

International Gramsci Journal

Volume 3
Issue 3 *Gramscian Concepts in (Inter)National
Situations / Pedagogical Questions and
Question of Translatability / Reviews*

Article 9

2019

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Recommended Citation

Sorgonà, Gregorio, “Gramsci and the critique of political economy” by Giuliano Guzzone
(English), *International Gramsci Journal*, 3(3), 2019, 81-84.

Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/gramsci/vol3/iss3/9>

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“Gramsci and the critique of political economy” by Giuliano Guzzone (English)

Abstract

This is a review in English by Gregorio Sorgonà of Giuliano Guzzone’s volume *Gramsci e la critica dell’economia politica. Dal dibattito sul liberismo al paradigma della “traducibilità”* (Roma: Viella, 2017)

Keywords

Gramsci, critique, political economy, international conflict, interwar capitalism, laissez-faire liberalism, translatability

“Gramsci and the critique of political economy”

Gregorio Sorgonà

Giuliano Guzzone's volume *Gramsci e la critica dell'economia politica. Dal dibattito sul liberismo al paradigma della “traducibilità” (Gramsci and the Critique of Political Economy. From the Debate on Free-Trade Liberalism to the Paradigm of “Translatability”)*¹ reconstructs the genealogy and profile of Gramsci's economic culture from his early writings to the prison writings. In tracing this itinerary, further ways emerge for understanding how Gramsci treated a number of the main political phenomena of his time, from fascism to the attempts to build a socialist economy in the Soviet Union. The several modes of interpretation may be brought back to a framework which, starting from a philosophical approach, then intersects with other disciplines. This conceptual framework into which the argument of the book is inserted may be put into the context of the line of studies that appraises Gramsci's historicist approach and, by way of this, his attempt to reformulate Marxism through a critique of deterministic materialism. The definition of the *philosophy of praxis* is therefore a reference point in the development of Guzzone's argumentation, which tries to link the genesis and the maturation of a more detailed economic thought than the one which characterized the period before his imprisonment.

Guzzone starts from the premise that in the young Gramsci economics had an existence *sui generis*: being rigidly determined by political will and by historical conditions, it did not for him have a disciplinary status. At this stage of his biography, as compared with historical judgment, economic discourse fulfilled a service role; it contributed for example to an interpretation of the relations of class in Italy and its national bourgeoisie in the light of the backwardness of the former and the narrow-mindedness of the latter. The economy was essentially “a place for the manifestation of power and strength” (p. 51) and its subordination to political will is accentuated in the early writings after the October Revolution, in polemic with the conception of stages, characteristic of the history

¹ Rome, Viella, 2018, pp. 305.

of reformist socialism, for which there could be no correspondence between a condition of economic backwardness and one of revolutionary acceleration. In the years that separated the Russian Revolution from the birth of the Communist Party of Italy this attitude became strengthened and the economy became as aspect of the international conflict between post-First World War capitalism and the break-down of its order on a world scale. The complement to this conception of politics is a fatalist definition of capitalism, destined for sure catastrophe. These are well-known characteristics of the economic culture of Italian communism at its origins, which Gramsci managed to overcome by reflecting on the capacities of capitalism for self-preservation, in particular the ones that emerged after the crisis of 1929. Guzzone singles out in the prison years the break from which there originated a new treatment in the passage, as he writes, “from the period of convulsive and haphazard readings to the stage of the elaboration of a precise ‘intellectual plan’” (p. 109), in other words one of an analytic economic discourse whose genesis is dealt with by the author in an epistemological and historical fashion.

The reflection on economics is accompanied by a reflection on the status of science. Guzzone notes that Gramsci passes from not attributing a scientific value to economics, resolving “the cognitive contribution of science into the sole practical and material relationship between man and nature” (p. 131), to a different definition of economics, located between science and ideology. The procedures which this discipline observes may be reiterated, as in the case of the natural sciences, but they remain historically determinate, and therefore dependent on the conditions whose dynamic transformation cannot be compared to the almost-fixed character of the data of natural science. For this reason, economic laws take on for Gramsci a tendential and not absolute form, even when the market set-up has been changed from a capitalist to a socialist one. The polemic directed against the objectivity of economic laws would appear to strike two contrary objectives: on the one hand determinist Marxism and, on the other, liberal culture, both of them alike in sharing an ahistorical conception of the relations of production.

The recognition of the epistemological status of economics, which is concluded in the last chapter, devoted to the inferential

relations between Gramsci and Italian pragmatism, is interwoven in the text with what may properly be defined as a historical level of analysis. This latter appreciates the nexus between the perfecting of the economic discourse and the revision of the judgment on the bourgeois reaction to the end of the liberal State. In terms of periodizations, for Gramsci the event that determined the new post-liberal set-up was the First World War, not the 1929 crisis. The matrix of history therefore remains a political, not an economic, one. What changes is not the primacy of politics, which if anything comes out strengthened, but rather the analysis of the crisis of capitalism; this is understood no longer as catastrophe, but is considered in its cyclical nature. The capacities of the capitalist market to transform itself through State intervention therefore finds appreciation, the choice of whose causes may be isolated both within the internal crisis of the liberal system and in the competitive challenge launched by the birth of the USSR.

The crisis of the revolutionary movement and the coming to power of fascism in Italy are constitutive parts of this reflection on the economy. In the 1926 Lyon Theses of the PCI, where one sees a significant distancing from the “catastrophe paradigm”, the possibility of the revolutionary crisis remains immanent within fascism, but the paradigm indicates a new mode of organizing the bourgeoisie and in consequence “political and ideological elements impose themselves on the [...] attention [of Gramsci], which – according to the degree of development – are able to slow down” the decline of capitalism (p. 100). The government of the economy, as well as that of the masses, is a way of reading the history of fascism and its corporative ideology. While isolating the Gramsci’s oscillations on the subject, Guzzone therefore lends support to the interpretation that the Italian regime was one of the forms of passive revolution between the two wars, meaning by this concept the process of conserving bourgeois hegemony, a process realized through the introduction of elements of planning previously considered unthinkable. The passive revolution changes the form of the determinate capitalist market which had lain at the origins of classical economy. The text deals with this outcome by highlighting Gramsci’s interest in the non-Marxist critics of this disciplinary framework. His argument finds its resolution in a critique also of Soviet planning and Marxism, given the lack of adequate analytical

instruments to correspond to a new determinate and socialist-oriented market, since the ones available had stopped at an economic-corporative phase and at a deterministic conception of economics.

A number of the distinctive elements of Gramsci's economic discourse would return in the economic culture of the communists when Italy became a Republic, a sectoral aspect of the political culture of Italian communism. Within this latter, conceptions of capitalism as an exclusively coercive system, and therefore incapable of self-reform, existed together with non-deterministic approaches. Gramsci was a more or less explicit reference point for the latter way of posing the question, in which we find some of the ciphers of his thought that emerge in Guzzone's volume. These include, for example, the tendential nature of economic laws, the importance attributed to the currency as an instrument of competition and conflict on the international market, a dynamic conception of imperialism, and a system capable of exerting economic, and not merely military, hegemony. From the point of view of the interdisciplinary dialogue used by the author, this study is therefore to be regarded a useful reference for investigating in more detail the political culture of Italian communism and the theorizations of the crisis of capitalism which have come to ripeness from the second post-war period onwards. This, it should be noted, is fundamental as a subject, but has only scarcely been investigated by historiography, and often liquidated with no further consideration as the expression of a catastrophist *forma mentis*.