

Tibor Szabó

## YOUNG GRAMSCI AND THE PHILOSOPHY OF PRACTICE

Gramsci's philosophy is often regarded in recent philosophical literature to be one of the intellectual forerunners of the New Left, the „Western Marxism”. (Markovic, Davidson, Macciocchi, Botto, Germino etc.)<sup>1</sup> In their view Gramsci is a „philosopher of praxis” who reduced the totality of the classic Marxist tradition to Praxis thus having „historicized”, „humanized”, applied Marxism to the conditions of the West. How far is this picture of Gramsci valid? What is really Gramsci's relation to Marxism? In what did Gramsci „rework” Marxist Philosophy and how has he laid the science of politics on new foundations? We are seeking answers to these questions reconstructing Gramsci's early work, which is an actual task for research even forty years after his death. But only that reconstruction can be valid and free of misinterpretation which takes certain philological and methodological aspects into account. The statement is right especially for his early works (1911—1920), since the letters and articles written at this time are posthumous works — they are being identified at the present, too. An undeformed reconstruction can be gained only by reviewing these articles in a chronological order — this, at the same time proves that young Gramsci's philosophical conception had undergone a considerable *development*. Examining his early works in their development is important for he reaches a fuller understanding of Marxian and Leninian theory and practice at this time. This is in our opinion Gramsci's „way to marxism”.

### I. The period of Gramsci's theoretical formation (1911—18)

Although he uses the term only later, the problem of praxis is a central one in his early work. As we can learn from the memories of A. Pastore, professor of philosophy at the University of Turin, he dealt with the problem „how the idea becomes a practical power” parallel with his literary and linguistic studies.<sup>2</sup> This very problem already includes

<sup>1</sup> M. Markovic: *Gramsci and the unity of Philosophy and Politics*, Praxis, Zagreb 1967. n. 3. pp. 333—339.; A. Davidson: *Antonio Gramsci: towards an intellectual biography*, London 1976 Merlin Press; M.—A. Macciocchi: *Pour Gramsci*, Editions du Seuil, 1974 Paris; E. Botto: *Il neomarxismo*, I—II. vol. Roma 1976 Edizioni Studium; D. Germino: *The radical as Humanist: Gramsci, Croce and the „Philosophy of Praxis”*, Bucknell Review, vol 20, Lewisburg, Pennsylvania, 1972 n. 1. pp. 93—116.

<sup>2</sup> D. Zucaro: *Antonio Gramsci all'Università di Torino 1911—1915*, Società 1957. n. 6. p. 1110.

the searching of the possibilities of human activity. He tried to answer it under two influences. He was partly influenced by the activity, and praxis comprehension of idealism, namely Papini's version for pragmatism, futurism, Gentile's early work for a certain degree, but most of all Croce's eclectic idealism. On the other hand, both in theoretical and in practical respect he was significantly influenced by the socialist movement, from Salvemini to Mondolfo, from Labriola and Sorel mediated by Croce to as far as Marx.<sup>3</sup> He frequently arrived at forming and accepting inconsequent standpoints due to this dual influence. His article in 1914 on active and busy neutrality is a characteristic one in this respect. Here his position on Italy's entrance in the war was nearing Sorel's mythic praxis-conception. Even though this article was purely theoretical and not practical (intervenient), his silence for a year and a half proves, he had felt its one-sidedness and mistake.

When he begins writing again in 1916, as a professional journalist this time, in his conception on the relationship of culture and activity a definite return to Croce can be perceived. He accepts even Croce's terminology and accordingly, emphasizes the importance of spiritual activity. But he wishes this spiritual activity to be in the service of socialist movement. He thinks spreading culture and consciousness, that is proletarian culture and class-consciousness widely is enough to change the society. This idealist stimulation meant a positive possibility for Gramsci against the theoretical motionlessness,<sup>4</sup> though he exaggerates the role of culture and consciousness in forming the society. At this time he agrees with Croce's early conception, namely „We make history ourselves, of course considering the objective conditions among which we are; but with our own sufferings, with our own strives, with our own ideas.”<sup>5</sup>

As a consequence of the spiritual and moral crisis caused by the war, the problem of spiritual activity appears together with moral problematics in 1917 in young Gramsci. This was the standpoint of the theoreticians of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Internationale (Kautsky, Jaurès etc.), too; and socialists outside the 2<sup>nd</sup> Internationale — like Sorel and Lukács — also emphasized this point. Young Gramsci joins in laying stress on the necessity of Renan's, Sorel's, Croce's „intellectual and moral reform” and underlies the historical role of moral responsibility. His previous conception is made significantly more concrete by this and now he expects the changing of the society not from spiritual activity, but from the activity coming from man's moral duty. He notices that masses cannot be won over merely by

<sup>3</sup> Naturally he was influenced by the working class movement itself, but this duality and clearing the sources had begun to change only after the Russian Revolution, then he comes to discover: „We are revolutionists in our deeds while we are reformists in our way of thinking.” in: A. Gramsci: *Scritti giovanili 1914—1918*, Torino 1958 Einaudi p. 132.

<sup>4</sup> „Gramsci understood. — as Togliatti said in the collection of his speeches and articles on Gramsci — that the new idealist culture meant a step forward in the development of our national culture just like Hegelism meant a step forward generally in the development of European philosophical culture. Thus he understood that it is impossible to have a pronouncedly negative relation to this new intellectual trend...” in: P. Togliatti: *Antonio Gramsci*, Roma 1971 Riuniti p. 41.

<sup>5</sup> B. Croce: *Primi saggi*, Bari 1919. Laterza pp. 67—68.

influencing them culturally, but they should change practically in order to be able to form the society of the future with a different activity.

The importance of moral activity is pointed out against the passivity of the masses in the young socialist newspaper, *Città futura*. He writes as follows, „I hate indifferent people. Indifference is lack of will, parasitism, cowardness, it is not life. Therefore I hate indifferent people. Indifference is a heavy burden of history. It is like a heavy stone hung on the neck of a swimmer, like motionless material in which the best enthusiasm gets lost . . . Indifference works rather effectively in history. Though passively, but it works. It is the animal material which stands up against intellect and strangles it.”<sup>6</sup> The positive demands of the „Sollen”, par excellence activity, moral action and immanent will based on the comprehension of historical responsibility are emphasized against indifference and passivity as the negative behaviour forms of the „Sein” in young Gramsci.

He thinks activity presumes will which should become the *common will* of the society. These are underlined against the so-called arm-chair-politics or as he later called it: the politics of „if”. He writes as follows: „The principle of the so-called smallest strain, the principle of the arm-chair-comfort, which very often means: you should not do anything, becomes popular.”<sup>7</sup> — adding that the main obstacle of creating the new society is this indifferent social and political behaviour.

In this interpretation his polemy against the reformist-socialist views encouraging this behaviour in the people can be observed. He opposes especially Turati’s, Treves’s and Loria’s concepts, saying that they „. . . reduced Marx’s doctrine to outer schemes, to natural rule which prevails fatally, out of people’s will, their united activity, and out of the social forces carried out by this activity.”<sup>8</sup> making the impression in the members of the society, „. . . as if history would be nothing else, but a huge natural phenomenon, eruption, earth-quake to which everybody is a victim, those who want it as well as those who do not want it, those who are conscious of it and those who are not, those who were active and those who were indifferent.”<sup>9</sup> These economical and naturalist conceptions twisted Marx’s theory and transformed it to be the doctrine of the inactivity of the proletariat. This polemic by young Gramsci is very significant and points out that he asserts the Marxian meaning of the phrase: „people make history themselves . . .”

He begins to study history that should be changed by human activity and praxis only as a result of the analysis of the First World War and especially of the Russian Revolution.<sup>10</sup> This is a *turning point* in Gramsci’s philosophical work, because — like Lukács, too — he realizes at this time: changing reality is not only a cultural-spiritual task, but mainly a concrete-historical one. Due to his own concept and to the limited infor-

<sup>6</sup> A. Gramsci: *Scritti giovanili*, quoted edition pp. 78—79.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 77—78.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* p. 154.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* p. 85.

<sup>10</sup> The great influence of the First World War and of the Russian Revolution is emphasized by P. Anderson, in: *Considerations on Western Marxism*, London 1976. NLB p. 27.

mation he cannot have a total picture of the Russian events. His famous writing *Revolution against the „Capital“* can be judged correctly only regarding this fact. What does this so frequently interpreted revolution against the Capital mean? It surely does not that young Gramsci would be anti-Marxist. Just on the opposite: he writes against false comprehensions of Marxism, against the narrow-minded and scientist views, characteristic of reformism, which negates Marx's spirit, using his „letters“ as their starting-point.

Young Gramsci strives to see Marxism as a living guide of action in constructive way. But his anti-reformism leads to accepting the other extreme: he interpreted the new Russian Revolution as creator of a „new moral atmosphere“ which — in his view — carried out seizing the power in an anti-Jacobin way. For Gramsci this anti-Jacobin revolution proves that the economical factor alone is not decisive in the development of the society. That is — as he says — you need not expect that England's history repeat itself in Russia, but people's activity can also lead to the new society. The need for social activity guide him to analysing Italian social and political situation. He realizes that „Thought — although it is free — is determined, more exactly, determined by history.“<sup>11</sup> and culture, as well as consciousness are determined by the concrete historical situation. That means that consciousness cannot be altered alone, but it changes together with the change of its conditions.

A threefold polemics can be observed in young Gramsci's philosophical development in 1918. On the one hand he criticizes Salvemini's cultural messianism which is a *culturist* view; on the other he rejects *economism*, that derives the movement of society from the changing of economy and excludes human activity from the shaping of history;<sup>12</sup> finally he rejects *Jacobinism* which overemphasizes the violent character of political activity. In his opinion this is a messianist view of history, that is making a myth of praxis, to which Lukács is near at this time in his *History and class-consciousness*.

Now he becomes aware of the fact that changing the society can be realized by linking up political, economical and cultural activity, without overemphasizing either's role. Cultural activity has yet some priority since it starts class struggle by making the proletary conscious of the aim. This aim is to be realized by activity. That means: in young Gramsci's conception politics is the aim, and culture is the means of realizing the political aim. Among his contemporaries Lukács's comprehension, on the contrary is a culturist one, because for him culture is the aim and politics merely the means.<sup>13</sup> Culture makes the changing of the everyday consciousness of wide masses possible, that means an important contribution to preparing and carrying out political revolution by creating consensus.

<sup>11</sup> A. Gramsci: *Scritti giovanili*, quoted edition p. 260.

<sup>12</sup> Regarding this, a considerable similarity can be found in Gramsci's and Engels's as well as in Lenin's views who both rejected economism energetically. (See Engels's later letters and Lenin's *What is to be done?*) L. Paggi thinks Gramsci's counter-economism to be the guiding thread of Gramscian philosophy. In: L. Paggi: *Antonio Gramsci e il moderno principe*, Roma 1970. Riuniti.

<sup>13</sup> Vid.: I. Hermann: *Lukács György gondolatvilága*. (The world of George Lukács's thoughts), Budapest 1974. Magvető Ed. pp. 117—118.

When Gramsci begins to use the term of praxis (1919), he interprets it in this sense. Partly he returns to Labriola's praxis-concept,<sup>14</sup> while he is nearing Lenin's concept, too. Thus, at the end of his early work he sees the necessity of revolutionary action, but interprets it in an individual way. He writes as follows: „The problem today, on the top of social catastrophe, when the whole has broken up and every kind of autocratic hierarchy has collapsed for ever, is that we should help the working class in seizing the political power, that we should study and search the adequate means for carrying out transferring the power with the smallest possible bloodshed, that the new communist state should be formed after a short period of revolutionary terror.”<sup>15</sup>

What is then praxis? „The permanent exceeding of the empirical individual, the permanent response of the spiritual universality” or as he puts it another way: „*Converting philosophical meditation into practice*”. Consequently young Gramsci did not make the role of praxis mythical, neither consciousness nor praxis are „demiurgos” in his case, rather they are the means of changing everyday life and thinking for the sake of an aim. They are what Marx expresses this way: „Theory also becomes material power when it seizes masses.”<sup>16</sup> The row of actions that he calls praxis now instead of activity, will create consciousness and consensus later on, besides which little place will remain for the forcing (violent) element: dictatorship when forming the new state.

## II. The period of the *Ordine Nuovo* (1919.—1920)

In the period of the *Ordine Nuovo* this notion is altered but does not basically change. The „ordinary confrontation of ideal with the practical” — that Lenin rejects so much<sup>17</sup> — is wholly unacceptable for Gramsci as well. He says, the association of the ideal and material elements must be achieved, that is, the realization of the ideal, of socialism, more exactly of the proletarian dictatorship as an idea must be urged on. He writes on socialism as a true theory — that had incarnated only in Russia until that time — as follows: „Absolute truth is not enough to carry the masses into action, to support them with revolutionary spirit but there should be a *definite* truth . . . in view of human history truth is only what is realized in action, what fills our existing conscience with zeal and enthusiasm, what is realized in the real conditions and profound movements of the masses themselves.”<sup>18</sup> On this peak of the revolutionary wave — during the so-called „red two years” of 1919—1920 — Gramsci speaks for the realization of the proletarian dictatorship and for the foundation of the new state and fully rejects all forms of positivist reformism. He plays an outstanding role in the movement of the factory councils not only theoretic-

<sup>14</sup> A. Labriola: *Saggi sul materialismo storico*, Roma 1964 Riuniti; On returning to Labriola vid. also L. Paggi: *Antonio Gramsci e il moderno principe*, quoted edition, p. 17.

<sup>15</sup> A. Gramsci: *Scritti politici*, Roma 1973 Riuniti pp. 239—240.

<sup>16</sup> Marx: *A hégei jogfilozófia bírálatahoz. Bevezetés.* (To the criticism of Hegelian law-philosophy. Introduction.) MEW, vol I. Budapest 1957 pp. 384—385.

<sup>17</sup> Lenin, *Filozófiai füzetek* (Philosophical Sketches), LÖM, vol. 38, p. 96.

<sup>18</sup> A. Gramsci, *L'Ordine Nuovo 1919—1920*, Turin, 1954, Einaudi, p. 397.

tically but practically, as well. At this time, however — on Labriola's and Lenin's influence — he knows that history must be examined always really, in its social-economical context, for our action aiming at its change can succeed only this way. Therefore he refuses comprehending revolution as a thaumaturgical act. Revolution — he writes — „is not a thaumaturgical act but a dialectical process of historical development”.<sup>19</sup> It is a long process, a movement of two distinct phases. The one is the so-called minimal program, a short revolutionary action necessary for the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat, the other — and according to Gramsci, the more important one — is the so-called maximal program, forming the psychology of the proletariat, and organizing the working class into a ruling class. Its preconditions are acquiring the „art” of economical and political leadership and direction. Revolution is thus a long-lasting process of the concretization of praxis, of revolutionary action. Gramsci's early revolutionary theory — in contrast with the opinion of Althusser and his followers — cannot be linked up with the reformism of the theoreticians of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Internationale. The classics of Marxism — Marx, Engels and Lenin — had often declined the false comprehension by which revolution would be a single action. Socialist revolution — Lenin writes — „is not a single action, not a battle fought on only one front, but a whole period of the widest class conflicts, a long row of battles fought in all the questions of economy and politics.”<sup>20</sup> A real grasp of society should consider revolution as well as history itself a process, in the course of which two considerable leaps may occur. The workers of Turin aimed at this during the „red two years”, offering an excellent example of class struggle in economical, political and cultural fields, even though the workers did not succeed in settling the historical alternative — as Gramsci had analyzed — between the forces of the socialist revolution and of the reaction on their own benefit. The Ordine Nuovo movement was in any case „The translation of comrade Lenin's conception into the Italian historical reality as he had explained it in some writings published in the *Ordine Nuovo*”,<sup>21</sup> and thus it was a significant stage of the Italian workers' movement.

### III. Conclusions

*Some conclusions* may be derived from these points.

1. The most fundamental categories (culture, consciousness, producer as a concrete individual, moral responsibility, consensus, activity, etc.) which are characteristic of Gramsci's later conception nearly in the same sense, can be found in his early philosophy. Therefore no contrast can be discovered between the theory and the practice of early and late Gramsci; on the contrary: a definite continuity is observed in his work from this aspect. Let us take such essential points like revolution — a

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 30.

<sup>20</sup> Lenin, *A szocialista forradalom és a nemzetek önrendelkezési joga* (The socialist revolution and the right of nations to self-determination), LÖM, Budapest, 1967, vol. 27, p. 244.

<sup>21</sup> A. Gramsci, *L'Ordine Nuovo*, quoted edition, p. 152.

process or keeping the right proportions between the compelling (dictatorial) and consensual elements of revolution, the importance of the consciousness and activity of the history-forming subject.

2. Gramsci's philosophy cannot be presented so that it over-estimated the role of praxis in forming history. Although after 1917, in world historic aspect, the main task was, without doubt, rendering the ideas of Marxism into practice and realizing them, Gramsci — in contrast with his contemporaries, Lukács and Korsch — did not have illusions regarding a quick changing of the existing society. He always strives to draw a line between himself and extremes like Jacobinism or messianism and at the same time to underline the historical importance of highly responsible conscious action. Praxis for him is not „demiurgos” but a social ontological process between ideal and material which can be interpreted only in view of the dialectics, in the connection of the real historical conditions and the concrete individual taking this stand. He comprehends the Marxian term „people make their own history” in its entirety and totality without making either of the anthropological, practical and historical elements absolute.

3. Here it should be indicated that Gramsci — in contrast with Mastroianni's opinion — was not a voluntarist à la Bergson neither that time, nor later. Still less was he a follower of Luxemburg's spontaneity cult. Will for Gramsci is always a „collective will” consciously accepted by society, while spontaneity is always connected with discipline, organization and with consciousness, as well, like in Lenin.

4. Gramsci therefore — as it is obvious — did not accept the violence myth of anarcho-syndicalist Sorel. Activity, praxis are never identical with violent action at all costs for Gramsci, what is justified by the end, but it is an action which strives to achieve a radical change of society through the people and by their changing. This standpoint justifies Gramsci's acceptance of the „moral and intellectual reform” deriving from the line of Renan-Croce-Sorel.

5. Gramsci belongs to the newer generation of Marxism (the greatest representative of which is Lenin) that gives a central importance to man, to man's consciousness history-forming action, in one word: to the subjective factor. In the state of imperialism, it was necessary to shift the emphasis from the objective social factors to the subjective ones. But Gramsci comprehended it not in a biased way, but dialectically, as he knows that the subject is only a starting point who initiates social changes. Still — for real changes — it is necessary to have a knowledge of objective social conditions.

Summarizing, we can say that Gramsci always tried to consider the anthropological, practical and historical elements — which form the totality of Marxism — and with Lenin's help made efforts to re-create the unity of Marxism that had been broken up by the 2<sup>nd</sup> Internationale and Sorel. This dialectical understanding gives the basis of Gramsci's creative Marxist conception that has become the guiding principle for the political action of Italian working class and that directed it amid the hard circumstances of class struggle without having become dead, stiff, „Gramscism”.

Szabó Tibor

## A FIATAL GRAMSCI ÉS A GYAKORLAT FILOZÓFIÁJA

A tanulmány azokat a főbb eredményeket foglalja össze, amelyekre Gramsci fiatalkori filozófiájának (1911—1920) elemzése során jutott a szerző.

Kiindulópontja az, hogy Gramsci elméleti és gyakorlati munkásságát el kell különíteni az idealizmustól és a „balos” irányzatoktól. Ez egyrészt *hatástörténeti* szempontból Croce és Sorel vonatkozásában érvényes, másrészt Gramsci „idealizmusát” hangsúlyozó (Riechers, Garaudy) vagy épp ellenkezőleg „praxisfilozófus” voltát kiemelő (Germino, Macciocchi, Botto) *értelmezésekkel* szemben fontos.

A tanulmány rámutat arra, hogy Gramsci fiatalkori filozófiájában már látszanak és konkrétan meg is fogalmazódnak azok a törekvések (a praxis mint gazdasági, politikai és kulturális cselekvés; a forradalom mint szükséges, de nem „csodátévő” aktus, hanem folyamat stb.), amelyek későbbi, már érett felfogásában segítik őt a marxizmus II. Internacionálé által megbontott totalitásának Marx és Lenin szellemében való visszaállításához.

Тибор Сабо

## ПРАКТИЧЕСКАЯ ФИЛОСОФИЯ МОЛОДОГО ГРАМШИ

В работе суммируются главные итоги анализа всей философской деятельности молодого Грамши (1911—1920 гг.)

Автор в своей работе исходит из положения, согласно которому теоретическую и практическую деятельность Грамши необходимо отграничить от идеализма и «левацких» направлений. С одной стороны, это касается *истории влияния* Кроче и Сореля, с другой стороны это важно относительно такого *понимания* философии Грамши, когда подчёркивается его «идеализм» (Рихерс, Гаради и др.) или, наоборот, его «практическая философия» (Жермино, Макки-окки, Ботто и др.)

В работе указывается на то, что в философии молодого Грамши уже заметны и конкретно сформированы стремления (практика как экономическое, политическое и культурное действие; революция как необходимый, но не «чудотворный» акт, а процесс и т. д.), которое впоследствии зрелому Грамши помогли восстановить тотальный характер учения Маркса и Ленина, подорванного II Интернационалом.