

Political Crisis and Social Transformation in Antonio Gramsci. Elements for a Sociology of Political praxis

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Abstract

The paper deals with the analogy between the concepts by which Gramsci, in his Prison Notebooks, analyzes the post-war crisis of democracy and the contemporary crisis of representative democracy. Gramsci's analysis is centered on the crisis of political parties, transformism, the crisis of the authority of republican institutions, the spread of apoliticism in the social body, the decline in the prestige of Parliament, as well as on Caesarism. Today's political sociologists are once again interested in the study of the same set of phenomena: crisis of mass-based parties, antipolitics and antiparlamentarism, transformism, crisis in the authority of the political class, prevailing corporate interests within republican institutions, and populism. In the light of a cyclical recurrence of the same phenomena, which suggests the presence of a systemic correlation with today's democracy, the theoretical instruments used to investigate such phenomena in Gramsci's Notebooks, seem to provide relevant interpretative tools still today. In the present paper, we try to identify the usefulness that the categories employed by Gramsci to analyze the crisis of parliamentary democracy may provide in analyzing today's crisis of representativeness, within the more global Gramscian understanding of political modernity.

Keywords: Gramscian thought; marxist sociology; political sociology; political praxis; hegemony

1. The thought of Gramsci in the history of Marxism

The flexibility of the concepts developed by Antonio Gramsci, and the attention that he addressed to the issue of ideological and cultural processes in advanced capitalist societies, justifies the interest his thinking has often raised in intellectual and political spheres. It is not by chance that Eric J. Hobsbawm (1974, 39) called him the most original Marxist thinker of the twentieth century. Although scholarly attention has been focused largely on the political originality of his intellectual work, in our opinion, the Gramscian categories may also prove a useful analytical tool, particularly within a sociological framework. In order to understand the relevance of Antonio Gramsci's social theory, it must be contextualized in the broader historical framework of theoretical Marxism. Strongly influenced at a young age by Antonio Labriola's Marxism (Badaloni 1975; Paggi 1979), Antonio Gramsci soon developed a critical attitude towards the kind of determinist Marxism as expressed by the principal leaders of the Second International, such as Kautsky, as well as by some theorists of the Bolshevik revolution, such as Plekhanov and Bukharin.

In fact, from Kautsky to Stalin, a whole generation of Marxist thinkers had supported the argument that the historical process obeyed specific laws of necessity, so that it was possible to imagine the transition to socialism as an automatic process, inscribed in history. The masses of workers were *de facto* deprived of their subjectivity in the revolutionary process. Such interpretation of Marx's historicism in an evolutionary key presupposes the historical irrelevance of class action carried out by the proletarian masses. Antonio Gramsci, by providing a different interpretation of Marxist theory, counters the automation of evolution with the collective will of the masses. Not incidentally, Marx himself in his eleventh thesis on Feuerbach stated: «The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to change it» (Marx 1958, vol.2, 405). Gramsci, through Marx, emphasizes the human element that realizes itself through the organized action of civil society. Certainly also Marx risked ending in some forms of determinism, by predicting the capitulation of the capitalist system under the influence of the contradictions expressed by the system itself; yet, in his work, he would always stress the aspect of driving force represented by the political consciousness of the masses. Karl Kautsky, on the contrary, long considered the guardian of Marxist orthodoxy, had offered a mechanistic interpretation of Marx in stating that: «Marx and Engels recognized that revolutions are not made at will.

They come with inevitable necessity, when the conditions which render them necessary exist, and are impossible so long as those conditions, which develop gradually, do not exist» (cited in Fried, Sanders 1964, 436). Kautsky's view clearly denies the role of human intervention in the historical process, thus rejecting the possibility of historical alternatives. Such an objectivist theory of history is also central to the thinking of Plekhanov and Bukharin in the process of Marxism Bolshevization. As Salamini notes (1981, 4-5), «from a theory of capitalism structure and development, [it] becomes the theory of the creation of new historical formations, that is, new forms of human organizations and institutions». Gramsci's aim is therefore to restore the unity between political theory and praxis. Leninism had already represented, in a way, a valid response to the mechanicism of the Second International, by emphasizing the role of political leadership of the party, but had been unable to explain the failure of the revolutionary perspective in the West.

According to Gramsci, the core of the problem does not lie so much in the non-realization of the objective historical conditions, as in the absence of a subjective realization of the objective conditions for social transformation. It is precisely this insistence on the subjective elements in Marx's theory that differentiates Gramsci from Lenin. According to the Gramscian perspective, social transformation is a function of the creative role of the masses and of the political ability to articulate a revolutionary consciousness. From this point of view, the intellectuals' role becomes crucial. The Italian philosopher states that «every revolution has been preceded by an intense labor of criticism, by the diffusion of culture and the spread of ideas amongst masses of men» (Gramsci 1977, 12). The basic themes of his writings, therefore, concern the clear rejection of mechanistic and economic interpretations of Marx's doctrine and the adherence to a fully historicist and humanist form of Marxism. Marxism is for Gramsci not only an economic science, but first and foremost a worldview that points to an intellectual and moral reform of society.

This goal is unattainable without the collective will created in political praxis. The process of social reformation is therefore the result of the historical transformation of the "economic class" into a "historical class" that takes place in the dialectical relationship between the masses and the intellectuals. Whereas Lenin had stressed the primary role of the revolutionary vanguards organized into a party, in Gramsci's view, both vanguards and party are subordinate to the collective will of civil society. The autonomous mass organization originated inside the party, in this sense, does not represent just a part of the masses; rather, it forms with them an organic whole. If the revolution is primarily a process of cultural reform, then both intellectuals and the party, interacting with the popular masses, must work toward the development of a political consciousness and a collective will, corresponding to the elaboration of a historically rooted ideology of transformation. If the aim is the revolutionary seizure of power, it is also true that the subaltern classes, in order to be successful, must work towards creating the conditions for transformation, aiming to be an ideologically hegemonic class well before becoming the dominant social group. The socialization of the means of material production is only one aspect of the revolutionary process, which must be associated with the socialization of the means of cultural and intellectual production.

As Buci-Glucksmann observes (1979), the thought of Gramsci goes beyond the mere culturalistic reinterpretation of classical Marxism, making of him a theorist of political forms of transition defined by the dialectical relationship between social forces. From this point of view, we believe that the Gramscian categories can be articulated into the framework of a sociology of political praxis. The general sense of political praxis is the affirmation of the collective will, which becomes the hermeneutic canon of Gramscian historiography but, as Salamini observes (1981, 22), the structure of this praxis «is a dialectical unity of objective and subjective elements, of structural and superstructural activities, of materialism and idealism. Its major protagonists are the masses, the intellectuals, and the party. Its point of direction is the creation of hegemony». The aim of this paper is to find in Antonio Gramsci's thought those concepts and categories that can be useful in the interpretation of certain aspects of our contemporary politics. This issue will be related to the broader Gramscian conceptualization of the political party, the role of the intellectuals, the historical phases of transition, modernity and the State. In conclusion, we will try to establish a connection between these different aspects, highlighting the different theoretical perspectives that such connection can open in relation to current cultural and political processes.

2. The forms of collective action in the crisis of politics

Let's begin by illustrating the meaning of some key concepts related to Gramsci's interpretation of the forms of political mobilization, starting with the theme of the formation of a collective will. Gramsci contrasts, with the formation of a stable collective will, the sort of spontaneism-economicism whose theoretical references can be found in Georges Sorel and Rosa Luxemburg. According to Sorel (1908, en.tr. 1999), political action takes place through a spontaneous trade union mobilization, which for Gramsci characterizes a negative phase.

The sense of the term 'negative' lies in the primitive stage of a collective will that is formed out of pure distinction. This is a typical feature of the historical action of the lower classes, characterized by a fragmentary and episodic nature, subject to the constraints imposed by the initiative of the dominant social groups. The State is the place where the unification of the ruling classes and the harmonization between political society and civil society occur, whereas the fragmented and reactive action of the subaltern masses stems from the absence of similar places of unification. This is essentially why the collective action of groups of people with no power historically tends to take on the traits of rebellion or subversion, whereas its nature is negative due to the fact that people gain self-awareness primarily by antagonizing the action of the dominant group, yet, for this very reason, they remain subalterns.

The theme of *State spirit* is directly related to the issue of collective action of the lower classes. The term "state spirit" indicates a much broader system of meanings than the semantic domain of the term "State" does. For Gramsci, political action possesses "state spirit" when it assumes continuity with the past and the future. Every political act should be seen as a moment in a complex process. State spirit means responsibility for this complex process, which needs to unfold itself by understanding the unknown forces developing in social contexts (underground, *in fieri*, objective but not yet subjective). The concept therefore refers to both the "consciousness of duration" and the identification of the real social and cultural processes in which political initiatives can take root. Political realism is thus defined as the renunciation of the pursuit of an immediate political success and as the construction and preservation of the conditions for future actions. The presence of State spirit is a condition of stability of the collective will, necessary to overcome the fragmented, subversive and reactive initiative of the subjugated masses. State spirit for Gramsci is first substantiated by the party's spirit, because the political party is an in-embryo state structure.

The lack of State spirit coincides with «apoliticism». In the forms of collective action, apoliticism is for Gramsci the action as an end in itself, "an act for the act's sake", a gesture performed as a part of individual or group leadership, or for mere demonstration purposes. In this regard, the causal link is represented by the dynamics that bind together a bottom-up apoliticism, that is, a spontaneist apoliticism expressed by people and collective movements, with a top-down apoliticism, displayed by the ruling classes, based on consensus-building and the exertion of power on the creation of personal patronage. The sectarianism of some forms of political action is thus treated as a form of patronage, while the base which renders them possible and which makes of them two opposing but consubstantial forms of political action, is the absence, within a given state, of an accomplished domain of legal order and of a real integration of the masses into the political sphere. The phenomenon of "transformism" is traced back to a system of government limited by these two conditions and is defined as a lack of programmatic distinction between the different political parties emerged on the electoral terrain, and thus with no stable connection with defined social groups. Transformism is, first of all, the exclusion of the masses from the management of the state, and it is always a sign of political hegemony on the part of moderates.

The core concept of the Gramscian thought about the forms of political action is the idea of economic-corporative action. This term refers to a certain level of internal homogeneity of self-consciousness and organization of a collective body. In fact, Gramsci identifies three levels of political action corresponding to three phases of development: first, the economic-corporative level, the most basic, where solidarity and forms of collective action are internal to a single category but not to a class; second, the economic-political level, where the action is based on class solidarity expressed by simple trade union demands, while the question of the state is viewed only in the sense of juridical equality between dominated and dominant within the existing arrangements; and third, the state-hegemonic level, in which there is a growing awareness that the interests of a group should also become the interests of other social groups: this level refers to the political phase, where already germinated ideologies become a political party which can favor the establishment of a unity based on economic, political, and intellectual (moral) goals. This phase can be developed towards the elaboration of a general hegemonic level aimed to prompt all social energies. In this respect, Gramsci makes reference to the historical example of Jacobinism, considered a model of general hegemonic ability. The economic-corporative action denotes an excessive insistence on practice and a corresponding lack of "superstructural elements" - of consciousness, culture, politics -, that is, the immediate domination over an elementary structural situation, unable to expand. It is the opposite of a hegemonic action, able to extend its influence to the structures of political decision.

3. Historical phases of transition and crisis of hegemony

The Gramscian themes we use as references to characterize today's collective action are conceptually linked by a common background. Not only because they point to mutually related phenomena, but also because these phenomena express certain characteristics of the historical and social system.

The historical and conceptual element in which they should be framed is that of the phases of transitions. According to Gramsci, these phases are firstly marked by waves of cultural materialism: consent for the ideologies of the declining historical phase has run out, but a new consensus and new cultural syntheses cannot come into being yet. From the perspective of cultures and ideologies, we find ourselves in an interregnum marked by skepticism toward any general formulas and all forms of abstraction and “sublimation”. The whole system of superstructures - law, theory, culture, ethics, religion, ideology, politics - is characterized by a lower degree of abstraction, generalization, systematic arrangement, and universalistic spirit; it acquires a pragmatic quality linked to empirically verifiable data, and is legitimized by reference to reality, revolving around the *hic et nunc* of life, and denying the possibility of any system. In the early stages of transition there is a general refusal of intellectuality in favor of a strong emphasis on practice. The corrosion of the supersensible world reaches all sorts of abstract arrangements – Enlightenment, socialism, and philosophies of history. This is what Gramsci has in mind when he discusses the crisis of abstraction and the radical immanence of general formulas. For Gramsci, the phases of transition lead, as we shall see later, to the construction of new cultural syntheses, resulting from a dialectical subversion of the constitutive elements of previous historical stages.

Gramsci refers to the same process when discussing ethical arrangements. Transitional phases are stages of moral dissolution, that, even in this case, prelude to the formation of new conceptions: «Periods of moral dissolution have often occurred in history: they often indicate that a design has aged, collapsed, has become pure formalistic hypocrisy, yet it tries to coercively remain in vogue by forcing the society to a double life; periods of libertinage and disintegration, in fact, constitute exaggerated forms of reacting to hypocrisy and duplicity, and they almost always herald the shaping of a new conception» (Gramsci 1977f, 266). The identification takes on the traits of «superhomism», interpreted by Gramsci as a tendency to conceive of the individual affirmation as an «expansion of the personality without moral constraints». Cynicism becomes the fundamental character of moral life. It is seen as a fatalistic attitude inclined to consider the social environment in the same way as a state of nature under the exclusive domination of power. The social environment is considered as the place of the unleashing of the Nietzschean “will of pure power”, no longer incorporated in abstract arrangements. The crisis and the failure that characterize the phases of transition are related to the political sphere.

The state acquires an economic-corporative resemblance, characterized by the prevalence of the moment of domination over the moment of consensus, and the prevalence of the economic moment over the ethical-political one. An example of this outcome is liberalism. In Gramsci’s view, liberalism is a political construction aimed at giving centrality to pure economics, a functional design to change the ruling class, the economic program of the State and the distribution of national income. Liberalism implies both a regression from the historical form of political modernity and a structure characterized by some key elements: overlapping between state and government and between state and civil society; centrality of income rather than profit; intensification of exploitation in labor relations; immediate domination over power relations; loss of hegemonic ability by politics; and a crisis of the principle of authority affecting its actors and institutions (political parties, parliament, etc.). These are the aspects that characterize an economic-corporative form of state. Any opposition to these processes would display the characteristics described in the previous chapter, always on an economic-corporative level, therefore incapable of hegemonic expansion due to a split between social action and political action. Going back to the distinction between the three levels of political power relations – economic-corporative, economic-political, state-hegemonic –, we can say that corporative regression implies a split between the economic moment and the state-hegemonic moment.

These historical phases tend to hinder what Gramsci calls «catharsis», that is the superior processing, within the human mind, of the structure into a superstructure, as well as the transition from the objective to the subjective and from a realm of necessity to a realm of freedom. Catharsis occurs when the structure, from an external force that assimilates and makes the social actor passive, becomes a means to freedom, a way of creating a new ethical-political form. In contrast, in an economic-corporative regression, the ruling classes, and the cultures they express, tend to lose their hegemonic ability over society, as their action is guided by the more pressing economic moment. This process affects the whole sphere of politics: legislative assemblies tend to lose their function of mediation between conflicting economic interests. The resulting crisis of authority encourages, in turn, the spread of apoliticism among the social body. From a concrete historical point of view, Gramsci analyzes this process in Italy in relation to the political crisis following the First World War. At that time, «the hegemonic apparatus disintegrated and the exercise of hegemony became permanently difficult and hazardous». The phenomenon is presented using various expressions, such as «crisis of the principle of authority» or «dissolution of the parliamentary system» (1977b, *PN1*, 59). A political crisis is always, for Gramsci, a crisis of hegemony, thematized as the detachment of political parties from their social classes of reference, leading to the collapse of the representative function and leaving the field open for providential or charismatic men (Frosini 2009).

The origin of these processes of crisis, for Gramsci, lies primarily in the nature of the relationship between social forces. The crisis affecting parliamentarism, representation and parties, which he observes in the tangible historical development of his times, is the result of a static equilibrium in the conflict between hegemonic groups and subordinate social groups. According to Gramsci, the regressive crisis of the 1920s and 1930s had been brought about by the invasion of the scene by the organized labor movement, which had made it difficult to exert liberal hegemony, while the War had worked as a historical fracture, as a catalytic moment for all the social and political tensions and contradictions that had been previously accumulated in a molecular way. Fascism - the revolution-restoration - was the answer provided by the Italian ruling classes to the crisis in postwar liberal hegemony. In Gramsci's analysis, the phases of transition imply a reduction of higher superstructures to a level that is closer to the structure. All the phenomena described so far, both in ethical and political terms, characterize a historical period as elementary, economic-corporative: a typical historical phase when the general framework of the structure undergoes a transformation, although corresponding ideological and cultural elements have not been formed yet. Historical phases of transition are ambivalent: on the one hand, they can facilitate the emergence of authoritarian syntheses (such as Caesarism-Bonapartism); on the other, the very closeness between structure and superstructure increases the chances for the emergence of new conceptions, cultural synthesis and ideologies.

The questions on our present times this framework suggests - and thus, the possible paths of theoretical and empirical research - are basically three. First, one may wonder whether today's "transition phase" is going to evolve towards a new equilibrium, and whether the current economic downturn may foreshadow a crisis affecting its corresponding cultural background. The second open question is whether, in Western democracies, today's crisis is a prelude to the coming into existence of a new crossroad between Caesarism-Bonapartism and new progressive forces. Thirdly, which shape such forces are likely to take, should they manage to go through the three stages of development into collective bodies? As we have seen, the forces that can compete for hegemony must be characterized by a worldview and, at the same time, by an ability to interpret and direct (on the Jacobin model) the objective - not yet subjective - progressive forces unfolding throughout society, and, finally, by state spirit and party spirit. On this conceptual level, the above questions concern those worldviews and cultural syntheses that any possible collective will may work out, and whether they will constitute a break from the political cultures of the 20th century or rather, a sort of restructuring. Moreover, on which progressive forces will such new worldviews and cultural syntheses be grounded?

4. The role of the intellectuals

According to Gramsci, the process of transformation can only be guaranteed by the birth of a new "historical bloc" defined by the organic unity between structure and superstructure, meaning that the complex set of superstructures is an ideological reflection of social relations of production. Between the two elements there is a necessary reciprocity, which is precisely the real dialectical process (1977a, 48). The historical bloc is not a sort of amalgamation or alliance between different classes, but rather a hegemonic situation in which social cohesion is ensured by a new conception of the world (superstructural dimension) and by a dominant social class (structural dimension). In this context, the dominant power of a given social group or class is not guaranteed by violence and by the monopoly of the means of production, but by a more subtle process of gathering consensus from other social groups. At this point, the role of intellectuals becomes crucial, as they represent the "functionaries" of the superstructure (Garin 1969). Originated as one of the categories in the specialized world of production, they become the administrators of social hegemony. Gramsci seeks an answer to this question: Are the intellectuals an independent social group, separate from the social groups existing in every historical society? Or, conversely, has any social group its own specialized category of intellectuals?

Actually, every social group, being brought into existence on the original ground of an essential function in the world of economic production, gives shape to one or more organic intellectual classes which have the task of giving homogeneity and awareness of its historical function to the reference group, not only in economic but also in social and political spheres. The entrepreneur, for example, holding a dominant position in a capitalist society, creates the industrial technician, the engineer, the economist and, of course, the organizer of a new culture and a new law. In addition, the figure of entrepreneur itself is a superior social elaboration requiring a higher degree of executive, and thus intellectual, ability (1977b, PN12, 3). Each "essential" social group, emerging into history out of the preceding economic structure, finds always pre-existing social categories that seem to be representatives of a historical continuity. We can recall the role of the "Ecclesiastics" who, for a long time, held the monopoly of social, cultural and educational institutions. They can be considered as members of a social category organically bound to the landed aristocracy so that they were seen as to have equal juridical status with the aristocracy with whom they shared privileges. But their monopoly on superstructures would be limited over time by the birth of other categories organically bound to the secular power of the monarchs.

All these categories of traditional intellectuals, although organically related to a group, saw themselves as the successors of a century-old history and for this reason they placed themselves on positions formally autonomous and independent from the dominant social group. In order to clarify this issue, we should understand the meaning of the concept “intellectuals”. Can we identify a single criterion that may allow us to characterize all the various intellectual activities? First of all, all men are intellectuals, but not all men have the “function” of intellectuals within society. Historically, some specialized categories are created for the exercise of intellectual functions in connection with major social groups. A fundamental characteristic of any group evolving toward domination is, therefore, the struggle for the ideological assimilation of traditional intellectuals. By accepting the idea that any superstructure is related to the structure, even the intellectuals are in close relationship with the world of production, and this relationship is mediated by the whole system of the superstructures whose intellectuals represent the “functionaries”. Gramsci, roughly distinguishes between two major superstructural levels: that of “civil society”, that is, the ensemble of organisms commonly called “private”, and “political society” or “State”, corresponding to the hegemonic function the dominant social group exercises throughout society, either directly, through the control functions of command exercised through juridical and police institutions; or indirectly, by strengthening and developing organic cultural institutions.

Therefore, the role of the intellectuals can be compared to that of “deputies” of the dominant social group exercising the subaltern functions of hegemony and political government (1977b, PN12, 10). Intellectual activities, of course, can be divided into degrees expressing qualitative differences in moments of extreme opposition. At the highest level would be the creators of the various sciences, philosophy, art, etc.; at the lowest level, the so-called “administrators” or disseminators of the accumulated and pre-existing intellectual wealth. Within this context the political party plays its role. Some scholars think that a party is nothing but a social group’s own way to develop its own category of organic intellectuals. Actually, in civil society, the party is the institution that performs the same function the state plays in political society. It creates a bond between organic intellectuals of a given group and traditional intellectuals. Therefore, all members of a party play chiefly an intellectual function, since their activity is divided into directive, organizational and educational dimensions. «In a political party the elements of a social group exceed the economic moment of their historical development and become agents of general activities, at national and international levels» (1977b, PN12, 14). So far, we have seen how, «when we distinguish between intellectuals and non-intellectuals, we are referring in reality only to the immediate social function of the professional category of intellectuals, that is, one has in mind the direction in which their specific professional activities is weighted, whether towards intellectual elaboration or towards muscular-nervous effort.

This means that, although one can speak of intellectuals, one cannot speak of non-intellectuals, because non-intellectuals do not exist.» (1977b, PN12, 21). There is no sphere of human activity from which any different measure of intellectual intervention can be completely ruled out. *Homo faber* and *homo sapiens* cannot be separated. Regardless of his profession, every man is a philosopher, an artist, a man of taste, and above all every man contributes to a worldview and to a line of moral conduct. Thus the problem of creating a new class of intellectuals lies in the elaboration of that critical intellectual activity that exists in everyone, by changing its relationship with the muscular-nervous effort towards a new and different balance. By making sure that the muscular effort itself, as the expression of an innovative general practice within the physical and social world, becomes the foundation of a new and integral conception of the world (ibid.). «The mode of being new intellectual can no longer consist in eloquence, which is an exterior and momentary mover of feelings and passions, but in active participation in practical life, as constructor, organizer, “permanent persuader” and not just a simple orator - and nevertheless superior to the abstract mathematical spirit; from technique-as-work one proceeds to technique-as-science reaching a humanistic conception of history, without which one remains “specialized” and doesn’t become “directive” (specialized + politician) (ibid., 22).

5. The role of the party, or the collective intellectual

Gramsci’s scholars have paid great attention to his conception of the political party as if it were the core of his intellectual elaboration. Actually it will be easier to understand the conception of the party in Gramsci by focusing on the relationship between ‘party’ and ‘masses’. In Gramsci, the birth of a party (as mentioned in chapter 2) marks the passage of a fundamental social group from an economic to a hegemonic phase. The party becomes an instrument in the hands of the lower classes by giving value to their autonomy in the general framework of a new society. As Nardone observes (1971, 51), the Gramscian party is an entity distinct from the masses, or from a social group not yet politically active, but it will be organically linked to it at a later stage, which is the phase of political consciousness and hegemony. In a first stage, the party is *de facto* an elite, a vanguard that anticipates a future society, a kind of history in progress. The achievement of hegemony, which requires the conscious unity of civil society, is the historical condition in which the Gramscian party tends to lose its usefulness.

At this point, it discards its nature of partiality and identifies itself with the interests of the whole society. Gramsci's idea of the party is not simply a program waiting implementation. It has the task to anticipate the future experience of a progressive society; it is an experimenter of new conceptions of the world and represents a historical necessity only for those groups who aspire to become hegemonic. The Gramscian approach contrasts with the approach of both Michels and Sorel, and with that of Lenin, to name just three authors who dealt with the problem of the relationship between political organization and the masses. In his study on the German Social Democratic Party, Michels focuses on the internal hierarchy of political parties even when they have democratic aspirations. In fact, due to a sort of "iron law", political parties are merely the expression of the oligarchic vocation of every democratic system: «Democracy leads to oligarchy, and necessarily contains an oligarchic nucleus». The masses lack the ability of self-government, and they lack expertise and experience: «The incompetence of the masses is almost universal throughout the domains of political life, and this constitutes the most solid foundation of the power of the leaders» (Michels 1959, 86).

For Gramsci, instead, an individualistic and charismatic analysis of political parties makes sense only when it describes the initial formation of a mass party; yet, when a static equilibrium – a decisive factor for the immaturity of progressive forces – is achieved, the oligarchic trends tend to prevail. To the oligarchic variant of the party proposed by Michels, Gramsci opposes the idea of a party as an organic (and dialectical) relationship between masses, intellectuals and leaders. The party thus becomes the Modern Prince, but in a quite different sense if compared with Machiavelli's approach. In this respect, Gramsci talks of Machiavelli's *Prince* in terms of a "living book" in which ideology and political science come together into the dramatic making of "myth", an aspect which is not present, to quote just one, in the work of Sorel, who, from the conception of "myth-ideology", has never reached an understanding of the historical necessity of the political party, thus confining himself to the organizational hypothesis of trade union, within an impulsive and rather irrational framework, connected to a feeling of spontaneity. George Sorel, however, refers to the masses as the base of political activity in a state of absolute independence from any organization or centralized authority (Sorel 1908, en.tr. 1999).

For the French sociologist, the spontaneity of the masses is the only form of political rationality. Gramsci, on the contrary, describes an image of the party as a collective intellectual giving body to a movement that would otherwise be doomed to failure. The party plays the role of the organic intellectuals exerting moral, cultural and ideological leadership. In contemporary society, the modern prince cannot be identified with a real person but rather, with an organism that is «an element of a complex society in which already begins the materialization of a collective will, recognized and partially affirmed in the action». This organism can be rightly identified with the political party, «the first cell in which there come together germs of a collective will tending to become universal and total.» (1977d, *PN13*, 6). In its development process the modern prince disrupts the system of intellectual and moral relations.

The first point that an analysis of Machiavelli's work raises is the issue of "politics" as an autonomous science, and thus, of the role that political science must undertake as part of a systematic conception of the world. In the philosophy of praxis, discrimination will not be achieved between the moments of absolute spirit, but rather, in setting the degrees of the superstructure, that is the dialectical position of political activity as a particular level of superstructural character. One can therefore conclude that political activity represents an elementary degree in which the superstructure is still into the dramatic phase of mere voluntaristic statement. Obviously, a critical analysis of Machiavelli should also take into account that he was son of his times, so closely tied to a specific historical context, characterized by internal struggles in the Florentine Republic; in other words, a State which was not able to get rid of the feudal structure. Moreover, the Italian historical context was at the time characterized by inter-state conflicts to achieve a balance hampered by the existence of the Papacy and other structural remains of the Middle Ages. In this context, Machiavelli follows the (general) rules for a strong state that, at that time, could only be an absolute monarchy. He railed against the relics of feudalism, not against the progressive classes (1977d, *PN13*, 17).

The art of politics is based on the fact that there are rulers and ruled, leaders and led. The point here is simply to choose between focusing only on the ways to achieve a more effective rule, by forming better leaders, or rather, on simultaneously creating the condition for the disappearance of such division. This condition is linked to the divisions between social groups, but we must bear in mind that the distinction between directors and directed occurs also within a single group. In this sense, it represents an expression of the division of labor, since it is a technical matter. Once this principle is established, it is undoubtedly proved that parties are the most appropriate way to develop leaders and leadership skills. Parties can come in many forms, including that of "anti-party", that is the very negation of the party but, actually, also individualists are party men, with a difference, «they would like to be "party-leaders" for God's Grace, or for the "stupidity" of their followers.

Individualism, in this sense, is nothing but “animal apoliticsm”» (1977d, PN15, 22-23). Some state that, in the modern era, the new prince cannot be a personal hero but rather a collective body, that is, a political party that provides the rationally and historically grounded objective to create a new state. Although every political party originates as the collective expression of a single social group, there exist some parties which are concerned with the problem of playing a function of balance between their group’s and other groups’ interests, so that the progressive development of their group is achieved by means of consent and support from other groups.

In the modern world, organic parties often splinter into fractions, each of which takes in turn the denomination of party. For this reason, it often happens that the leadership of the organic fundamental party does not belong to any of these party-fractions, but acts as if it were an independent and *super partes* driving force. In this sense, we may state that there are two forms of party that seem to disregard immediate political practice: on the one hand, a body constituted by an intellectual elite whose function is to lead culturally and morally – conforming to the general ideology – a great movement of similar parties, which are actually fractions of the same organic party; and, on the other hand, a body that, in contemporary times, takes the shape of the mass party, where the masses have actually the only task of expressing a independent general allegiance to a more or less visible political center.

«The mass is simply “occupied” with moral sermons, with emotional prods, with messianic myths rousing expectations of an age of wonders when all the contradictions and miseries will be automatically resolved and remedied» (1977d, PN17, 26). When writing the history of a political party, producing a narration of the inner life of a political organization is not enough; first one has to study the history of a specific social group. «Only from the whole complex framework of social and state system (and often with international interference) the history of a certain organic party will result; so we can say that writing the history of a party means nothing but writing the general history of a country from a monographic point of view» (1977d, PN13, 27). A party is more or less meaningful only when it is able to influence the historical determination of a country.

Only the establishment of a dialectical relationship between party and masses can avoid the risk of elitism or, conversely, of irrational spontaneism. The masses, organized into a collective will, are the foundation of the historical transformation and the creators of new historical blocs. The party is the instrument the masses will use in their political act; therefore, it will always be subordinate to them. It ceases to exist when it becomes a State by extending the hegemony of the masses to the whole society.

6. The role of the masses and common sense

As Salamini notes (1981, 73), Antonio Gramsci's sociology can be defined as a political sociology of history, namely a sociology that interprets universal history from the particular history of the subaltern masses. Whereas positivist Marxism tried to establish relationships between phenomena and to explain their meaning starting from an apparently fixed factual world, in Gramsci the same world of facts is the product of a complex dialectical historical process. The analysis of phenomena becomes a useless hypostasis if we do not take into account their historical development and their mutual relationship. In particular, as Nardone notes (1971, 18), according to Gramsci, the historical truth is the product of a specific political praxis. The very social reality is essentially a political reality, and every historical event is always a variable dependent on the political praxis of the present history. History is for Gramsci a unitary process in which the dimensions of past, present and future merge into a single category, which is the political praxis of the times. The future is nothing but the transcendence of the past that is achieved through the practice of the present. Absolute protagonists of these political processes are the masses aware of their progress toward hegemony.

Mobilization and organization of the masses are for Gramsci the most significant event of the twentieth century. In particular, the Russian revolutionary experience leads him to analyze the dynamics that brought the Bolshevik Party to power in Russia in the twentieth century, the Jacobin party in France in the eighteenth century, and the moderate party in Italy in the nineteenth century. After a careful historical and comparative analysis, Gramsci concludes that, unlike what happened in Italy, Jacobins and Bolsheviks, following different paths, managed to develop a unifying ideology able to give shape to a new historical bloc in a dialectical relationship between masses and intellectuals, between high and popular culture. The development or non-development of subaltern masses is for Gramsci a fundamental hermeneutical principle in the analysis of historical processes. The most important historical factor is not, in fact, represented by the development of economic forces but rather by people’s ability to organize into a collective will. In Europe, particularly in Italy, there is a tradition of substantial passivity on the part of the masses. This produces mystifying and extra-historical values. On the contrary, a popular organized mass, active and conscious, is able to create new socio-historical worlds, by legitimizing them, in political praxis, through new worldviews. The political praxis of the masses is, in this sense, a source of historical certainty. Any mechanical law of necessity, as well as any form of alienation and mystification, disappears in the active awareness of the organized civil society.

The activities of the dominant (but not leading) classes always require the non-activity of subordinate social groups. The masses, especially in Italy, live for Gramsci in a primitive stage of indifference and apathy, superstition and fatalism. The awareness of their interests is so limited that never exceed the dimension of the local context in which they live. Excluded from high culture, they are relegated to a folkloric dimension. Unlike in France and Russia, in Italy the masses have not been able, to achieve a hegemonic position, because hegemony presupposes above all emancipation and cultural autonomy. These considerations prompt Gramsci to reflect on "common sense" and "folklore", that is, the worldview of the popular masses at a time of substantial cultural primitivism. The notion of "common sense", in the thought of Gramsci, expresses a higher complexity than the one detectable in classical phenomenological sociology that simply identifies it with a set of beliefs perceived as true by the majority of people (Grooten, Steenbergen 1972). Berger and Luckman (1966, 14), for example, oppose common sense to theoretical thinking, by identifying it with «what people 'know' as 'reality' in their everyday, non- or pre-theoretical lives». Philosophy and classical sociology share the idea that common sense is essentially the expression of a natural attitude and a practical and universal conception of the world. Gramsci rejects this approach by insisting on the historical, ideological and political aspects of common sense, understood as a spontaneous philosophy separate from the philosophy of professional philosophers.

All men are bearers of a spontaneous philosophy contained firstly in the language, seen not only as a set of empty grammatical figures but also as a set of notions and concepts conveying a certain conception of the world. Once accepted this assumption, a quality leap is needed so as to move from a stage of pure observation toward one of critical awareness. Is it therefore better to think in such a disconnected way, namely, without having a sufficient critical awareness and thus to «mechanically» take part in a worldview imposed from outside? Or, conversely, is it preferable to develop one's own worldview, critically and consciously, to choose one's sphere of activities in connection with the workings of one's own brain and «take an active part in the creation of the history of the world, be one's own guide refusing to accept passively and supinely from outside the moulding of one's personality?» (1977a, *PN11*, 3-4). One's worldview is never the expression of a fully individual process; one always belongs to a particular grouping containing all those social elements that share the same way of thinking and acting. Although one may have the pretension to express an original point of view and an original way of life, one is always conformist to some sort of conformism; in other words, one is always "man-in-the-mass" or "collective-man". The crucial issue is rather understanding what kind of collective-man, that is, to what historical type some form of conformism corresponds. When a specific conception of the world lacks critical awareness, it lacks coherence, namely is disjointed to the extent that one can participate simultaneously in a variety of men-in-the-mass.

One's own personality is constructed in a chaotic way and within it there can be «elements of the cave man as well as principles of the most modern and advanced science, mean local-minded prejudices of any past historical periods, along with intuitions of a future philosophy typical of a worldwide unified mankind» (ibid.). Whereas philosophy reflects mostly the traits of the individual elaboration of thoughts, common sense, instead, expresses the «widespread and scattered characters of a generic thought» of a certain age and in a certain popular environment (1977a, *PN11*, 13-14). Common sense is therefore the worldview of the subaltern masses during the negative phase of their development, namely, the phase of political and cultural subordination to a dominant group. Because of its lack of critical awareness, common sense is unable to think dialectically and historically. Its conception of reality is natural, static, and fatalistic and the system of beliefs underlying it is interpreted by the subaltern masses as a set of categorical imperatives. From this point of view, common sense is perfectly connected to the concept of "folklore" that, in Gramsci's view, has been wrongly analyzed as something picturesque, when it should have been studied as a manifestation of an organized popular conception of the world and life. Obviously, it is a largely unconscious worldview, because it is not elaborated nor systematized. Only in folklore one can find the remaining contaminated documents, surviving evidence of that «confused agglomerate of all the conceptions of the world and life that have succeeded one another in history» (1977e, *PN27*, 262).

It can only be understood as a reflection of the conditions of the cultural life of a people, a sort of popular religion less systematic than confessional religion. From folklore one can draw out the «morality of the people», understood as «a determinate (in time and space) set of principles for practical conduct and of customs that derive from them or have produced them. Like superstition, this morality is closely tied to real religious beliefs» (1977e, *PN27*, 263). Nevertheless, in the context of folklore and common sense, Gramsci identifies a positive core, a creative element that, if developed, may lead to the development of an autonomous popular self-consciousness. Cultural development is indeed a mechanism of transcendence from a universal primitive stage. This means that in order to achieve cultural emancipation one needs always to start from the analysis of common sense.

7. Modernity and permanent crisis of mass society

In Gramsci's view, political modernity coincides with the strengthening of civil society as a cohesive relational context, and, at the same time, with the construction of states in the strict sense. Whereas the medieval state formations (economic-corporative phase) had been essentially a mechanical bloc of different social groups, the modern state has replaced the mechanical bloc of social groups with their subordination to the hegemony of the dominant group. The expanding ability and the historically progressive function of the new dominant group (bourgeoisie) revolve around the construction of a full political and territorial unity of the state, and around the development of dynamic and cohesive societies. The bourgeoisie is for Gramsci the first ruling class in history to function as a body in continuous movement, basically able to absorb the whole society by elevating it to its own cultural and economic level. Politics changes its status in relation to pre-modern societies, as long as its main task is not to impose on society a certain order and obedience to the established authority, but to actively involve society in development processes and, to this aim, to transform its organization and composition. Hence the effort to work out an organic passage of people from other classes to the "bourgeois class" is, for Gramsci, the salient feature of early modernity (Burgio 2003).

The ethical function of democratic rights and the pedagogical function of the institutions are dependent on this fundamental character of the bourgeoisie. The State represents in this light all the functional apparatuses needed to harmonize civil society and political government, that is, to homogenize the first as a function of the latter. The dual dynamic - subsumptive and inclusive - that characterizes the relationship between bourgeoisie and subaltern classes, is a factor of crisis when it constantly changes social and political power relations. By extending the social area involved in trade relations, the growth of the bourgeoisie, in Gramsci's reading, emancipates increasingly wider areas of extra-economic (political-military) subjugation typical of pre-capitalist social formations, by fueling the pressing instances of political recognition and inclusion in citizenship. This paradoxical dynamic constitutes the dialectics of hegemonic relationships, whereby the growth of the dominant's ability to lead involves the establishment of autonomous and potentially conflicting subjectivities. The dialectics of hegemony insists on the same contradictory and ambivalent processes we have observed when referring to the relationship between structure and superstructure. For Gramsci, political modernity and capitalism coincide. On the basis of this interpretive framework, he identifies three stages of political modernity.

The first phase, in pre-1789 France, when an epochal split occurs in Europe between France, where a strong bourgeoisie asserts itself by proving its ability to unify society, and to claim the need for a modernization of the state-political sphere, and Central Europe (particularly Germany and Italy), hindered by a static equilibrium between bourgeois social power and the political power held by traditional classes. During the second phase, from 1789 to 1870, political modernization unfolds to the point of turning against its own premises. France is marked by a radical social dynamism and by a "war of movement" which consistently puts at stake the balance in the social composition of citizens and in the relationships between political and social forces, thus leading to the Paris Commune, seen by Gramsci as a periodizing event. Although the unfolding of political modernity crosses the various European countries in quite different forms and at different degrees of intensity, it actually affects the whole continent. The social dynamism, the centralization of political power, the role of the parliament as a place of mediation of interests, and the consolidation of the autonomy of civil society (parties, trade unions, associations) all concur to the configuration of the modern state and to the constitution of civil society both as a place for the exertion of hegemony, and a place for the struggle for hegemony that gradually transforms itself from a «war of movement» into a «trench warfare». The state thus becomes a «political society + civil society», an «armored hegemony of coercion».

But the emblematic event of the Paris Commune, according to Gramsci, breaks this expanding dynamic, by coming on the scene between the two dialectical poles of subsumption and inclusion that characterize a bourgeoisie government, therefore constituting the third stage of modern politics, that is, the organic crisis of mass society. The Commune represents for Gramsci the limit of the expanding ability of the bourgeoisie. The social dynamism that it determines brings the subaltern classes to take an active role in society, through access to leadership positions, improved life conditions, or through the struggle to improve and expand the sphere of citizenship. The inclusive potentiality of a bourgeois society cannot expand indefinitely, because its excessive spread would threaten the very mode of production. The ruling classes respond to this risk by turning to new stages of economic and corporative domination, where the expanding-inclusive dynamics are replaced with modes of social government that are very similar to the closed pre-bourgeois caste. Modern politics in these terms is a process of constant dialectical tension between inclusion and exclusion, between both expanding and regressive tendencies of the ruling class. For modern democracy, a crisis is a normal cyclical condition, because the expanding-inclusive dynamics of citizenship and the inclusion of the masses in politics, which constitute the essence of the democratic process, are always connected to contradictions and conflicts.

Gramsci identifies, on the one hand, in fascism and, on the other, in Fordism, the reactions of the ruling classes to the first crisis of mass society. Today's neo-liberalism can be regarded as the economic-corporative response to the expanding dynamics determined by the "historical bloc" of post-war Fordism-Keynesianism, that is, by the growth of the social strength of the subaltern masses occurred during the "glorious thirty years" of the so-called organized capitalism. We could also say that political modernity has never gone beyond the organic crisis started in the late nineteenth century. The expansion of the sphere of citizenship and the growth of the political centrality of the masses determine a setback in social dynamics, a regression of the state into an economic-corporative form and the consequent opening of a gap between ethical-political and economic moments, thus lowering the higher superstructures almost to the degrees of the structure. During the 1930s, while Gramsci was writing his works, he could witness all these processes taking place around him. Yet, we can observe similar dynamics also in the 1970s. This means that these are phases when the political and cultural debate focuses on the "crisis of ideologies", which we can, therefore, consider a cyclical crisis.

Mass society has been undergoing a permanent crisis since the late nineteenth century – even if the crisis occurs in a karstic way, preceded and followed by responses of the dominant classes in the form of «passive revolution» (i.e. without emotional connection with the masses) and by the formation of historical bloc, such as the one that characterized the thirty years of post-war balance. The crisis of the mode of economic production seems to be equally permanent. The first major contemporary capitalist depression occurred in the years 1873-1896, and was followed by a new cycle of expansion focused on the combination of free-financial activities and the enlargement of the world market. This paradoxical phase led to the first World War and to the Second Great Depression of the 1930s. This phase was overcome only after the Second World War because of the changes occurred in the geopolitical and economic field. The world economic system underwent a new crisis in the 1970s, and the answer given to this crisis was still grounded on the combination of liberalism and financialization. The downturn our financial system is experiencing today is the result of an almost uninterrupted crisis which has its roots in the beginning of the present millennium, when the crisis of the "New Economy" took place, leading to the present financial crisis.

Both constitutive poles of modernity - political and economical – have tended to fall cyclically into a crisis since the late nineteenth century, and these crises are overcome in certain moments, which, given the long time span of modernity, seem to represent the exceptions. Between the length of the organic crisis and the contingency of the disintegration of a historical bloc, we can imagine a form of relationship similar to the one existing between the relief and the background. The contingent crisis of a historically limited balance is the place where the foundations of the organic crisis are made visible after being eclipsed in the earlier balance. At the same time, the crisis does not occur in the forms taken during previous transitions. On the one hand, it is influenced by the productive, technological, and cultural changes come about during the historical development; on the other, it is the manifestation of the cumulative progression of some foundations of capitalist modernity - including the extension and the intensification of those sectors of society organized around the centrality of the commodity-form – that, in the long-term of social change, increasingly assert themselves producing stable and systematic consequences.

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