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Giancarlo de Vivo: Nella bufera del Novecento: Antonio Gramsci e Piero Sraffa tra lotta politica e teoria critica [In the Storm of the Twentieth Century. Antonio Gramsci and Piero Sraffa between Political Struggle and Critical Theory] (in English)

Abstract

This book review discusses the recent volume of Giancarlo de Vivo, which offers a documented reconstruction of the role of the economist Piero Sraffa as the link between the prisoner Gramsci and the Italian Communist Party leadership in exile. Sraffa is shown to have acted autonomously of the party when Gramsci's wishes, as expressed in two letters in particular to his sister-in-law, Tat'jana, were for caution to be adopted in regard to the leadership's positions. There is also an analysis and defence of Sraffa's position in regard to the controversial 1928 letter from a party leader abroad (Grieco), before Gramsci was sentenced, which the prisoner considered to have worsened his position. This seems not to be true, but what did worsen attempts to ameliorate his position was publication in translation in *L'Humanité* of Professor Aracangeli's medical report on him. The stances of Sraffa and Gramsci on questions regarding the nature of historical materialism and the philosophy of praxis are taken into consideration, as are the first steps taken by Sraffa in formulating his challenge to the dominant neo-classical school in economics, an opposition which found its greatest expression in Sraffa's 1960 volume, *Production of Commodities by Means of Commodities* (*Produzione di merci a mezzo di merci*).

Keywords

Relations Gramsci-Sraffa-PCI leadership; attempts to reduce sentence; letter from Grieco; philosophy of praxis; challenge to neo-classical economics

Gramsci e Sraffa tra lotta politica e teoria critica

Nerio Naldi

Giancarlo de Vivo's volume¹ contributes to reconstructing basic aspects of the biographies of Piero Sraffa and Antonio Gramsci and the events that bound them together during Gramsci's imprisonment. In this brief review we shall deal with four subject matters which the book goes into in depth in its two main chapters and their appendices.

The first of these is the reconstruction of the role of Sraffa as the link between Gramsci and the foreign centre of the Communist Party of Italy (PCd'I or PCI) during Gramsci's years in prison. In this context the contribution made by de Vivo's book allows us to confute certain undocumented claims which over the last few years have gone so far as to describe Sraffa as a functionary of the PCI or of the Comintern with a task of surveillance over Gramsci, as a person whom Gramsci did not trust, or even as Gramsci's gaoler rather than his friend. de Vivo singles out decisive elements which allow us to reconstruct Sraffa's line of conduct, characterized by absolute faithfulness to Gramsci, even when faced with the critical position that he – Gramsci – had assumed regarding the way that the PCI leaders had managed relations with him, the imprisoned head of the Party. In particular de Vivo's research allows us to conclude that Sraffa, as explicitly requested by Gramsci, did not transmit to the foreign centre of the PCI copies of two crucial letters that Gramsci addressed to his sister-in-law, Tat'jana Schucht, on 5 December 1932 and 27 February 1933, asking that they should remain reserved for her and for the *advocate* – namely Piero Sraffa.² (This request was contained only in the

¹ *Nella bufera del Novecento: Antonio Gramsci e Piero Sraffa tra lotta politica e teoria critica (In the Storm of the Twentieth Century. Antonio Gramsci and Piero Sraffa between Political Struggle and Critical Theory)*, Castelvecchi, Roma, 2017.

² In English in *Letters from Prison*, Vol. II, ed. Frank Rosenberg and trans. Raymond Rosenthal, pp. 236-9 and 274-8 respectively. Rosenberg and Rosenthal specify in an endnote to the letter of 13 February 1933 (p. 271) that in their translation the code word *avvocato*, rendered as “attorney”, is Piero Sraffa both there and thenceforward; and elsewhere in the *Prison Letters*, where not otherwise specified (e.g. as the “military attorney”), Sraffa is usually meant. [tr. note.]

27 February letter. The 5 December letter which, in all probability, Tat'jana transmitted to Sraffa only when they met in Rome between 8 and 11 January 1933, was initially held back, it may safely be said after assessment of its content, even if it did not contain an explicit indication in this sense; this indication did come from Gramsci in response to a request for clarification by Tat'jana during her prison visit to Gramsci on 19 January, and Sraffa was informed of this in Tat'jana's letter to him of 11 February.)

de Vivo reaches these conclusions by analysing the available documents of use for reconstructing how the original of Gramsci's letters and their copies were sent out of Italy and the ways and extent to which, in the years of fascism, these reached the foreign centre of the PCd'I and Togliatti; or then how, after 1945, they arrived in the hands of Togliatti and the leading cadres of the PCI who were successively involved in their publication. These constitute important elements which up to now have not received sufficient attention. To this same end, it is of great importance to have it documented that in 1974 Sraffa was still in possession of a good number of the copies of the letters, made by Tat'jana Schucht and sent by her regularly to Sraffa, that Gramsci had written to her in 1933. In particular, as well as the copies of the letters of 5 December 1932 and 27 February 1933, Sraffa also had in his possession the copies of the letters written by Gramsci from the end of April to mid-July and from the end of September to mid-November, while after 1933 Gramsci's letters were very few in number. He also had those letters that Tat'jana wrote to him, beginning with the ones of 19 January and 11 February 1933, in which she outlined to Sraffa the content of a number of the conversations she had had in prison with Gramsci and of requests that he himself made, that the PCI foreign centre should not be informed.

In addition to these observations we may add that the data collected by de Vivo allow us to state that, while having kept to himself the copies of the letters of 5 December 1932 and 27 February 1933, Sraffa then continued once more regular transmission to the PCI foreign centre the copies of others of Gramsci's letters, even if they might mention the contents of the two preceding ones (here one should bear in mind Gramsci's letter to Tat'jana of 6 March 1933). It therefore

seems that Sraffa intended to follow Gramsci's precise indications scrupulously. However in May 1933, i.e. immediately after the publication in *L'Humanité* of the medical report prepared by Prof. Arcangeli after he had examined Gramsci in prison, Sraffa interrupted transmission of the letters, in all probability doing so this time without any indication from Gramsci.

The publication in *L'Humanité* – we are unable to state with any certainty if and when Gramsci came to know of it – caused “a disaster” (to use Sraffa's words). It blocked the attempts that Sraffa had begun to obtain a substantial reduction of Gramsci's sentence, this being the substance of the legal action undertaken in March 1933 before the Special Tribunal by the advocate-attorney, Saverio Castellet. Sraffa's non-transmission of the copies of the letters of Gramsci that reached him after the publication of Professor Arcangeli's report may therefore be interpreted as a reaction to that publication.³

After this interruption, it may be inferred that Sraffa again began to transmit to the PCI foreign centre the copies of Gramsci's letters, handing over those of the period from the middle of July to the end of September 1933. These were the copies of letters that he had received from Tat'jana while he was in Italy on his summer vacation, and most probably Sraffa consigned them personally to the PCI foreign centre in France on his way back to England. Transmission of copies of the letters was again interrupted in the succeeding months, when Sraffa was in England, and again in December when he returned to Italy for his winter holidays, he did not hand them over. On this occasion too, we may associate the non-consignment to a “disaster”, once again using Sraffa's words: at the beginning of December Angelo Sraffa had informed his son Piero of the seizure, presumably in July or August, of a circular regarding the attitude to be adopted by imprisoned communists when faced with the possibility of requesting conditional liberty. This seizure blocked definitively the attempt that had been initiated through Castellet, and it is reasonable to suppose that Sraffa,

³ Arcangeli's report is cited almost in its entirety in English in Alastair Davidson's *Antonio Gramsci: Towards an Intellectual Biography*, London, Merlin Press, 1977 (reprint Amsterdam, Brill, 2017), p. 284. [tr. note.]

taking into account the fact that the foreign centre of the PCI, also, was aware that the fascist police had been able to infiltrate the structures of all the anti-fascist organizations, maintained that on such a delicate question channels of information should have been managed more prudently.

The second subject that de Vivo deals with is contained in the appendix to the first chapter, which, in essence, repropose the lines of his research, published in 2009, on the position taken by Sraffa on Ruggero Grieco's letter of February 1928, on Gramsci's interpretation of it, and on the initiatives that Tat'jana promised to undertake on her return to the USSR after Gramsci's death.

In the pages of this appendix, de Vivo gives the complete lie to the inferences of those who have claimed that Sraffa was playing a double game and who have described him as the feigned friend of Gramsci, pretending to share his theses and his worries but, after his death, being ready to reverse his position and put himself on the opposite side – the one on which Gramsci maintained obstacles had been placed to the first attempts to obtain his release.

de Vivo's lines of argument demolish the two mainstays of these inferences. The first is the claim that Sraffa expressed two contrary judgments on Grieco's letter: one in 1928 which was decidedly negative (defining it as "criminal") and another, more moderate, one in 1937 (defining it as an "imprudence"). The second mainstay is the claim that, at the end of the 1960s, in order to free himself from a weight on his conscience, Sraffa returned to his 1928 position, describing the letter as the cause of a "disaster".

On the first of these claims, de Vivo demonstrates that the 1928 judgment, which Tat'jana Schucht reported to Gramsci, could not have been expressed by Sraffa and that, in effect and inevitably, there is no evidence that he had so expressed it. On the second claim, de Vivo demonstrates that the two disasters to which Sraffa refers had no connection with Grieco's letter and, as already seen, are both to be dated to 1933.

The second part of de Vivo's book opens with a presentation of Sraffa through the lens of his intellectual relationships with two of the most important representatives of twentieth-century European culture, John Maynard Keynes and Ludwig Wittgenstein. There follows an illustration of the most significant stages of his intellectual, economic and political formation, and how these were intertwined with Gramsci's political activity through a succession of periods in which their meetings were either more, or less, frequent, up to the year of Gramsci's arrest in 1926. From here, de Vivo goes on to illustrate two equally interesting points: the positions on which Marxism and the dominant economic theory were based in the first decades of the last century and the way in which one fundamental aspect regarding the interpretation of Marxism was shared in common by both Sraffa and Gramsci. If the dividing line between Marxism and the dominant economic theory could be associated with a distinction between the theory of value and the theory of prices, indicating – as belonging to the former – subject matters that are different from the more direct explanation of the prices of single commodities and their variations (this being an approach that one can recognize in notes prepared by Sraffa in summer 1927), that distinction saw Marxism as substantially marginalized and excluded from the main core of economic theory and self-limited to the sphere of the study of the dynamics of the system and its laws of motion. And exactly in the context defined by the great themes of historical materialism (an expression that, in Gramsci's use of it, Sraffa would suggest considering as a synonym for Marxism) and of the Marxist reading of economic and social dynamics (as well, obviously, as in the subject matters of everyday politics), de Vivo singles out the horizon of the conversations and discussions, known to be both long and impassioned, that Gramsci and Sraffa engaged in between 1924 and 1926.

This context is defined by de Vivo by means of an extremely interesting reconstruction that allows us to approach Sraffa's view of the meaning of historical materialism. Although Sraffa wrote little on this, even after taking into account the unpublished manuscript material in his archive, precise indications regarding his non-deterministic vision may be found from a reading of the booklet,

Marxism To-Day, published by Maurice Dobb in 1932 and by succeeding interventions by Dobb himself in defence of his own position, which was subjected to very harsh attacks by the guardians of the Marxist orthodoxy that prevailed within the Communist Party of Great Britain. From these documents it turns out that Sraffa had discussed and contributed to the elaboration of Dobb's text and shared its content and the non-deterministic way in which the relationships between "ideal" and "material" events had been framed;⁴ these were subjects that are to be found in Gramsci's approach, and which link up with two manuscripts of Sraffa's dating to 1942, reproduced in the documentary appendix to de Vivo's book.

The volume ends in this same documentary appendix with the publication of some of Sraffa's writings dating from 1921 and 1927. One of these, the text of a lecture given by Sraffa in 1927 on the subject of the fascist corporative State, is unpublished, while the others are the three articles of his published in *L'Ordine Nuovo* in 1921. Before this appendix, however, de Vivo devotes a number of pages to the role played by Marx in the development of Sraffa's thought, or, more precisely, to the role that his reading of some of Marx's texts, in particular the *Storia delle dottrine economiche* [in English *Theories of Surplus Value*] and the study of the schemes of reproduction contained in the second book of *Capital*, may have had in defining the first steps that he took towards working out the sets of equations that constitute the central core of his 1960 volume *Production of Commodities by Means of Commodities*. There are various indications that lead us to think that Sraffa began working out these equations in England in the autumn of 1927 and, thus, at a time when it was not possible for him to have any exchange of ideas with Gramsci. We do however know that, before his arrest, Gramsci already possessed an edition of the French translation *Histoire des doctrines économiques*, published in 1924-25. It would not therefore seem strange, even if we have no information on this score, that Gramsci and Sraffa may have spoken of the content of this book. In actual fact however de Vivo's attention is not turned towards researching into a possible exchange of ideas on these themes between Gramsci and Sraffa, but to indicating a possible line of autonomous

⁴ See Maurice Dobb, *On Marxism To-Day*, London, The Hogarth Press, 1932, p. 14. [tr. note.]

development of Sraffa's thought stemming from his reading of the first chapters of the *Histoire des doctrines économiques* and of parts of the second book of *Capital*. This is a line of development that, in de Vivo's view, would have led him to conceiving his set of equations.

On this point, our opinions differ. My own point of view is that, while it is obvious to recognize that Marx was always a reference point of primary importance for Sraffa, this does not mean that the very first steps towards working out the set of equations that we then find in *Production of Commodities* were taken by following an inspiration originating in Marx. The way in which de Vivo reaches this conclusion regarding the origin of Sraffa's equations is based on the identification of a similarity between certain descriptions of the physiocratic approach contained in the *Histoire des doctrines économiques*, Marx's schemes of reproduction, and the first equations written down by Sraffa. However, beyond these similarities the manuscripts datable to autumn-winter 1927 conserved among the Sraffa Papers do not allow us to document in concrete terms a link between that hypothetical source of inspiration and Sraffa's original draft of his equations. A manuscript dated 26 November 1927, in which Sraffa claims that his work will lead to a reformulation of Marx's theories, is clearly successive to the draft of his first equations, which that same day he showed to Keynes. This statement of his does not therefore indicate a genealogy of the equations, but a programme of work stemming from them.

In actual fact, if no useful evidence for reconstructing the genealogy of Sraffa's equations may be recognized in the Sraffa Papers, in order to explain their origin one can do nothing other than have recourse to the clues put forward as similarities like those indicated by de Vivo. However some items of evidence are recognizable and direct us along a different path, in which Marx has a role, on a level with other classical economists, although only as part of an approach to the explanation of exchange values founded on objective parameters. On this basis, in a document prepared in the summer of 1927, Sraffa outlines the possibility of reducing the value of a commodity to the quantity of an "absolutely necessary commodity" which is directly and indirectly used in its production. But this way of posing the question,

which Sraffa explicitly applies in interpreting the thought of David Ricardo, was immediately recognized by him as analytically insufficient. It could lead to a precise and analytically justified result only in the particular case of a community that produces solely what is just sufficient for reproducing itself. However negative this conclusion may be, in our view it is from here that there stems the attention paid by Sraffa to the case of an economic system in conditions of simple subsistence. And this is the specific evidence, found in the Sraffa Papers which brings us most closely into contact with the first set of equations written by Sraffa, a set of simultaneous equations which describe§ the material conditions of the reproduction of a community whose net product is expressed in physical terms and is equal to zero. This set may therefore have been written by Sraffa as the first step towards calculating the quantity of an “absolutely necessary commodity” directly and indirectly employed in the production of any commodity whatever. But in writing this set, one may argue that it appeared obvious to Sraffa that there was the possibility of determining exchange ratios through its resolution and for that reason he immediately abandoned the attempts to reduce the value of any other commodity to an “absolutely necessary commodity”. The new perspective that unexpectedly opened up before him induced him to extend that set of simultaneous equations to the case of an economy that produces a positive net product – and this is what we find in the manuscripts contained in the Sraffa Papers. At the same time, Sraffa could see how these sets of equations assumed characteristics typical of the physiocratic approach (namely the representation of the production process in physical terms and as a circular process), which had fallen into neglect and to which even Marx had referred only in some isolated passage in his *Theories of Surplus Value*.