ANNIVERSARY FORUM

Gramsci's folklore bundle

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Contribution to *Anniversary Forum: Cirese 101. Rereading Gramsci's* Observations on Folklore, Antonio Maria Pusceddu, Filippo M. Zerilli, eds, *Anuac*, 11, 1, 2022.

In the years after the publication of the Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith's *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (1971) introduced Gramsci's writings to a wide Anglophone audience, the Sardinian Marxist was eagerly embraced by many would-be progressive, Anglophone anthropologists. Here, it seemed, was an intellectually rigorous left theorist with a serious interest in "culture", a Marxist who argued that "Folklore must not be considered an eccentricity, an oddity or a picturesque element, but as something which is serious and is to be taken seriously" (Gramsci 1971: 191). These anthropologists' knowledge of Gramsci frequently derived more from Raymond Williams' *Marxism and Literature* rather than the notebooks themselves. This perhaps helps explain why they often overlooked the notebooks' critical, indeed sometimes downright hostile, assessment of peasant culture and folklore, as when Gramsci writes scornfully of conceptions of the world shaped by "the little old woman who has inherited the lore of the witches" (Gramsci 1971: 323). One of Alberto Cirese's aims in *Gramsci's Observations on Folklore*, is to make sense of Gramsci's apparently contradictory attitude to folklore.

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2022 | ANUAC. VOL. 11, N° 1, GIUGNO 2022: 55-64.
ISSN: 2239-625X – DOI: 10.7340/anuac2239-625X-5279

The definition of folklore

"Folklore" is certainly a shifting category in the notebooks. To understand these shifts, a passage quoted by Cirese is helpful. Gramsci writes of "the entire system of beliefs, superstitions, opinions, ways of seeing things and of acting, which are collectively bundled together under the name of 'folklore'"(Cirese 1982: 240)[1]. Note that the always careful and precise author of the notebooks describes this heterogeneous collection as "bundled together under the *name* of 'folklore'". In other words, he treats the concept "folklore" not as some actually existing, coherent whole, but rather as a way of labelling a disparate range of beliefs and behaviours – a bundling together that leaves open the possibility that they may not constitute a single entity. This is very characteristic of Gramsci, who rarely met an abstract concept without immediately calling it into question. As, for example, when he writes in *Some Aspects of the Southern Question* (an essay he was working on just before his imprisonment), "the peasant question is historically determined in Italy; it is not the 'peasant and agrarian question in general'"(Gramsci 1978: 443). Similarly, in the notebooks we find him castigating the novelist Francesco Perri for ignoring historical particularities in his 1928 novel *Emigranti* in which "historical distinctions, essential for understanding and depicting the life of the peasant, are wiped out, and the confused whole is reflected in a rough and brutal way" (Gramsci 1985: 305). In Gramsci's view, Perri has "lump[ed] together pell-mell all the generic motifs that in reality have very distinct temporal and spatial characteristics" (Gramsci 1985: 306).

At the same time, Gramsci recognises the need for broad concepts. *Aspects of the Southern Question*, for instance, ends with his insistence that Italian intellectuals from the North and the South need to understand that "only two social forces are essentially national and bearers of the future: the proletariat and the peasants" (Gramsci 1978: 462). The point is that the world we seek to map with our concepts is an ever-shifting mass of entangled relationships moving through history. The content of our categories have to shift depending on the questions we are trying to answer, and the particular realities and relationships involved.

Over the years, the apparent inconsistencies and contradictions inherent in the shifting, fluid nature of Gramsci's concepts have led a number of scholars to attempt to tidy up, as it were, what they see as the notebooks' disorder – a disorder often attributed to the difficult conditions under which they were written. In an essay originally published in the 1970s, which would

1. See Gramsci 1971: 323.

become one of the most influential essays on Gramsci in the Anglophone world, Perry Anderson argues that not only did Gramsci have "to produce his concepts within the archaic and inadequate apparatus of Croce or Machiavelli", he

> wrote in prison, under atrocious conditions, with a fascist censor scrutinizing everything that he produced. The involuntary disguise that inherited language so often imposes on a pioneer was thus super-imposed by a voluntary one which Gramsci assumed to evade his jailors (Anderson 2017: 30)[2].

The result, according to Anderson, is a text characterised by "spaces, ellipses, contradictions, disorders, allusions, repetitions. The reconstruction of the hidden order within these hieroglyphs remains to be done. [...] A systematic work of recovery is needed to discover what Gramsci wrote in the true, obliterated text of his thought" (Anderson 2017: 30).

Cirese, also writing in the 1970s, is more in tune with Gramsci's fluid and flexible thought than Anderson, noting that "the specific differences which Gramsci insists on as soon as he has connected things at a general level are almost more radical and decisive than the affinities" (Cirese 1982: 240) Nonetheless, he shares Anderson's desire to bring order to the notebooks. His aim is to "bring out the general principles underlying" what he terms "the three cardinal features of Gramsci's definition of folklore", namely that folklore represents "a conception of the world" that is "characteristic of the subaltern classes", and that is "in opposition to official conceptions" (Cirese 1982: 215). One problem with this, or any attempt to fix Gramsci's understanding of folklore in any definitive way is that "folklore" in the notebooks is such a shifting creature that it is difficult to identify *any* consistent principles beyond a lack of rigour and coherence: "there is nothing more contradictory and fragmentary than folklore" (Gramsci 1985: 194). And while folklore as a "conception of the world" is *primarily* associated in the notebooks with subaltern groups, those "social strata which are untouched by modern thought" (Gramsci 1992: 186), this resolutely secular thinker also writes: "all religions, even the most refined and sophisticated, are 'folklore' in relation to modern thought" (Gramsci 1985: 190). Further evidence of the instability of Gramsci's concept is that having linked folklore to those "untouched by modern thought", he goes on to claim: "Even modern thought and science furnish elements to folklore, in that certain scientific statements and certain opinions, torn from their context, fall into the popular domain and are 'arranged' within the mosaic of tradition" (Gramsci 1992: 187).

2. See Green 2011 for an argument that the role of censorship in shaping the notebooks has been exaggerated.

In his article Cirese cites these passages indicative of the fluidity of "folklore" for Gramsci. At the same time he remains committed to his project of systematising the Sardinian Marxist's understanding of this protean entity. But perhaps the very project of seeking a coherent and stable theoretical entity goes against the grain of the thinker we find in the notebooks – a thinker whose aim was not to create an armature of stable and rigorous theoretical concepts but to understand the particular, and ultimately unique, ways history unfolds in a given time and place? When we read the notebooks, maybe it is more productive to focus on the twists and turns of his thinking as their author moves from one topic to another, and the ways in which the meanings of concepts like folklore, the state, and civil society shift as they are deployed to analyse different historical realities? Joseph Buttigieg argues forcefully for just such an approach in his 1994 article, *Philology and Politics: Returning to the Text of Antonio Gramsci's Prison Notebooks,* writing "the study of Gramsci's thought in the corpus of the *Quaderni* [...] enables us to understand the extent to which Gramsci's thought is alive and unified precisely *through* its fragmentariness" (Buttigieg 1994: 117, Buttigieg's emphasis).

The importance of folklore

Like all of us, Gramsci was a product of his historical moment. While he explicitly rejected any simple teleological narrative[3], he also saw human history as progressive. The outcome of the struggle between contending forces in society might be inherently unpredictable, the shape of the future unknown, nonetheless, human society was moving forward. Take, for instance, this passage in the notebooks:

> We are all conformists of some conformism or other, always man-in-the-mass or collective man. The question is this: of what historical type is the conformism, the mass humanity to which one belongs? When one's conception of the world is not critical and coherent but disjointed and episodic, one belongs simultaneously to a multiplicity of mass human groups. The personality is strangely composite: it contains Stone Age elements and principles of a more advanced science, prejudices from all past phases of history at the local level and intuitions of a future philosophy which will be that of a human race united the world over. To criticise one's own conception of the world means therefore to make it a coherent unity and to raise it to the level reached by the most advanced thought in the world (Gramsci 1971: 324).

3. See Crehan 2002: 76-80, for Gramsci's rejection of a teleological historical narrative.

It is worth noting the stress that Gramsci places on the need to adopt a critical attitude to whatever "conformism" we happen to have acquired in the course of our socialization – in large part because he recognises the power of the "conformisms" that possess us through an unconscious osmosis.

Conceptions of the world shaped by the kind of "folklore" (*folclore*) familiar to Gramsci from his Sardinian childhood, were conformisms that needed to be critiqued. This is a very different attitude to that of Italian folklorists of the time, who (to quote from a survey essay Cirese wrote for the American *Journal of the Folklore Institute*) believed in

> the existence of a "people" representing the "spirit of the nation," the complete authenticity of popular culture as opposed to the falsity of "foreign" political institutions, the absolute "spontaneity" of the products of the "popular spirit" and above all of the popular poems and songs, and the "artificiality" of literary artistic poetry (Cirese 1974: 14).

Such romanticism was totally rejected by Gramsci, who saw it as casting a sentimental veil over the harsh realities of the lives lived by most Italian peasants, a harshness stemming from the economic and political realities of post-unification Italy. As someone with close personal experience of rural Sardinia, he saw "folklore" not as some pure, "authentic" representation of the "spirit of the nation", but as a collection of heterogeneous fragments that were in general retrograde. The primary value of these fragments, as he wrote in a note, which is at the heart of Cirese's article, lay in the rare evidence they provide of "all the conceptions of the world and of life that have succeeded one another in history" (Gramsci 1985: 189). This evidence, however, is "adulterated and mutilated". Not, it should be stressed, that Gramsci thought that somewhere behind these mutilated fragments lay an unmutilated, coherent conception of the world:

> The conception of the world [underlying folklore] is not elaborated and systematized because, by definition, the people (the sum total of the instrumental and subaltern classes of every form of society that has so far existed) cannot possess conceptions which are elaborated, systematic and politically organized and centralized in their albeit contradictory development (Gramsci 1985: 189).

So why does this co-founder of the Italian Communist Party nonetheless insist that folklore is "something which is very serious and to be taken seriously" (Gramsci 1985: 191)? One reason, as Cirese notes, is Gramsci's belief in the importance of education. If they are to be effective, educators need to understand the world, or worlds, inhabited by their pupils. This means that the study of folklore should be included in the teaching training provided by the state:

> the state is not agnostic but has its own conception of life and has the duty of spreading it by educating the national masses. But this formative activity, which is expressed particularly in the education system [...] does not work on a blank slate. In reality, the state competes with and contradicts other explicit and implicit conceptions, and folklore is not among the least significant and tenacious of these; hence it must be "overcome". For the teacher, then, to know "folklore" means to know what other conceptions of the world and life are actually active in the intellectual and moral formation of young people, in order to uproot them and replace them with conceptions which are deemed to be superior (Gramsci 1985: 191).

The idea that "folklore" should be studied in order to "uproot" and "replace" it is probably not one shared by many anthropologists, but it was undoubtedly a key reason for Gramsci's interest, although not, I would argue, the only one.

As a political activist shaped by the struggles of the early decades of the twentieth century, Gramsci saw the industrial working-class as the primary source of social transformation. For him, "the Northern urban force" was primary among "the fundamental motor forces of Italian history", the "locomotive" that when combined with the "most advantageous" alliance of the other major forces (the Southern rural force; the Northern-Central rural force; the rural force of Sicily; and Sardinia) is capable of creating "a 'train' to move through history as fast as possible" (Gramsci 1971: 98). As Gramsci's scare quotes indicate, the metaphor of the train is not exact. There is no already-laid-down rail track, nor are the different carriages driven forward by the "locomotive" mechanical entities, but rather fractious collections of sentient beings with their own ideas of where the train is, or should be, headed. Notably, of the five "fundamental motor forces of Italian history" mentioned by Gramsci, four are rural. In Italy, as he wrote in *Aspects of the Southern Question*, the proletariat had to join forces with the peasants: *together* they were the "bearers of the future" (Gramsci 1978: 462).

Crucially, for this co-founder of the Italian communist party, there was no pre-determined road to that future, already mapped out by Marxism: Marxism, he wrote, was an unfinished project, "a new culture in incubation, which will develop with the development of social relations" (Gramsci 1971: 398). Tellingly, he endorses Rosa Luxemburg when she writes of

> the impossibility of treating certain questions of the philosophy of praxis [Gramsci's usual way of referring to Marxism] in so far as they have not yet become *actual* for the course of history in general or that of a given social grouping (Gramsci 1971: 403-404, Gramsci's emphasis).

In the Italy of the inter-war years with its large rural population, progressives were doomed to failure if they treated peasants simply as an undifferentiated, and backward-looking mass who must blindly follow the lead of the working-class "locomotive". Progressives needed to engage with the peasant masses and win their support, a process that begins with a genuine attempt to understand them in all their contradictory heterogeneity. Folklore provided vital evidence, albeit "mutilated and adulterated", of how peasants saw the worlds they inhabited. "Folklore", Gramsci writes, "can be understood only as a reflection of the conditions of life of the people, although folklore frequently persists even after those conditions have been modified in bizarre combinations" (Gramsci 1992: 187).

Peasant "conceptions of the world" in the notebooks may be characterised as not only fragmentary but generally reactionary, but this is not always the case. Within the contradictory heterogeneity of "folklore" Gramsci sees progressive as well as reactionary elements. For instance, contained within the popular forms of Catholicism prevalent among peasants – defined by Gramsci as part of the folklore bundle – are "[i]mperatives [...] that are much stronger, more tenacious and more effective than those of official 'morality'" It is necessary, however, to

> distinguish various strata: 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 (Gramsci 1985: 190).

Folklore for Gramsci emerged out of the realities of peasant life. One of the crucial insights of Cirese's article is his stress on Gramsci's "political and theoretical commitment" to the "relationship between cultural phenomena and the social groups by which they are conveyed" (Cirese 1982: 242).

An example of Gramsci's interest in the complex and heterogeneous threads to be found in the "folklore bundle", and their links to specific historical realities, is his note on the nineteenth-century millenarian, peasant revolutionary Davide Lazzaretti (Gramsci 1996: 18-20)[4]. His new Republic, Lazzaretti declared, would "not be the republic of 1848" but "the Kingdom of God, the Law of Justice that has succeeded the law of Grace" Other commentators had linked Lazzaretti's millenarian vision to atavistic memories of 14th century legends. Gramsci, however, saw it as a phenomenon

4. All subsequent quotes in this paragraph are from this note.

related to its particular historical moment, connecting it both to the influence of an anti-monarchical priest, Onorio Taramelli (described by Gramsci as "a man of fine intelligence and wide learning"), and the peasant rebel's "desire to differentiate himself from 1848, which had not left good memories among the peasants in Tuscany". In short, who peasants are, what they believe, and the political movements to which they are attracted, can only be discovered through empirical investigation.

An effective, oppositional conception of the world that views the world from the vantage point of those subordinated by the existing capitalist order, and that challenges its hegemony in a serious way, has to be rooted in subaltern experience, and speak to that experience. Subaltern narratives emerge initially as incoherent fragments, the "rough and jagged" embryonic "beginnings of a new world" (Gramsci 1971: 343). This is inevitable given that subaltern groups – even urban ones – inhabit a world saturated with narratives of the world that view things from the vantage point of the dominant. Nevertheless, these "rough and jagged" beginnings are the foundation of that new world: "Is it possible that a 'formally' new conception can present itself in a guise other than the crude, unsophisticated version of the populace?" (Gramsci 1971: 342). In other words, there is no already-present, counter-hegemony waiting in the wings. The work of transforming the embryonic "beginnings of a new world" into coherent and effective political narratives is done by intellectuals. Not intellectuals as traditionally understood, but the organic intellectuals a subaltern group itself creates as it emerges from subalternity (see, for instance, Gramsci 1971: 334-335).

While Gramsci had no doubt that the *primary* force with the potential to drive history forward was the industrial working-class, he was equally clear that in the Italy of his day with its large rural population, progressives had to pay attention to peasants and take their understandings of their lived experience seriously. The "creative and progressive innovations" generated by peasants needed to be incorporated into the progressive narrative. A famous letter Gramsci wrote to his sister-in-law Tatiana Schucht soon after his arrest is relevant here. In the letter he lays out his study plans while imprisoned, mentioning four main topics: the history of Italian intellectuals; comparative linguistics; Pirandello; and the serial novel and popular taste in literature. For him, as he explains to Tatiana, "there is a certain homogeneity among these four subjects: the creative spirit of the people in its diverse stages and degrees of development is in equal measure at their base" (Gramsci 1994: 84). The "creative spirit of the people" , I suggest, was also present for Gramsci in folklore. Following that creative spirit through

time and space, however, demanded flexibility in the concepts used to capture it, and it is this flexibility that explains many of the notebooks' "spaces, ellipses, contradictions, disorders, allusions, repetitions" so frowned on by Anderson (2017: 30).

In the case of folklore, maybe it is more productive to accept the unstable, protean character of the relationship between "folklore" and "peasants", the specific nature of which can only be determined through careful, empirical investigation of the specific context, rather than attempting to identify some clear and constant, underlying "general principles" (Cirese 1982: 215)? As Gramsci writes in a note quoted by Buttigieg in his 1994 article:

> If it is necessary, in the perennial ebb and flow of events, to establish concepts, without which reality would be incomprehensible, it is also necessary – indeed it is indispensable – to establish and to bear in mind that mutable reality and concept of reality must be historically understood as inseparably bound together, even though they are logically distinguishable ([*QC*, 1241] quoted in Buttigieg 1994: 120).

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