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Robert P. Jackson

Antonio Gramsci's Dialectic: Past and Present

1 Introduction

This article considers some of the questions addressed by the *Materialistische Dialektik* conference (30/31 October 2015, FU Berlin) through the prism of the thought of the Italian philosopher and revolutionary Antonio Gramsci.¹ How do Gramsci's writings help us to re-think the notion of a 'materialist dialectic', and, what pertinence might his reflections on dialectics have today for understanding the complex layers of historical sediment that constitute a Marxian conception of dialectics?

At first glance, Gramsci may seem like a peculiar choice for this operation. In his *Prison Notebooks*, while discussing a book on the history of materialism written by the German Neo-Kantian Friedrich Albert Lange, Gramsci argues that:

Marx always avoided calling his conception "materialist" and whenever he spoke of materialist philosophies he criticized them and asserted that they are criticizable. Marx never used the formula "materialist dialectic" – he called it "rational" as opposed to "mystical", which gives the term "rational" a very precise meaning.²

Gramsci focuses our attention on the danger of eliding distinct contents of concepts by overlooking the concealed diversity beneath superficially identical formulations. This is certainly the case here with terms like 'rational' or 'materialist', since he notes (following Plekhanov) that Lange's conception of materialism includes neither historical materialism nor its Feuerbachian type. Gramsci's proclivity for caution and care with regard to matters of terminology is one of his vital methodological contributions in our current endeavor to re-evaluate and to stimulate a dialogue between various readings of Marx.

Rather less careful treatment of terminology has led some to regard Gramsci as a 'culturalist' thinker in a restrictive sense, whose engagement with the tradition of Italian neo-idealist thinkers, such as Benedetto Croce and Giovanni Gentile, renders his relationship with materialism somewhat suspect. Gramsci himself conceived the philosophy of praxis as going beyond both 'traditional' idealism and materialism, while incorporating the living elements of each.³ Thus, while he shows a willingness to criticize prevailing or 'traditional' materialisms, he does not rule out the philosophy of praxis as a non-'traditional', critical and non-mechanical form of materialism. In-

¹ I would like to extend my thanks to the organisers of the conference, Stefano Breda and Kaveh Boveiri, and to the contributors during the discussion, in particular Frieder Otto Wolf and Alex Demirović, for their stimulating and helpful comments on my original paper. I would also like to thank Francesca Antonini for her comments on a draft of this article.

² Gramsci 2011, Vol. 3, p. 354; Q8, §206, p. 1065 – Henceforth references from anthologies or the published volumes of the critical edition of Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* in English, are also given as Q [notebook], § [note], [page], in the Italian critical edition (Gramsci 1975).

³ Gramsci 2011, Vol. 3, p. 179; Q7, §29, p. 877.

deed, this critical approach to the search for a 'new philosophy' is a strong recommendation for re-examining the relevance of Gramsci's writings on dialectics today.

Moreover, the historical-philological reading of Gramsci's texts, developed predominantly through Italian-language scholarship in recent decades, permits a renewed and deepened understanding of his work.⁴ Paying close attention to the context of Gramsci's writings, this approach analyses the 'rhythm' and development of his thought. With particular regard to the *Prison Notebooks*, this requires being attentive to the process of drafting and re-drafting that constitutes those texts as an open and dynamic laboratory. This mode of study of Gramsci's writings has produced fruitful resources, such as those cited above, but also collective projects such as the *Dizionario gramsciano*,⁵ that are highly useful for our current endeavour.

The question of Gramsci's conception of the dialectic connects inextricably to the wider assessment of his 'philosophy of praxis' as belonging to the sphere of 'classical' Marxism, while also representing an original and innovative development of Marxist thought. In this short piece, I will seek to trace some of the sources of Gramsci's conception of the dialectic, and its emergence in opposition to, on the one hand, the 'speculative idealism' of Croce and, on the other, Nikolai Bukharin's 'metaphysical materialism'. I will elaborate connections between Gramsci's reflections on the dialectic and his distinctive articulation of the relationship between structure and superstructures, arguing for their foundation in his innovative conception of the 'homogeneous circle' of philosophy, politics and economics. Finally, I will make some brief observations on the contemporary relevance of Gramsci's thought in relation to more recent thinkers.

2 The Sources of Gramsci's Dialectic

In his entry for 'dialectic' (*dialettica*) in the *Dizionario gramsciano*, Giuseppe Prestipino points towards a Heraclitean influence on the formulation of the concept of the dialectic in Gramsci's pre-prison writings.⁶ Thus, in the newspaper *L'Ordine Nuovo*, during the period of his involvement in the struggles of workers in Turin (23 August 1919), Gramsci writes that history is a process of eternal becoming, "an indefinite dialectical process"⁷. It is worth noting the credit commonly given to Heraclitus for introducing the notion of the "unity of opposites" to the dialectic, an important theme in Gramsci's delineation of his own conception.

Prestipino argues that Gramsci defines his notion of the dialectic more precisely during the period of his incarceration.⁸ In his prison writings, the Hegelian influence on Gramsci's formulation of the dialectic becomes increasingly evident. Thus, while describing the educational initiatives among his fellow prisoners in a letter to his sister-in-law Tania (25 March 1929), Gramsci describes the dialectic as "the historically concrete form of thought"⁹. These references to Hegel become more explicit in a later letter to Tania (30 May 1932), in which Gramsci characterizes the philosophy of praxis as capable of purifying the natural sciences of their mechanicism by identifying itself "synthetically with the dialectical reasoning of Hegelianism"¹⁰.

⁴ E.g. Frosini 2010, Cospito 2011a, and Cospito 2011b.

⁵ Liguori and Voza 2009.

⁶ Prestipino 2009, p. 212.

⁷ Gramsci 1987, p. 176 – Translations from Italian texts not currently available in English editions are my own.

⁸ Prestipino 2004, p. 56.

⁹ Gramsci 1996, p. 249.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 582.

Gramsci's reflections on Hegel emphasize the concrete sense of history that emerges from the latter's philosophy, particularly his capacity to judge the historical function of superseded philosophies. Thus, Gramsci argues against any conception that makes anachronistic judgements about the whole of past philosophy, claiming that: "Methodical anti-historicism is sheer metaphysics"¹¹. In this sense, Gramsci is quite scathing about the superficial treatment of the dialectic advanced by Bukharin in his *Popular Manual*¹², which fails to present the historical validity of outmoded philosophies and to consider their supersession "from the point of view of the entire development of history and of the real dialectic"¹³.

In the spirit of preserving what he sees as the historical strengths of Hegelian thought, Gramsci follows Marx's *The Poverty of Philosophy* in criticizing the "pseudo-Hegelianism of Proudhon"¹⁴. For Gramsci, Proudhon failed to comprehend that it was necessary for "each member of a dialectical opposition to seek to be itself totally [...] since only in that way can it achieve a genuine dialectical 'transcendence' of its opponent"¹⁵. Gramsci observes:

[...] that the critique of Proudhon and of his interpretation of Hegelian dialectic contained in *The Poverty of Philosophy* may be extended to [Vincenzo] Gioberti and to the Hegelianism of the Italian moderate liberals in general.¹⁶

Gramsci re-fashions the criticisms advanced by Marx in the past for use in his own present. He criticizes the 'reform' of Hegel's dialectic that he finds in the work of Croce. While approving of Croce's aim to render Hegelianism 'immanent' and non-metaphysical, Gramsci argues that Croce has in fact reproduced a speculative philosophy. For Gramsci, these valid aims require re-translation into a non-speculative and realistic form.

Gramsci argues, "Croce's philosophical conception has to be adapted [*occorre rifare ... la stessa riduzione*] in the same way that Hegel's was by the first theorists of the philosophy of praxis"¹⁷. An understanding of these two distinct sets of co-ordinates, Gramsci-Croce and Marx-Hegel, is important for characterizing the nature of the dialectic in Gramsci's 'philosophy of praxis', and Gramsci's intervention into debates on the interpretation of Marxism that he advances in the *Prison Notebooks*. While they are intimately connected, we should be careful not to conflate entirely the relationship between Gramsci and Croce and the Marx-Hegel nexus.¹⁸

3 Gramsci, Croce and the 'Dialectic of Distincts'

¹¹ Gramsci 1971, p. 449; Q11, §18, p. 1417.

¹² Bukharin's "Theory of Historical Materialism: A Popular Manual of Marxist Sociology" (1922).

¹³ Gramsci 1971, p. 449; Q11, §18, p. 1417.

¹⁴ Prestipino 2004, p. 55.

¹⁵ Gramsci 1971, p. 109; Q15, §11, p. 1768.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 162n*; Q13, §18, p. 1592. When Gramsci refers to 'Italian moderate liberals in general', he is alluding, above all, to the thought of Benedetto Croce.

¹⁷ Gramsci 1995, p. 355; Q10.I, §11, p. 1233. Gramsci's notion of adaptation [*riduzione*] is related closely to his conception of 'translation' [*traduzione*] between the spheres of politics, philosophy and economics. This connection plays a complex and important role in his project for the renewal of the 'philosophy of praxis'.

¹⁸ Indeed, I will not have space to deal here with the specificities of Gramsci's relationships with Sorel as regards the 'spirit of cleavage', with Gentile and his critique of Croce, and a host of others, such as Rodolfo Mondolfo, etc.

For Gramsci, the relationship between the dialectic in Marx and Hegel is mediated through the trajectory of neo-Hegelian thought in Italy.¹⁹ We can see Gramsci's dialectic, in part, as a Marxist response to a form of 'post-Marxism', namely the aforementioned 'reform' of the Hegelian dialectic put forward by Croce.²⁰ Gramsci is interested, on the one hand, in the extent to which Croce's philosophy is shaped by and in reaction to the historical materialism of Antonio Labriola among others. In this sense, Croce's philosophy represents an original expression that requires a close engagement. On the other hand, Gramsci also regards Croce's thought as playing an ideological stabilizing role to the existing political order by providing it with a philosophical basis.²¹ In this regard, Gramsci takes up a notion, originally proposed by Labriola, that it was necessary to produce an 'anti-Croce', along the lines of Engels's polemic against Eugen Dühring.²²

Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith observe this dual aspect inscribed in the figure of Croce in the *Introduction* to their *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. For Gramsci, Croce is at once comparable to Dühring, the progenitor of a "diffuse ideology", and to Hegel, from whose "specific philosophical system" Marxism can be renovated and liberated from "positivistic accretions".²³ While these two aspects can be analytically isolated, Gramsci's conception of the relationship between philosophy and ideology is complex and articulated. This nexus of 'Philosophy-Ideology' is one of the important themes that we must explore in order to illustrate the particularities of the dialectic in Gramsci's thought.

3.1 The 'Dialectic of Distincts'

Croce famously substitutes Hegel's 'dialectic of opposites' with a 'dialectic of distincts'²⁴. In doing so, Croce accentuates the circular aspect of the Hegelian dialectic, through which particular forms, while they have a negative internal opposition, do not transmit this oppositional characteristic positively in their external form as 'distincts'. Thus, Prestipino argues that for Croce, "the historical dialectic becomes nothing but a succession of pure forms"²⁵. Despite its conception of progressive historical transformation (at least at the verbal or conceptual level), the Crocean dialectic essentially preserves only the conservative aspect of the Hegelian dialectic. From a political perspective, Croce conceals the conflictual vitality of historical antagonisms by reabsorbing one-sidedly "the antithesis within the thesis"²⁶.

In the *Notebooks*, Gramsci assesses the balance sheet of Croce's contribution, who has "drawn attention energetically to the importance of cultural and intellectual facts in historical development"²⁷, and elsewhere remarks upon "his affirmation of a moment of practice, of a practical spirit, autonomous and independent though linked in a circle to all reality by the dialectic of distincts"²⁸. The strength of this 'dialectic of distincts' lies in its capacity to overcome certain me-

¹⁹ At the same time, the importance for Gramsci of Engels's observations on the dialectic in *Anti-Dühring* should also be noted (Liguori 2015, p. 133).

²⁰ Peter Thomas presents Gramsci's criticism of Croce as one of the earliest confrontations between Marxism and a sophisticated 'post-Marxism' (Thomas 2009, p. 261).

²¹ Searching for the 'intimate cement' holding together civil society and the state, Gramsci famously refers to Croce as a 'secular pope' (Gramsci 1995, p. 475; Q10.II, §41.IV, p. 1307).

²² See Liguori 2015, p. 133.

²³ Gramsci 1971, p. xxiii.

²⁴ Croce 1969.

²⁵ Prestipino 2004, p. 56.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Gramsci 1971, p. 56n5; Q10.I, §12, p. 1235.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 137; Q13, §10, p. 1568.

chanistic reductions of the relationship between these elements of reality. However, for Gramsci, Croce's conception is limited by its speculative language, which requires 'translation' (a very important and specific Gramscian operation²⁹), from a limited ethico-political history to an 'integral' conception of history, which would be capable of incorporating the former within the latter.

Gramsci recognizes Croce's efforts to "make idealist philosophy remain faithful to life" and his struggle against "transcendence and theology in the particular forms assumed in religious-confessional thought"³⁰. He praises Croce for having dissolved false questions, and for reposing them in more stimulating ways. Yet, according to Gramsci, Croce's historicism remains at this "theological speculative stage". Gramsci differentiates between Croce's distinction of "moments of the spirit", and the distinction between various "levels of the superstructure" that are elaborated in the "philosophy of praxis"³¹. With characteristic caution, Gramsci suggests that one can approximately refer to political activity as the first "level", or moment, "in which the superstructure is still in the unmediated phase"³².

Gramsci argues that Croce's principle of the 'dialectic of distincts' is "to be criticized as the merely verbal solution to a real methodological exigency, in so far as it is true that there exist not only opposites but also distincts"³³. Yet, Croce's 'dialectic of distincts' is a contradiction in terms. The dialectic is a relationship between opposites, and inasmuch as its elements are distinct, they are not dialectical. Gramsci regards Croce's solution to the problem of "historicity" as a speculative one, or in other words, Croce achieves the unity of theory and practice in a tautological manner.

3.2 Structure and Superstructures

Gramsci's understanding of the dialectic relates to his distinctive "dilated" reading of Marx's conception of base and superstructure (*Basis/Überbau*) when elaborating the relationship between the forces and relations of production in society.³⁴ While Croce's thought advances an effective criticism of vulgar Marxism's treatment of superstructures as epiphenomena, Gramsci seeks to renovate the Marxist conception of the relationship between structure and superstructure in dialogue with the Sorelian concept of the 'historical bloc'.³⁵ Peter Thomas points out that Gramsci, far from dispensing with Marx's metaphor of *Basis/Überbau*, employs it "in ways that seem consonant with quite 'orthodox' understandings, albeit with significant specifications and extensions"³⁶. Despite limited access to Marx's writings under prison conditions,³⁷ Gramsci repeatedly returns to discuss the text of the *Preface to the Contribution towards the Critique of Political Economy* and the *Theses on Feuerbach*. He indicates that the question of the relations between the structure and the superstructures is "the crucial problem of historical materialism"³⁸.

Gramsci links this metaphor to Marx's formulation of the 'ideological terrain', as the 'legal, political, religious, aesthetic or philosophic' forms upon which human beings become conscious of

²⁹ See Boothman 2010.

³⁰ Gramsci 1995, p. 347; Q10.I, §8, p. 1225.

³¹ Gramsci 1971, p. 137; Q13, §10: p. 1568.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Gramsci 1995, p. 399; Q10.II, §41.X, p. 1316.

³⁴ Liguori 2015, p. 67.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

³⁶ Thomas 2009, p. 96.

³⁷ See Cospito 2011a, and Liguori 2015, p. 121.

³⁸ Gramsci 2011, Vol. 2, p. 177; Q4, §38, p. 455.

class struggles and fight them out. Gramsci comes close to equating the notions of “ideologies” and “superstructures” (in the plural).³⁹ As Thomas points out, the relation of structure and superstructures is a crossroads in Gramsci’s thought which “opens onto political practice as Marxism’s Archimedean point.”⁴⁰

For Gramsci, a failure to establish the complex “dialectical nexus” between “permanent” and “occasional” elements in the development of “incurable contradictions” within the structure constitutes one of the key methodological failings of the historical analysis of Second (and Third) International Marxism.⁴¹ Later, Gramsci argues that, “the complex, contradictory and discordant *ensemble* of the superstructures is the reflection of the *ensemble* of the social relations of production”⁴². The reciprocity that takes place between structure and superstructure in this relationship is “precisely” what Gramsci refers to as the “real dialectical process”.⁴³

3.3 Critique of Croce

The severity of Gramsci’s criticisms of Croce modulates throughout the *Notebooks*. Yet ultimately, Gramsci serves a hard judgement on the transformation of the Hegelian dialectic in the hands of Croce and Gentile. Gramsci suggests that their ‘reform’ is in fact a ‘reactionary’ one:

Have they not amputated the most realistic, most historicist part? And is it not, instead, exactly of this part that only the philosophy of praxis, to a certain extent represents a reform and supersession?⁴⁴

While Croce makes some effective criticisms of Hegel by questioning the capacity of Hegel’s ‘Absolute Spirit’ to be immanent within the world, Croce’s hostility to the worldly impurities of the political-passionate presents its own difficulties for the coherence of his thought.⁴⁵ For Gramsci, Croce develops a “purely conceptual dialectic”, which would be suitable perhaps for a world without social contradictions, but is of a utopian type in the current one.⁴⁶ Whereas Hegel’s reflections on history broached the great contradictions and conflicts of his time, according to Gramsci, the dialectic in the hands of Croce loses its “vigour” and becomes a “scholastic question of words”.⁴⁷

4 The Real Dialectic and the Dialectical Method

A specification of terms might help us to approach the complexity of Gramsci’s conception of the dialectic. In certain places, Gramsci qualifies his use of the term dialectic by referring, as we have seen, to the ‘real dialectic’, relating to philosophical knowledge of history. In other places, Gramsci refers to the dialectic as a ‘method’, or as a “technique of thought”⁴⁸. Prestipino cites

³⁹ Thomas 2009, p. 98.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Gramsci 2011, Vol. 2, p. 177; Q4, §38, p. 455.

⁴² Gramsci 1971, p. 366; Q8, §182, p. 1051.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 366; Q8, §182, p. 1052.

⁴⁴ Gramsci 1995, p. 400; Q10.II, §41.X, p. 1317.

⁴⁵ See Frosini 2013.

⁴⁶ Gramsci 1971, p. 356; Q7, §35, p. 886.

⁴⁷ Gramsci 1995, p. 375; Q10.II, §41.XIV, p. 1326.

⁴⁸ Prestipino points out that according to Michele Martelli, Gramsci’s dialectic has three rather than two aspects: gnoseological, methodological and ontological (Prestipino 2004, p. 56 n 2-3; Martelli 1996).

examples from the *Notebooks* where Gramsci appears to prioritize one aspect in the first draft of a text, while emphasizing the other in a re-drafted version.⁴⁹ Thus, in the fourth notebook, Gramsci says, “The dialectic is also a technique [...] but it is also a new thought”⁵⁰. Whereas in the second version of the same note, he says, “the dialectic [...] is a new way of thinking, a new philosophy, but through that it is also a new technique.”⁵¹ The interesting point to observe here is the inversion between the first and second versions of this note.

Gramsci displays a great interest in the further study of the interrelationship between these aspects, in particular as they might relate to the themes of philosophy, technique and judgement, ‘conformism’ and the renovation of common sense. Gramsci is critical of Croceanism for reducing philosophy to a methodology of history.⁵² While this has its merits in the development of a technique, the resulting speculative historiography falls far short of fulfilling the requirements of an ‘integral’ conception of history.

4.1 Crocean Marxism?

Maurice Finocchiaro, in his book *Gramsci and the History of Dialectical Thought*, argues that the influence of Croce on Gramsci’s thought is so profound as to constitute a qualitatively novel form of “Crocean Marxism”. Finocchiaro claims that Gramsci, while conscious of the substantial ways in which Croce had influenced his thought, was not fully aware of his methodological debt to the idealist philosopher.⁵³ Finocchiaro asserts that:

[Gramsci’s] critique of the Crocean philosophy of history and politics amounts to charging Croce with being undialectical, although [...] this undialectical procedure is also un-Crocean in the sense of going against the dialectical approach Croce normally followed in his criticism.⁵⁴

Despite Gramsci’s claim to treat the dialectic both as a technique and as a new philosophy, and thereby to transform the Crocean dialectic, Finocchiaro contends that the ‘dialectic of distincts’ subsumes the ‘real dialectic’ in Gramsci’s thought. If so, Gramsci’s conception of the dialectic avoids one-sidedness in cognitive expressions only at the expense of giving a superficial treatment to the real historical development of social contradictions. For Finocchiaro, Gramsci subordinates the (real) dialectic of these antagonistic social forces of history within the cognitive dialectic (as a technique). In short, Finocchiaro argues that Gramsci fails to render these two aspects of the dialectic coherently within the ‘philosophy of praxis’.

Steven Mansfield points out that there are numerous elements of Croce’s thought that Gramsci would see as capable of being incorporated into his philosophy of praxis, e.g. “Croce’s ethical-political approach to politics, his anti-positivism, and his anti-transcendentalism”⁵⁵. Yet, Mansfield argues that this is far from legitimate grounds for characterizing Gramsci’s philosophy as a form of Crocean idealism. For Prestipino, the distinctive development of Gramsci’s thought overall, in particular his conceptions of ‘hegemony’ and ‘passive revolution’, renovates his understanding of the dialectic conferring upon it new semantic content.⁵⁶ I would concur that Grams-

⁴⁹ Prestipino 2004, p. 57.

⁵⁰ Gramsci 2011, Vol. 2, p. 159-60; Q4, §18, p. 439.

⁵¹ Gramsci 1995, p. 301; Q11, §44, p. 1464.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 300; Q11, §44, p. 1463.

⁵³ Finocchiaro 1988, p. 234.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

⁵⁵ Mansfield 2011, p. 218.

⁵⁶ Prestipino 2004, p. 56.

ci's 'philosophy of praxis' radically reconfigures this Crocean matrix whilst drawing vitality from its engagement with Croce's lexicon.⁵⁷

4.2 Politics and Philosophy

Gramsci differentiates himself with the idealist consequences of Croce's 'dialectic of distincts' especially through his innovative formulation of the relationship between the 'structure' and 'superstructures' within Marxism. He criticizes Croce for maintaining that the philosophy of praxis had replaced the Hegelian 'idea' with the 'concept' of structure. Gramsci refutes this claim, and explains the novelty of the 'philosophy of praxis' with regard to Hegel:

The Hegelian "idea" has been resolved both in the structure and in the superstructures and the whole way of conceiving philosophy has been "historicized", that is to say a new way of philosophizing which is more concrete and historical than what went before it has begun to come into existence.⁵⁸

Of particular importance for this "new way of philosophizing" is the identity proposed by Croce between history and philosophy. Gramsci sees a number of rich critical consequences that flow from this Crocean proposition. However, he argues that "1) it remains incomplete if it does not also arrive at the identity of history and politics [...], and 2) thus also at the identity of politics and philosophy"⁵⁹.

For Gramsci, if one admits the identity of politics and philosophy, then one must also accept that the distinction between philosophy and ideology is a matter of gradation, a quantitative rather than a qualitative distinction. For Gramsci, Croce's "Olympian attitude" of serene intellectual impartiality made it impossible for him to think a conception of philosophy in which a required "historical bloc" could be realized, "establishing the dialectical position of political activity (and of the corresponding science) as a particular level of the superstructure"⁶⁰.

This limitation of Croce's thought arises from his identification of the political moment with the moment of 'passion', which he imbues with a predominantly pejorative connotation. For Croce, ethics subsumes politics, or, in other words, politics is reduced to the individual passion. By contrast, Gramsci adopts the politics/passion identity and imbues it with a positive sense. He re-configures the matrix of those terms that he appropriates from Croce's thought. Thus, Gramsci is interested in the establishment of passion in its "far-reaching historical importance", as an "organised and permanent" passion, which is inconceivable within the Crocean framework.⁶¹

In Gramsci's 'philosophy of praxis': "One cannot make politics-history without this passion, without this sentimental connection between intellectuals and people-nation"⁶². These reflections lead Gramsci towards his rich discussion of the concept of the "national-popular",⁶³ as well as a radically democratic conception of philosophy, and to the figure of the "democratic philosopher", who stands in "an active relationship of modification of the cultural environment".⁶⁴

⁵⁷ E.g. the "movement of moral and intellectual reform", "absolute historicism", "immanence", etc.

⁵⁸ Gramsci 1971, p. 448; Q11, §20, p. 1420.

⁵⁹ Gramsci 1995, p. 382; Q10.II, §2, p. 1241.

⁶⁰ Gramsci 1971, p. 137; Q13, §10, p. 1569. This is a complex question that merits further investigation (see Liguori 2015, p. 28).

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 138; Q13, §8, p. 1567.

⁶² Ibid., p. 418; Q11, §67, p. 1505.

⁶³ See Durante 2009.

⁶⁴ Gramsci 1971, p. 350; Q10.II, §44, p. 1332.

5 Gramsci, Bukharin and Gnoseology

I will turn now to discuss another of Gramsci's most significant interlocutors in the *Prison Notebooks*. Gramsci's engagement with Bukharin's *Popular Manual* is motivated by his dissatisfaction with the prevailing currents in Marxism, which he believes have failed to advance an adequate treatment of the dialectic in their texts.⁶⁵ Thus, in Bukharin's *Popular Manual*, Gramsci argues:

The dialectic is presupposed, in a very superficial manner, but is not expounded, and this is absurd in a manual which ought to contain the essential elements of the doctrine under discussion [...].⁶⁶

Gramsci suggests that there are two potential sources of this absence.

The first reason lies in the bifurcation of the 'philosophy of praxis' into, on the one hand, a positivistic "sociology" and, on the other, a "metaphysical or mechanical (vulgar) materialism".⁶⁷ This dualistic framing of Marxism relegates the dialectic from its position "as a doctrine of knowledge and the very marrow of historiography and the science of politics" to a "sub-species of formal logic and elementary scholastics"⁶⁸. For Gramsci, this prevents us from seeing the extent to which the philosophy of praxis is an original and integral philosophy, which exceeds both 'traditional' idealism and materialism. The 'new dialectic' must be grasped, says Gramsci, as a means of both effecting and expressing the transcendence of old philosophies.

The second reason emerges from a sense in Bukharin that the dialectic is "something arduous and difficult, in so far as thinking dialectically goes against vulgar common sense"⁶⁹. Despite the felt need that might exist for a systematic presentation of a completed doctrine, Gramsci argues that the 'philosophy of praxis' remains in a phase of criticism. The danger of Bukharin's emphasis on indisputable 'certainties' is that it disarms the critical elaboration of a new philosophy, and simply recreates the metaphysics and dogmatism of the past in new forms. As we have seen above, Gramsci engages Croce's 'dialectic of distincts' to overcome the mechanicism of 'metaphysical' materialism. At the same time, for Gramsci, the elaboration of a new dialectic should retain its roots in concrete history and the antagonistic struggle of social forces.

5.1 Coutinho, 'Labour' and 'Interaction'

Gramsci's emphasis on the creativity of the 'focal point' of political praxis, the autonomy of political science, has led some commentators to criticize his conception of social ontology as insufficiently developed. For Carlos Nelson Coutinho, Gramsci's gnoseological thesis of the effective reality of human knowledge as social relations leads him to slide into idealist positions "without reaching its ontologico-social implications"⁷⁰. Thomas explains this "politico-gnoseological thesis" as a theory that deals with the "effective reality of human relations of knowledge".⁷¹ Thomas is modifying a phrase used by Christine Buci-Glucksman, when she affirms that Gramsci's conception neither privileges philosopher-intellectuals as custodians of knowledge, which they impart to the masses, nor reduces knowledge to an epiphenomenon of mechanically-determined eco-

⁶⁵ Although, it should also be noted that Gramsci used Bukharin's book as a model and pedagogical tool in his pre-prison educational activities for the Italian communist party.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 434; Q7, §29, p.876-7; Q11, §22, p. 1424.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 435; Q11, §22, p. 1424.

⁷⁰ Coutinho 2013, p. 67.

⁷¹ Thomas 2009, p. 97.

nomic forces.⁷² Gnoseology is contrasted with more epistemological approaches, which view knowledge as a type of speculative and passive reflection.

Coutinho argues that Gramsci was unable to “systematically distinguish the two essential modes of human praxis, ‘labour’ and ‘interaction’” to which “scientific” and “ideological” consciousness are connected.⁷³ We might ask whether such a distinct separation of these is required on the terrain of Gramsci’s gnoseology, and whether we are therefore in danger of importuning the text of the *Notebooks* by forcing it into the mould of an epistemological position. Gramsci certainly cautions against the unmediated introduction of natural scientific concepts into the study of human history, but Coutinho seems to imply that this necessarily leads to the introduction of idealist elements into Gramsci’s conception. This might depend on whether we follow Coutinho’s commitment, following Lukács, to science as de-anthropomorphizing knowledge.⁷⁴

In the *Notebooks*, Gramsci rejects the purely reflective pretensions of metaphysics to absolute objectivity, but nowhere suggests that he denies the possibility of scientific knowledge *tout court*.⁷⁵ Indeed, as Peter Thomas points out: “Discussions of science – not merely theoretical reflection on it, but analysis of technical problems and procedures – are a central recurring theme of the *Prison Notebooks*”⁷⁶. Gramsci is a keen observer of the historical particularities of scientific practice, and was keen to identify the complex character of its modern form. This is not to obviate the challenges identified, e.g. by Althusser, in Gramsci’s position that “science too is a superstructure, an ideology”⁷⁷. Nevertheless, Thomas points out that:

[...] this statement has a precise meaning: also science is one of the forms in which members of classes come to know the struggle in which they are engaged – [...] in a very particular and efficacious way.⁷⁸

For Coutinho, the gnoseological subject is the knowing subject, and it is counterposed to the ontological or acting subject.⁷⁹ However, as Buci-Glucksmann points out, Gramsci is highly critical of any treatment of knowledge or theory as an “accessory” to practice.⁸⁰ Thus, he would reject the assertion that gnoseology precludes or can be mechanically separated from activity, which is in fact Gramsci’s central concern. Buci-Glucksmann explains this conception as a dual process in which “philosophical positions have their effects in all practices,” and “all practices contain knowledge effects”.⁸¹

Gramsci recognizes that the dissolution of claims to absolute truth has problematic consequences. In particular, he is concerned that historical relativism might undermine the certitude required for motivating decisive political action. Yet, Gramsci’s reluctance to substitute the speculation of bourgeois thought for a Marxian metaphysics appears to be well founded. For Gramsci, despite the attendant risks, the new dialectic of the ‘philosophy of praxis’ must be one that is self-reflexive if it is to avoid reproducing the symptomatic passivity of the proletariat’s experience of the subaltern position.

⁷² Buci-Glucksmann 1980, p. 346.

⁷³ Coutinho 2013, p. 70.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ See Antonini 2014.

⁷⁶ Thomas 2009, p. 315.

⁷⁷ Gramsci 1995, p. 293; Q11, §38, p. 1457.

⁷⁸ Thomas 2009, p. 101.

⁷⁹ Coutinho 2013, p. 67.

⁸⁰ Buci-Glucksmann 1980, pp. 346-347.

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 349.

5.2 The 'Homogeneous Circle' of Politics, Philosophy and Economics

As can be inferred from the indications given above, Gramsci attempts to formulate the real problem to which both Croce and Bukharin have responded in distinct but related ways. Thus, Gramsci argues that:

If "speculative idealism" is the science of categories and of the *a priori* synthesis of the spirit, i.e. a form of anti-historicist abstraction, the philosophy implicit in the *Popular Manual* is idealism upside down, in the sense that the speculative categories are replaced by empirical concepts and classifications which are no less abstract and anti-historical.⁸²

Gramsci's 'philosophy of praxis' seeks to contribute towards the creation of an integral conception of the world, sufficient unto itself, constituted by the 'convertibility' of the activities of 'Philosophy-Politics-Economics' and the reciprocal translatability of their respective specific languages. For Gramsci, each of these elements is implicit in the others. They form what he describes as a "homogeneous circle"⁸³.

The conversion between these different moments relies on the principle of 'translatability' that underpins the coherence of Gramsci's conception. As Mansfield has pointed out, translatability "is not limited to formal or theoretical languages but is based upon the interrelationship of the practices out of which languages develop", and as such is rooted within a "materialist philosophy of internal relations".⁸⁴ This principle is crucial to distinguishing Gramsci's dialectic from that of Croce, and for understanding the historical genesis of the 'philosophy of praxis' itself.

6 Gramsci and Contemporary Thought

To conclude, I will very briefly address the second question of the conference: why should we be concerned *today* with Gramsci's formulation of the dialectic in his *Prison Notebooks*? Figures such as Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe have sought to deploy Gramscian concepts to address contemporary problems of method and render a dialectic between logics of difference and logics of equivalence. However, they argue that Gramsci is constrained by a class reductionism. For Laclau and Mouffe, despite the potential of Gramsci's concept of hegemony, there remains an "essentialist core" of productivism in his thought.⁸⁵ Thus, they would suggest that Gramsci is unable to articulate sufficiently a logic of difference and the radical indeterminacy of political and social identities. Mansfield rejects these charges, suggesting that Laclau and Mouffe exaggerate the essentialist logic in both Marx and Gramsci.⁸⁶ In order to criticize the reading of Gramsci by Laclau and Mouffe, Mansfield examines what he sees as their under-emphasis on the dialectic of identity and difference both in Gramsci's "analytic methodology and in his substantive theory"⁸⁷.

In this article, I have explored elements of Gramsci's reflections on dialectics that would support this thesis and stimulate further enquiry. I have sought to demonstrate that Gramsci's reflections on the dialectic can stimulate insightful reflections on the Marx-Hegel relationship and continue to contribute to contemporary debates on method in critical theory. Furthermore, I would

⁸² Gramsci 1971, p. 437; Q11, §14, p. 1403.

⁸³ Ibid., p. 403; Q11, §65, p. 1492.

⁸⁴ Mansfield 2011, p. 227.

⁸⁵ Laclau and Mouffe 2001, p. 69.

⁸⁶ Mansfield 2011, p. 218.

⁸⁷ Mansfield 2011, p. 218.

suggest that staging encounters between Gramsci and more recent figures remains a conceptually productive exercise enabling us to articulate a conception of the dialectic in dialogue with contemporary forms of thought.⁸⁸

Although limitations of space prevent a further exploration at this juncture, Gramsci's dialectic offers possibilities for conceptually productive encounters with contemporary thinkers. A particularly productive encounter is, in my opinion, the one with the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. Gramsci's insistence on human knowledge as a practice puts him, in this respect at least, in the company *avant la lettre* of thinkers such as Bourdieu, who seek to shift the terrain of the analysis of social domination away from theories of consciousness and toward theories of practice.⁸⁹ In flagging up these points, rather telegraphically, I would argue that it is worth re-considering both the *past* and the *present* of Gramsci's dialectic.

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⁸⁸ E.g. Althusser, Foucault, post-structuralism, new materialisms, etc.

⁸⁹ For an extended comparative analysis of the thought of Gramsci and Bourdieu, see Jackson 2017.

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