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Dizionario gramsciano / Gramscian Dictionary: Philology

Abstract

This is a translation into English of the Dizionario gramsciano entry "Philology" by Ludovico De Lutiis. Philology, the "methodological expression of the importance of particular facts", underlies Gramsci's writings in the Notebooks and lies at the centre of various reflections; it is indispensable for reconstructing an author's thought and, indeed, the past. Gramsci drew inspiration for his own anti-positivist approach, contrasted to that of Bukharin, in part from Ernst Bernheim's outline of historical method. Reading a text or situation, and knowing how not to read too much into it (a refusal to "importune" [sollecitare] the text), is essential to objective, dispassionate understanding. In these terms the interpretation of the present is "living philology", where "human nature is the totality of historically determined social relations". This "philology of history and politics" form part of Gramsci's critique of determinist Marxism. Through the interpretation of a situation by a "collective organism", i.e. through "living philology", the essential link is formed "between great mass, party and leading group" in order to "move together as 'collective-man'".

Keywords

Philology, living philology, historical method, anti-determinism

Philology (Filologia): Gramsci Dictionary

Ludovico De Lutiis

Gramsci names philology as the subject of his university studies only on very rare occasions, always in his *Prison Letters* and always *en passant*. The lemma often however acquires a value in other types of conceptual contexts and in the *Notebooks* the philological method is at the centre of various reflections. The starting point for these reflections is often Gramsci's hostility to those who "importune the texts", which for him means that

out of zealous attachment to a thesis one makes texts say more than they really do. This error of philological method occurs also outside of philology in studies and analyses of all aspects of life. In terms of criminal law, it is analogous to selling goods at lesser weight and of different quality than had been agreed upon, but it is not considered a crime unless the will to deceive is glaringly obvious. But don't negligence and incompetence deserve to be sanctioned – if not a judicial sanction, at least an intellectual and moral sanction.¹

These considerations may be compared with others found in the *Notebooks* and *Prison Letters*: "there is no doubt that one can find whatever one wants in the past by manipulating points of view and the system of yardsticks and values" (Q3§62, pp. 341-2; *PN* Vol. 2, p. 61); "I believe that inspiration should be dropped into a 'ditch' and instead one should apply the method taught by the most particularized experience and the most dispassionate or objective self-criticism".² Philology is then for Gramsci an indispensable tool for defending the objectivity of the reconstruction of the past and, especially, of the thought of an author; it must be accompanied by a

¹ "Sollecitare i testi": cf. Q6§198, p. 838 of the Gerratana critical edition of the *Quaderni del carcere*, Torino: Einaudi, 1975 (henceforward notebook and paragraph number and, in one case, subsection of the paragraph, followed by the page number, are cited in the text); in English this paragraph is "Importuning the texts", *Prison Notebooks* (henceforward *PN*, followed by volume and page number in the text), ed. and trans. J. A. Buttigieg, New York, Columbia University Press, 1992, 1996 and 2007: here Vol. 3 (2007), p. 141.

² Critical edition of the *Lettere dal carcere*, ed. F. Giasi, with appendices by M.L. Righi: Torino, Einaudi 2020, p. 122. Gramsci's letter is dated 4 July 1927, and addressed to Giuseppe Bert: see in English *Letters from Prison*, ed. F. Rosengarten and trans. R. Rosenthal, New York, Columbia University Press, 1994, Vol. 1, p. 119.

series of technical capacities that contribute to the use of a method that permits one (or at least attempts to permit one) to have the texts express exclusively what is contained in them. Many of these judgmental capacities are the object of reflection regarding the reconstruction of Marx's thought that Gramsci set as an aim; such would be the fruit "of detailed work [...] conducted with the most scrupulous accuracy and scientific honesty" (Q4§1, p. 419; *PN* Vol. 2 [1996], p. 137).³ A number amongst the various points listed are of a characteristically philological nature:

One should also study and analyze the work of elaboration that the author performed on the material of the works he subsequently published; at the very least, such a study would provide clues for the critical evaluation of the reliability of the versions if the unpublished works edited by others. The further removed the preparatory material for the published works is from the definitive text composed by the author himself, the less reliable is the version of that kind of material edited by a different person (Q4§1, p. 420; *PN* Vol. 2, p. 138).⁴

As well as fostering the philological method and historiographical impartiality in the study of the past, in Gramsci the concept of philology plays a significant role in the definition of "living philology". The two spheres are, moreover, connected and an important *trait d'union* is provided by the background to each of Gramsci's reflections on the theory of history, the historicization of the concept of "human nature":

The basic innovation introduced by the philosophy of praxis into the science of politics and of history is the demonstration that there is no abstract 'human nature', fixed and immutable [...] but that human nature is the totality of historically determined social relations, hence an historical fact which can, within certain limits, be ascertained with the methods of philology and criticism (Q13§20, pp. 1598-9; *SPN*, p. 133).

It is through this lens that we have to read the polemic with Croce's interpretation of the concept of "structure", conceived of

³ In the rewritten text (Q16§2, pp. 1840-1) Gramsci indeed adds the word "philological" before "detailed" ("minuzioso"), not present in the first draft text, here quoted from Q4.

⁴ The rewritten text of Q16§2 is structurally rearranged somewhat as compared with the first draft text and qualifies "study and analyse" with "minute" ("minutamente"), while "posthumous" replaces "unpublished" (cf. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* [henceforward *SPN*] ed. and trans. Q. Hoare and G. Nowell-Smith, London: Lawrence and Wishart 1971, pp. 384-5).

speculatively, so much so that Croce speaks of a “hidden God”, but this concept must, rather, be conceived of historically as an

ensemble of objective conditions which can and must be studied with the methods of ‘philology’ and not of ‘speculation’. It must be studied as something ‘certain’ that may also be ‘true’ but it must be studied first of all in its ‘certainty’ in order for it to be studied as ‘truth’ (Q10I§8, p. 1226).⁵

Gramsci realized the need for work on Marxism that took its inspiration from the approach to the historical method adopted by Ernst Bernheim in his volume on historiography and the theory of history.⁶ The work envisaged could take the form of a “a collection of immediate criteria, of critical precautions, etc., a philology of history and politics as they are conceived by the philosophy of praxis” (Q16§3, p. 1845; *SPN* p. 415). This undertaking would be, to a certain extent, a critique of Bukharin and of his partly positivistic Marxism. The juxtaposition between statistics and philology is inserted in the same conceptual context, which leads Gramsci to his reflection on “living philology”; regarding this juxtaposition we may note however a non-negligible divarication between what is written in November 1930 and in July-August 1932. In 1930 there seems to be a an anti-empiricist component present:

‘Philology’ is the methodological expression of the importance of particular facts understood as definite and specific ‘individualities’. This method is challenged by another one, namely the method of ‘large numbers’ or ‘statistics’, which is borrowed from the natural sciences, or at least from some of them. But not enough attention has been paid to the fact that the law of ‘large numbers’ can be applied to history and politics only as long as the great masses of the population remain passive or are assumed to remain passive [...] (Q7§6, p. 856; *PN* Vol. 3 [2007], p. 159).⁷

In 1932 however Gramsci would write:

⁵ In English in *Further Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (henceforward *FSPN*), ed. and trans. D. Boothman, London: Lawrence and Wishart 1995, p. 347.

⁶ E. Bernheim, *Lehrbuch der Historischen Methode*, 6th edition (1908 [1889¹]), Leipzig: Duncker und Humblot.

⁷ A minor point to note is that the lines quoted here restore the inverted commas that in one case are by oversight omitted in the printed version of Joseph Buttigieg’s translation.

If philology is the methodological expression of the importance of ascertaining and precisising particular facts in their unique and unrepeatable individuality, one cannot however exclude the practical utility of isolating certain more general 'laws of tendency' corresponding in the political field to the laws of statistics or to the law of large numbers which have helped to advance various of the natural sciences (Q11§25, p. 1429; *SPN*, p. 428).

This opening to the 'laws of tendency' is consistent with the elaboration of a theory of history alternative to positivism, that is to the identity between the natural and social sciences, as much as to idealism, that is to the Crocean idea that historical prediction is a non-sense and has the same epistemological status as gambling. It is not by chance that, again in 1932, Gramsci defended Ludovico Limentani from the accusations levelled at him by Croce, who had liquidated Limentani's volume *La previsione dei fatti storici* (*The Prediction of Historical Facts*) in just a few lines. Gramsci's comment [on Croce's view regarding predictions of the future: *trans. note*] was: "one has the impression that Croce's reasoning is rather that of a literary academic and of one whose phrases are chosen for their effect" (Q10II§41VI, p. 1311; *FSPN*, p. 428).

Inserted into the articulated theory of history and politics present in the *Notebooks*, there is therefore the concept of "living philology", which is presented as a key concept in the process of reciprocal influence between the mass of the people and political leaders, a concept supported by the idea of a substitution of a collective organism for the leadership of single political representatives. Living philology is a difficult concept to fit into one given framework, since it involves different spheres of reflection and very diversified theoretical notions: it does not constitute the simple transfer of philology (that is the methodological expression of the importance of particular facts understood as "individualities", defined and rendered precise) into the context of political action, but it also calls into the arena a broad vision of history and of human beings:

With the extension of mass parties and their organic coalescence with the intimate (economic-productive) life of the masses themselves, the process whereby popular feeling is standardized ceases to be mechanical and casual (that is produced by the conditioning of environmental factors and the like) and becomes conscious and critical. Knowledge and a judgment of the importance of this feeling on the part of the leaders is no longer the product of

hunches backed up by the identification of statistical laws, which leaders then translate into ideas and words-as-force. (This is the rational and intellectual way and is all too often fallacious.) Rather it is acquired by the collective organism through ‘active and conscious co-participation’, through ‘com-passionality’,⁸ through experience of immediate particulars, through a system which one could call ‘living philology’. In this way a close link is formed between great mass, party and leading group; and the whole complex, thus articulated, can move together as ‘collective-man’ (Q13§25, p. 1430; *SPN*, p. 429).

⁸ The hyphenated form is present in Gramsci’s original, drawing attention to the etymological roots of “compassion”: