

NOTE CRITICHE

Antonio Gramsci, Waddah Charara and Walter Benjamin

A walk on the wild side of intellectual militancy

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Giovanni Pizza | *L'antropologia di Gramsci. Corpo, natura, mutazione*, Milano, Carocci, 2020, pp. 182.

Fadi A. BARDAWIL | *Revolution and disenchantment: Arab Marxism and the binds of emancipation*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2020, pp. 280.

Tilla RUDEL | *Walter Benjamin. L'angelo assassinato*, traduzione di Lorenza Canepa, Milano, Excelsior 1881, 2007, pp. 182 [ed. orig. *Walter Benjamin: L'ange assassiné*, Mengès, Paris, 2006, pp. 208].

Prologue

Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) and Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) are probably among the most cited and least understood political and cultural critics of contemporary social sciences. Less influential outside the Arab hemisphere remains Waddah Charara (1942-), a key figure of critical intellectual history and a protagonist of the Lebanese New Left in the sixties and seventies, a cultural and political critic, writer and social scientist. Charara, similarly to Gramsci and Benjamin, offered a deeply engaged analysis of universal questions regarding the political imagination and the possibilities of emancipatory politics. The three figures share a number of captivating characteristics: they all had experiences of intellectual militancy in times of war, they were all notably “free-minded spirits” that are difficult to categorise, they all transcend personal, political and academic boundaries and move considerably beyond conventional routes of academic or political career paths.

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Antonio Gramsci, Waddah Charara and Walter Benjamin: A walk on the wild side of intellectual militancy

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As in the taboo-breaking journeys of personalities of Andy Warhol's factory in New York evoked in "A walk on the wild side" by Lou Reed¹, I reflect in this commentary on the ground-breaking and unconventional intellectual legacies of these key figures as portrayed in three books: Giovanni Pizza's *L'antropologia di Gramsci*, Fadi A. Bardawil's *Revolution and disenchantment* and Tilla Rudel's *Walter Benjamin: l'ange assassiné*.

1st Act: Antonio Gramsci

Giovanni Pizza's volume constitutes a sophisticated attempt to follow the legacy of Gramsci's concepts and theories in different contemporary intellectual environments. Moving beyond the classical concept of anthology, the merit of the book is to offer a highly original perspective on the trajectories of Gramsci's thought and how it is applied in a wide array of fields. As one of the most influential experts on Gramsci in Italian academia and beyond, Pizza offers in this volume not so much an analysis of Gramsci's thought itself, but an examination of the repercussions of Gramsci's writing and acting on both Italian and international anthropology.

Under chapter headings that allude to the grand themes of political thought, the reader can find thoughtfully crafted itineraries of the "traffic in theory" (Bardawil 2020) of Gramsci's concepts on contemporary key anthropologists in the Anglo-Saxon hemisphere and, importantly and often overlooked, in a variety of Italian schools of thought. Examining the uses of Gramsci's concepts and ideas by authors as Kate Crehan, Jane Cowan, Anna L. Tsing and Brenda M. Farnell, Pizza outlines how anthropology developed a set of methods to problematise the "obvious" and questions common-sense conceptions of everyday life. Importantly, for Pizza, this strand of research in anthropology distinguishes itself from the study of cultural difference, as understood for example by Ulf Hannerz (2016) and others. Departing from the difference between hegemony and domination, the legacy of Gramsci has shaped directly or indirectly many of those studies that attempt to analyse the complexities of cultural, corporal and political elements. Thus, Gramsci has contributed to develop a realm of study that, similar to Jacques Derrida's deconstructivism later, has the aim of de-naturalising and de-objectifying, and of questioning how power relations became perceived as unquestioned.

Pizza outlines how Jane Cowan, an anthropologist from the University of Sussex known for her reflections on the conundrum of rights and culture (2006), combined innovatively in her early ethnography of dance the

1. It was actually Bernardino Palumbo (2006: 46) who applied, probably for the first time, Lou Reed's poetry as a critical methodological inspiration.

Gramscian notion of hegemony with Bourdieu's concept of habitus. This conceptual move allowed her to extend the Gramscian notion of hegemony to bodily processes of incorporation as well, moving beyond what the concept of habitus would have allowed. Pizza's volume is not free of an indirect critique of how Gramsci's multifaceted ideas have been presented in relatively reductive terms. For example, in a subsequent chapter, Pizza outlines how in Anna L. Tsing's work the same notion of hegemony has been transformed from an explicit point of reference in her early work (1993) into an implicit assumption in her later work (Tsing 2005). In other words, Pizza demonstrates how Gramsci's concept of hegemony fundamentally shaped lines of thought in many realms of the social sciences, although this might not be explicit.

In other chapters, Pizza traces how Gramsci's thought has come to characterise entire schools of thought in Italian anthropology. These are often overlooked in Anglo-Saxon contexts. Most strikingly, the intellectual and political engagement of Tullio Seppilli, founder of the first Italian Institute of ethnology and cultural anthropology at the University of Perugia, has given birth to a scholarly group in which the political suggestions of Gramsci and Marx were systematically present in the background of each research endeavour. Methodologically, Pizza emphasises how Seppilli's work reflects profoundly the "rigour of doubt" and the heuristic potential of dialogical exchange in order to examine the processes of construction of taken-for-granted concepts in everyday life, for instance in popular beliefs on health, as an entry point to demystify processes of hegemony. Conceptually, Gramsci's understanding of cultural boundaries as interlinked with dynamics of power has guided both political action and the theorisation of the social world in ways that imply a complexity that merits more attention. Another often-overlooked theme of reflection in the books concerns Gramsci's understanding of cultural dynamics and identities as intrinsically fluid in a way that does not allow a reductive interpretation in terms of hybridity, as popular in contemporary social sciences. As it is widely known, in an exchange of letters with his wife of Jewish origin Tatiana Schucht, Gramsci fiercely rejected the idea that different cultural "worlds" exist, such as exemplified by Christian and Jewish collective identities, underlining the dynamics of assimilation and cultural interchange. This relatively fluid notion of cultural boundaries has also sparked criticism, for instance in Alessandra Tarquini's (2019) analysis of the trajectories of the Italian Left and the constitution of Jewish collective identities. She suggests that precisely this open-minded notion of cultural boundaries facilitated an underestimation of anti-Semitism in Europe in the period before the Second

World War. This ongoing debate demonstrates the multifaceted potential of Gramscian intellectual legacy. In this sense, one of the merits of Pizza's work is that it demonstrates how Gramsci's legacy is far more complex and multifaceted than is often acknowledged, and his complex personality seems to appear rather reduced in mainstream applications of his concepts. In Pizza's writing, instead, the intricate fascination with a mode of inquiry centred on the "rigour of doubt" shines out between the lines of a portrait of an intellectual militant who appeared unrelentingly passionate for debate, contestation and re-elaboration; a passion that did not stop even with his imprisonment.

2nd Act: Waddah Charara

Similar to Gramsci, Waddah Charara experienced the hopes and despair associated with intellectual militancy, political transformation and war. Fadi A. Bardawil excavates the trajectories of critical theory beyond its usual horizon focusing on Charara's intellectual militancy. His study underlines the necessity to overcome the common-sense distinction between "universal" or "abstract" Western intellectuals, and "local" or "particular" native intellectuals in the rest of the world who cannot aspire to more than regional prominence. Charara is the co-founder of Socialist Lebanon, a socialist organisation associated with Lebanon's New Left in the sixties and seventies, and is also a cultural critic and academic, engaged with many of the "universal" challenges of political transformation that have been debated by intellectuals around the world, i.e.: who are the agents of political transformation? What are the sites of political transformation? What are the binds and potentials of emancipatory politics? Socialist Lebanon was one of the major intellectual vehicles in the Arab world that articulated a critique of communist stages of development and modernisation theory in general.

The merit of Bardawil's exceptionally delightful study of the archives of Socialist Lebanon is not only that it breaks down this distinction in classical postcolonial fashion, but actually dismantles the polarity itself. Arab intellectuals are often left with the option either to become "Westernised natives" or to "self-Orientalise". In contrast, Bardawil traces the cosmopolitan roots of Charara and his companions back to French and Anglo-Saxon education overlapping with broader influences from the Arab world. For instance, Charara grew up in rural southern Lebanon, which was integrated into broader economic, medical and administrative networks that allowed its inhabitants to move relatively freely between Mandate Palestine,

Lebanon and Syria. Open borders allowed, for example, visits of Jewish doctors in Palestine, to sell agricultural products in Jewish or Palestinian seaports, or to pursue education partly in Beirut, partly in Paris. The Christian Maronite liberal and pro-Western culture of Lebanon intersected here with Druze, Muslim, Jewish and European leftist perspectives at many levels. These experiences seem also to have influenced his later critique of nationalist and sectarian politics. Socialist Lebanon, founded in 1964, provided a frame for its protagonists to engage in a cosmopolitan outlook with Third-Worldist texts, primary texts from the Marxist tradition, locating itself as a laboratory of political imagination in the orbit of universal leftist theories. Bardawil recalls one of his interviewees about the vivid intellectual life of this group:

There was [Charara] who worked more than the others, and he had an older relationship with this line of work than the others, because he had a tight relationship with the Unef and the French Communist party. He was a Ba'thist beforehand too... Fawaz we used to consider the Leninist of the group, the class analysis guy, and the one with organisational conceptions (Bardawil 2020: 63).

Influenced by the writing of Ibn Khaldun and Antonio Gramsci, Charara reinterpreted the civil war in Lebanon as a crucial watershed, and not the 1967-war. For most Western-influenced thinkers such as Edward Said and others, this war, started with the Israeli occupation of the Jordanian West Bank, assumed a central status in shaking up political consciousness (Abu-Rabì 2006). In the course of his life, Charara developed an analysis of the implications of the Lebanese civil war and how the events of this war have transformed the hopes of the New Left into disenchantment. In particular, according to Bardawil, this period was pivotal for the development of Charara's autocritique of militant intellectuals. Factional and national identities replaced the more cosmopolitan outlook of transformative politics. In his spirited *al-Kirras al-Azraq* (The Blue Pamphlet), Charara reflects in a Gramscian style on the role of intellectuals as vectors of revolutionary change, taking up as well many theoretical suggestions from the subaltern studies group around Gayatri Spivak, Dipesh Chakrabarty and others. Starting with an analysis of the abstract image of 'the worker' as part of a homogenous group associated overwhelmingly with the material implication of the class struggle, he develops a fine-grained critique of the objectification of identity categories in New Leftist discourses, denouncing many contradictions of universal value (Bardawil 2020: 127). In harsh tones, Charara predicates "behind the mask of Marxist jargon, a petite bourgeoisie whose horizon of ambition is constituted by the state apparatus to move forward; a bourgeoisie that glorifies in talk workers and peasants while it

does its best [in practice] to retain the differences between itself and them” (The Blue Pamphlet: 35, cited in Bardawil 2020: 122). Taking up the consequences of his critique, Charara moved in 1973 into the multi-ethnic working-class neighbourhood Burj Hammud, northeast of Beirut, in order to make personal connections with rural migrant workers and live up his ideals.

In sum, Bardawil’s timely “fieldwork in theory” (2020: 8) offers important insights into a laboratory of political imagination out of the radar of mainstream critical theory and explores the cosmopolitical traffic of leftist theories. His work overcomes the distinction that depicts “Western” universal theory as opposed to non-Western local theories, highlighting the transnational modulations of critical theory in a new light and in multiple directions. The protagonist of the book, Charara, shares with Antonio Gramsci not only many common aspects of militant intellectuals, including his first-person engagement that did not stop at threats of war, violence and major difficulties. As it is the case with many other contemporary militant intellectuals (Boni, Koenler, Rossi, forthcoming), his own personal story remains the testimony of a figure that directed his intellectual and political passion towards many realms of cultural and political life, academia and politics, shaping deeply contemporary liberal and left politics in Lebanon and beyond.

3rd Act: Walter Benjamin

Tilla Rudel’s volume on Walter Benjamin is an empathic analysis of the personal and intellectual vicissitudes of Benjamin’s exceptional personality, as well as the legacy of his writings. Rudel, who has followed the traces of Benjamin, interviewing testimonies and experts, represents Benjamin’s extraordinary life story and its aftermath as it intersected with some of the great minds of his time, such as Theodor W. Adorno, Franz Kafka and Gershom Sholem, as well as some of the most striking events associated with the rise of fascism and, as in the case of Gramsci, the Second World War.

Walter Benjamin is portrayed vividly by Rudel as an unconventional and creative mind, an unbounded “free-minded” spirit, that moves uncontaminated beyond and above the vicissitudes of institutional or political constraint, paying a high price for his ability to constantly elude institutional constraints. This becomes clear from Rudel’s quotation of Hannah Arendt when describing Benjamin’s writing: “What is really difficult to understand in Benjamin is that, although he is not a poet, he thinks in a deeply poetic style” (p. 13). What emerges forcefully from Rudel’s portrait is how Walter Benjamin moved constantly out of the boxes that society seemed to have

predisposed. And Benjamin travels. He is always on the move: from Berlin to Frankfurt, from Paris to Moscow, from Riga to Ibiza. This becomes clear from the events around his post-doctoral research thesis (*Habilitation*, in the German academic system) that appears as a literary critique but is philosophical in substance and thus has difficulty in being accepted by either a commission of philosophy or one of literature studies. Rudel suggests also that increasing anti-Semitism contributed more or less openly to Benjamin's difficulties finding a place in the academy. However, after a few attempts to enter the German academic system he travels relatively spontaneously to Capri, a destination for alternative social experiments at the time².

One of the most interesting parts of the book is the careful description of his encounters in Capri, that seem to open up his intellectual horizon significantly. Asja Lacis, for instance, depicted by Benjamin himself as a "Russian communist from Riga" introduces him to socialist and critical theory, shaping deeply his future writings. The intellectual production of that period demonstrates some notable shifts towards a more cosmopolitan outlook on social transformation, overcoming questions of national or religious identity. This re-orientation also strengthens his life-long friendship with Theodor W. Adorno, whom he meets with Max Horkheimer for the first time after his stay in Capri in a café in Frankfurt. Shortly afterwards he moves to Moscow, where the relation with Lacis turns out to be a rather tumultuous one.

Another striking part of the book concerns the story of his suicide. After delaying his escape from Nazi fascism, he hoped to cross the border between France and Spain at a time when it was already more than dangerous. Illustrated with melancholic images of the region, this chapter underlines how again it was a misunderstanding that led Benjamin to lose hope of reaching a safe haven in the USA, upon the invitation of Theodor W. Adorno to come to New York. Beforehand, Gershom Sholem had made several attempts to invite Benjamin to Jerusalem, promising to support his academic career at the newly established Hebrew University. On one occasion, he also paid for the trip, but Benjamin, undecided about whether immigrating to Palestine was the right move, spent the money on another trip to Ibiza. Once Sholem found out about the death of Benjamin, he was apparently shocked. He disappeared for about 48 hours and spoke about Benjamin only in 1965, when he published *Benjamin and his angel* (Sholem 1981).

2. See, for instance, the movie by Mario Martone, *Capri-Revolution*, Italy, 2018.

Exodus

All three figures covered in this review are probably not understood well enough. Gramsci's and Benjamin's intellectual legacy has shaped contemporary mainstream academia, becoming almost unavoidable points of references for the elaboration what is presented as theory in social sciences and the humanities. However, their intellectual legacy has often been reduced to a number of attractive key concepts. The volumes examined here underline how their multifaceted thinking and acting have often been misunderstood or reduced to some key-points that fit into an existing framework. Charara, by contrast, has remained largely outside of mainstream Western critical theory due to a number of underlying structural reasons concerned with how the traffic of theory evolves. Their complex life trajectories in conflictual times, their extraordinary capacity to move beyond the boundaries of established settings, and their intellectual and political engagement remain often represented in rather reductive terms. In short, this walk on the wild side of intellectual militancy has highlighted some of the vicissitudes of the traffic of theory, overcoming many common-sense polarities such as mainstream and marginal realms of theoretical elaboration that will still shape contemporary critical theories for some time.

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