories.

In Italy, Gramsci’s regionalist preoccupations, which, as Giuseppe Fiori has shown, provided the formational impetus that led the young thinker to socialism and the various aspects of cultural critique that might have strengthened post-war Italy, have in fact remained buried or have surfaced with a tardiness that could possibly have been detrimental to the survival of the PCI.

**RECONTEXTUALIZING**

In October 1975, days before his murder, Pier Paolo Pasolini gave a lecture at a school in Lecce. There, sixteen years ago, he explored with the attending faculty and students cultural matters that called for immediate attention then as much as they do now. The text of the resulting debate has been published under the title *Volgar’eloquio* (1987) and stands as yet another document in Pasolini’s stance on the recognition, importance, and much needed protection of cultural diversity.

The value that Pasolini gives Gramsci in today’s world historically positions the Sardinian in a manner that distances Pasolini from the charges of traditionalism, idealism, and even reactionary tendencies levelled at him whenever he dared speak of subaltern cultures:
Verdicchio

SYMPOSIUM 173

Per Gramsci era lecitissimo parlare di emancipazione, perché Gramsci lavorava quarant’anni fa, in un mondo arcaico che noi non osiamo neppure immaginare. [...] Allora era giustissimo [...] perché i pastori sardi erano, vivevano in un dato modo. È inconcepibile la differenza. Quindi non puoi richiamarmi Gramsci come esempio di emancipazione, puoi ricordarmi Gramsci come anello di una catena storica che porta a fare nuovi ragionamenti oggi, a riproporre un nuovo modo di essere progressisti, un nuovo modo di essere gramsciani. [...] quando Gramsci dice genocidio [...] prende una posizione in favore delle vittime contro coloro che li hanno vittimizzati; prende una posizione in favore delle culture particolaristiche che venivano distrutte contro la cultura centralistica che le distruggeva. (53)

With this, I am not basing my reading of Gramsci on Pasolini. The latter’s relationship to subalterns, to Southern Italians, to the populations of the “Third World” is complicated, contradictory, and ambiguous. However, Pasolini’s identification of Gramsci as “a link in a chain” provides an important perspective for rethinking his currency among cultural critics and probably one of Pasolini’s best moments in his critique of the Italian cultural situation.

To his credit, Gramsci’s work does not represent a theoretical body, but presents a theoretical stance that, by not delineating or centering itself as a proponent of a strong “theory,” leaves its readers the possibility of interpretation and expansion. Of course, this also leaves room for what may be called “misunderstanding,” but as a whole the Gramscian corpus is an intricate set of details in which every fragment participates, thereby resulting in much less ambiguity than one might expect.

As Pasolini further remarks in Volgar’eloquio, Gramsci is important for us today because we face not “the problem of a cultural and anthropological reality, but the problem of the survival of a cultural and anthropological reality” (60). Part and parcel of this reality is the survival of the Southern Question which, though not the same as that which concerned Gramsci, has transformed into what Giovanni Russo views as an urgent concern for the future of Italy in the European scheme. As such, it is all important that Gramsci’s specificity of argument rests upon the N/S problematics of the Italian nation.

GRAMSCI’S OSSERVAZIONI SUL FOLCLORE

[...] folclore non come elemento “pittoresco” ma come “concezione del mondo e della vita” di determinati strati della società in contrapposizione con le concezioni del mondo “ufficiali.” (Letteratura e vita nazionale, 215)

Because cultural diversity has, in the interest of a nationally homogeneous culture, been reduced to connotations of folkloric quaintness, I think it impor-
tant to emphasize that Gramsci’s “Osservazioni sul folclore” have contributed
to establishing folklore not as the remains of archaic cultures to be studied in
the attempt to reconstruct a prehistoric past but as oppositional and subaltern
cultures. In the postwar period, Ernesto De Martino, one of Italy’s foremost fol-
clorists, identified a contradictory and dissimilar set of laws at work between
“a conservative folklore (religious) and a progressive one” which was reflect-
ed in the protest songs of peasants and workers. De Martino’s writings, such as
“Intorno a una storia del mondo popolare subalterno,” along with Gram-
sci’s, have enabled cultural anthropologists to view the field with a renewed
objective.

In this aspect, a most important contemporary scholar is Luigi Lombardi-
Satriani, who has extended the Gramscian base into a consideration of fol-
clore as a “culture of contestation.” In his volume Antropologia culturale e
analisi della cultura subalterna (1974), Lombardi Satriani augments Gram-
sci’s writings on folklore to extend his identification of various levels of con-
testation: (1) immediate contestation with rebellion; (2) immediate contesta-
tion with acceptance; (3) implicit contestation; and (4) acceptance of the
hegemonic culture, all of which reveal folklore’s strategies for survival
through diversified interaction with the dominant culture. In Antropologia, as
in subsequent volumes, Lombardi Satriani therefore offers a view of fol-
clore/subaltern culture that is extremely complex and far removed from the
simplistic and static sense assigned it by official culture.

Alberto Cirese prefers to view folklore as an index of cultural inequalities
within modern society. In Intellectuals, folklore, istinto di classe: Note su
Verga, Deledda, Scotellaro, Gramsci (1976), Alberto Cirese utilizes folklore
as an index of cultural inequalities with which to analyze the work of writers
and their relationships to the subaltern cultures which they represented or
sought to represent. An important section within those pages is the one dedi-
cated to a reading of Gramsci’s “Osservazioni sul folklore” (65–104); it is
within these pages that Cirese highlights important aspects of Gramsci’s con-
siderations of elements beyond economics as determinants in social relation-
ships.

Vittorio Lanternari, ethnographer and anthropologist, is particularly
adamant about folklore’s status as a prebourgeois culture and therefore some-
thing of a transitory stage in the inevitable evolution toward bourgeois domi-
nant culture. In Crisi e ricerca di identità: Folklore e dinamica culturale
(1977), he questions tendencies of folcloric revival as they have manifested
themselves in recent times and, with that, any notion of folklore as a socio-
anthropological presence.

Within this limited sampling, I find Lombardi Satriani’s work the most
appealing. Lombardi Satriani views folklore neither as an unimportant residue
of archaic cultures nor as a pure and uncontaminated culture; he makes no
such demands on folklore/subaltern culture, thereby recognizing that cultural interaction is an inescapable, and not necessarily negative, event.

In conclusion, I would like to address the particular character of Gramsci’s writings that make possible their recuperation in a “new manner” as suggested by Pasolini. The singularity of Gramsci’s works is that they are the product of a subaltern subject. As a Sardinian, Gramsci represents the very subject construction that is engaged in the formation of nation-states. While this dimension of Gramsci is overlooked in Italy mostly out of orthodoxy within the parameters of the left, it is also disregarded by, or unknown to, non-Italians. The writings of Stuart Hall, Cornell West, and Gayatri Spivak, all of whom quote Gramsci with frequency, ignore the particular circumstances of the Italian cultural situation, collapsing it into a notion of nationhood which is useful to their argument. To consider Gramsci solely as an Italian Marxist is a misprision of his subjectivity that supports the type of State power apparatus he unveils in his writings.

We may be well beyond the installation of “dialects as [. . .] a cultural and anthropological reality,” but we are in fact in the midst of “a problem of cultural and anthropological survival,” to again quote Pasolini. It is this facet of “Italian culture” that can be most revealing and provide great insight into the workings of culture and state formation. Gramsci needs to be read and studied, first and foremost, as a representative of the condition from which he was “educated” into Italianness. It is in such a re-reading that Gramsci can best lead us to “a new way of being Gramscian.”

1. If any time is prime for a reconsideration of a Gramscian view of Italy it would seem to be now. As the political body frays even beyond its usual condition, the Leghe and the MSI vying for power in the North and South respectively, are among the few untouched political survivors of this upheaval, among which we must also include the Mafia. As I have argued elsewhere, the annexation of Southern Italy into a unified Italian state and Italian colonialist activities in Africa are two dimensions of a similar historical moment. In light of the much heralded aid to the “ex-colonies,” which has been shown to have been nothing more than a profitable scam by generations of politicians, including De Michelis and Craxi, Gramsci’s The Southern Question takes on an unparalleled urgency.


3. Cornell West is probably the best example of Gramscianism in the United States, and gives a good account of his “neo-Gramscian perspective” in “Marxist Theory and the Specificity of Afro-American Oppression” in Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture, pp. 17–33. West, too, might find a closer look at the situation that spawned Gramsci to be interesting, since there are many crossovers with the African American elements he discusses.


5. [For Gramsci, it was legitimate to talk about emancipation because he worked, forty years ago, in an archaic world that we cannot even imagine. [. . .] It was right then [. . .] because Sardinian shepherds lived in a very particular manner. The difference is inconceivable. So you cannot quote Gramsci as an example of emancipation; you can recall Gramsci as a link in a historic chain that leads us to new questions today. To propose a new way of being progressive, a new way
of being Gramscians. [. . .] when Gramsci says genocide [. . .] he takes a position in favor of the victims and against those who victimized them; he takes a position in favor of particularistic cultures that were being destroyed and against the centralist culture that destroyed them.


7. [Folclore not as a “picturesque” element but as a “concept of the world and life” of particular parts of society in opposition to “official” concepts of the world.]

8. I have continued to use folclore instead of folklore to signify, with the altered spelling, the contestatory aspects of those cultures rather than their commonly assigned status.


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