

Some Notes on the Tragic Writing of Antonio Gramsci

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Abstract

This essay considers the tragic elements present in Gramsci's prison writings, including both the Prison Notebooks and the Prison Letters. It highlights specific moments in both the notebooks and the letters in which this tragic element presents itself. These include the interpretation of the often cited motto of 'pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will' present in the notebooks, of the *für ewig* character of the notebooks as expressed in an important prison letter, and of other important passages. Also, it shows how the tragic element expresses at the same time the fusion of Gramsci's personal tragedy with the political tragedy of the Left in general. Finally, the essay treats on how this tragic element transcends itself in the claim for the fertilizing of the social terrain for a better future.

Key Words: Antonio Gramsci, Critical Theory, Political Theory, Tragic Writing

Murió mi eternidad y estoy velándola.
(César Vallejo, *La violencia de las horas*)

We have to be careful when interpreting the words mentioned repeatedly by Gramsci in his prison notebooks, attributed to Romain Rolland, 'Pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will'. We have to prevent ourselves from falling into the easy temptation of emphasizing the second part, as if it made all the sense emphasizing the element of the will given Gramsci's interpretation of Marxism as a 'philosophy of praxis'. Let us be clear, the interpretation of Marxism provided by Gramsci (1975: 435, 1434) is one of an autonomous, comprehensive, and totalizing conception of the world capable of interpreting the social totality with the aim of progressively transforming it. In his conception of Marxism as a philosophy of praxis, the theoretical component is not in any way reduced to an instrumental one in which theory ends up being a slave to political practice (Gramsci 1975: 1386). The fact that his conception is not on the one side mechanistic and deterministic should not lead the reader on the other hand to read in Gramsci an idealist and subjectivist interpretation of Marxism. Gramsci (1975: 1579) showed in his prison notebooks that he took to heart Marx's dialectical claim that a society does not pose for itself those tasks for which the necessary conditions for their solution do not yet exist, conditions which are themselves at the same time 'educated'.¹ Ultimately, Gramsci's thought is one that is open-endedly dialectical and that always attempts to grasp the whole of the complex of social relations; to read every different social sphere in their integrality forming what he calls a historical bloc. If there is a definite emphasis throughout and underneath the different notes contained in his *Quaderni* is in his concern – central in the general history of political thought - over the relationship between leaders and led, governing and governed (Gramsci 1975: 1752). The use of the motto 'Pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will' in his mature work expresses what we read as a dialectical and realist tension in his writing while in prison,

¹ Gramsci's dialectical approach to Marxism also shows in his discussion and critique of what he read as two opposed conceptions, Benedetto Croce's idealist historicism and Bukharin's positivist understanding of historical materialism. His most consistent engagement with Croce is present in notebook 10 while the most consistent one with Bukharin is present in notebook 11.

tension which lies behind what we read as a tragic mode of writing both in Gramsci's prison letters and in his notebooks.

The Material and Historical Basis Behind Gramsci's Tragic Writing

Let us briefly remember that Gramsci was finally arrested on 8 November 1926, as a result of the general elimination in the part of Mussolini of what was left of political democratic liberties in Italy, including the elimination of parliament and of all the non-fascist parties. Life in prison was not easy for the Sardinian Marxist. Harsh prison conditions worsened Gramsci's weak physical and sickly constitution that he had endured ever since he was a child.

Morally and emotionally speaking, he suffered a double or triple isolation. Sentimentally isolated since he was robbed of his liberty, he never got to see in person his second son Giuliano, nor was he ever to see again his other son Delio nor his wife Giulia. The latter, suffering from nervous illnesses, was unable to travel to Italy to visit him. It was only his sister-in-law, Tatiana, who like a true Antigone mostly tended to Gramsci's needs while in prison. She sent him books, journals, medicines, clothes, visited him at various times, and more importantly was Gramsci's main personal interlocutor throughout his entire prison life. She also served as an important intermediary between Gramsci and his friend Piero Sraffa, the Communist Party, and even with his wife Giulia.² In addition, it was Tatiana who after Gramsci died rescued the 33 notebooks for posterity.

A further isolation is registered in the political realm. To add to the inherent political isolation brought about by being imprisoned, he was doubly politically isolated once the Communist International adopted in its sixth congress the line of social fascism, which rejected from the outset any form of alliance with social-democrats or other non-communist anti-fascist sectors. The Italian party adopted such a line, leaving behind the agenda established in the Lyon Congress which had been thought out in great measure by Gramsci. Being realistic and suffering in the flesh what was in general terms a general wave of defeat for the left in Western Europe, Gramsci, saw such a polarizing political agenda as ultra-leftist childishness and stupidity, and saw in it the self-defense of the Soviet regime. In the concrete situation of the relative consolidation of fascism in Italy, Gramsci thought that the political strategy to follow was the proposition of a wide anti-fascist constituent assembly. We know because of Tatiana that in prison Gramsci identified the constituent assembly as the Italian translation of the Leninist strategy of the united front. This heterodox position cost Gramsci the friendship, even within prison, of fellow imprisoned party comrades (Spriano 1979).

It was a 'big and terrible world' as Gramsci used to say, felt by him as even more horrible by being greatly disconnected from it. The few avenues of connection with it were an intense epistolary activity and, after finally getting the permission in January of 1929, the possibility to work and write in his cell.

² For a detailed account of the complex affective and communicative relationship between Gramsci and Giulia, see the work of Francisco Fernández Buey (2001).

The Letters and the Notebooks: Again the *Für Ewig*

The Gramscian writing present in his prison letters can stand alone in regards to his writings in the prison notebooks. Nevertheless, an appropriately comprehensive reading of the notebooks requires the parallel reading of the letters. The reading of Gramsci's posthumous *magnum opus* – fragmentary and rough as it may be – is completed along with his epistolar activity. Obviously, it is in great measure because of the exceptional circumstances in which the *Quaderni* were written. In his letters from prison, we see Gramsci communicating tenderly with his mother, asking for books and journals, commenting on some reading, elaborating briefly some idea, proposing various plans for study, struggling for an effective and affective communication with his wife Giulia, dialoguing or arguing with his sister-in-law Tatiana, etc. We see the more human side of him, in a sense, and we see him in a descending curve of progressive physical and moral degeneration. We see in the letters all of the suffering of a man that knows himself without a probable escape and that is fully aware of his own degeneration and of the possibility of death.

Already as early as in an often quoted letter to Tatiana, dated March 19, 1927, there is a subtle reference to his concern or acknowledgement of the possibility of death and of his precarious situation in general. In addition, the letter is important since in it Gramsci communicates what is the second plan of study he proposes for himself for when he receives permission to write in his cell. Prior to expressing his work plan to Tatiana which consisted in a group of studies on the formation of intellectuals in Italy, on comparative linguistics, on Pirandello, and on popular literature, Gramsci expresses the following:

I am tormented (this is, I think, a is a phenomenom proper of prisoners) by this idea: that I should do something "*für ewig*", according to the complex conception of Goethe, that I remember tormented our Pascoli very much. Ultimately, I would like, according to a pre-established plan, to occupy myself intensely and systematically with some topic that absorbs me and centralizes my interior life (1996: 55).³

Let us note some of the uses made by Gramsci of the expression *für ewig* — “for ever”. The first thing to note is that Gramsci proposes a plan of study and work as a mode of psychological and moral resistance. That is, the act of writing itself found in the *Quaderni* is a form of personal and ‘molecular’ resistance to his personal deterioration within prison, again deterioration which is not only related to his physical health but also to his moral capacity including as recently remembered by Fernández Buey (2001: 168), his problematic communication with Giulia.

Second, the *für ewig* means for Gramsci a perspective which partakes of a greater degree of objectivity and permanence than his pre-prison writings, for example, in great part dedicated to the polemics of the everyday and to necessities dictated by the active militancy in the party. A ‘disinterested’ perspective he will state in the letter of 19 March 1927 to refer to this degree of relative objectivity, to this greater sense of permanence to his writings in prison. Even taking into account the criticism made by Aldo Natoli (1997:

³ The author is responsible for all the translations from the Italian.

XXII-XXIII) in his introduction to Gramsci and Tatiana's correspondence to the effect that the emphasis on the expression *für ewig* has been overplayed, there is no doubt of the qualitative difference between the writing found in the *Quaderni* and the one found in his pre-prison writings. The *Quaderni* were certainly not 'disinterested' maybe in a literal sense, but what it suggests is a greater degree of objectivity and analytical autonomy.

Third, as commented by Gerratana (1975: XVII) and again recently by Fernández Buey (2001: 149-150), and very important to our present subject of Gramsci's tragic writing, this *für ewig* expresses implicitly Gramsci's own thoughts on his mortality and also expresses his self-consciousness of the real possibility of his death in prison. As Fernández Buey (2001: 150fn) includes in a footnote of his *Leyendo a Gramsci*, in the *Canti de Castelvecchio*, the text to which Gramsci makes reference to in his letter, Pascoli writes: "You are a girl and you do not know what *for ever* means. *For ever* means dying...". Thus, from very early on, even prior to his grave health crises, Gramsci knows himself to be facing the very real possibility of his death.

In the prison letters, Gramsci's writing turns particularly tragic in specific moments. For example, some of his letters of February of 1933 to his sister-in-law Tatiana are really gut-wrenching in that they include Gramsci's reflections on his overall general degeneration and also in which he accuses even Giulia as one of his condemners. Thus we see in a letter of 27 February 1933, in a reaction to Giulia's scarce communication, Gramsci (1996: 690) writes:

What has condemned me is an organism much vaster, of which the Special Tribunal has been but the external and material indication that has composed the legal act of the sentence. I should say that even Giulia has been among these "condemners", I think, even more, I'm firmly persuaded, if unconsciously, and there are a series of people less unconsciously.

Probably, and very bitterly, Gramsci was referring to the possible harassment Giulia might have been experiencing in her home in Moscow, from her family and particularly according to Gramsci from her sister Eugenia, who was a functionary of the Soviet government and did not think much of Gramsci. True or not, Gramsci thought this was part of the reasons for not having an effective communication with Giulia, condemning Gramsci to further isolation and loneliness. In summary, the reader can trace Gramsci's progressive physical and moral deterioration throughout the letters.

Now, Gramsci's tragic writing does not limit itself to the prison letters. In spite of Gramsci's attempt to give his writings in the *Quaderni* a greater objective quality, 'for eternity', these do not achieve to evade the tragic mode completely. The various reflections over life in prison found in the *Quaderni*, as well as the repetition of the motto 'pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will', point to how Gramsci's real personal tragedy broke the intended *für ewig* character of the notebooks.

With this in mind, the weight in the motto lies on the part of the 'pessimism of the intellect'. In contrast to that pessimism of the strong and of the plenty of which Nietzsche talks about in his *The Birth of Tragedy*, Gramsci's pessimism of the intellect points to the realistic pessimism of the momentarily vanquished, of the subaltern. It is an intelligent

pessimism that, although conscious of the present condition of subalternity, knows that history is an open-ended process, a constant correlation of forces, of hegemonies and counter-hegemonies, and that it cannot have a final conclusion. That is, it is a pessimism of the intellect which does not renounce but claims an optimism of the will.

Gramsci maintains an optimism of the will, although in the minimal form in which it can be exercised in defeat. It is in this militant, though realist, sense that in one of his worst moments in terms of personal health in 1932 Gramsci writes on the necessity of knowing how to be “the manure [*concio*] of history”. In notebook 9 Gramsci (1975: 1128) writes: Before everybody wanted to be ploughmen of history, to have active roles, each one to have an active role. Nobody wanted to be the “manure” of history. But, can one plough the earth without first fertilizing it? Thus, there has to be the ploughman and the “manure”. [...] Something has changed, because there is he who adapts “philosophically” to being “manure”, who knows he should be it, and adapts.

The expression “manure of history” is pregnant with meaning. On the one hand it expresses the clear recognition of present political defeat, thus we have to realize that it is not time to unrealistically try to act as full ploughmen but as manure. On the other hand, as ‘manure’, we should not renounce, even in defeat, our ethico-political duty to fertilize the social terrain for better conditions of political possibility in the future. For Fernández Buey (2001: 204), this note expresses the transition of politics to the critique of politics, that is, from politics to pedagogy. Moreover, this note shows again the overflow of Gramsci’s personal and political tragedy into his notebooks, and this conflates itself with the tragedy of general defeat of the international communist movement during these times. It is in this sense that Gramsci (1975: 1128) adds, “It’s like the question of the man about to die, as they say”, yet as he observes:

But there is one great difference, because just before dying one is in a decisive act that lasts for an instant; instead, regarding the question of the manure, this affair lasts a long time, and is presented once again in each moment. We live only once, as they say; one’s own personality is irreplaceable.

The comparison is tragic: to contribute to fertilize for a future struggle conscious of the present impotence and mortality. In this sense, the work in the *Quaderni* becomes a tragic but also a heroic effort, since Gramsci writes in prison with the perspective of wanting to contribute to this pre-political pedagogy while at the same time being uncertain as to whether his work will ever be read. That is also why the *Quaderni* are an open work, since it intends to open up a dialogue without knowing if there is going to be somebody on the other side of that dialogue. It is a body of work that in a sense – besides its obvious incomplete and fragmentary nature – can only be completed with the work of an active interpretation, or better still, with the work of an active political interpretation.

Conclusion

Gramsci was one of those political theorists who lived in a particular historical moment in which ‘the old was dying but the new was yet to be born’. As such, he was in a position of having to necessarily rethink new social and political realities in great measure with concepts inherited from the past but reworking them in the present in order to think about new articulations for a political project for the future. Past and present, and

future. Those who wish and struggle for a better present recognize in Gramsci's tragic yet untamed writing the expression of his own tragedy, and see in his defeat our own. In his prison writings, the tragedy of Gramsci the man is fused and confused with the general tragedy of the subaltern. This is one of the reasons why personal motives and feelings break into the *Quaderni* and their supposed *für ewig* character. Have we learned ourselves to know how to be 'the manure of history'? Pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will.

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