

Gramsci and the religion of the subalterns: the case-study of the dalits (untouchables) in south asia

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“Religion, common sense, philosophy.
Finding connections among these three
intellectual orders...”

(Gramsci, *Prison Notebook 8*, § 204)

In a recent article (Zene 2011) I discuss, among other things, the implications of Spivak's position in her script 'Can the Subaltern speak?', for a particular group of subalterns, the Dalits (or ex-Untouchables) of South Asia. I maintain in that paper that if we analyse the experience of Dalits – their history and life-experience – with the eyes and seriousness of the 'integral historian', we can conclude that Dalits constitute a major example, almost an archetype, of the Gramscian subaltern. Moreover, Religion, a significant component

in the Dalits' life-experience, occupies a prominent place also in their struggle to achieve recognition within civil and political society. The 'religion of the subalterns' – defined also as 'common sense' and 'philosophy of the masses' – is a prominent Gramscian theme.

In the present paper, following a brief note on the general condition of the Dalits and their effort to affirm themselves as political subjects, I will discuss and compare the writings and activity of Gramsci and Ambedkar, the Indian leader of ex-Untouchables, highlighting their commitment in favour of Subalterns/Dalits. This inquiry will shed some light on the following research questions: 1) Why are Dalits a prototype of Gramscian subalterns? 2) Why is 'religion' relevant for the subalterns and for Gramsci? 3) What is the connection between religion and civil-political society for both the subalterns/Dalits and for Gramsci?

WHO ARE THE 'UNTOUCHABLES'-DALITS

The word 'Dalit' comes from the Sanskrit, and bears a precise meaning: "suppressed", "crushed", "downtrodden", or "broken to pieces". It was first used by Jyotirao Phule (1827-1890)¹ in the nineteenth century, to describe the oppression faced by the members of the so-called "untouchable" castes, in relation to high castes, particularly Brahmins, in South Asia. Phule's legacy was carried on by Valangkar (? - 1900),² Pande (1864-1924),³ and mostly by Ambedkar (1891-1956), as we shall later see.

The word 'Untouchable' – the old '*Chandala*' described in the Laws of Manu (*Manusmriti*) – designates within the caste system those groups which do not belong to the four main castes and, as such, are considered 'outcastes' (*avarna*). Their condition is sanctioned by Vedic religious texts which classify certain groups practising a given activity (e.g. musicians, drum players, leather workers, cleaners, barbers, fishermen etc...) as 'impure' or 'polluting', hence their untouchability. However, this religious and ritual impurity and segregation is extended to all spheres of life: social, political, economical, educational and even geographical, given that untouchables are required to live outside villages or in special quarters in cities, they do not have access to shops, to water tube-wells, to schools and certainly not to Hindu temples. Although untouchability has been abolished by the Indian Constitution, and made illegal in other countries of South Asia, over 200 million people in this part of the world are affected with the curse of untouchability.

The most neutral term used to define 'untouchable' groups, which since the time of British rule in South Asia has been adopted by legal and constitutional terminology, is 'Scheduled Castes' (or 'Scheduled Tribes' for the *Adivasis*, which designates the indigenous

¹Phule, himself a member of the Mali caste, has been described as "the father of Indian social revolution" (Keer, D. 1997).

²Gopal Baba Valangkar (?-1900), "an early Mahar Dalit activist who, while drawing on Phule's postulation of a military history for Dalit castes, historicized Dalit social stigmatization in particular and urged a focus on the unique disabilities of being untouchable" (Hedge 2010: 1).

³Vithoba Raoji Moon Pande (1864-1924), "typified the new upwardly mobile Mahar community's growing refusal to countenance socio-ritual stigmatization and whose challenge to caste discrimination instituted an alternative source of religious authority in the form of a Mahar priesthood within the Hindu fold" (Hedge 2010: 1).

people of a given region). Following this line, in 2008 state governments in India were asked not to use the word 'Dalit' in official documents because, so the National Commission for Scheduled Castes maintains, the term is 'unconstitutional'. However, while the word Dalit is defined unconstitutional by the law, for those who call themselves Dalits, the use of this word has prompted a new awareness of their status and position in society and a path to discovering a self-perception of their loss of human dignity, a found recognition of their 'being broken' as human beings, not solely within the limited circle of their immediate community but in relation to both the State and civil society. This new consciousness, however, has a long history spanning many centuries.

Untouchability has deep roots in the history of South Asian countries, as the origin of some alternative religions to Hinduism demonstrates (Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism...), or the raising of various anti-caste reformist movements within Hinduism itself testifies. An indication that opposition to the caste system and to untouchability is nothing new.

The lengthy and torturous path from being an Untouchable to becoming a 'Dalit' has been paved with many significant moments, often considered by some as trivial and marginal, which nevertheless constitute the bones of history in the making. If we discard these 'traces' in search of humanity, we will not make proper sense of Dalit consciousness in the many scripts, life stories, autobiographies, poetry, music, labeled since the 1960s 'Dalit literature'⁴. These writings represent not solely Dalits' self-awareness as subjects of their own history, thus being conscious of poverty, oppression and humiliation, but also a contribution to Dalit political commitment, with a clear movement from self-pity to active responsibility in favour of the socio-economic, cultural, educational and religious demands made by Dalit communities. One particular group among Dalits worth mentioning at this point are Dalit women who, having challenged the double burden of oppression, firstly within their own groups as well as the oppression coming from the rest of society, have also been able to offer a critical, alternative approach to 'feminism' in a post-colonial setting.

THE GRAMSCIAN SUBALTERNES

In all his writing (pre-prison, prison letters and the *Quaderni - Q*), Gramsci makes extensive use of the terms 'subaltern/s', 'subalternity' and 'subaltern groups', following both their conventional but also metaphorical meaning (the latter at times in order to avoid prison censorship). Gramsci gives us a concise presentation of his theory in one of the 'special Notebooks', Q 25 (§1-8, 2279-94) entitled '*On the margins of History (History of the Subaltern Social Groups)*'. This is a development of some notes already present in Q 1, 3 and 9. Gramsci avoids giving any clear definition of these 'subaltern groups' because they cannot be lumped together under one single, homogenous entity. This is made clearer if we take into account that while Gramsci initially talks of 'subaltern classes', in the later notes

⁴ Dalit writings have been part of the Indian social narratives since the 11th century (e.g. Cekkilar's *Periya Puranam*) but the flourishing of Dalit literature making use of different Indian languages, such as Marathi, Hindi, Kannada, Telugu and Tamil, came into prominence during 1960s.

he prefers to use the expression 'subaltern groups', denoting the disgregation and disunity of these social groups, something Gramsci had already noted, when reflecting upon the themes of the *Southern Question* ['one great social disintegration', as he defined the South of Italy].

In a famous note from Q 25, §2, Gramsci remarks:

The history of the subaltern social groups is necessarily fragmented and episodic. It is undoubtedly the case that in the historical activity of these classes there is a tendency toward unification albeit in the provisional stages, but this tendency is continually broken up through the initiative of the dominant groups, and therefore can be demonstrated only at the termination of a historical cycle, if this cycle ends in success. The subaltern groups are subject to the initiative of the dominant groups, even when they rebel and are in revolt... Every trace of autonomous initiative is therefore of inestimable value for the integral historian; the consequence is thus such a history may be dealt with only by monographs and that every monograph requires a very large accumulation of materials often difficult to assemble (Q 25, §2, translation by Bellini et al., 2010: 15).

As a political leader and a strategist, Gramsci's preoccupation is to offer a solution to the 'fragmented and episodic' history of subaltern groups. In order to achieve a share of power, having established the weaknesses of the subalterns' lack of cohesion and, despite a tendency to unification, Gramsci invites us not to dismiss this 'spontaneity' but to direct it towards full consciousness (*consapevolezza*). As Buttigieg (2009: 827) reminds us, this unity of "spontaneity and conscious leadership" is, according to Gramsci "the real political action of the subaltern classes, in so far as it is mass politics and not mere adventure by groups that appeal to the masses." (Q 3, § 48, Buttigieg ed. 1996: 51).

It is at this juncture in which the spontaneity of the subalterns is taken into account and given a new consciousness and political direction, where Gramsci brings together different ideas, theories and actors, playing collectively in the arena of historical commitment. Here we can find a real confluence of many Gramscian themes and ideas, coming together: the intellectuals, common sense, culture, folklore, popular culture, hegemony, the role of education, the southern question, civil society, ideology, the ideological front etc. This flowing together of many related ideas and themes is not meant to provide a solid theoretical apparatus, almost a perennial system, but they do come together in a dialectical relationship, always renewing through the evidence offered by philosophical reflection and praxis.

Not only does Gramsci provide a methodology apt to interpret history ("Every trace of autonomous initiative is therefore of inestimable value ..."), but he invites the interpreter of history (the 'integral historian'), while learning from the past, to excavate deeply into the present, to consider reality as expressed in its ethical-political and economic-juridical

dimensions, so that the integral historian is able to get hold of the dynamic significance of reality. This is possible, because the integral historian directs his observation towards relations of power, becoming himself a point of force within this web of power. Moreover, the integral historian (i.e. the 'democratic philosopher') places himself and his point of view with that of the masses. The masses being interested in conducting the struggle for equality to the bitter end (to extreme consequences), help place the integral historian within the most dynamic point of view concerning reality. All in all, the notion of 'integral history/historian' maintains not only an element of completeness – (i.e. considering the nexus of various aspects of reality), but also a sought after 'partiality', in the sense that the integral historian is not solely an external observer of history, but takes sides within it, with a clear option in favour of the subalterns (Frosini, personal communication).

If we consider for a minute the expression "philosophy of praxis" at face value – not solely as a metaphor for 'communism/Marxism' – this contains in its totality the programme of the 'integral historian', who, as an intellectual, is ready to re-think an ideology able to challenge those ideological parameters which keep certain groups in a situation of subalternity ("The subaltern groups are subject to the initiative of the dominant groups, even when they rebel and are in revolt..."). This rethinking, however, does not happen at a purely theoretical level, but springs out of an experienced reality, out of history itself, within which the historian finds himself. Hence, his ability to change history, to challenge history and to motivate others to do so, from within, exactly because he takes 'praxis' very seriously ("Every trace of autonomous initiative is therefore of inestimable value..."). Philosophy, even as a theoretical reflection, starts with 'praxis', with everyday life, with life itself, and returns to it, in order to change it.

Gramsci laments the failure of both positivist and idealist (e.g. Croce) philosophers ('traditional philosophies') for being unable to establish this connection with the masses and the subalterns, thus failing to recover their 'spontaneity', their 'philosophy' ('vision of the world') and their 'common sense'. Only when this connection is established, can the limitations of 'common sense' be surmounted in order to transform it in 'good/critical common sense'. As we shall see, also in the case of the Dalits, we need to establish a connection between religion, common sense and philosophy, as Gramsci reminds us (Q 8, § 204), so as to explain the resilience of the Dalit movement throughout history, its failures and successes, and the opposition it has received from dominant groups.

We find an expanded view of Gramsci's broad methodology for studying subaltern groups in Q 25, § 5. Here Gramsci introduces the "historical unity of the leading classes" which is not 'purely juridical and political', but rests on "the organic relationships between State or political society and 'civil society'." For this very reason, he adds, "The subaltern classes by definition are not unified and cannot unify until they become a "State"; their history is therefore interwoven with civil society, it is a "disaggregated" and discontinuous function of the history of civil society and, by way of this, of the history of States and of groups of States." Furthermore, Gramsci offers his solution ("One must therefore

study...”): six phases⁵ as a path to be followed by the integral historian, specifying that these phases of study are not exhaustive but need to be integrated with intermediate phases and combinations of phases, to conclude that: “The [integral] historian must record, and discover the causes of, the line of development towards integral autonomy, starting from the most primitive phases...”

In my view, the history of different Untouchable groups in South Asia, comprising their journey from untouchability to becoming Dalits, offers an astonishing example of “the line of development towards integral autonomy” taking into account also the starting point “the most primitive phases.” These ‘primitive phases’ can be interpreted here as both the incipient untouchable-Dalit self-awareness, but also the lowest stage at which dominant groups, both within the State and civil society, have placed these subaltern groups. In the case of ‘Untouchables’ there is little doubt that their status in society has ranked them even beyond subalternity, to the point of being considered non-human: *‘Amra manus na’* (We are not human beings), with a condition which, reflecting social, political, economical, juridical and religious ostracism, reaches the point of ontological negation and humiliation: “the ontological hurt endured by untouchables” (Gheeta 2009, 107).

THE RELIGION OF SUBALTERN/DALITS

In order to illustrate the applicability of Gramscian views on subalterns to the situation of Dalits, I move now to give a short presentation of the undisputed leader of the Dalits, Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar.⁶ Incidentally, Ambedkar was born in the same year as Gramsci, 1891, and he died in 1956. He belonged to one of the major, highly respected, but Untouchable castes in Maharashtra, the Mahar caste.

After matriculation he attended college, aided by the Maharaja of Baroda, and obtained a BA in English and Persian in 1912. In 1913, again with a scholarship, he joined Columbia University. Here he worked with John Dewey, Edwin Seligman and A. Goldenwiser, obtaining a masters and a PhD. In 1916 Ambedkar is accepted into the London School of Economics (LSE), and the Grey’s Inn for the Bar-at-Law, but in 1917 he returns to India to serve in the Baroda State so as to fulfil the agreement to work for the State in return for his Scholarship. “... [T]he environment at Baroda ... became humiliating and hostile once people got to know he was an untouchable.” (Rodrigues 2002: 8). The very

⁵ the objective formation of the subaltern social groups, through the development and upheavals that take place in the world of economic production, their quantitative expansion and their origin in pre-existing social groups, whose mentality, ideology and goals for a certain length of time they continue to conserve; their active or passive adherence to the dominant political formations, the attempts to influence the programs of these formations in order to impose their own demands and the consequences that these attempts have in determining the processes of decomposition and renewal or of giving rise to a new formation; the birth of new parties of the dominant groups in order to maintain the consent of and control over the subaltern groups; the formation itself of the subaltern groups for demands of a restricted and partial nature; the new formations that assert the autonomy of the subaltern groups albeit within the old frameworks; the formations that assert integral autonomy etc. (Q 25, § 5, Bellieni et al. 2010: 16).

⁶ I am following here the excellent ‘Life-Sketch’ published in Rodrigues, V. Ed. 2002: 6-17.

obvious question is: if an Untouchable with the academic and professional preparation as Ambedkar's was treated in this way, what was happening to the thousands of Untouchables who had no such standing? Or perhaps, was he being penalised for 'knowing too much' and for challenging old interdictions? Either way, the experience of humiliation must have resulted in Ambedkar's for the rest of Ambedkar's life.

In 1920, Ambedkar returned to LSE, obtaining an M.Sc. in 1921 and a D. Sc. in 1923, studying under Edwin Cannon. Meanwhile, in 1922 he was invited back to the Bar-at-Law at Grey's Inn, and the following year, upon returning to India, began legal practice at the Bombay High Court. During this period, Ambedkar took on his social and political activity in favour of Untouchables, establishing hostels for educational purposes, fighting for access to water supplies, publishing journals and creating organisations which promoted social equality for 'depressed classes'.

All this culminated in December, 1927 in the *satyagraha* (non-violent resistance): "The *Manusmirti* was publically burned by Ambedkar and his followers ... to show that Untouchables were no longer prepared to abide the religious and ritual confinement upheld by caste Hindus." (Rodrigues 2002: 10). In the same year he took a prominent public role when appointed Member of the Legislative Assembly of Bombay Province, taking a leading role in defending the Depressed Classes.

Ambedkar was also inspirational for the Kala Ram Temple movement in 1930 when he prompted fellow Untouchables to challenge religious laws and enter a Hindu temple, in Nasik. He exhorted them with these words:

"It is not true that entry into Hindu temples will solve your whole problem. Our problem is very broad. It extends into the political, social, religious and economic spheres. Today's *satyagraha* is a challenge to the Hindu mind. From this true *satyagraha* we shall see whether Hindu society is ready to treat us as human beings."⁷

From this period onwards, and taking advantage of the experience gained, Ambedkar spent his energies defending the rights of Untouchables. By 1935 he realised that "the British administration in India was not sympathetic to the pleas of the 'Untouchables'..." (Rodrigues 2002: 11), Gandhi had no intention of making many concessions, and "that the upper castes were not prepared to bring about, or even concede to social and religious changes that embodied equality" (Rodrigues 2002: 11). This clearly mirrors the considerations concerning subaltern groups written by Gramsci during that very same period: "The subaltern groups are subject to the initiative of the dominant groups, even when they rebel and are in revolt..."

Nevertheless, Ambedkar's opposition to the caste system and Untouchability continued in many ways, in particular as representative of the Depressed Classes at the first

⁷ From the speech of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, 2 March 1930, at the Kalaram Mandir, in Nasik (Maharashtra), in the presence of 15,000 Dalits.

Round Table Conference in London (1930), standing in favour of a separate electorate for these classes and directly confronting Gandhi at the second Round Table Conference. When a separate electorate was granted to Untouchables through the Communal Award in 1932, Gandhi resorted to fasting and a compromise was reached with the Poona Pact.⁸ Ambedkar was uncompromising: "The communal award was intended to free the Untouchables from the thralldom of Hindus. The Poona Pact is designed to place them under the domination of the Hindus" (BAWS, vol.5, p. 355, quoted in Rodrigues 2002: 12).

Ambedkar's fight in favour of an amelioration for Untouchables was conducted on different fronts, mainly religious, political, legal and educational. Having realised by 1935 that 'Hinduism could not be reformed', he recommended at meetings and conferences that Untouchables should give up Hinduism, provoking much reaction. Although he postponed the issue of conversion until almost the end of his life "his later writings demonstrate that he did not forget the issue and took to an intense study of Hinduism and comparative religion for the next twenty years" (Rodrigues 2002: 12-13). However, his political and legal opposition to Caste and Untouchability was firmer than ever.

His deep understanding of the Muslims' demand for a separate state,⁹ led him to create the Scheduled Caste Federation (SCF), transforming it into a party. Although obtaining poor results at elections, given the electoral set up, he continued his political campaign indeed "he often loved to define politics as the 'art of the possible'." (Rodrigues 2002: 15). A series of writings during this troubled periods confirms his strong commitment: he wrote *Annihilation of Caste* (1936), *Mr. Gandhi and the Emancipation of Untouchables* (1943), *What the Congress and Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables?* (1945), *Who were the Shudras? How they came to be Fourth Varna in Indo-Aryan Society* (1946), *State and Minorities* (1947), *The Untouchables: Who were They and Why They became Untouchables?* (1948).

Apart from their scholarship, these works by Ambedkar clearly showed his intention to try wresting control over the Scheduled Castes from Gandhi and Brahminism, and reach out to the non-Braminical constituency (Rodrigues 2002: 15). The events of 1946 'marked a major shift in Ambedkar's attitude towards the Congress' (Ibid.) and in 1947 he joined the Nerhu Cabinet as Law Minister.

On 19 August 1947, he was made the chairman of the drafting committee of the Indian Constitution. Although Ambedkar later described himself as a hack, a large part of the Constitution was based on his conceptual framework... Apart from formulating the issues, it was remarkable how Ambedkar piloted the draft constitution in the Constituent Assembly, winning kudos from all quarters (Rodrigues 2002: 15).

⁸ See, *What Congress and Gandhi have done to Untouchables*, BAWS, vol. 9, pp. 307-11.

⁹ In 1940 Ambedkar wrote a study on *Pakistan or the Partition of India*.

After some political disappointments and disagreements regarding foreign policy, he resigned from the Cabinet in 1951. However, Ambedkar then managed to dedicate himself to the creation of many educational institutions for the uplifting of Untouchables. Finally, during the 1950s he found in Buddhism an alternative ideology to Hinduism. "He saw Buddhism as an ideology that engages with the world, privileging the poor and exploited. Ambedkar repeatedly asserted that Buddha had a social message." (Rodrigues 2002: 26). For this very reason, not only was his way of interpreting Buddhism considered different ('Ambedkar's Buddhism'),¹⁰ but he also conjoined a reflection of Marxism, as an inspiring political ideology: "Along with Buddhism the ideology that deeply attracted him in the 1950s was Marxism. In point of fact in November 1956, he made a trip to Nepal to attend the World Buddhist Conference where he spoke on Karl Marx and Buddha." (Rodrigues 2002: 17). A month earlier in October 1956, he had converted to Buddhism with several thousand of his followers from the Mahar caste.

GRAMSCI AND AMBEDKAR ON SUBALTERNES AND DALITS

Gramsci and Ambedkar were contemporaries - both born in 1891 - and although operating in different environments, the similarities of their strategy and political philosophy to empower subalterns/Dalits are indeed striking. Their activity as leaders, always combined with a solid theoretical reflection, springs out of their own and others' lived experience of subalternity. Both found inspiration in Marxism, both were critical towards religion, but considered religion relevant; both assessed the presence of subalterns through social, cultural and critical historical analysis, and sought to negotiate a rightful place within the state and society for these 'excluded.' For both, the solution was to come from the effort of the subalterns themselves, as subjects of their own destiny, to achieve "consciousness", aided by the role of leaders/intellectuals. Their 'holistic' approach enlightens the present-day "Dalit Question" as a challenge posited not simply to Dalits and concerned scholars, but to societies/states and to the international community. As early as 1920, at the First All India Conference of the Depressed Classes in Nagpur, Ambedkar "argued that the emancipation of the Depressed Classes was possible only through their own initiative." (Rodrigues 2002: 9).

Gramscian studies are now flourishing in Italy and elsewhere. Although "Ambedkar has never really been taken seriously as a thinker in India" (Omvedt 2006: 438), recent studies invite us to reflect on his fundamental intuition of the untouchable subject becoming a Dalit (Rao 2009; Guru ed. 2009; Omvedt 2003; Zelliott 2004).

My work among the ex-untouchable Rishi of Bangladesh motivated me to re-read Gramsci and to apply his thought to this milieu (Zene 2002, 2007). While remaining critical of the experiment of the *Subaltern Studies* collective for "domesticating Gramsci's

¹⁰ See also, Rodrigues, V. 1993. Making a Tradition Critical: Ambedkar's Reading of Buddhism, Peter Robb (ed.) *Dalit Movements and the Meaning of Labour in India*, Delhi, Oxford University Press, pp. 299-338.

revolutionary thought” (Ahmad 1993: 46), I nevertheless find their insight pertinent. In my view, the Gramscian concept of ‘subalternity’ clearly points towards the ‘ex-Untouchables’ as the epitome of the ‘subaltern’, and more precisely towards the Dalits’ self-consciousness (Zene 2011), most forcefully expressed in the experience of Dalit women (Rao ed. 2003; Rege 2003, 2006; Narayan 2006).

In the concluding remarks to a recent article of mine (2011: 102), while discussing the process from the awareness of oppression towards the mobilisation of Dalit consciousness, I refer to the Dalit historic leaders as instrumental in this development. In particular, I underline the vigilant role of Ambedkar as inspiring organiser, while prompting the Dalits to publically burn copies of the *Laws of Manu* (1927), and to defy the injunction not to enter Hindu temples (1930), thus challenging an age-long tradition concerning the religious and human discrimination of the Dalits from the rest of the community. Even at that very early stage of ‘civil disobedience’, Ambedkar was all too aware that the road to liberation and salvation (*mukti*) – political, social, religious and economic – would be a long and painful journey.

All these elements joined together - my direct involvement with Dalits in South Asia, the influence of Gramsci’s reflection on the subalterns and a closer approach to Ambedkar’s thought and action to the experience of the Dalits – prompted me not only to approach both Gramsci and Ambedkar in conjunction, but also to involve other colleagues to reflect together upon their political philosophy and lived experience of subalternity and Dalithood. With this in mind, I invited them to gather and share their ideas and findings so as to promote a debate among experts. In the concluding remarks I will return to describe this encounter in more detail. In what follows, I will discuss relevant thematic arguments – philosophy/religion, education, popular culture, translation – in an attempt to establish a meaningful comparative approach to Gramsci’s and Ambedkar’s theoretical concepts.

“Religion, common sense, philosophy. Finding connections among these three intellectual orders...”

(Gramsci, Notebook 8, § 204)

“Philosophy” for Gramsci is primarily ‘traditional philosophy’ and the way this has managed to achieve unity with ‘common sense’, given that “philosophy” is, from an integral and organic point of view, the accrual of ideological representations which, ordered together, constitute a given epoch, a historical period. For Gramsci, “Philosophy” = philosophy + common sense (in the same way as State = state + civil society). These traditional philosophies, though representing the avant-garde of common sense, have, according to Gramsci, established an unsuccessful relationship with common sense, thus explaining the bankruptcy of European civilisation. Upon this ‘failure’ Gramsci envisages the intervention of the “philosophy of praxis”, proposing an “organic solution”: a project of interaction not external and peripheral, but destined to revolutionise common sense from within, taking advantage of those forms of resistance which are present in common sense, even when

these forms are fragmentary and incoherent, as in the case of folklore and popular religion. Gramsci maintains that a moral and intellectual reform is needed in order to transform common sense into “good sense”, defined by Gramsci also as “new common sense” or “critical common sense.” The role of ‘intellectuals’, through making people think critically, transforms “common sense” into “critical common sense” so as to reach ‘*consapevolezza*’ (self-consciousness), thus moving from general philosophy to the philosophy of praxis. Given that the philosophy of praxis is itself a theoretical tool focused towards the attainment of political hegemony by the party, self-consciousness (*coscienza, consapevolezza*) cannot be confined to the sphere of inter-subjectivity (as for Croce and Gentile), but must be understood as a collective fact. Through communal self-consciousness (“*presadì consapevolezza*”), people acquire the ability to act collectively by means of achieving a common knowledge and a common ideological strategy borne out of the re-elaboration of the sporadic resistance present in folklore, popular religion and utopian movements.

The ‘philosophy of praxis’ - itself a ‘new religion’, necessarily immanentist and secular - is opposed to official religion and wishes to replace both religion and “common sense”. Gramsci’s initial reflection on the “traditional philosophies” (Croce and Gentile), leads him to emphasize the novelty of Marxism as a higher, “independent and original philosophy” (Frosini 2003). Moreover, when Gramsci envisages the ‘intellectual and moral reform’ positing the “question of philosophy as religion”, he underlines the political vitality of ‘religion’ which, when understood as in this case as ‘credence’ able to motivate action, becomes above all a ‘conception of the world’ (Frosini 2009: 40).

Ambedkar’s association with Marxism has been widely discussed (e.g. Kasbe 1985; Deshpande 1987), but his ‘ambiguities’ still remain at the centre of academic debate. Recently, Kinsey (2009) has argued that contemporary Buddhist revival in India would be better understood as “Marxist Buddhism.” A study of the connection between Gramsci and Marxism (Thomas 2009; Frosini 2009), but also between Ambedkar with Marxism will highlight the tensions with their respective states and societies (as for instance in the oppositional confrontation between Ambedkar and Gandhi concerning the caste system and Untouchability).

If we wish to formulate one working hypothesis which would motivate and inspire a possible encounter between the experiences of Gramsci and Ambedkar, I would suggest we take into account that just as Gramsci felt the need to overcome the reduction of Marxism to a “sociology of history” by Bukharin, so did Ambedkar need to find an “Indian philosophy” (namely Buddhism) which would allow him to implement, in terms of praxis, his political endeavours in favour of Dalits. While “vulgar materialism” (Bukharin) and the Marxism in India as experienced by Ambedkar left the subalterns and Dalits in “a state of ideological subalternity” (Dainotto 2009: 312), both Gramsci and Ambedkar sought, in different ways and with different means, to overcome this impasse.¹¹

¹¹ The novelty offered by our position is that, rather than postulating a ‘theoretical strength’ coming from the West, and a ‘subaltern experience’ available in the East, we propose an encounter of two different realities and experiences where both theory and praxis are present and meet across geographical and epistemic barriers.

Gramsci's distinction between "official" institutional religion, as historical formation able to exert hegemonic power, and the religion of the masses and subalterns – through which they express their 'common sense' – is relevant when compared to Ambedkar's view of religion, including his lifelong opposition to Brahmanism and his choice to convert to Buddhism. Ambedkar's conversion seems to respond to Gramsci's idea of a Marxism attentive to "people's spiritual needs", these intended not as a mystification but as "a combination of rationality, morality, and social consciousness, to take action out of reasoned volition" (Viswanathan 1998: 231). Indeed, "[F]or Ambedkar, the return to Buddhism was a project of political self-definition" (Rao 2009: 155). The "question of religion" in Gramsci, has occupied a relevant place in Gramscian studies during the recent past (e.g. La Rocca 1991, 1997; Portelli 1976; Díaz-Salazar 1991; Boothman 1995). This now needs to be readdressed but with an innovative slant if this is to be made relevant in comparative terms to a different milieu, such as South Asia. Equally relevant is the relationship of religion and communism in India (Menon 2002), in particular if we wish to establish a stronger connection with Ambedkar's thought on religion.

Thus, some of the questions to be addressed in this context are:

- Was Gramsci wrong in assuming that 'religion', as a lower form of the 'philosophy of the masses', was destined to disappear and to be replaced by the 'philosophy of praxis' through education and the advancement of a new 'modernity'? (Frosini 2009).
- Does Gramsci's proposal to promote an 'immanent religion of modern man' – through "intellectual and moral reformation" – have a future within postmodernity and the demise of all meta-narratives?
- Was Ambedkar right in postulating that 'religion' was to remain and would become necessary to Dalits as a viable tool for self-affirmation and emancipation? If so, was this the best way to overcome the religious tyranny of Brahmanism (i.e. to acquire freedom from religion via another religious discourse), without transforming the process into a 'war of religions'?
- Was Buddhism 'ready' to deliver the promised equality and freedom, or was this conversion - like conversion to other religions - unable to keep promises?

THE ROLE OF EDUCATION

The theme of education occupies a prominent place in all of Gramsci's writings, both as pedagogical concept and as lived experience derived from his role as journalist, factory-council organiser, party leader etc.. In opposition to Gentile (Fascist Minister of Education), who postulated an immutable, essentialist and ahistorical human nature, Gramsci proposes a philosophy of education which helps people to grow into mature and responsible adults, thus favouring the intellectual development of all and not of a chosen few (Q 11 and 12).

For this to happen, the role of organic intellectuals (and “integral historians”) in society becomes paramount. These topics have attracted the attention of several scholars (Peter Mayo ; Capitani and Villa 1999; Salmeri & Pignato 2008 – Meta 2009). In order to understand Gramsci’s writings on education one must not ignore “Gramsci’s two-pronged refutations of positivism and idealism, or his copious reflections on folklore, religion, language, journalism, popular literature, Americanism and Fordism, the role of the political party as educator in civil society, the state of Italian culture, the history of subaltern groups and the ‘Southern question’ ” (Buttigieg 2002: 69). In addition to this, the concept of hegemony is vital in order to appreciate the role of education in Gramsci since: “Every relationship of ‘hegemony’ is necessarily an educational relationship” (Q 10, II, § 44).

Gramsci’s “holistic approach” to education (Borg, Buttigieg, Mayo eds. 2002) will be pertinent to highlight Ambedkar’s views on education: “The backward classes have come to realise that after all education is the greatest material benefit for which they can fight. We may forego material benefits, ... but we cannot forego our right and opportunity to reap benefits of higher education to the fullest extent” (B. R. Ambedkar, BAWs, vol. 2, 62). A slogan on the front page of the weekly *L’Ordine Nuovo*, co-founded by Gramsci (1919), reads thus: “Educate yourselves because we’ll need all your intelligence. Rouse yourselves because we need all your enthusiasm. Organise yourselves because we need all your strength” (in Buttigieg 2002: 83). This is indeed remarkably close to Ambedkar’s slogan “Educate, Organise, Agitate!” Years later, Dalit students gave rise to the *namantar* (renaming) movement, “a demand for the right to be represented in the symbolism of the institution by renaming the university [Marathwada] after B. R. Ambedkar” (Rao 2009: 205-213). The violence endured by Dalits on that occasion goes deeper than class antagonism or symbolic politics. It is a matter of “understanding the relation between violence and politics, and between political violence and symbolic politics embedded in material and spatial practices” (Ibid.).

My hypothesis is that similarly to Gramsci who resisted, as a thinker and as a human being, the condition of remaining “trapped” in a Fascist jail – the very reason for his imprisonment, “to stop this brain from thinking”¹² - Ambedkar opposed the constraints of being “trapped” into caste and untouchability. Indeed, in the same way as Gramsci “succeeded in transforming the discomforts and forced illness of prison into a momentous contribution to twentieth century thought” (Francesca 2009: 2), Ambedkar’s consciousness of and activity to overcome untouchability succeeded in motivating many Dalits to find a reason within themselves to transform subalternity into counter-hegemony. One fruitful line of inquiry developed around the educational ideas of Paulo Freire and Gramsci (Mayo 1999) might well prove that the association between Gramsci and Ambedkar on this score is no less rewarding.

One possible line of inquiry here - after investigating the writings of Gramsci and

12 The Pubblico Ministero, Michele Isgrò, on June 2nd 1928, when delivering the prison sentence to Gramsci, said: “Dobbiamo impedire a questo cervello di funzionare per vent’anni.” [For twenty years we must prevent this brain from functioning].

Ambedkar on education, including relevant secondary sources – would be an empirical-theoretical research on the role of education among selected groups of Dalits in South Asia and the role/politics of present-day Dalit leaders and intellectuals in promoting education within their communities. This inquiry might help to address a more serious problem raised by Gopal Guru concerning the inequality of Social Science practice in India. Guru (2002) maintains that a split has been created within Social Sciences according to which some pundits, following past hierarchical thinking, detain the supremacy of dictating the higher status of theoretical work, while ‘others’ would be relegated to the menial task of ‘gathering date’, thus creating a “pernicious divide between theoretical Brahmins and empirical shudras.” Appealing to the authority of both Gramsci and Ambedkar, Guru contends that Dalits need to confront themselves with theoretical issues, since “poetry cannot be a substitute for theory”, and that “Dalits need theory as a social necessity.” (Guru 2002: 5006-7).

LANGUAGE/POPULAR CULTURE/FOLKLORE/NARRATIVE

Gramsci's former studies in philology gave him a sensitivity to problems concerning the nature of language (Derek Boothman 2004; Peter Ives 2004), and its relevance for different groups and classes. The ‘language’ of the subalterns, as for others, expresses their “conception of the world”, their culture, often communicated through the medium of “folklore” (“something very serious and to be taken seriously”, *Notebook 27*, § 1). In this respect, Gramsci characterizes “common sense” as the “folklore of philosophy”, linking it with concepts such as vision of the world, religion, good sense, conformism, tradition, morality, and ideology. While he does identify some negative elements with folklore (disregarded, picturesque, petty), he also sees a progressive function in it, brought about by the “organic intellectuals” who influence civil society thus promoting a “new common sense.” (cfr. Crehan 2002). These analytical tools would be of immense value when investigating the different layers of ‘language’ (economic, legal, religious, political etc) utilized by Ambedkar to achieve concrete results for Dalits, his mediating role in ‘translating’ the language of hegemonic power into the “common language” of the subalterns, and vice-versa. “Translation” and “translatability” (Boothman 2004) also figure prominently in Gramsci's writings, and respond to the need to safeguard differences and to give space to those voices which are muted by the coercion of hegemonic ‘monolingualism’. The “politics of language” (Ives 2004a), which shape social and cultural formations, are of utmost concern to the subalterns/Dalits in the quest to translate their ‘fragmented language’ (Green and Ives 2009) into political action for emancipation and recognition and the construction of subaltern subjectivities (Smith 2010). To be sure, particularly in the case of Dalits but also of other subaltern groups, the construction of subjectivities happens as a collective effort, given that subalternity can hardly, if ever, be surmounted at an individual level. The problem rather than being centred around the question of subalternity/subjectivity should focus on subalternity/collective-will, thus refusing, for instance, the separation of politics

and economics.

Notwithstanding the controversy surrounding Dalit life narratives for “bringing an undesired past into the present”, I agree with Rege that “they are one of the most direct and accessible ways in which the silence and misrepresentation of dalits has been countered” (2006: 13). There is a process of ‘translation’ in act here which goes far beyond the literary engagement of the feminist-scholar, to the point of questioning and challenging the politics and ethics of feminist standpoints themselves, in order to generate a different level of feminist commitment: “As a non-dalit woman, the process of translating the *testimonios* of dalit women has meant addressing my own ignorance about their histories, preferred social relations and utopias...” (ibid.: 387). In this sense, my own reading of the Dalit experience does not wish to superimpose Gramscian categories, but to translate those categories into ‘Dalit language’, so that my re-translation of their experience results in anything but a betrayal.

RECOVERING AMBEDKAR'S SIGNIFICANCE: 'TRANSLATABILITY' AND A GRAMSCIAN REREADING OF HISTORY.

In recent years, following the international congress on ‘Gramsci in the World’ at Formia in 1989, there has been a stream of initiatives around this theme, starting with John Cammett’s *International Gramscian Bibliography* (17,000 books and articles on or by Gramsci in 40 languages, now online) and the creation of the *International Gramscian Society*. In 2007, as part of the 70th anniversary of Gramsci’s death, various international conferences were organised. The congress in Rome on ‘Gramsci, cultures and the world’ (Schirru ed. 2009), was marked by a panel on “Gramsci in the Indian *Subaltern Studies*”, with an article by Guha giving some indications on how to make use of Gramsci’s “open writing” in India today, a topic widely discussed by Baratta (2009?). Both Capuzzo (2009) and Green (2009) highlight the limits of the *Subaltern Studies* project. I have addressed these shortcomings in my research (Zene 2011), including Spivak’s analysis of the ‘subaltern’ (1988). Many other publications also show the need felt to acknowledge the incidence of a ‘global Gramsci’. The tensions between new adaptations of Gramsci’s thought, especially to International Relations (IR) and International Political Economy (IPE), and the ‘faithfulness’ to his legacy promoted by Gramscian philologists is palpable in many scripts. Rather than trying to make sense of a neo-Gramscian or even a post-Gramscian stance (McNally & Schwarzmantel 2009), I propose to accept the challenge posited by our two political leaders thus enlightening our reflection on present-day subalternity. The “Southern Question”, be it geographical or metaphorical, still awaits an answer, new subalterns have populated Europe, untouchables are still present all over South Asia and Fascism can take many new forms and shapes (Ahmad 1993), including on the Italian scene (Landi 2008). All this prompts us to consider how, for Gramsci, “hegemony and civil society remit to unequal power relations” and that Gramsci “highlights the limits of modern democracy” (Buttigieg 1998: 55; see also Buttigieg 2005).

As part of this comparative effort, I proposed to reread Ambedkar's experience in the light of Gramsci's *Notebook 25*, "On the Margins of History (The History of Subaltern Social Groups)," not with the scope to validate Ambedkar's activity, but rather to probe Gramsci's methodology in a different milieu. My hypothesis is that, given Ambedkar's total dedication to the Dalit cause, he represents an outstanding example of the Gramscian 'integral historian', one who, despite the fact that Dalits' history is "necessarily fragmented and episodic" (*Notebook 3* § 14), is able to discover within history those "traces" that point towards self-awareness and emancipation (*Notebook 25* § 2). Like the Gramscian 'integral historian', Ambedkar is eager to retrace the concept of 'subalternity' as "... interwoven with his political, social, intellectual, literary, cultural, philosophical, religious, and economic analyses" (Green 2002: 3); like Gramsci, Ambedkar "wants to understand how the conditions and relations of the past influence the present and future development of the subaltern's lived experience" (Green 2002: 8).

CONCLUSION

In December 2010 I organised in London a workshop on "Gramsci and Ambedkar on Subalterns and Dalits". Its aim was to bring together, in not solely comparative terms, the political philosophies of Gramsci and Ambedkar, openly directed both at recognising the struggle of those excluded from civil society and at favouring their active participation. Notwithstanding inherent geographical and cultural differences, both Gramsci and Ambedkar were motivated by an intellectual passion and a political commitment to take sides with the subalterns: they learned from the subalterns' history and welcomed their efforts to be recognised as complete human persons. The commitment to achieve this was reflected in the five-part subheadings which highlight the main concerns developed in individual papers presented at the workshop. Thus, the theme of 'The Emergence of Subaltern/Dalit Subjectivity and Historical Agency', in which papers offered innovative ways to tackle a recurring topic in studies of subalternity, was followed by the analysis of a typical Gramscian theme, 'The Function of Intellectuals', which was duly examined by the participants and expanded in order to include the challenge of a different milieu, represented by the South Asian scene. The theme of 'Subalternity and Common Sense', though remaining a predominant reflection in Gramscian thought, offered the ideal opening to discuss 'Dalit Literature, Subalternity and Consciousness', in which the papers engaged with this novel terrain of Dalit emancipation, by listening to Dalit voices with serious, scholarly and ethical commitment. The concluding part, 'The Religion of the Subalterns/Dalits', offered a growing interest in both Gramscian and Ambedkarite studies, since the reflection on the religions of subaltern groups occupies a prominent place in their writings. This concluding part suggests a rejoinder with the first theme, not representing a closure, but rather including 'religion' as an effort towards the emergence of new, different subjectivities.

If, on the one hand, Gramsci opted for the overcoming of 'religion' as a mystifying element in the life of the masses, particularly of subalterns, on the other, he defended the 'right' of subalterns to have an 'inner life'. This is clearly illustrated by Gramsci's sarcasm when commenting on Alessandro Manzoni's "caste attitude" toward the "humble classes." "In the novel *The Betrothed* - Gramsci writes - there is not one common person who is not teased or laughed at . . . They are depicted as wretched and narrow people with no inner life. Only the nobles have an inner life" (Q 23 § 51). Gramsci cannot avoid noticing that the official interpretation of subalterns offered by Italian intellectuals does not merely rest on a narrow definition, but strikes at the very heart of their personhood as human beings, leaving them incapable of "an inner life." This was also the case, according to Gramsci, of other, more 'sensitive' intellectuals (such as Croce) who, while proposing a 'religion of freedom' for a select few, were unable to include the masses and the subaltern as part of this 'religion'. To overcome this failure and to include the subaltern in this new immanent religion, Gramsci proposes a 'moral and intellectual reformation', destined to transform the 'common sense' and religiosity of the subalterns.

This very tension is present in Ambedkar's judgement against Hinduism which also excluded the subalterns/Dalits, while imposing on them the heavy burden of ostracism: "A People and their Religion must be judged by social standards based on social ethics. No other standard would have any meaning if religion is held to be a necessary good for the well-being of the people (Ambedkar - *The Annihilation of Caste*)." The religion 'recovered' for the benefit of all by both Gramsci and Ambedkar is, in Durkhemian term a 'social fact' or perhaps even a 'total social fact', since while it concerns 'inner life' it is also motivating all other spheres of life, historical, economic, juridical, etc. and most of all life itself, with all its values, as testified by the words of Ignazio Silone, the writer of the novel *Fontamara*,¹³ dedicated to the resistance of subaltern peasants in southern Italy during Fascism:

"I do not conceive Socialist policy as tied to any particular theory, but to a faith. The more Socialist theories claim to be 'scientific' the more transitory they are; but Socialist values are permanent. The distinction between theories and values is not sufficiently recognized, but it is fundamental. On a group of theories one can found a school; but on a group of values one can found a culture, a civilization, a new way of living together among men" (Ignazio Silone, *The God That Failed*. 1965, pp. 101-102).

¹³ Commenting on *Fontamara*, Trotsky wrote: "Has this book been published in the Soviet Union? Has it come to the notice of the publishing houses of the Third International? This book deserves a circulation of many million copies. But whatever may be the attitude of the official bureaucracy towards those works which belong to the genuine revolutionary literature, *Fontamara* - we are certain - will find its way to the masses. It is the duty of every revolutionist to assist in circulating this book." (Leon Trotsky, *New International*, Vol.1 No.5, December 1934, p.159).

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