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Gramsci's *Observations on folklore*

Conceptions of the world, spontaneous philosophy and class instinct

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This essay was originally published with the title Concezioni del mondo, filosofia spontanea, folklore [Conceptions of the world, spontaneous philosophy, folklore] in 1969, in the conference proceedings Gramsci e la cultura contemporanea [Gramsci and contemporary culture], edited by Pietro Rossi (Editori Riuniti). An English translation was published in 1982, with the title Gramsci's Observations on folklore, in the volume Approaches to Gramsci, edited by Anne Showstack Sassoon for Writers & Readers, London. The present edition reproduces the 1982 English edition, with minor modifications. We have added the references to the English translation of Gramsci's Observations on folklore (SCW 188-195) and to other notes from the Prison Notebooks (PN2), not yet available when Cirese's essay was translated. We have translated the short unnumbered introductory section, omitted in the 1982 edition. Finally, we have expanded the title, following the version published in the book Intellettuali, folklore, istinto di classe [Intellectuals, folklore, class instinct] (Einaudi, 1976). More in general, the text was revised on the basis of the 1976 Italian edition, Concezioni del mondo, filosofia spontanea e istinto di classe nelle Osservazioni sul folklore di Antonio Gramsci. We thank Anne Showstack Sassoon for granting permission to republish the English translation.

(a.m.p., f.m.z.)

Gramsci's published writings cited:

LVN = *Letteratura e vita nazionale*, edited by Felice Platone, Turin, Einaudi, 1950.

PN2 = *Prison Notebooks. Volume II*, edited and translated by Joseph Buttigieg, New York, Columbia University Press, 1996.

QC = *Quaderni del carcere*, edited by Valentino Gerratana, Turin, Einaudi, 1975.

SCW = *Selections from Cultural Writings*, edited by David Forgacs and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, translated by William Boelhower, London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1985.

SPN = *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, edited and translated by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1971.

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Gramsci's Observations on folklore: Conceptions of the world, spontaneous philosophy and class instinct

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The following notes were written with the limited purpose of checking the validity of certain past or recent formulations that authorize or deny the prospect, for Gramsci, of the political use of folklore. These notes then had in some way to engage with aspects that were far enough remote from the initial one. Nevertheless, whatever the actual results may be, the basic intention remained that of understanding the text and reconstructing its context, without pursuing any endorsement or condemnation.

Without the possibility of systematically and exhaustively going through all texts, and to avoid unspecified and intentionally preconceived selections, I preferred to run the opposite risk, namely that of an excessive restriction of the text to analyse, and its possible tightening. In fact, I have fundamentally examined the corpus of Gramscian observations that were assembled by the editors and published under the title of “Observations on folklore” in *Letteratura e vita nazionale* [LVN 215-221]. It is therefore a group of excerpts which was created by a will different from that of the author. In the impossibility of overcoming the diaphragm that still stands between the manuscript and the printed work, that group of texts, however arbitrary it may be, constitutes a legitimate unitary object of research, given that for over twenty years it has acted in this actual constitution and not in any other, hypothetical and unspecifiable*. Furthermore, even with all its obvious flaws, this choice has at least the advantage of leaving unaddressed, and instead of explicitly denouncing, the composition and limits of the text to which the investigation applies, and of forcing one to justify the moments and the ways of resorting to pages and passages that are beyond those limits.

It goes without saying that, also because of the perhaps excessive delimitation of the text-object, the analysis that follows is configured as an extremely partial attempt.

1.0. Looking at Gramsci’s discussion of folklore in the most general terms, we find: firstly, that he expressly rejects the view that folklore is of no importance (it should not be thought of “as something strange or peculiar or colourful”); secondly, that he is no less explicit in claiming that it is important (though only as an object of study). He not only makes the point generically (folklore is “something very serious that must be taken

* The book was already in print when the excellent critical edition of the *Quaderni* edited by Valentino Gerratana was published.

seriously”), but argues it from the statement that the whole phenomenon of folklore contains or expresses a “conception of the world and life” which can be precisely located in *socio-cultural terms* in relation to other conceptions of the world (SCW 191, 189).

This conception of life and the world, as Gramsci makes clear, is characteristic of certain strata of society, namely the “people”. The people is taken in the sense of “the sum total of the instrumental and subaltern classes of every form of society that has so far existed” (SCW 189), and its conception of the world is not only “different” or “very different” from official conceptions of the world, but is “in opposition” or “in contradiction” or “in conflict” with them. Alternatively, “official” conceptions, characteristic of “the cultured sectors of historically determined societies” or the ruling strata or the “State” (SCW 190, 189, 188, 190, 193, 188, 190), are, like “official society” in general, “in competition and conflict” with folklore (SCW 193, 190).

All of this leads to the crucial observation that “folklore can only be understood as a reflection of the conditions of the people’s cultural life”. This is the reason why “the spirit of folklore studies should be changed, as well as deepened and extended”. Thus, pure scholarship must give way to more adequate research-criteria, notably the principle that “the people themselves are not a homogeneous cultural collectivity but present numerous and variously combined cultural stratifications” which can be identified to a certain extent “on the basis of the greater or lesser ‘isolation’” of “specific historical popular collectivities” (SCW, 190, 191, 189, 195).

1.1. What Gramsci does then is to *validate* an object or area of study on the basis of a *definition* of the object itself. But, though they do not preclude it in principle, neither Gramsci’s validation nor his definition add up to an endorsement either of the view that folklore, or the conception of the world which it contains or expresses, or the ways in which it goes against official conceptions of the world are valid in themselves; or of the possibility that they might be put to valid politico-cultural uses.

In other words, Gramsci’s statement that folklore is “something very serious” cannot be applied to the politico-cultural uses that might be made of folklore. Not only is this statement limited to folklore as an object of study, but it comes in a context where Gramsci stresses the need to bring about “the birth of a new culture among the broad popular masses”, i.e. to do away with “the separation between modern and popular culture or folklore” (SCW 191).

All that we can say for the moment is that Gramsci is raising “research into folklore” from the level of pure scholarship to that of “science or knowledge” (SCW 191), as well as promoting folklore itself from being a curiosity to being a *conception of the world*. And he takes the further step of locating it socially and culturally “in the framework of a nation and its culture”: *characteristic of the subaltern classes* on one hand, and in *opposition to official conceptions* on the other.

And closer examination of these three cardinal features of Gramsci’s definition of folklore will show that his endorsement cannot be extended to the politico-cultural sphere.

1.2. If we now go on to analyze the three key-concepts, at least as far as they emerge from the passages referred to so far, and try to bring out the general principle underlying them, we find the following:

1) Describing both folklore and official, or, more broadly, cultured intellectual products as *conceptions of the world* puts them on the same *generic* level, but there is still obviously a *specific* difference. It is indicated verbally by the distinction, and opposition, between “official” and “popular”. If we agree, for the sake of clarity, to use the adjective “folkloric” instead of “popular”, the generic equivalence and the specific difference can be represented thus:

folkloric versus official
conception of the world

This formula is only partially satisfactory, but we can make do with it for the time being.

2) As well as the fact that the folkloric conception is in *opposition* to the official one, Gramsci explicitly makes the point that: the inverse relation obviously obtains as well, and that official conceptions of the world are in *competition* or *conflict* with those of folklore.

What is not clear for the moment is which of the two conceptions is active and which is passive — a provisional uncertainty which can be represented equally uncertainly thus:

(active or passive) versus (active or passive)
opposition

3) The socio-cultural location of the two specific kinds of *conception of the world* is shown by the use of a series of semantically oppositional pairs. Generally speaking only one term of each pair is stated explicitly while the

other is left implicit, though it is immediately obvious. Here the implicit term is indicated by an asterisk: subaltern/*hegemonic; instrumental/*non-instrumental; cultured/*uncultured; ruling/*ruled; dominant/*dominated, etc.

This series of pairs can be reduced in essence to just two opposites. The first has to do with the socio-political sphere, the second with the socio-cultural sphere, social class and intellectual “sector” or category respectively.

We can represent the first as follows:

a) subaltern versus hegemonic
social class

It does not seem arbitrary to use the term “hegemonic” here, despite its not appearing explicitly in the pages in question.¹

The second pair could be represented by automatically employing the term “uncultured” as the implicit opposite of “cultured”. But the resulting contrast between *cultured* and **uncultured* could give rise to some misunderstanding. For there are reasonable grounds for believing that in Gramsci's view the usual contrast between *culture* and *non-culture* is not exactly the same thing, and does not imply the same judgement, as that between *culture* and *ignorance*, meaning the “complete absence of any form or kind of culture”. He speaks, as we have seen, of “the conditions of the people's *cultural* life”; he places popular song “in the framework of a nation and its *culture*”; he uses the expression “popular *culture* or folklore”, and so on. We shall want to return to this point in due course, but, in order not to prejudge the issue, we should leave open the possibility that the opposition lies not so much between *culture* and *non-culture* as between different kinds of culture. It therefore seems right to avoid using the term “uncultured” which we shall replace by the very Gramscian word “simple”. Bearing these points in mind, we can represent the opposition in the socio-cultural sphere, as regards intellectual “sector” or category, as follows:

b) simple versus cultured
intellectual category

1. Apart from obvious considerations, the term can be inferred without a shadow of doubt from (SCW 189). Furthermore, it can be seen as a correct equivalent of “ruling” and “dominant”, which are used explicitly in the phrases “governing strata” (SCW 190) and “dominant class” (SCW 194).

1.3. The semantic connections and distinctions so far identified can now be recapitulated as follows:

1	conceptions of the world	folkloric vs official
2	in mutual opposition	(active or passive) vs (active or passive)
3	located respectively in:	
	a) social classes	subaltern vs hegemonic
	b) intellectual categories	simple vs cultured

Reading the table vertically, we can see at once that “folkloric” connects with “subaltern” and “simple”. Neither of these terms go very well with an “active” position, either in common usage or, still less, in Gramsci’s. By the same token, the evident connection between “official” and “hegemonic” and “cultured” does not square with “passive”. In other words, even if Gramsci were not explicit on the point, the ambiguity still surrounding “opposition” would have to be resolved by assigning “passiveness” to folklore and “activeness” to official conceptions. The logic of connective and oppositional coherence alone then would lead us to the conclusion that the proposition underlying Gramsci’s considerations takes the following form:

The <i>folkloric</i> conception	is to	the <i>official</i> conception
as the <i>subaltern</i> social class	is to	the <i>hegemonic</i> social class
as the <i>simple</i> intellectual category	is to	the <i>cultured</i> intellectual category
as <i>passive</i> opposition	is to	<i>active</i> opposition.

2.0. This conclusion was fairly predictable, but it is confirmed by the specific points Gramsci makes on the material of folklore itself, the conception of the world it embodies, and the opposition between both of these and official conceptions. His points are not merely statements of fact. Whether they have to do with *content* or *form* (by which we understand here mode of organization or degree of inner coherence), they are decidedly judgemental in character, and the judgement can very rarely be called positive. Even if Gramsci occasionally modifies his judgement and assesses folklore positively in certain respects, it does not seem to alter our impression that he is being quite deliberately systematic in his devaluation of folklore (beginning with those features which we have listed).

2.1. It is often hard to make out whether Gramsci is talking about folk-material as such or the conception of the world it expresses, but the attributes he assigns all point plainly in a negative direction.

Thus, in a context where the reference is definitely to the material itself, Gramsci states that there is “nothing more contradictory and fragmentary than folklore”. Elsewhere, where the reference is less certain, he notes that “folklore” has stayed “scattered and many-sided”. Referring to the folkloric or popular conception of the world, Gramsci says that it is “to a large extent implicit” as well as “unelaborated”, “unsystematic”, and “many-sided” (*SCW* 190, 189):

not only because it includes different and juxtaposed elements, but also because it is stratified, from the more crude to the less crude - if, indeed, one should not speak of a confused agglomerate of fragments of all the conceptions of the world and of life that have succeeded one another in history. In fact, it is only in folklore that one finds surviving evidence, adulterated and mutilated, of the majority of these conceptions (*SCW* 189).

The negative judgement, then, affects all aspects of folklore: both the way in which it is organized and the nature or indeed the content of the elements which make it up. The way that Gramsci thinks and talks about this material, whether in general terms or through specific examples, is as something essentially debased, the spill-over of cultured conceptions. And not only is it backward in relation to the developments of science and “cultured culture”: it is even out of touch with the conditions under which the people actually live.

In addition to the passages already cited, one might look at those in which Gramsci underlines folklore's dependence on the “culture of the dominant class”, or where he talks about how “certain opinions and scientific concepts, taken out of context, and more or less distorted, are for ever falling into the popular domain” where they are “assimilated in strange ways” (*SCW* 193, 189); or again where the “Ptolemaic conception” – which elsewhere is assigned to “common sense” (*SCW* 190; *QC* 1456; *SPN* 420) is regarded as “typical of folklore”; or, finally, where he points out that

certain conceptions specific to folklore remain even after these conditions [of the people's cultural life] have been (or seem to be) modified or have given way to bizarre combinations (*SCW* 190)

The “tradition”, in short, is a “mosaic” (*SCW* 189).

2.2. Passiveness and backwardness of content are of course simply a manifestation of the fact that the material is incapable of elaboration or systemization. With everything connected in this way, what we appear to have is an entirely homogeneous series of attributes. Whether Gramsci is

referring to the material of folklore or its conception of the world, its content or its form, he always attributes to it qualities that constitute the *weak* (or negative, low-value) term of an oppositional pair whose *strong* (or positive, high-value) term is reserved more or less explicitly for conceptions to be found on the side of official society and the ruling strata.

Looking first at formal qualities, we find explicitly associated with folklore: *contradictoriness, fragmentation, dispersal, multiplicity, implicitness, non-elaboration, un-systematicness, difference, juxtaposition, stratification, indigestibility*, etc. Explicitly stated qualities such as *elaboration, systematicness, political organization and centralization, organic systemization*, etc. are reserved for non-folk conceptions. But it would obviously not be a distortion to extend the list to include the negation of the remaining “weak” terms assigned to folklore (**non-contradictoriness, *non-fragmentation, *non-multiplicity*, i.e. **unity, *non-implicitness*, i.e. **explicitness*, and so on).

There are some nuances, but most of these pairs point to the fact that the manner of ordering collections of cultural phenomena and their respective conceptions of the world, and the results of that process, are in one case positive and in the other negative.

The qualities that refer particularly to the manner in which the process takes place are elaboration, systematicness, organization, centralization, organic systemization and the like, and their opposites, whether explicitly stated or not. If we agree to call the positive and negative poles “organic” and “unorganic” respectively, and to refer to the ordering-process as “combination”, the semantic connections and distinctions can then be schematized as:

unorganic versus organic
combination

Such qualities as *fragmentation, dispersal, multiplicity, stratification* and their opposites are concerned on the other hand with the results of the process. To indicate the two different kinds of internal organization we can use the terms “fragmentary” and “unitary”, which gives us:

fragmentary versus unitary
internal organization

One pair – *implicitness/explicitness* – is left over, and this we can take as referring to the mode of expression or manifestation, schematized as:

implicit versus explicit
mode of expression

As regards the material of folklore — in other words what is contained in its opinions or beliefs or practices — Gramsci emphasizes above all the fact that it is a *debased spill-over*. This is obviously in contrast to the original character of what is produced by “culture”, so that we can represent the opposition as follows:

debased versus original
content

If we now add these new pairs of attributes to those already identified, we get the following (simplified) table:

folkloric	<i>versus</i>	official
(active or passive)	<i>versus</i>	(active or passive)
subaltern	<i>versus</i>	hegemonic
simple	<i>versus</i>	cultured
unorganic	<i>versus</i>	organic
fragmentary	<i>versus</i>	unitary
implicit	<i>versus</i>	explicit
debased	<i>versus</i>	original

– which makes it increasingly unlikely that the quality of *activeness* can be attributed to folklore.

2.3. Gramsci has quite different ways of talking about the forms taken by the opposition between folk and official conceptions, depending on which of the two aspects of the relation he is considering, and it is these explicit statements that enable us finally to decide the question of activeness and passiveness.

Looked at from the point of view of folklore, the opposition is “for the most part implicit, mechanical, objective” (SCW 188). But when it is looked at from the other point of view, it completely changes character and becomes something active and organized. This is what is implied when Gramsci asks whether the “elaboration” and “systemization” of Catholicism wrought by “intellectuals and the Church hierarchy” were not in fact necessary “to keep folklore scattered and many-sided”. The opposition appears even more active and organized when Gramsci refers to the state as an entity which is “not agnostic, but has its own conception of life which it is its duty to disseminate through education of the popular masses”: this “educational activity”, as Gramsci observes, “is in competition and conflict with other explicit or implicit conceptions”, amongst which is folklore “which, therefore, has to be ‘overcome’” (SCW 190, 191).

Thus, from the point of view of folklore the opposition takes the form at best of resistance. It might be a tenacious resistance, but in kind it is mechanical, implicit and objective. On the opposite side, one has an activeness which at the least is involved in “keeping things in check”, but which has the power to “uproot”, “replace”, “hammer”, and so on (SCW 191).

2.4. Once again, then, the weak and strong terms are distributed on each side of a sharp dividing line, with the former linked to folklore and the latter to official conceptions.

There are here at least two recognizable semantic distinctions. There is the opposition between *implicit*, *mechanical* and *objective*, and **explicit*, **non-mechanical*, **non-objective*; and there is that between the *aggressive* character of official conceptions and folklore’s attitude of *resistance*. The first obviously has to do with the degree of consciousness or intentionality involved, and we can represent it by the terms “mechanical *versus* intentional” (drawing on other passages in Gramsci, the terms “spontaneity *versus* conscious leadership” could be used instead²) The second opposition, which is concerned with aggressive capabilities and force of expansion, can be represented by the terms “active” and “passive” as already used.

It does not seem appropriate to run these two pairs together, so the connections and distinctions concerning the “opposition” that Gramsci speaks about require two different schematizations. The first is to do with *consciousness*, the second with the *capacity to influence* on the outside. If we may agree to use the term “opposition” to link the two poles of consciousness, we shall have the following schema:

2. SPN 196-197: “*Spontaneity and conscious leadership*. The term “spontaneity” can be variously defined, for the phenomenon to which it refers is many-sided. Meanwhile it must be stressed that “pure” spontaneity does not exist in history: it would come to the same thing as “pure” mechanicity. In the “most spontaneous” movement it is simply the case that the elements of “conscious leadership” cannot be checked, have left no reliable document. It may be said that spontaneity is therefore characteristic of the “history of the subaltern classes”, and indeed of their most marginal and peripheral elements; these have not achieved any consciousness of the class “for itself”, and consequently it never occurs to them that their-history might have some possible importance, that there might be some value in leaving documentary evidence of it”.

Gramsci goes on: “Hence in such movements there exist multiple elements of ‘conscious leadership’, but no one of them is predominant or transcends the level of a given social stratum’s ‘popular science’ — its ‘common sense’ or traditional conception of the world”. For the continuation of this passage, see Note 3 below.

mechanical *versus* intentional
opposition

And if we further agree to use the term “conflict” to link the two poles of the *capacity to influence* and expand, the relation will be represented as:

passive *versus* active
conflict

In this way we have both confirmed the straightforward hypothesis that the qualities Gramsci attributes to folklore are homogeneous in a necessarily *negative* sense, and resolved the ambiguity surrounding the “opposition” between the two conceptions. The general proposition underlying his statements can now be formulated as follows:

<i>folkloric</i> conception	is to	<i>official</i>
as <i>subaltern</i> social class	is to	<i>hegemonic</i>
as <i>simple</i> intellectual category	is to	<i>cultured</i>
as <i>unorganic</i> combination	is to	<i>organic</i>
as <i>fragmentary</i> internal organization	is to	<i>unitary</i>
as <i>implicit</i> mode of expression	is to	<i>explicit</i>
as <i>debased</i> content	is to	<i>original</i>
as <i>mechanical</i> opposition	is to	<i>intentional</i>
as <i>passive</i> conflict	is to	<i>active</i>

2.5. Everything falls into place, then, but perhaps just a little too neatly. Presented in this way, the constant attribution of weak or negative terms to folklore and strong or positive ones to non-folk conceptions has all the marks of the deliberate systematicity we mentioned before, and can obviously look suspect. Might it not in fact be a mirage or distortion produced by the schematization and hence excessive impoverishment of an argument that in itself is a good deal more mobile and articulated?

There is no question but that Gramsci's considerations are richer than the proposition we have come up with. Apart from anything else, there are a number of “positive” attributes which we have passed over but which need to be taken into account, as well as other qualifications and nuances. But before we go on to consider these, the point must be made that the systematic quality to which we have drawn attention is explicitly confirmed by the text as we have examined it so far.

It is Gramsci himself who says that all the negative qualities listed above *must* be assigned to folklore, *before* moving on to an examination of its concrete manifestations, and perhaps even quite separately from them. This list of negatives and their attribution to folklore are to be argued by deduction from the very concept of “people”. If the people consists of all subaltern and instrumental classes, it follows “*by definition*”, as Gramsci writes, that “the people [...] *cannot* possess conceptions which are elaborated, systematic and politically organized and centralized in their albeit contradictory development” (SCW 189, *Italics added*). Elaboration, systematicness and centralization are in fact expressions of hegemony (even if not only of hegemony), which is precisely what those classes which are still subaltern lack.

So systematic a dichotomizing of the various attributes would seem to be a real characteristic rather than an arbitrary impoverishment of the text.

3.0. This being the case — at least so far as we can see — it is fairly obvious that Gramsci’s treatment of folklore moves along two separate lines, and that his assessment changes radically as he shifts from one to the other. *On the one hand*, he considers folklore as an object of study and as such he validates it in full. But *on the other*, he looks at it as a force or factor in real life and its process of development, and from this point of view he characterizes it with a long, and so far systematic and unbroken, series of negative, low-value, qualities.

In other words, folklore is allowed the rank of a conception of the world, but within this category of phenomena it is placed at a lower level in the hierarchy than that assigned to the official conceptions from which it is distinguished and which stand in opposition to it. *By definition*, it is denied all the formal qualities of coherence, unity, consciousness, etc., which are typical of the hegemonic classes and their “official” conceptions. Gramsci’s esteem goes entirely to the latter, quite independently of the specific content of the conception in question or what social class it belongs to.

The upshot is a mixture of tensions and conflicts that border on the edge of ambiguity. The cultural expressions of the social classes with which Gramsci solidarizes so clearly at the political level are assessed positively to the extent that they are to be considered simply as an object of scientific research — but are judged negatively when it comes to seeing them as factors in real life and its process of development. Alternately, the cultural modes of the classes which Gramsci opposes both politically and culturally are esteemed as permanent “values” and “forces”.

It is precisely these tensions or ambiguities which give rise to conflicting interpretations on the question of the political use of folklore. Thus, at one extreme there is the tendency to shift Gramsci's positive judgement on folklore as an object of study onto its potential use in politics, while at the other we find his negative judgement on the modes and content of folklore extended to the object of study itself.

Everything seems to revolve around the real or apparent ambivalence of the concepts of "subaltern" and "official". The text seems to allow of two different interpretations which can be summarized very roughly and schematically as follows. Depending on how they are affected by the context, both singly and in relation to each other, the two concepts may take the form of an opposition either:

- (a) between "subaltern = the modern proletariat which today is historically in the right even if it has attained power only in a few cases" (for Gramsci, the USSR) and "official = the modern bourgeoisie which today is historically in the wrong even though in many cases it still retains power"; or:
- (b) between "subaltern = those classes, past or future, that are lacking in or deprived of historical force" and "official = those classes whose hegemony, whether past or future, constitutes real history".

It is at this difficult point that we turn for guidance to those of Gramsci's observations that we have not yet taken into account.

4.0. These remaining observations are different from the foregoing inasmuch as they provide a more or less immediately *positive* description of folklore. Few though they are, this is not a reason for discounting their effect on the systematic distribution of strong and weak terms noted above, and we should examine them with a certain amount of care. Here to begin with is a brief list of the relevant points.

- 1) Some of folklore's *weak* attributes are modified quantitatively by Gramsci at the level of general definition. Thus, he writes that the folkloric conception "is implicit to a large extent", and that its opposition to official world views is "for the most part implicit, mechanical, and objective" (SCW 189, *Italics added*).
- 2) Referring specifically to "morality of the people" — but without making it clear whether he is thinking of the conservative conceptions or the progressive innovations which he will distinguish between a little later on — Gramsci attributes a particular "tenacity" to certain folk-convictions: "imperatives exist that are much stronger, more tenacious and more effective than those of official 'morality'" (SCW 190).

- 3) Still in the area of morality, and also that of “juridical folklore”, Gramsci credits at least some folk-conceptions with the ability to “adhere and correspond spontaneously” to actual conditions of life and their process of development. Hence it can happen that:
- a) they are not always necessarily just the debased, inert, spill-over of dominant conceptions. So much is clear from the passage in which he speaks of

the ensemble of opinions and beliefs concerning one’s ‘own’ rights which circulate uninterrupted among the popular masses and are continuously renewed under the pressure of real living conditions and the spontaneous comparison between the ways in which the various social strata live (SCW 193).
 - b) they can sometimes have a progressive value which the analysis of cultural stratifications must take account of; thus, Gramsci underlines the need to “distinguish between different strata” in the sphere of popular morality as well:

the fossilized ones which reflect conditions of past life and are therefore conservative and reactionary, and those which consist of a series of innovations, often creative and progressive, determined spontaneously by forms and conditions of life which are in the process of developing and which are in contradiction to or simply different from the morality of the governing strata (SCW 189).
 - c) they may achieve a degree of expansive capacity that might throw official conceptions back on the defensive; thus, when discussing a certain kind of criticism levelled at “so-called natural law”, Gramsci notes that, behind its apparent objectives,

the aim of the controversy is in fact to curb the influence that the popular currents of “natural law” may (*and in fact do*) have, particularly on young intellectuals (SCW 193, Italics added).
- 4) Speaking about popular song — though there are indications that the point might be applied more widely Gramsci acknowledges that, even though folklore is generally speaking dependent on official conceptions, (i.e. the process of “cultural descent” from elites to masses is going on), the people is “itself” able to select according to its “own” criteria, these going more or less implicitly against official ones. Thus, he makes the point that even though popular songs “are written neither by nor for the people”, they have been “taken over by it because they conform to its way of thinking and feeling”; they are representative of “how it conceives life and the world, in contrast with official society”. This makes the phrases Gramsci uses elsewhere rather less generic:

folklore has always been tied to the culture of the dominant class and, *in its own way, has drawn from it* the motifs which have then become inserted into combinations with the previous traditions (SCW 194, Italics added).

5.0. It is fairly clear that there are two different ways in which what for the sake of brevity we shall call these “positive” remarks operate in relation to those already examined. Either they *introduce “new” qualities or aspects*, not previously taken into consideration, or which have not so far come to the fore; or they *modify in a quantitative sense* certain qualities already otherwise attributed. We shall examine these two aspects separately.

5.1.0. The following act in the first way and introduce “new” qualities: (a) the point about the particular “tenacity” of some popular conceptions; (b) the acknowledgement that folklore, at least in certain cases, is able to adhere “spontaneously” to real conditions of life as they develop; (c) the attribution of a “progressive” political value to some of the phenomena of folklore.

We must therefore introduce these new data into our previous table. But in so doing we have to observe that the positive remarks under examination, as is clearly stated, concern only *some* features or elements of folklore, while the negative characteristics equally clearly concerned the *whole* of folklore. This means two things: firstly, that these positive attributions are not to be placed at the same level as the negative ones already dealt with; and secondly, that assigning them to folklore *does not lead to* their negations being assigned to official conceptions *as such*, but at most to their affecting some aspects of the latter.

Thus, leaving aside the fact that the “tenacity” of popular attitudes is not always regarded “positively” (since it is also responsible for holding back the people in a manner deplored by Gramsci³), the statement “*certain* popular moral imperatives are more tenacious than those of official morality” means only that *certain* official imperatives are weaker than those of folklore. The

3. In this connection, cf. what Gramsci writes immediately after the passage cited in Note 2 above: “This is precisely what De Man, empirically, counterposes to Marxism; but he does not realize (apparently) that he is falling into the position of somebody who, after describing folklore, witchcraft, etc., and showing that these conceptions have sturdy historical roots and are tenaciously entwined in the psychology of specific popular strata, believed that he had ‘transcended’ modern science — taking as ‘modern science’ every little article in the popular scientific journals and periodicals. This is a real case of intellectual teratology, of which there are other examples: precisely, the admirers of folklore, who advocate its preservation; the ‘magicalists’ connected with Maeterlinck, who believe it is necessary to take up anew the thread — snapped by violence — of alchemy and witchcraft, so that science may be put back onto a course more fertile in discoveries, etc” (SPN 197).

same is true of the capacity to adhere to reality: some popular opinions have it, but this does not mean that non-folk opinions do not. But were any proof needed of the particular, *non*-universal, character of these positive qualities in folklore, one would only need to look at Gramsci's acknowledgement of the "progressive" value of certain popular beliefs or opinions. This acknowledgement rests on the creation of an explicit contrast between *progressive* and *reactionary* (or *conservative*) *inside* folklore itself — requiring, at most, an identical contrast inside official conceptions.

If, in short, we go on to fit these "new" qualities into the system of oppositions we have set up, we find that the latter is "extended" and also looks different on the page. Thus, if we agree to use the term "effective" for the capacity to adhere to reality, the table would be extended in the following (simplified) way:

	folkloric	<i>versus</i>	official

	(tenacious or not tenacious)	<i>versus</i>	(tenacious or not tenacious)
	(effective or not effective)	<i>versus</i>	(effective or not effective)
	(progressive or reactionary)	<i>versus</i>	(progressive or reactionary)

Only one of the oppositional pairs to which the extension is added appears to be affected in any way, and it is the one that concerns "content". From the point of view of folklore, content no longer appears as purely "debased": it might be "*occasionally* original", or even autonomous. This points forward to those quantitative modifications already mentioned which we shall be looking at more closely in due course.

Otherwise, the extension seems to leave the absolute nature of the oppositions and their distribution intact. The fact that folklore can sometimes be tenacious, effective and progressive (or rather, *more* tenacious etc. than official conceptions sometimes are) neither affects nor limits — if anything, to some extent it confirms and strengthens — the implicitness of the mode of expression, the unorganic character of combination, the fragmentation of internal organization, the passive-ness of the conflict, the simplicity or elementariness of the intellectual category, or in short the subaltern position of the social class to which folklore belongs. All that is affirmed is that the implicit mode of expression does not of itself preclude the presence of (some) progressive political values, that fragmentation or unorganicness nevertheless allow room for (some) strata of innovations, and so on.

The real consequence of the new group of oppositions is to be found at a different level. It is directly linked to the fact which makes it impossible to infer any positive judgement on folklore as such from what Gramsci wrote, the fact that the new oppositions *tenacious / not tenacious, effective / not effective, progressive / reactionary* do not coincide with the dichotomies *subaltern / hegemonic, un-organic / organic*, etc., but are added to them.

Because of this lack of coincidence, it is both possible and necessary to rearrange the whole system, no longer taking the opposition between *folkloric* and *official* as the point of reference but rather each of the new oppositions, most particularly that of an explicitly political kind.

The result is a complete reshuffling of the semantic connections and distinctions. What is revealed in the long run is that in Gramsci's text there exist implicit terms of conceptual reference which lie beyond the straightforward opposition between *folkloric* and *official* as it has been presented so far.

Pedantic though it may be, it could be of some use to represent the schema constructed in function of the dichotomy between *progressive* and *reactionary* in diagrammatic form. The schema would then offer us not two but four possible kinds of conceptions of the world. While the vertical connections between *folkloric* and *subaltern, implicit, unorganic*, etc., and between *official* and *hegemonic, explicit, organic*, etc. remain unchanged, the four kinds would take the following form:

folkloric and reactionary	official and reactionary
folkloric and progressive	official and progressive

5.1.1. One of the most immediately obvious features of this new pattern is that the concept of "official" is, so to speak, split in two. It is seen as capable of assuming at least one negative quality ("reactionary"), which interrupts the long and hitherto unbroken series of positive attributes – or of adding one further positive quality ("progressive") to all those preceding.

The first is hardly surprising, and it is moreover explicitly stated in the text with Gramsci describing some of the attitudes of the cultured and ruling strata as "the most narrow-minded conservatism" (SCW 193). This corrective to Gramsci's systematic acknowledgement of positive qualities is in any case perfectly consistent with the obvious gap between his own views and the "official" conceptions of the time and place in which he is writing and working. The compatibility between "official" and "progressive", on the other hand, might occasion some surprise, particularly since the text under consideration does not appear to offer any immediate indications or

concrete examples of a connection which we have brought out by purely formal and combinatory means. There is, however, no real reason for surprise if one reflects that the term “official” is really just a general heading for a number of highly valued qualities. So as regards its intrinsic qualities, the expression “official and progressive” can be translated, on the basis of the connections which we believe we have established, as: “a conception of the world that is organic, unitary, explicit, original in its contents, intentional in its opposition to other conceptions and active in its conflict with them, and finally, progressive”. Which obviously means for Gramsci the philosophy of praxis, historical materialism, Marxism — the point of view which he himself takes up. But “official” also means “pertaining to the cultured sectors and the hegemonic classes”: for Gramsci, both of these further conditions can be regarded as met only in the Soviet Union, whereas for the rest of the world only the first is satisfied. Thus it can be seen that, far from being produced by purely formal means, the combination of “official and progressive” stands in fact for the *goal* in view or the *model* which is referred to.

But there is a good deal more. By inserting this new combination, which in the first instance came about by purely formal means, the static nature of the opposition between “folkloric” and “official” is decisively broken. The four-term pattern above has no room either for Marxism as the conception of the world belonging to social forces that are not yet hegemonic or for those workers’ parties that are not yet in power. But it is that same pattern which demands their presence, based as it is on three terms denoting a given state of affairs and one which designates a goal and a model. The schema therefore represents a process, an action in time, and thus contains Marxism as not yet hegemonic, the workers’ parties as not yet in power, or more precisely the class-struggle. These are present not as terms or factors, but as mediators or *agents* which effect the transition from the given state of affairs to the new situation and transform a “progressive” that is still “folkloric” (i.e. still subaltern, implicit, fragmentary, etc.) into a definitively “official” (i.e. fully hegemonic) “progressive”.

5.1.2. Thus our formal repatterning of the schema in function of the political assessment explicitly stated by the text has led us to recognize from within the presence of an underlying context, of unspoken but decisive conceptual reference-points. It is precisely to the tacit but active presence of these references that the ambivalence or ambiguity mentioned above has to be related, for it comes about as the result of repeated, sudden shifts, not perhaps kept entirely under control, from one level or point of view to another.

a) If the level concerned is that of describing a given state of affairs, and as long as the factors taken into account are limited to *bourgeois* official conceptions on the one hand and folklore as reflecting the cultural life of *the great masses of the people* on the other, the oppositional, what one might almost call alternative, value of the folkloric conception is immediately apparent, and the way is opened to a recognition of its ability both to produce its own autonomous culture and to select products handed down from above for its own, opposite, ends.

In such cases, the text authorizes us to recognize the folk conception as a spontaneous form of the "spirit of cleavage", which Gramsci defines elsewhere as "the progressive acquisition of consciousness of [the innovatory class's] own historical personality", (PN2 52-53) and to see "progressive" or "protest" folklore at least as the manifestation of a *class-instinct* ("instinct" of course being understood as a "primitive and elementary historical acquisition", not a biological phenomenon) (SPN 199).

b) But this limitation of perspective to the level of pure description and the straightforward comparison between folklore and bourgeois conceptions is short-lived. Straight-away, reference to the essential terms comes into play, the tension opens up between things as they are and the goal in view, and we move from the area of static description to that of action or process. At this point, there are at least three sides to the comparison (folklore, bourgeois conceptions, Marxist conception), and all the decidedly negative limitations of folklore come to the fore, however progressive it might be in certain respects and however significant its opposition to the official conceptions of the bourgeoisie. At the same time, the way is cleared for an appreciation of all the formal qualities which are possessed by official conceptions (whether bourgeois or proletarian) and not by folklore in its role as the cultural expression of social classes that are still subaltern. When it comes to an appreciation of those formal qualities, Gramsci contrasts folklore with the Marxist conception of the world, not with bourgeois ones: what are now in question are *class-consciousness* and class-struggle, the Communist Party, proletarian hegemony, in other words, the aims and agents of a huge transformation of things as they are.

So it seems that the constant play of light and shadow falling across Gramsci's discussions of folklore and official conceptions is to be attributed to the fact that the beam is cast from a number of different angles. But it is controlled by a single switch movement towards a goal and adaptation to a model.

5.1.3. We cannot, however, ignore the point that in all the criss-crossing of levels and points of view, one perspective remains constant. This is the esteem afforded to certain qualities which we shall call intellectual and, which are the condition and expression of hegemony, *by whichever class it is exercised*. These qualities are presented, so to speak, as crossing class-boundaries: their possession or exercise is conditioned by class, but not their value, which is permanent. That is why one cannot be sure what hierarchical order all the terms, explicit and implicit, which the text relates to one another, should be put in, except for the entirely positive elements at one extreme (“official and progressive”) and the entirely negative ones at the other (“folkloric and reactionary”). The order of the middle terms remains uncertain, since it is impossible to determine whether more value is given to what is politically positive (which would put “folkloric and progressive” higher up the scale) or to what is formally positive (in which case it would be “official and reactionary”).

There is then a question whether a “progressive” content which is without formal capacities or intellectual force should not be considered inert, if not indeed “reactionary”, while formal and intellectual capacities, even though their content is “reactionary”, should of themselves ultimately be regarded as “progressive”.

A solution to this problem might be found if we look back to Gramsci’s examination of other forces. His interest in folklore as an object of study is consonant with his desire for “a more cautious and precise assessment of the forces acting in society”⁴. Undoubtedly he regards folklore as one of these forces.

4. PN2 52-53: “*Ideological material*. A study of how the ideological structure of a ruling class is actually organized: that is, the material organization meant to preserve, defend, and develop the theoretical or ideological ‘front’” [...].

The press is the most dynamic part of the ideological structure, but not the only one. Everything that directly or indirectly influences or could influence public opinion belongs to it: libraries, schools, associations and clubs of various kinds, even architecture, the layout of streets and their names. The position that the church has maintained in the modern world cannot be explained without knowledge of the incessant and patient efforts it makes to ensure the continuous development of its particular sector of this material structure of ideology. Such a study, conducted seriously, would be quite important: besides providing a living historical model of such a structure, it would inculcate the habit of assessing the forces of agency in society with greater caution and precision. What can an innovative class set against the formidable complex of trenches and fortifications of the ruling class? The spirit of cleavages—that is, the progressive acquisition of the consciousness of one’s historical identity—a spirit of cleavage that must aim to extend itself from the protagonist class to the classes that are its potential allies: all of this requires complex ideological work, the first condition of which is an exact knowledge of the field that must be cleared of its element of human mass”.

We have already seen him paying tribute to the “tenacity” of folklore, and pursuing this line a little further we would find more explicit statements elsewhere, as for example when Gramsci writes:

It is worth recalling the frequent affirmation made by Marx on the “solidity of popular beliefs” as a necessary element of a specific situation. What he says more or less is “when this way of conceiving things has the force of popular beliefs”, etc. Another proposition of Marx is that a popular conviction often has the same energy as a material force or something of the kind, which is extremely significant (SPN 377)⁵.

Another example would be his note on the “fanatical granite compactness of the ‘popular beliefs’ which assume the same energy as ‘material forces’” (SPN 404).

These observations might obviously allow us to regard “material forces” (and hence folklore in so far as it is comparable to material forces) as “content” and intellectual qualities as “form”, tending thereby “to reinforce the conception of ‘historic bloc’” (SPN 377). As a consequence we would be authorized by the text at this point to see the positive aspect of folklore as residing in the fact that it is a “force” or “energy” which is made the content of a “form” that takes shape elsewhere, *rather than* in particular items of content, however progressive they may be.

But on the other hand, the whole argument lends itself to oversimplification. Notwithstanding Gramsci’s declared intention to treat this

distinction between form and content [as having] purely didactic value, since the material forces would be inconceivable historically without form and the ideologies would be individual fancies without the material forces (SPN 377)

even the dialectical relationship between form and content is broken. The intellectual form is regarded as pre-existent or at any rate determining, while, if the material forces are regarded as essential, it is only at the instrumental level. Their content (as well as the “other” forms which this content cannot but take on) is completely devoid of interest. In spite of Gramsci’s statement to the effect that “the demands of cultural contact with the ‘simple’” must be “continually felt” (and therefore satisfied) (SPN 330f), the only point of interest in the simple is their material force, with which contact is made in political action rather than cultural or scientific research.

5. SPN 377. The passage goes on: “The analysis of these propositions tends, I think, to reinforce the conception of *historical bloc* in which precisely material forces are the content and ideologies are the form, though this distinction between form and content has purely didactic value, since the material forces would be inconceivable historically without form and the ideologies would be individual fancies without the material forces”.

This revision is by no means a trivial one. It involves a transition from quality to quantity which is consonant with certain of Gramsci's general procedures. But could all the contrasting pairs we have before us be revised in the same way?

It would make sense for "simple", "fragmentary", "unorganic" and "mechanical", but a good deal less so for the contrast between "subaltern" and "hegemonic". It is true that, forcing the issue a little, we could conceive of attenuations or exceptions in this case as well. Using words a little bit loosely, one could say for example that the proletariat today is *a little less subaltern* (or even, looking to the other side of a not precisely defined dividing-line, *a little more hegemonic*). Gramsci himself is basically presenting the dominant classes as *a little less* (or *not entirely*) *hegemonic* when he talks about the expansive power of certain popular beliefs. But such expressions have very little rigour about them and simply correspond to *a little stronger, a little weaker*, and so on. We know perfectly well in fact that "*a little more power*" is not "*power*", and that the difference between them is precisely "revolution".

It is in short extremely difficult to recast the qualitative contrast between "subaltern" and "hegemonic" as a simple continuous gradation of quantitative steps from "*more subaltern*" (or perhaps "*less hegemonic*") to "*less subaltern*" (or "*more hegemonic*"). But even if we did decide to do it, and push Gramsci's text in a "reformist" direction, so to speak, we would come up against further and not inconsiderable difficulties.

For even if Gramsci regarded *all* the qualitative contrasts he presents us with as quantitative distinctions, the fact remains that *by definition*, as he puts it, he systematically and nearly always *absolutely* assigns negative qualities to folklore, and almost without exception he expresses himself in terms of quality and discontinuity (words sometimes *betray* one's thought, as is well known, but also in the sense that they *make clear* what it really is).

So we are faced with an alternative. By explicitly introducing a number of quantitative modifications we would bring about a radical transformation in the system of qualitative contrasts that seemed to be emerging from the text. But there are strong arguments against such a transformation: the fact that it is difficult to give a quantitative sense to the fundamental contrast between *subaltern* and *hegemonic*; Gramsci's attribution of negative qualities to folklore and positive ones to official conceptions "by definition", and his use of an essentially qualitative terminology. All these factors indicate that his modifications should be relegated to the conceptual sidelines, and lend to his positive comments on folklore the banal character of exceptions which confirm the rule.

5.2.2. Once again, then, an ambivalence is created, two possible ways of reading the text.

One way might be to lay emphasis on the value of the positive comments and the quantitative modifications. But then we not only run into the difficulties which have just been mentioned, but also have to face the fact that folklore is the target of a whole series of negative qualifications which extend far beyond the terms presented here, and this is not easy to get round. Quite apart from the numerous remarks scattered through the rest of Gramsci's work, there is a rather revealing incongruence in the text of the *Observations* itself. Having just given a rigorous definition of folklore, Gramsci goes on to say that "it could be argued that all religions, even the most cultured and sophisticated, are 'folklore' in relation to modern thought", even if there is the "vital difference" that "religions... are, as has been said, 'elaborated and systematized' by (religious) intellectuals and the Church hierarchy" (SCW 189). With this statement, Gramsci goes against his own definition of folklore as characteristic of the subaltern classes and standing in opposition to official conceptions, and demonstrates that, in spite of the rigorous terms he himself has established, the idea that "folklore" actually means everything that modern thought (with its apex represented by Marxism) must sweep away is firmly entrenched⁶.

One can then resolve this ambivalence in the opposite direction, and the text gives us considerable authority for so doing. But we then find ourselves having to pose a much more important question to the text itself. The reasons for his negative assessment of folklore are clear enough, and at the same time it is understandable that Gramsci should take a serious interest in the subject on more than one occasion (not only is he forced to exercise his powerful intellectual curiosity on a large number of minutiae, but there is also that element of tenacity that makes folklore important for the purposes of knowing and transforming reality). But we still have to ask ourselves how he manages conceptually to define so "indigestible" a "mass of debased fragments" and debris as *a conception of the world*, when its essentially unorganic character is enhanced rather than diminished by the presence of a few conceptions that are progressive and effective.

6. Another slight divergence from the more rigorous concept comes where Gramsci says that "common sense" is "philosophical folklore" (SCW 189). But elsewhere Gramsci distinguishes between "popular" common sense, the common sense of "the more educated strata of society" and that of "the intellectuals" (cf. SPN 331). I think that this distinction *according to socio-cultural strata or levels* should be given more thought than it usually is in discussion of Gramsci's concept of common sense. In the first place, it confirms Gramsci's alertness to what I have referred to elsewhere as *connotation* (i.e. the solidarity between cultural phenomena and social groups). Furthermore, it warns us to be careful not to relate to common sense as a socially undifferentiated phenomenon what Gramsci relates, or might relate, specifically to the common sense of the cultured strata or that of the popular strata (which are in their turn internally socially differentiated): cf. his distinction between "different" Catholicisms (SPN 420).

6.0. Gramsci's definition of folklore as a *conception of the world* draws together into a single category phenomena that differ widely from each other, ranging from this indigestible mass to Marxism which he regards as the only truly "original and integral conception of the world", the harbinger of "an historical epoch", a conception that is incomparably superior to any non-Marxist official conception, however elevated, and one that will be superseded only with "the disappearance of political society and the coming of a regulated society" (SPN 381-382).

The range covered is so wide that one cannot help asking whether to speak of folklore as a conception of the world is anything more than a play on words. If not, then the common element has to be found which allows Gramsci to bring together under a single conceptual heading phenomena which he himself shows to be radically divergent from one another because they either have or do not have certain qualities regarded by him as being of decisive importance (originality, critical consciousness, organicity, centralization, etc.).

In short, what is it that makes them alike or brings them together in spite of such deep (and repeatedly emphasized) intrinsic differences?

There seem to me two different answers to this question.

The first answer is explicitly stated by Gramsci, but is the less persuasive. It is the solution he gives to the wider problem of the relations between "spontaneous" philosophy and "scientific" philosophy, of which the relation between un-organic conceptions of the world and critical conceptions are only a specific example. From it derives the quality of "spontaneity" which Gramsci explicitly attributes to folklore's capacity to adhere to reality (SCW 190, 192).

The second, and in my view, more valid answer is also to be found in Gramsci, but not in anything he says explicitly. Rather, it is contained in the very nature of the conceptual operation that he undertook specifically, but not exclusively, in respect of folklore.

6.1. The first solution alluded to above consists in the distinction which he makes (and it is already implicit in the *Observations*) between "differences of quality" and "differences of quantity".

Discussing the relations between "modern theory" (i.e. Marxism) and "the 'spontaneous' feelings of the masses"⁷, Gramsci asserts that

7. SPN 198-199: "At this point, a fundamental theoretical question is raised: can modern theory be in opposition to the "spontaneous" feelings of the masses? ("spontaneous" in the sense that they are not the result of any systematic educational activity on the part of an already conscious leading group, but have been formed through everyday experience illuminated by "common sense", i.e. by the traditional popular conception of the world — what is unimagatively called "instinct" although it too is in fact a primitive and elementary historical acquisition). It cannot be in opposition to them. Between the two there is a "quantitative" difference of degree, not one of quality. A reciprocal "reduction" so to speak, a passage from one to the other and vice versa, must be possible. (Recall that Immanuel Kant believed it important for his philosophical theories to agree with common sense; the same position can be found in Croce. Recall too Marx's assertion in *The Holy Family* that the political formulae of the French Revolution can be reduced to the principles of classical German philosophy".

there can be no “opposition” between them because “between the two there is a “quantitative” difference of degree, not one of quality. A reciprocal “reduction” so to speak, a passage from one to the other and vice versa, must be possible (SPN 199).

If one recalls that just before Gramsci had written:

It may be said that spontaneity is [...] characteristic of the “history of the subaltern classes”, and indeed of their most marginal and peripheral elements, [which] have not achieved any consciousness of the class “for itself” (SPN 196);

and bearing in mind the quality of spontaneity attributed to folklore’s capacity to adhere to reality, and, finally, the identification of the “people” with all the subaltern classes, it becomes clear that the *quantitative* continuity which Gramsci establishes between “modern theory” and “spontaneous feelings”, between the highest form of consciousness and the most unconscious experiences, can immediately be transferred to the relation between folklore at its most fragmented and official conceptions at their most organic. They are both *conceptions of the world* because the difference between them is one of “quantity”, *not* one of “quality” (SPN 347).

But the assertion that there is a quantitative continuity between Marxism and spontaneous feelings (in support of which Gramsci turns first to Kant and Croce and only subsequently to Marx: SPN 199) is simply a more specific and clearer application of a far more general principle: “the principle that all men are ‘philosophers’”: this idea too is not exclusive to Gramsci, and Gramsci himself regards it as in a certain sense a common sense truth (SPN 323, 330). What this means is that

between the professional or “technical” philosophers and the rest of mankind, the difference is not one of “quality” but only of “quantity” (SPN 347).

Admittedly, Gramsci adds at once:

The term “quantity” is being used here in a special sense, which is not to be confused with its meaning in arithmetic, since what it indicates is greater — or lesser degrees of “homogeneity”, “coherence”, “logicality”, etc; in other words, *quantity of qualitative elements* (SPN 347, Italics added).

In Gramsci’s view, the difference is not limited to the fact that the

philosopher [...] “thinks” with greater logical rigour, with greater coherence, with more systematic sense than do other men,

but consists primarily in the fact that

the professional or technical philosopher [...] knows the entire history of thought. In other words, he is capable of accounting for the development of thought up to his own day and he is in a position where he can take up a problem from the point which it has reached after having under-gone every previous attempt at a solution.

For that reason,

he has the same function in the field of thought that specialists have in their various scientific fields.

Nevertheless, a “qualitative” continuity between “the specialist philosopher” and “the rest of mankind” appears to be re-established by virtue of the fact that the philosopher is a specialist in an activity that is common to everyone, namely thought:

it is not possible to conceive of any man who is not also a philosopher, who doesn't think, because thought is proper to man as such, or at least to any man who is not a pathological cretin (*SPN 347*).

These statements are clearly the realization of the programme that Gramsci sets himself in the study of philosophy and culture.

It is essential to destroy the widespread prejudice that philosophy is a strange and difficult thing just because it is the specific intellectual activity of a particular category of specialists or of professional and systematic philosophers. It must first be shown that all men are “philosophers”, by defining the limits and characteristics of the “spontaneous philosophy” which is proper to everybody (*SPN 323*).

It is worth adding that Gramsci sees this “spontaneous philosophy” (or what he also calls “common and popular”: *SPN 328*) as being contained, “not only in language” and “in common sense and good sense”, but also

in popular religion and, therefore, also in the entire system of beliefs, superstitions, opinions, ways of seeing things and of acting, which are collectively bundled together under the name of “folklore”.

And finally that he goes on to say that

everyone is a philosopher, though in his own way and unconsciously, since even in the slightest manifestation of any intellectual activity whatever, in “language”, there is contained a specific conception of the world (*SPN 323*).

There is then more than enough to establish a direct link between Gramsci's concept of “spontaneous philosophy” and his definition of folklore as a “conception of the world”. Folklore, as Gramsci conceives it, is in fact a special form of “spontaneous” philosophy; thus, considerations about the latter could, it would appear in principle, be transferred to the former. On this basis, Gramsci's remark elsewhere that “‘pure’ spontaneity does not exist in history”: it would come to the same thing as “‘pure’ mechanicity” (*SPN 196*) may also be applied to the folk conception of the world.

This is further confirmation of the fact that elaborated and critical conceptions on the one hand and on the other the indigestible mass which folklore might be defined as can both be placed in the same category because the difference between them for Gramsci is one not of *quality*, but only of *quantity of qualitative elements*. The “positive” remarks on folklore, like the modifications to its negative attributes, are the more or less explicit pointer to this underlying conceptual intention.

This would seem to be the end of the matter, were it not for the difficulties we have already outlined in connection with the transformation of the resolutely *qualitative* system of characterization attributed by Gramsci to folklore and folkloric conceptions; and were it not further for the fact that the specific differences which Gramsci insists on as soon as he has connected things at a general level are always more radical and decisive than the affinities.

In addition to what has already been noted in connection with folklore, the reader’s attention is drawn to the decisive distinction between philosophy tout court — which alone is “an intellectual order” — and forms of spontaneous philosophy such as “religion and common sense”, which

cannot constitute an intellectual order, because they cannot be reduced to unity and coherence even within an individual consciousness, let alone collective consciousness (SPN 326).

6.2. The fact is that in order to maintain a link between the opposite terms of his repeated swings back and forth from identities to differences and from quantitative continuity to qualitative discontinuity, as Gramsci wished, he must be able to call on a precise, and more than purely verbal, criterion of distinction between *qualitative differences* (which would break the continuity he claims) and *differences of quantity of qualitative elements* (which on the contrary would not undermine the connection he seeks between the “specialist” philosopher and the “common” philosopher, “conscious leadership” and “spontaneity”, intellectuals and “simple people”, or, to use more current and realistic terms, between leaders and masses, central committees and the rank-and-file, and so on).

But in the absence of such a criterion — and it seems to me that it is absent, at any rate in the uses which more or less frequently we have *actually* made of Gramsci’s thought — in its absence, the link is broken; the subtle and indefinite dividing-line between *quality* and *quantity of qualitative elements* is erased; the constantly emphasized specific differences prove far more decisive than the attribution to a single common genus; to acknowledge the presence of a conception of the world even in the slightest

intellectual activity becomes a game of words without further consequence; to assert that “all men think” becomes a trivial banality in face of the fact that *some* men think *well* and *many* think *badly*, and does not so much as scratch the surface of the prejudice which Gramsci wanted to destroy.

All of this would matter very little if all that was involved were a few marginal questions concerning the debris of folklore. But far larger problems are involved, problems as important, precisely, as that of “conscious leadership”. Above all it would not matter were it not that — in the process of its becoming “the common sense of a [particular] environment”, as is the fate of “every philosophy” (SPN 330f) — the uneasy balance between quantitative continuities and qualitative separations was not in fact broken in favour of the second term. As a result, certain hierarchies of subject-matter and sectional interests traditional to our culture remain essentially intact. This is also meant, let me be quite clear, as a note of self-criticism.

6.3. Nevertheless, the extremely wide range that Gramsci allows to his idea of conception of the world, the way in which he extends it to include even the most bizarre, disparate and chance combinations of heterogeneous and indigestible elements, has an undoubtedly aggressive power in the face of traditional conceptions, their identification of *culture* with their *own* culture and their reduction of *history* to the history of the *upper reaches* of society.

This aggressiveness — which is active even in spite of other indications of Gramsci to the contrary — does certainly not originate from the generic principle that all men think so everyone is a bit of a philosopher. It would in any case be hard to find in this one principle any criterion whereby one might assign some form of *unity* to even the most indigestible masses of material — something that must be done if we are to distinguish one conception from another, let alone talk about a *conception of the world*.

The fact of the matter is that this aggressive drive springs from Gramsci's entire political and theoretical commitment.

It is this commitment which brings about, for example, certain sudden and even disquieting ruptures in the carefully weighted balance — whether of a didactic or a dialectical kind between form and content, intellectuals and common people, and so on. As an example, take the passage where Gramsci asks (but only in very indirect relation to folklore):

Is it possible that a “formally” new conception can present itself in a guise other than the crude, unsophisticated version of the populace? (SPN 342)⁸

8. The passage goes on: “And yet the historian, with the benefit of all necessary perspective, manages to establish and to understand the fact that the beginnings of a new world, rough and jagged though they always are, are better than the passing away of the world in its death-throes and the swan-song that it produces” (SPN 342-343).

But another, and very important, part of Gramsci's political and theoretical commitment is his tendency to set up a constant relationship between cultural phenomena and the social groups by which they are conveyed. At the same time as always being concerned with formal coherence and organicity, Gramsci pays continual attention to the links between indigestible masses of material as well as organic philosophies and one or other of the "many social groups in which everyone is automatically involved from the moment of his entry into the conscious world" (SPN 323). Precisely because he is aiming for a "more cautious and precise assessment of the forces acting in society", Gramsci does not draw up his observations on the basis of very general class-distinctions, but provides a working *scale-model*, articulated into categories, groups and sub-groups. He makes a distinction between "the common sense of the more educated strata of society", that "of the people" and that of the "intellectuals" (SPN 330f)⁹; he emphasizes the fact that

there is one Catholicism for the peasants, one for the petits bourgeois and town workers, one for women and one for intellectuals which is itself variegated and disconnected (SPN 420);

and still more directly he makes the point that

in acquiring one's conception of the world one always belongs to a particular grouping which is that of all the social elements which share the same mode of thinking and acting (SPN 324).

This "grouping" can sometimes consist simply of dispersed and isolated individuals, whose only link with each other is that of shared conceptions. However, it can also be a concrete social or socio-cultural group: it "can be one's village or province". Furthermore, though the conception of the world which holds sway there and is "mechanically" imposed on its members may be pieced together from other sources, it is born or can be born — whatever its more distant origins — from a cultural activity which is socially internal to the group and qualitatively homogeneous with it:

9. Elsewhere Gramsci writes: "Common sense is not a single unique conception, identical in time and space. It is the "folklore" of philosophy, and, like folklore, it takes countless different forms. Its most fundamental characteristic is that it is a conception which, even in the brain of one individual, is fragmentary, incoherent and inconsequential, in conformity with the social and cultural position of those masses whose philosophy it is. At those times in history when a homogeneous social group is brought into being, there comes into being also, in opposition to common sense, a homogeneous — in other words coherent and systematic — philosophy" (SPN 419).

On another occasion, Gramsci affirms even more explicitly: "Every social stratum has its 'common sense' and its 'good sense', which amount in effect to the most wide-spread conception of life and mankind" (QC 2271).

it can have its origins in the parish and the “intellectual activity” of the local priest or aging patriarch whose wisdom is law, or in the little old woman who has inherited the lore of the witches or the minor intellectual soured by his own stupidity and inability to act (SPN 323).

Thus the use Gramsci makes of the idea of *conception of the world*, at least when dealing with “spontaneous” conceptions, is constantly supported by a dense network of references to concrete social situations, however humble, whose “way of seeing and acting” is constituted by the cultural formation with which Gramsci is engaged at the time. Thus, any judgement on the formal qualities or content of such material is accompanied by the acknowledgement that, whatever its origins or level, that particular “combination” of cultural elements is the intellectual heritage of a particular social group. The group lives it and makes use of it from the inside, without realizing its contradictoriness, or at any rate not realizing it in the same way as somebody looking in from the outside. Thus, any combination of cultural elements which is embodied by an identifiable social group comes to constitute a kind of “*de facto* unity”. It can be looked at from the point of view of the group which recognizes itself in it and so can legitimately be called a “conception of the world” because, even if it is not so *for us*, it is *for others*. Not for nothing do phrases such as “in its own way” recur in Gramsci.

Gramsci's continual linking of cultural phenomena and social groups — and nowhere more clearly than in the pages on folklore — seems then to provide the real explanation for the way in which he is able to bring radically different phenomena under a single conceptual heading, without the concept itself dissolving. To regard folklore too as a conception of the world is not a mere play on words precisely to the extent that, if only for a moment, judgement is suspended on its content and formal qualities, and it is acknowledged as having a unitary existence for the “people”.

It is no less true of course that the moment of judgement is essential and decisive in Gramsci, than it is that the distinction between the two moments seems to be resolved in favour of the judgement, or rather the condemnation. For while the ways in which he uses the idea of conception of the world appear closer (with all due reservations) to the ethno-anthropological concept of “culture” than to the traditionally selective conception of culture as an elite-phenomenon, it cannot be forgotten that in a section entitled *Hegemony of western culture over the whole world culture* (SPN 416-418), Gramsci has left us one of the most inward-looking formulations both of the ethnocentric view of world cultural history and of the limitation of the European “cultural process” to the elites, to the definite exclusion of “popular cultures”.

But to refer to this passage must not in its turn lead us to forget all the rest, that is to say, what was actually achieved. Above all, it should not lead us to ignore the tensions, some of them serious, which build up in the course of the work. It is precisely the need prompted by these tensions to identify what Gramsci says and how, that enables him to be actively, and not just historically, present in the field of socio-cultural research today.