

Gramsci's *Philosophy of Praxis*

Joseph Gravina

joseph.gravina@um.edu.mt

Abstract

Gramsci's *Philosophy of Praxis* was an attempt to present Marxism as a political philosophy promoting the inter-definable relation between theory and practice. No practice without theory; every man was a philosopher. Marx's call to change the world (act) more than interpret it (think) did not repudiate philosophy. It re-affirmed the unity theory-practice contextualising it in history. This characterised the intellectual project of the *Prison Notebooks* as the way ahead for the political affirmation of the working class. Praxis became a pedagogical, consciousness-raising practice. Enriched by other concepts – structure-superstructure (mode of production), intellectuals-working class (historic bloc) – Gramsci's praxis was also an attempt to prevent Marxism, philosophically presented as *historical materialism*, from morphing into metaphysics and vulgar materialism. Respecting the strictures of 'translatability', praxis is adopted to discuss the 1970s industrialisation and its aftermath in Malta.

Keywords: *Gramsci, praxis, philosophy, politics, Malta.*

Introduction

Antonio Gramsci was born in 1891 in Ales (Sardinia). Following his education on the island, he gained a scholarship and began to study modern linguistics at the University of Turin. However, political and economic developments in Italy and outside, turned his attention away from academic exercise to political activity and journalism. He was elected to parliament in 1924 as a member of the Italian Communist Party he helped co-found. When the Fascist government relinquished basic freedoms, Gramsci was arrested on November 8, 1926, still an MP, and sentenced to a 20-year prison term. He began his *Prison Notebooks* (henceforth *PNs*) in February 1929 and stopped in April 1935, physically and mentally exhausted. Extremely weak, in April 1937 he was released and died a few days later in a health clinic.

In the *PNs*, Gramsci studied the relation between theory and practice within the Marxist tradition. This included how the study of *philosophy* contributed to political and economic practice. The goal was to cleanse Marxism, philosophically framed as historical materialism, from mechanistic and deterministic trends; the tradition was transformed into a *philosophy of praxis* (henceforth *PoP*). Gramsci followed this

path heralded by Marx's call in his *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* for the realisation of philosophy by a combative progressive movement that transcended prior German philosophy, considered strong in theory but weak in achieving the emancipation of the masses.

The head of this emancipation is philosophy, its heart the proletariat. Philosophy cannot realize itself without the transcendence of the proletariat, and the proletariat cannot transcend itself without the realization of philosophy.¹

Re-affirming its unity with practice, "theory also becomes a material force as soon as it has gripped the masses." (ibid.)

This re-iterated the call in the *Theses on Feuerbach* (1845; henceforth *Theses*) to change the world rather than merely interpret it. These two facets of the PoP can be derived from this.

Italy

In Italy, the PoP was developed as an autonomous philosophical system by the Italian Marxist, Antonio Labriola. The "marrow of historical materialism", he wrote, it moved "from life to thought, and not from thought to life; this is the realistic process" (in Haug, 2000, p.6). Besides its *Theses*-based call to arms, the autonomous status inspired Gramsci to take the intellectual challenge to high culture (Burgio, 2014, 414-447). In retaliation to Croce's downgrading of Marxism to a canon of research, Gramsci rectified:

... at the level of theory PoP cannot be confounded with or reduced to any other philosophy. Its originality lies not only in its transcending of previous philosophies but also and above all in that it opens up a completely new road, renewing from head to toe the whole way of conceiving philosophy itself. (Q11:27)²

Both Croce, Labriola's moral philosophy student at the University of Rome, and the other Italian philosopher, Gentile, wrote texts on Marxism but both took praxis to the political Right. Croce was to have an impact on Gramsci (Hegel and Machiavelli). His secularism and anti-positivism, a moral and intellectual stance more progressive than other alternatives, and relations with the French syndicalist Georges Sorel, made him popular with the Left. Gramsci's youthful Croceanism was revised in the *PNs*.

1 Available from <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/critique-hpr/intro.htm>. [Accessed on August 31, 2019].

2 Q stands for *Quaderno* (Notebook), followed by the note number. This accords with Gerratana (Gramsci, 1975).

Gramsci thought the outspoken anti-communist Croce was correct in his attack on materialist Marxists and the need to liberate Marxist thought from positivist dogma. Notwithstanding authorship, all intellectual material had to be subjected to the same critical rigour. Croce's role also drew attention to culture and philosophy in politics, and the role of the great intellectuals in creating (or not) a historic bloc of intellectuals and working class (Q10/I:12). For Gramsci, he was a prop for passive revolution with its "dialectic of conservation and innovation" (Q8:27). In line with this concept re-elaborated from Vincenzo Cuoco's reference to the 1799 Neapolitan top-down democratic experiment lacking popular support, Croce's histories express a liberal fear of the masses. In *Theory and history of historiography*, Croce countered Marxism's totalitarian ideology with his 'religion of freedom' but, as Gramsci counter-attacked, his ethico-political history was a "taming of Hegelian dialectics" and "part of a liberal utopia that aims to banish from history the destructive moment and transform contradictions into differences" (Haug, 2000, pp.3-4). Gramsci considered this elite intellectual practice as philosophic obfuscation.

He believes he writes a history in which the element of class is exorcised and instead he describes with great accuracy and merit the political masterpiece by means of which a determinate class manages to present and to have accepted the conditions of its existence and its class development as a universal principle, as a conception of the world, as a religion, that is, he describes in reality the development of a practical means of government and domination. (Q10/I:10)

Conceptions of the world and consciousness

In 1929, on the first page of Q1, Gramsci set forth the need to study the "theory of history and historiography". This resurfaced in a letter of the same year to Tania, his sister-in-law. Concurrently, he translated Marx's *Theses* and the historico-political 'Preface' to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859; henceforth *Preface*), both fundamental texts for the PoP. Discussing it in terms of historical materialism, Gramsci placed the accent on 'historical' instead of 'materialism', the latter more prone to metaphysical temptation. This spurred him to criticise Bukharin's Marxism as "metaphysical or mechanical (vulgar) materialism" (Q11:22) in terms of causal laws explaining both natural and social world; determinism and rejection of free will. This was regress to pre-Marxian metaphysics searching for the eternal (Q4, p.40). Instead, to understand the 'nature of man', one starts from social relations in historically determined social formations rather than via 'pure' metaphysics. As "absolute historicism", he wrote, the PoP was "the absolute secularisation and earthliness of thought, an absolute humanism of history" (Q11:27). Althusser (2006) was to remain unconvinced: the role of philosophy was ahistorical. Countering metaphysics was one thing; drowning theory in historicism,

another. For Althusser, Marxist dialectical philosophy (not historical materialism) corrects knowledge and defends theory from ideology and is not a conception of the world. However, this suggested theory as science's gatekeeper, alienated from class struggle. This dialectical materialism was rather undialectical when what was needed instead was for it not to be a "a philosophy of Marxism, but a philosophy for Marxism" (Thomas, 2009, p. 34).

For Gramsci, class conflict had to do with consciousness building and philosophy was a tool in class ideological relations. However, besides external challenge, this faced problems within Marxist theory. In his *Preface*, Marx describes social relations being independent of the will of the agents while social consciousness corresponded to the economic structure.

The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness.³

Gramsci was to conceptually re-integrate *will* and redefine Marx's superstructure(s) as the consciousness-forming political and ideological context outside the exclusive determination of the economic structure. Superstructures are not "mere appearances" or "less real", as suggested by Croce (Malinowski, 2005, pp. 971-2). 'Appearance' is attributable to superstructural mutability and not to historical validity: "'Man acquires consciousness of social relations in the ideological terrain': is not this an affirmation of the necessity and the validity of 'appearances'?" (Q8:60). The terrain is where, in Gramsci's terms, "every man is a philosopher", developing a concept of the world, not necessarily elaborate or specialised, but reflected in his action, common sense, and language. This is where civil society becomes a central concept, similarly re-elaborated by Gramsci. Thankful for its bourgeois creation, the subaltern masses had an opportunity for ethico-political emancipation subverting traditional dominant-subaltern relations (Finocchiaro, 2002). To protect it from metaphysics, following Lenin, Gramsci developed the *hegemonic apparatus*. Buci-Glucksmann described how this "qualifies the concept of hegemony and gives it greater precision ... as a complex set of institutions, ideologies, practices and agents (including the 'intellectuals')" (1980, p. 48). Far from speculative and generic political theory, the PoP has to tackle concrete and established hegemonic apparatuses expressing the materiality of class— the Church, schools, trade unions, etc.—and dismantle their social basis. It also confirms the *extended state* concept combining formal, political institutions with civil society's hegemonic forces. Faced with crowded 'trenches' and 'permanent fortifications' in civil society, politics becomes a war of position. In it, the PoP does not exclude the ethico-political and instead attaches "full weight" to the cultural factor, to cultural activity, to the necessity for a

3 Available from <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1859/critique-pol-economy/preface.htm>. [Accessed on August 31, 2019].

cultural front alongside the merely economic and merely political ones" (Q10/I:12). This pulls philosophy toward politics.

Praxis, a pedagogical concern

As a politician and journalist, Gramsci was in a constant relation with the social milieu projecting a specific role for the intellectual. There are individual intellectuals with their "more or less subjective and arbitrary ideologies" and the 'elite' Renaissance intellectuals who educate people 'from above', shying away from political action; others are "organic" or "collective" (the Party), ensuring the "'hegemony' of a ruling class by carrying its 'conception of the world' (or organic ideology) into the everyday life of all men" (Thomas, 2009, p. xxiv). Gramsci historicizes this in the transition from castal logic to capitalist modernity's fluid inter-class mobility. Caste survives amongst the clergy, high officers in the army and bureaucracy and traditional intellectuals in academies and university, etc. Caste is also recalled when profitable to the dominant class (Burgio, 2014, pp. 176-7). Still, the bourgeoisie recognised "the will of conformism" and hence, ethnicity in the conception of the law and function of the State as it attempted to absorb and assimilate other classes. For Gramsci, this extended state beyond the formal was an educator not exclusively limited to private economic interests. This is associated with "Hegel's doctrine of parties and associations as the 'private' woof of the State", a French Revolution legacy, and described as,

... government with the consent of the governed—but with organised consent, and not generic and vague as it is expressed in the instant of elections. The State has and demands consent, but it also 'educates' this consent, by means of the political and syndical associations; these, however, are private organisms, left to the private initiative of the ruling class. (Q1:47)

Nonetheless, the dominant class still has the initiative in civil society creating a social basis for its hegemonic leadership. Suggestions of passive revolution follow when the state's ethical or emancipatory claims are shown to be empty words, and political debate is bureaucratised and technicised. Once again, philosophy has a role.

The philosophy of an epoch... is, therefore, nothing other than the 'history' of that epoch itself, nothing other than the mass of variations that the leading group has succeeded in imposing on preceding reality. History and philosophy are in this sense indivisible. They form a 'bloc'. (Q10/II:17).

The PoP becomes the alter ego even when considering transitions to socialism that were complicated in the West:

It is the expression of these subaltern classes who want to educate themselves in the art of government and who have an interest in knowing all truths, even the unpleasant ones, and in avoiding the (impossible) deceptions of the upper class and—even more—their own. (Q10/II:4)

Malta

Taking philosophy, politics and history integral to Gramsci's PoP in order to elicit meaningful links between two separate realities, and furthermore, across time, is open to a number of traps, first and foremost that of pushing theory beyond its context. Significantly, this association is a bedrock criterion of PoP. Liguori consoles: "Something is always lost in translation" (2015, p.210). It suggests caution. Another suggestion is to advance from history. The first step is to set the Maltese context in the 1970s. Beforehand, one final reflection. The arguments here deal with political and ideological, historically-determined social relations.

The Malta Labour Party (henceforth MLP) won the 1971 general elections and remained in office for sixteen years. It realised an export-based industrial manufacturing agenda. The social structure was affected. The mass of local industrial bourgeois was never enough and when state-assistance (wage freeze and protectionist policies) stopped, they went back to traditional merchant capital and real estate (Vella, 1994). Industrial workers employed by private capital, not colonial administration, were a novel sector represented politically by the governing MLP and its ally, the General Workers Union. Forced to be "functional substitute" to a weak bourgeoisie (Vella, 1989, p.194), government provided political leadership (populist and, with the Nationalist Party, henceforth PN, dispelling structural tensions in the parliamentary arena); economic entrepreneurialism (welfare, investment incentive schemes, vocational training, etc.); and cultural innovation (secularisation, State-Church separation, etc.). The petty bourgeoisie was less homogenous. The number of traditional, small-scale producers, traders and small-holding farmers decreased; the new recruits, increasingly university-trained, of engineers and technicians, accountants and managers, or state administrators, blossomed.

Academics, unless directly disturbed, appeared unperturbed. Amongst others, there was an "apparent inability or unwillingness (or both) of Maltese sociology to consider Malta's economic development in a balanced way" and, Vella added, specifying industry, it was "a clear indication that sociologists are hardly free from the influence of hegemonic pressures in society" (2012, p.243). Other intellectuals remained aloof, not feeling the need for cultural contact with the 'simple' (Liguori, 2015, p.105), except to reify traditional tools, legends, etc. Some did not escape change. Rev. Peter Serracino Inglott (henceforth PSI) ousted the scholastics as he reorganised the philosophy department at the University of Malta (henceforth

UOM), only for the Faculty of Arts and that of Theology to be suppressed from campus in 1978, not fitting in the major UOM reform by the MLP government to rid the campus from pre-industrial professions – notaries and lawyers, doctors, priests and teachers. The Theology case confirmed the need to secularise public space; eventually, under a post-1987 Demo-Christian PN government, it was important enough to return to campus and to give the Church privileged approval of full-time staff appointments by the UOM's Philosophy Department. Whilst the MLP Reform aligned structure (industry) and superstructures (social reproduction), for PSI, the 'contemplative' scholastics were ill-prepared for new dynamics. He intended to break the detachment from society of "Catholic spirituality and praxis" (Montebello, 2009, p.109). Public space, not least in the ever-growing social media where culture industries were becoming popular, socio-political tools aiming to shape social consciousness, had to be re-occupied. Foremost in media expertise, Rev. Joe Borg's page on the UOM website illustrates his presence and practice. PSI's agenda was still on at the turn of the century; Anthony Spiteri proposed a transcendence discourse within "incarnational and praxical coordinates" intent on socio-political action (1997, pp.121-2).

This makes the role of PSI, given obvious differences, arguably close to that of Croce as discussed above. Both were popular across social class boundaries, attracting Left followership. Both innovated as they faced traditional intellectuals. Croce, who was minister for Public Education in Giolitti's government, developed a conservative Liberal philosophy of practice (Q15:62); PSI supported the 'liberalising' conservative PN amongst others as policy-maker, as the prime minister's private consultant, and in the 1988 Education Act (which received heavy criticism for content and gestation by the Liberal philosopher Wain in *The Maltese national curriculum: A critical evaluation*, 1991). J. Friggieri, provided a seamless continuity in succeeding PSI as head of the Philosophy department and was also a PN MEP election candidate. Similar to Croce (the Italian from outside university circles), PSI introduced a relatively more liberal, non-dogmatic language and non-provincial morality in philosophy (Montebello, 2009, p.109) and wanted philosophy to tackle political and scientific issues. And yet, Montebello adds, his texts were unhistorical and severed links between philosophy and the social context or else confirmed a conception of the world based on the age-old reason-and-faith balance. As in the case of Croce, one needed to discover what was left out. PSI was unable or unwilling to appraise real problems historically or politically, reducing them to "exclusively linguistic (or artistic) problems", argued Vella (1989, p.177). This "dialectic of conservation and innovation" (Q8:27), understood here as "the critical search for what is equal in the apparent diversity, and distinct and even opposite in the apparent uniformity" (Q13:36), draws PSI to the same 'cultural innovation' boat as MLP Prime Minister Mintoff. The odd coupling is focal. Within their organisations there was a recognition of deep-cutting crises as the Church struggled against secularisation and the MLP faced late peripheral industrialisation. This uncovered contradictions

that determined immediate efforts by groups and personalities bent on conserving the relevance of their organisation, showing the structure is correctible and their role defensible. In their different fields, PSI's popular status amongst philosophers and Mintoff's high reputation amongst politicians appears to indicate 'success'. As with PSI's innovation and conservation, Mintoff's praxis, with an "explicit distrust of 'theoretical' discourse and of 'intellectuals' generally" (Vella, 1989, p.190), increased popular participation in politics but participants remained supporters, exhibiting "doses of the traditional adaptations to powerlessness for many years to come" (Zammit, 1984, p.130), while his concentration of power increased.

Conclusions

The **Marxist tradition** was absent in Malta in political practice (excluding the activities of a restricted group), and a combative movement that could realise a progressive philosophy was identifiable instead in the anti-colonial stream represented by the Dockyard workforce. The Liberal fear of the destructive moment (see Croce above) was exploited and transformed into a counter-praxis against this politicised movement. Mintoff on his part managed to ensure its integration within his political agenda by tackling the GWU pragmatically. He was assisted by the fact that the overwhelming majority of GWU members were MLP supporters.

Marxism was almost absent in theoretical practice; it could always guide **research towards meaningful and comprehensive observations**. Gramsci's conceptual armature qualifies it further. Thus, **passive revolution's** dialectic of conservation and innovation was identified in the praxis of PSI and Mintoff. The former's intellectual practice of philosophy performing as a renovated conception of the world, worked for the PN's building of class alliances with the new petty bourgeoisie (and associated expectations). PSI provided valuable assistance to Church and Party. Gramsci's critical descriptions of how historic blocs of intellectuals and social classes/sectors are created is valuable in this case. PSI's contribution worked against the MLP already suffering the backlash of its historically necessary political and cultural protagonism promoting its economic agenda.

Gramsci's redefinition of Marx's **superstructure(s)** as the consciousness-forming political and ideological context outside the exclusive determination of the economic structure gave resonance to civil society's concrete and established *hegemonic apparatuses* of Church, political parties, schools, trade unions, etc. PSI's contribution to state responsibilities confirms the **extended state** concept combining formal political institutions with select civil society hegemonic forces illustrating the 'full weight' of the cultural factor. Instead of becoming an opportunity for subaltern ethico-political emancipation subverting traditional dominant relations, civil society was the terrain that made the transition to socialism, promised by the MLP, complicated, and it hardly left the ideological field. It indicated the dominant

'history' of the time, i.e., what the ruling political group attempts to impose as reality. This is how history and philosophy become indivisible and form a 'bloc' (Q10/II:17). Paradoxically, the world projected by strong economic groups supporting the PN would, arguably, be more of a game-changer of conceptions promoted by the conservative stream than by the MLP's socialism.

References

- Althusser, L. and Balibar, E. (2006) *Reading Capital*. Trans. B. Brewster. London, Verso.
- Buci-Glucksmann, C. (1980) *Gramsci and the State*. London, Lawrence & Wishart.
- Burgio, A. (2014) *Gramsci: Il sistema in movimento*. Rome, DeriveApprodi.
- Coutinho, C.N. (2012) *Gramsci's political thought*. Chicago, Haymarket Books.
- Debono, M. (2013) *L-Eroj, l-Idoli u l-Mit tad-Demokrazija*. Public presentation at Philosophy Sharing Foundation. 13th March 2013.
- Finocchiaro, M.A. (2002) *Gramsci and the history of dialectical thought*. New York, Cambridge University Press.
- Gramsci, A. (1975) *Quaderni del carcere*. (Vols. I-IV). Ed. V. Gerratana. Turin, Einaudi.
- Haug, W.F. (2000) Gramsci's 'Philosophy of Praxis': Camouflage or refoundation of Marxist thought? *Socialism and Democracy*, 14 (1), 1-19.
- Liguori, G. (2015) *Gramsci's pathways*. Trans. D. Broder. Chicago, Haymarket Books.
- Malinowski, L. (2005) *Main currents of Marxism: The founders, the golden age, the breakdown*. Trans. P.S. Falla. New York, W.W. Norton & co.
- Montebello, M. (2009) *20th century philosophy in Malta*. Malta, Agius & Agius.
- Thomas, P. D. (2009) *The Gramscian Moment: Philosophy, hegemony and Marxism*. Chicago, Haymarket Books.
- Spiteri, A. (1997) Scientific research programmes and the religious option. In, J. Friggieri & S. Busuttill (Eds.). *Interfaces: Essays in honour of Peter Serracino Inglott*. UOM.
- Vella, M. (1989) *Reflections in a Canvas Bag: Beginning philosophy between politics and history*. Malta, PEG.
- Vella, M. (1994) 'That favourite dream of the colonies': Industrialization, dependence and the limits of development discourse in Malta. In R. G. Sultana, & G. Baldacchino (Eds.), *Maltese society: A sociological inquiry*, 55-78. Malta, Mireva.
- Vella, M. (2012). Forgetting industry: The scarce and selective visibility of Malta's industrial experience in the field of vision of Maltese sociology. In J. Chircop (Ed.). *Revisiting labour history*, 175-254. Malta, Horizons.
- Zammit, E. L. (1984) *A colonial inheritance: Maltese perceptions of work, power and class structure with reference to the labour movement*. Malta University Press.

Bio-note

Dr Joseph Gravina is a University of Malta lecturer employed within the Systems of Knowledge department at the Junior College. His research interests focus on Antonio Gramsci's writings. He has written Gramscian analyses of Don Lorenzo

Milani's work in Barbiana; adopted his concept of passive revolution for its contribution to the study of 'peace' and the study of economic development and education in the history of postRisorgimento Italy. He elaborated Althusserian concepts to write about the Malta Labour Party's cultural politics during the 1970s and 1980s. Other research interests include the study of human rights education and the comparative study of industrialisation, social reproduction and education. He has also contributed to edited works and peer-reviewed journals.