

# International Gramsci Journal

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Volume 4  
Issue 2 *PHILOSOPHY; EDUCATION;  
SUBALTERNS; COMMON SENSE / REVIEWS*

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Article 5

2021

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### Recommended Citation

Cingari, Salvatore, The term “populism” in Gramsci’s Prison Notebooks, *International Gramsci Journal*, 4(2), 2021, 25-42.

Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/gramsci/vol4/iss2/5>

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## The term “populism” in Gramsci’s Prison Notebooks

### Abstract

The article opens by underlining that Laclau’s juxtaposition of Gramsci and populism is in part analogous to the operation carried out some decades ago by Alberto Asor Rosa and Rosario Romeo, although their evaluation was contrary to that of Laclau. We then attempt to demonstrate the limits of these interpretations, through a reconstruction of the national-popular theme in Gramsci: the correct interpretation of this category goes back not to the romantic imaginary of the Volkstum but to a development linked to the most enlightened circles of Russian culture. The national-popular thus alludes to a historically and nationally determined dimension, albeit one capable of universalization. This is confirmation of the non-“populist” nature of Gramsci’s argument. In his view, folklore has to be not idealized, but studied seriously, with the aim of superseding it in a paradigm that fuses together spontaneity and leadership, popular and high culture. As corroboration of this thesis we look at the ways in which the word “populism” is actually used in the Notebooks. The conclusion is that Gramsci, following Lenin’s example, referred “populism” to politico-cultural and literary phenomenologies unable to emancipate the people while, at the same time, he argued that it was necessary to understand and develop in a truly democratic perspective the social needs that populism expresses. This thesis is of great current relevance for those who believe that the social necessities lying behind the current “populist moment” must be understood in order to develop a higher “popular” perspective.

### Keywords

People, class, populism, Volkstum, narodniki, national-popular

# *The term “populism” in Gramsci’s Prison Notebooks*

Salvatore Cingari

## *1. Introduction*

Populism is quite evidently a theme of the utmost topicality.<sup>1</sup> To investigate the real use of this term in Gramsci will prove useful to the contemporary theoretical-political debate, within the framework of its new actualization in the field of the radical left attempted by Laclau. It is noteworthy that Laclau’s interest in Gramsci originates from the opposite motive to that which, more than fifty years ago, prompted a young Asor Rosa to refute the legacy of communist leader in *Scrittori e popolo*, that is, the de-substantialization of the concept of “class” and an evaluation of the category of “people” not strictly identified with that of working class. Laclau is interested in *hegemony* as overcoming of idea of class. However, I am not going to discuss his use of Gramscian categories here.<sup>2</sup> But it is worthwhile to stress that, while for the Laclau<sup>3</sup> of *On Populist Reason* the term “populism” is superimposed on the very idea of “the political” – to be taken as the space in which a “people” is built

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<sup>1</sup> On this see D. Palano, *In nome del popolo sovrano? Il populismo nelle postdemocrazie contemporanee*, S. Cingari and A. Simoncini (eds), *Lessico postdemocratico*, Perugia, Perugia Stranieri University Press 2016, pp. 157-86.

<sup>2</sup> E. Laclau, *La razón populista*, Buenos Aires, Fondo de cultura economica 2005 (English translation; *On Populist Reason*, London, Verso 2005). I will confine myself to register what Geminello Preterossi has stressed as regards the fact that there was in Gramsci’s concept of “hegemony” much more “substance”, not in essentialist terms but in economic, social and cultural terms, than in Laclau’s linguistic-libidinal interpretation. This was what made Preterossi state: “Gramscian hegemony was not ‘populist’”. See G. Preterossi, *Ciò che resta della democrazia*, Roma-Bari, Laterza 2015, pp. 136-7.

<sup>3</sup> In *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (London, Verso Books 1985), there was a distinction between “radical democracy” and “popular” politics: cf. E. Laclau and C. Mouffe, *Egemonia e strategia socialista* (1985), Genova, Il Melangolo, 2011 (for example, pp. 66-7, 87, 119-120, 127, 133, 210-13, 217; in the English translation, see pp. 22, 35, 63-4, 69, 72-3, 131-4, 137). The two authors distinguished a “right wing populism” from “radical democracy”, accepting Stuart Hall’s theses on Thatcherite populism, blending traditional values and freedom of enterprise in a new liberal-conservative hegemony (*Egemonia e strategia socialista*, pp. 252 and 254-5; *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, pp. 168 and 169-170). On this use of Gramscian categories see D. Boothman, “Introduzione”, in D. Boothman, F. Giasi, G. Vacca (a cura di), *Gramsci in Gran Bretagna*, Bologna, Il Mulino 2015, pp. 22-6 and Stuart Hall, *Popular-Democratic vs. Authoritarian Populism* in *Marxism and Democracy* (ed. A. Hunt), London, Lawrence and Wishart 1980, pp. 157-85; in Italian, *La politica del thatcherismo: il populismo autoritario, ivi*, pp.107-37.

against an “internal” enemy, by triggering a conflict that escapes the differentiating forms of the institutional wielding of power – in Gramsci “populism” means something totally different. Its connotation is Marxist-Leninist (which was then absorbed after the Second World War into the liberal-democratic lexicon): that is, a political ideology which praises the virtues of “the people”, without providing the instruments of a real emancipation. The historical example from which the word originates are the Russian populists. What is interesting, though, is that, in the *Notebooks*, Gramsci uses the term also to mean something closer to a contemporary usage, that is, to refer political-cultural movements, which are properly bourgeois, and even conservative, that focus on the “the people”.

It may be noted that, while in the pre-prison writings<sup>4</sup> Gramsci seems to use the term according to a Bolshevik and Leninist interpretation,<sup>5</sup> in the *Prison Notebooks* themselves he pays attention to populist sensitivity in areas which differ from those of the leftist movements. Gramsci does not subject the phenomenon to a denunciation but is interested in its deep social core, to be developed into a genuinely “popular” politics. In this light, the authentic lesson that Gramsci’s writings offer us seems to detach itself at the same time from a certain contemporary use of the term “populism”, intended as a hallmark of positions that are critical of inequalities, and from the tendency of progressive or liberal socio-cultural communities to liquidate the popular success of populist leaderships, even reactionary ones, as purely “pathological” phenomena.

However, it is necessary first to focus on the question of “populism” of which Gramsci was charged in the past (cf. Asor Rosa, above) and on the category of the national-popular.

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<sup>4</sup> It is thanks to Michele Filippini, who was in charge of digitalizing Gramsci’s pre-prison writings, that we are able to identify the few occurrences of the term: A.Gramsci, *Fuori del dilemma*, in “Avanti!”, 29 Novembre 1919; id. *Operai e contadini*, in “Avanti!”, 20 Febbraio 1920; id. *Nel paese di Pulcinella*, in “Avanti!”, 20 Ottobre 1920; Id., *Vladimiro Ilic Ulianov*, “L’Ordine nuovo”, Marzo 1924, pp. 2-4; Id., *Il partito repubblicano. II*, “l’Unità”, 22 ottobre 1926.

<sup>5</sup> On Lenin’s critique of populism, see in English: Lenin, 1893, 1894 and 1894-5, and also Lenin 1899 (for these references in Italian and English, see the attached Bibliography of Lenin’s works quoted in this contribution.) Lenin considered populism a utopian and subjective movement, driven by petit-bourgeois tendencies, and incapable of formulating a realistic analysis of capitalism, while being inclined, on the one hand to idealize the obščina and other forms of traditional agricultural property without realizing its pre-capitalistic and unequal potential, and on the other to misunderstand the progressive character of capitalism itself as compared to pre-modern forms of dependence.

## 2. *The Question of Populism in Gramsci and the National-Popular*

First, it is crucial to clarify that in Gramsci the organic-hegemonic reorganization of a differentiated popular mass always aims at “politically” transcending the original stage into which the “people” were, to use a Heideggerian concept, “thrown” [*geworfen*]. As is well known, Gramsci’s attention to folklore never showed any condescending attitude or populist complacency towards the “Little World of the Past” for which – at the limit – he showed feelings of *pietas*.<sup>6</sup> There was no cult of the natural *naïvité* of the people, as would emerge in the socialist realism of the inter-war period.<sup>7</sup> Spontaneity and conscious leadership were one and the same thing in the *Notebooks*, and Gramsci always thought that an antagonistic cultural autonomy had to be directed at the appropriation of high culture, renewing it without appearing external or alternative to it.<sup>8</sup>

On the other hand, Asor Rosa’s theses in *Scrittori e popolo* (*Writers and People*) – a book born on the wave of the impact caused by Mario Tronti’s *Operai e capitale*<sup>9</sup> – lose part of their merit in the light of the sociological decline of the workers as subjects, whose centrality was all founded on his analyses. We should remind ourselves that Asor Rosa himself then acknowledged, towards the end of the eighties, that the possibility for the working class to seize power no longer existed, although he continued to defending the

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<sup>6</sup>A. M. Cirese, *Concezioni del mondo, filosofia spontanea, folklore*, in P. Rossi (ed.), *Gramsci e la cultura contemporanea*, vol. II, Roma, Editori Riuniti, 1970, pp. 297-328. See also *Id.*, *Intellettuale, folklore, istinto di classe* (1975), Torino, Einaudi, 1976, pp. 108 e 117; C. Tullio Altan, *Populismo e trasformismo. Saggio sulle ideologie politiche italiane*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 1989, pp. 293-4; G. M. Boninelli, *Frammenti indigesti. Temi folclorici negli scritti di Antonio Gramsci*, Roma, Carocci, 2007, pp. 18 and 179; F. Dei, *Dal popolare al populismo: ascesa e declino degli studi demologici in Italia*, in “Meridiana”, n. 77, 2013, pp. 83-100; *Gramsci, Cirese e la tradizione demologica italiana*, in “Lares”, n. 3, 2011, pp. 501-18; *Id.*, *Popolo, popolare, populismo*, International Gramsci Journal, 2(3), 2017, pp. 208-38. For Antonio Fogazzaro’s *The Little World of the Past* see among other references in the *Quaderni del carcere*, Q1§44, p. 43; in English *Prison Notebooks* (henceforward *PN*), Vol. 1, ed. and trans. J. A. Buttigieg (with the help of A. Callari), New York, Columbia University Press 1992, p. 139. Vols. 2 (covering notebooks 3, 4 and 5) and 3 (notebooks 6, 7 and 8), referred to later, came out in 1996 and 2007 respectively with the same publisher.

<sup>7</sup> See R. Mordenti, *I Quaderni del carcere di Antonio Gramsci*, in *Letteratura italiana*, ed. A. Asor Rosa, vol. 16, Torino, Einaudi, 2007, p. 302.

<sup>8</sup> See R. Mordenti, *op.cit.*, pp. 302-4.

<sup>9</sup> See M. Tronti, *Operai e capitale*, Torino, Einaudi, 1966, pp. 79 (“la classe operaia rifiuta politicamente di farsi *popolo*”: “the *working class* refuses politically to become a *people*”) and 84 (“il popolo ha da difendere i suoi diritti, la classe operaia deve richiedere il potere”: “the people has its rights to defend, the working class has to demand power”), 102, 108, 110-111, 196, 217, 233, 242, 245. In English, cf. *Id.*, *Workers and Capital* (trans. David Broder), London, Verso 2019.

structure and the significance of *Scrittori e popolo* in view of its capability to supply instruments able to demystify ideology and to look at the world from a *different* perspective from the dominant one.<sup>10</sup>

However, a number of years before that, Asor Rosa had already reassessed Gramsci's advanced attention for the more modern economic-productive processes in his notebook on Americanism. This happened despite the fact that he continued to underline the idealist matrix of such a perspective of intellectual and moral reform aimed at through economic-structural changes. And he also highlighted the fact that in Gramsci the "socialization" of Fordism seemed to lay undue emphasis on capitalism itself.<sup>11</sup> In his book on culture in the *Storia d'Italia* published by Einaudi in 1975, Asor Rosa does not hint at taking up again the position he expressed in *Scrittori e popolo*,<sup>12</sup> essentially attributing Gramsci's continuity with a specific humanist-bourgeois tradition to Togliatti's interpretation of his writings in the post-war era.<sup>13</sup>

And yet, Asor Rosa is not the only one who advocated a "populist" connotation for Gramsci's thought. We may refer to Rosario Romeo and his *Risorgimento e capitalismo*.<sup>14</sup> Disputing Gramsci's propositions on the rural-democratic revolution which had not been endorsed by the *Partito d'azione*, Romeo argues that the national-popular category in Gramsci originates from the Russian *narodnost'*, which is in turn a calque of the German *Volkstum*; and, he adds, such a transposition via Herzen and the slavophiles had been reformulated democratically prior to entering Russian revolutionary thought. The German origin of this Russian term proposed by Romeo is taken from Franco Venturi,<sup>15</sup> who, in his monumental reconstruction of the revolutionary currents of nineteenth-century Russia, was in all truth far from wanting to denounce any reactionary and anti-modern components; on the contrary, at times the reconsideration seems to criticize Leninist or deterministic outlooks

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<sup>10</sup> See A. Asor Rosa, *Scrittori e popolo. Il populismo nella letteratura italiana contemporanea*, Torino, Einaudi 1988, pp. VII-VIII.

<sup>11</sup> A. Asor Rosa, *Intellettuali e classe operaia. Saggi sulle forme possibili di uno storico conflitto e di una possibile alleanza*, Firenze, La Nuova Italia 1973, pp. 545-88.

<sup>12</sup> See A. Asor Rosa, *La cultura*, in *Storia d'Italia*, Vol. IV, Tomo II, Torino, Einaudi 1975, pp. 1439-48, 1456-64, 1548-67.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.1593-5.

<sup>14</sup> R. Romeo, *Risorgimento e capitalismo* (1959), Bari, 1963 (second edition, 1970 reprint), p. 26n.

<sup>15</sup> F. Venturi, *Il populismo russo*, Einaudi, 1952.

via a perspective, as Walter Benjamin argued, that in order to proceed one needs at times to look back to the past.

In actual fact, as has been noted by Maria Bianca Luporini<sup>16</sup> the *narodnost'*-*Volkstum* connection is flawed. As a concept the *nazionale-popolare* – this is the form Gramsci used, not the one which elides the first “e” *nazional-popolare* (used even by scholars of the calibre of Norberto Bobbio, Omar Calabrese, and Luigi Firpo) or even the fusion of the two terms in *nazionalpopolare* – does not refer to Russian populism as much as to the debate, at a high cultural level, between classicism and romanticism in the figures of the poet and literary critic P. A. Vjazemskij (an admirer of French liberal thinkers), Puškin, the Dekabrist Turgenev, and the philosopher and literary critic V. G. Belinskij. Even Tolstoj, defending himself from the populists’ accusation of having failed to represent the people in *War and Peace*, argued that he had instead represented *narodnost'*: national and popular, even though in his novel it was incarnated in members of the upper classes. We should not therefore refer to *Volkstum* as the source of *narodnost'*; rather, we should look at the French *nationalité*. Gramsci in fact translated *narodnost'*, which is at the same time *popular* and *national*. The step towards *national-popular*, which allows for the assimilation of the term in popular language, which seems parallel to attempted appropriations of Gramsci by the “national right”, is due to such a misconception. M. B. Luporini argued that the reference to “Russian revolutionary thought” in Gramsci’s term is linked to its mistaken identification with “populism”. And yet, for Puškin, *narodnost'* was present in Shakespeare, in Lope de Vega, in Ariosto, in Racine and in Calderon (*O narodnosti v literature*), just as for Gramsci the national-popular is to be found in the Greek classics, in Shakespeare, in Tolstoj, in Verdi.<sup>17</sup> And, in referring to Romeo in *Scrittori e popolo*, even Asor Rosa had resorted to the idea of the Russian and populist origin of the national-popular, using the category to distinguish Dante from Petrarch.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> See M. B. Luporini, *Alle origini del “nazionale-popolare”*, in G. Baratta e A. Catone (eds), *Antonio Gramsci e il “progresso intellettuale di massa”*, Milano, Unicopli 1987, pp. 43-51.

<sup>17</sup> See L. Paggi, *Antonio Gramsci e il moderno principe*, Vol. I, *Nella crisi del socialismo italiano*, Roma, Editori Riuniti, 1970, pp. 184-5.

<sup>18</sup> M. B. Luporini, *op.cit.*, p. 47.

In drawing attention to this analysis of Luporini's, Lea Durante<sup>19</sup> has more recently restated the “non-populist” nature of the “people-nation” and the “national popular” concepts in Gramsci. Asor Rosa's intention was influenced by a liberating drive in the light of the official interpretation of the PCI, which Togliatti gave of his guiding light,<sup>20</sup> an interpretation which adhered too closely to the historicist-idealistic paradigm.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, the fact that the national-popular cannot be identified with common sense is illustrated by Gramsci's critical analysis when applying the very notion to Croce's thought. Durante has noted how in Gramsci's “national-popular” – at times referred to as “popular-national” – also alludes to the dimension of the State.

Luporini's and Durante's analyses have been reinforced by an essay by Giancarlo Schirru, in which another tessera is introduced in the mosaic of Gramsci's “national-popular”, that is, the debt towards the internal debate in Bolshevik culture in the early 1920s on the need to valorize the nationalities of the non-Russian languages, so as to realize a type of hegemony that could be questioned exactly by setting off from a sense of belonging based on identity. A similar stance was taken by Palmiro Togliatti in the postwar period.<sup>22</sup>

The notion of the “national-popular” stems then, in Gramsci, from the necessity to recompose the romantic-historicist phase in the development of thought and of political projects in the solidity of material and cultural relationships, but also in close connection with the necessity to enfranchise the popular classes from the elements of a subaltern nature in a national-popular subject aspiring to become international, just as the “non-class class”.<sup>23</sup> Gramsci's interest in the national popular reverberations in the work of Alfredo

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<sup>19</sup> See L. Durante, *Nazionale-Popolare*, in *Le parole di Gramsci. Per un lessico dei Quaderni del carcere*, Roma, Carocci, 2004, pp.150-169.

<sup>20</sup> F. Frosini has given some attention to Togliatti's “populistic” interpretation of Gramsci in F. Frosini, *Prefazione* to G. Savant, *Bordiga, Gramsci e la Grande Guerra (1914-1920)*, Napoli 2016, p. 14.

<sup>21</sup> See R. Mordenti, op.cit., pp. 325-30.

<sup>22</sup> See. G. Schirru, *Nazionalpopolare*, in F. Giasi, R. Gualtieri, S.Pons (a cura di), *Pensare la politica. Scritti per Giuseppe Vacca*, Roma, Carocci, pp. 239-53.

<sup>23</sup> See G. Baratta, *Le rose e i Quaderni*, Roma, Carocci, 2003, pp. 47, 158. In this sense, no appropriation of Gramsci from right-wing readings appears legitimate when based on the idea of the “territoriality” of truth and therefore the idea of Gramsci as an “Italian thinker” put forward by Diego Fusaro in *Antonio Gramsci* (Milano, Feltrinelli, 2015) seems misleading. Even the rightist Italian journalist and political philosopher Marcello Veneziani has highlighted the impossibility of assimilating Gramsci into Italian conservatism, given the “illuministic” root of the concept of the “national popular” (M. Veneziani, *La rivoluzione conservatrice in Italia*, Roma, SugarCo 1994, pp. 89-93 and 254).

Oriani<sup>24</sup> derived from his interest in the relation between intellectuals and the question of the “people-nation”, but also from the necessity to make the working movement come up to the challenge posed by fascism which, as argued by George L. Mosse, did not wish to “educate” or “refine” the workers’ tastes, but was happy with the “common man’s preferences” so as to make them instrumental to its own ends.<sup>25</sup> However, the fact remains that most references to Oriani in the *Notebooks* were negative and reductive, due to the “provincial” nature of his legacy and his message.<sup>26</sup> Something similar can be argued in relation to Vincenzo Gioberti’s influence on Gramsci’s reflections regarding the “popular” and the “national” – as rightly analysed by Asor Rosa<sup>27</sup> – an influence that Gramsci would then develop, through his immersion in Russian culture, in a different interpretation of history, as he had done in relation to Vincenzo Cuoco’s “passive revolution”.<sup>28</sup> Gramsci’s appreciation of Gioberti, the author of the *Primato Morale e Civile degli Italiani*<sup>29</sup> as also for other Italian moderates, possessing a greater realism than the democrats, cannot be viewed in isolation from his general evaluation of the moderate and “innovative-conservative” paradigm achieved by linking together Gioberti and Croce or even Proudhon.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>24</sup> See Gramsci Q9§42, p. 1121 (first draft “A text”); Q8§165, p. 1040 (sole draft “B text”); and Q23§8, p. 2196; in English cf. *Selected Cultural Writings* London, Lawrence and Wishart 1985 (henceforward *SCW*), ed. D. Forgacs and G. Nowell-Smith and trans. W. Q. Boelhower, pp. 214-5 (second draft “C text”, including material from Q9§42).

<sup>25</sup> G.L. Mosse, *L’uomo e le masse nelle ideologie nazionaliste*, Roma-Bari, Laterza 1982, p. 178; in the original English *Masses and Man: Nationalist and Fascist Perceptions of Reality*, New York, Fertig 1980.

<sup>26</sup> A. Gramsci, *Quaderni del carcere*, vol. I, Q1§100, Q4§68, Q6§68 (pp. 95, 512, 735-736 respectively); vol. II, Q9§56 and Q9§107 (pp. 1130 e 1172 respectively) and vol. III, Q19§5 (p. 1977); all except the last-mentioned are to be found with this paragraph numbering in *PN*, Vols. 1, 2 and 3, *cit.*; the part cited from Q19§5 is not as yet in an English-language anthology. The aspect referred to in the text is not taken into account by S. Valitutti (*Origini e presupposti culturali del nazionalismo in Italia*, in R. Lill, *Il nazionalismo in Italia e in Germania fino alla prima guerra mondiale*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 1983, pp. 100-1). Valitutti underlines Gramsci’s “recognition” of Oriani as the representative of an “Italian national-popular grandeur”, without further contextualizing it in its wider and quite differently articulated judgment that may be reconstructed from the *Notebooks*.

<sup>27</sup> See A. Asor Rosa, *Scrittori e popolo*, 1965, pp. 264-70 (1979 edition, pp. 213-8). Norberto Bobbio touches on Asor Rosa’s point in his famous study *Gramsci e la concezione della società civile*, in P. Rossi (ed.), *Gramsci e la cultura contemporanea*, *cit.*, Vol. 1 p. 97n. More recently, Gioberti’s influence on Gramsci’s “national-popular” has been emphasized by D. Fusaro, *op. cit.*, p. 54.

<sup>28</sup> See L. Durante, *op. cit.*, pp. 163-4.

<sup>29</sup> See A. Gramsci, *Quaderni*, Q1§46, p. 55 (*PN* Vol. 1, *cit.*, p. 152) and vol. III, pp. 1914-5.

<sup>30</sup> See *Quaderni*, Q7§79, p. 912; Q8§30, p. 959; Q8§39, p. 966, Q10I§6, p. 1220; Q10II§41XIV, p. 1326, Q13§18, p. 1592; Q14§72, p. 1740 and Q15§11, p. 1766. All here up to Q8 are in *PN* Vol 3, *cit.*; Q10I§6 and Q10II§41XIV are in *Further Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. D. Boothman, London, Lawrence and Wishart 1995, pp. 342 and 373-4 respectively; for

### 3. *The Prison Notebooks*

We shall now proceed to examine the use Gramsci makes of the term “populism” in his *Prison Notebooks*.

In the adjectival form or as a noun the terms “populismo/populista” in the *Notebooks*, just as in the early writings, are rarely used by Gramsci, even though he does use these terms more than is indicated in the subject index list at the end of the Einaudi Italian edition; even the *Dizionario gramsciano*, published by Carocci, is not very comprehensive as regards such a usage.<sup>31</sup> We should also include all the passages where he uses the Russian term *narodniki* and others. Though Domenico Mezzina’s entry in the *Dizionario* has the merit of bringing to the fore such a crucial question, it seems to focus only on the negative shades of the concept in Gramsci, without paying too much attention to its semantic intricacy. In my view, the way he deals with this subject highlights what is only partly a negative assessment. On the one hand Gramsci speaks of populism in terms that are very far from the use made of them in Laclau’s interpretation of the concept: for Gramsci, populism is considered a cultural-political habit incapable of emancipating the popular masses. And yet he sees in it features of interest in so far as it may be taken as a way to bridge the gap between the intellectuals and the people, in a socio-cultural scenario such as the Italian one, where this relationship was never very easy. It is this shade of meaning which a young Asor Rosa thought Gramsci to be guilty of: as compared to the era of the factory councils he had, so to speak, carried out a “Moderate” involution with respect to with “working-class autonomy”, and had become more and more interested in the “people” in its genericity, thereby making his own message appeal to the moderate-and-transformist paradigm of post-unification Italy, a paradigm that was modernizing and at the same time conservative.

It is quite obvious how the semantic enrichment of the usage of the term “populism” in the *Prison Notebooks* as compared to the early writings (which is, as I suggested, in line with Lenin’s use of it), is linked to the different framework of political and internal motivations which animated Gramsci’s thought: it was necessary, during the prison years, to the reasons for the defeat of the

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Q15§11, see *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Q. Hoare and G. Nowell-Smith, London, Lawrence and Wishart 1971, p. 108.

<sup>31</sup> See D. Mezzina, entry in G.Liguori e P.Voza, *Dizionario gramsciano. 1927-1936*, Roma, Carocci 2009, pp. 654-6.

workers' movements, and to elaborate a higher vision of politics capable not just of developing antagonisms, but also of understanding the core truth in the discourse of enemies and adversaries.

However, let us now take a close look at Gramsci's words where the term appears, beginning from the places in which the meaning is still the canonical one. In Q8§35, in which Gramsci criticizes the abstract nature of the agrarian reform program put forward by Giuseppe Ferrari, a parallel is created with "Bakunin, and the Russian *narodniki* in general: the landless peasants are mythologized for the 'pandestruction'", however, Ferrari (and Gramsci notes that he is "not against inheritance of the capitalist kind"), unlike Bakunin, was "aware of the liberalizing nature of the reform".<sup>32</sup> By the same token, in Q15§52,<sup>33</sup> while discussing Nello Rosselli's book on Pisacane,<sup>34</sup> Gramsci disagrees with the interpretation of Pisacane as a "precursor" of Sorel. His "popular initiative" is, rather, coloured by "extreme 'populist' tendencies", that is to say, Russian nihilism, the "theory of 'creative pandestruction' (even with the low-life underworld)"; and the flaws of the democrats as ruling class, unlike the Russian Jacobins can be referred to this – though Rosselli does not mention such a connection. It goes without saying that the reference to Russian populism in this passage (as in the pre-prison works) makes Romeo's thesis of Gramsci's "populism" animated by an idea of the national popular originated in Russia, even more problematic. Let us see now how the use of the term populism in Gramsci is rather more complex than this.

#### 4. *The Semantic Slide*

In Notebook 3 Gramsci equates the *narodniki* (but also the social-revolutionaries or the Slav national-socialists) to the Italian socialist movement, because of the presence of individuals of bourgeois origin who endorsed the cause of the proletariat only to opportunistically "return to the fold" in times of crisis (in the Italian case this happened with the advent of nationalist trade unionism and with fascism itself). Populism then, becomes the

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<sup>32</sup> See A. Gramsci, *Quaderni del carcere, cit.*, Q8§35, pp. 961-2; PN Vol. 3, p. 257.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, Q15§52, pp. 1815-6.

<sup>34</sup> See N. Rosselli, *Carlo Pisacane nel Risorgimento italiano* (1932), Torino, Einaudi 1977, pp. 219-24.

result of a detachment between “ruled” and “rulers” rather than the mark of a short circuit.<sup>35</sup>

Elsewhere in the Notebooks Gramsci seems almost to bring Asor Rosa’s *Scrittori e società* to the reader’s mind. In Notebook 6 (1930-1932) he comments on an article by Arrigo Cajumi<sup>36</sup> on Giovanni Cena,<sup>37</sup> in the journal “Italia letteraria” (24 November 1929). The passage is quite interesting since the term “populism” is referred to a literary feeling, alluding to the historico-political topos of “going to the people” Concerning Cena, Cajumi wrote (Gramsci’s comments are in brackets):

A self-educated man who miraculously escaped from the brutalizing experience of his father’s work and from his small native town, Cena unconsciously became part of the movement which in France – continuing a tradition (!) deriving (!) from Proudhon on (!) through Vallès and the Communards up to Zola’s *Quatres évangiles*, the Dreyfus affair, and the Popular Universities of Daniel Halévy, and which continues today in Guéhenno (!) (rather than in Pierre Dominique and others) – was defined as going to the people. (Q6§42; PN Vol. 3, p. 33 and SCW p. 270).

And here are Gramsci’s observations:

Cajumi takes a catchphrase of today, used by the populists, and transports it into the past. In the past, from the French Revolution up to Zola, there was never a split between the people and the writers in France. The symbolist reaction created a wide gap between people and writers, between writers and life; Anatole France is the perfect example of a bookish and caste writer. (*loc. cit.*)

The use of the term “populism” is, then, here referred on the one hand to a movement which *aspired to being popular* but, differently from the pre-Zola phase, *did not succeed in so being*, and maintained an élitist separation from the “people” itself; on the other, it refers to a writer who – as Gramsci notes – in mixing socialist orientations and openings to nationalism, anticipated fascism:

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<sup>35</sup> On this see G. Schirru, p. 252. I owe to Schirru’s essay the passages in which Gramsci uses the term *narodniki*.

<sup>36</sup> A journalist, Arrigo Cajumi (1899-1955) began writing in *La Stampa*. Dissenting from the regime, he adopted left-liberal positions (after WWII he would write for Pannunzio’s *Mondo*), yet was critical of Croce’s idealism.

<sup>37</sup> Q6§42, pp. 716-9; PN Vol. 3, pp. 32-5.

In his article “Che fare?” [“What is to be done?”] Cena wanted to fuse the nationalists with philo-socialists like himself. But, in the end, wasn’t this petty bourgeois socialism à la De Amicis an embryonic form of national socialism that attempted to advance itself in so many ways in Italy and found fertile ground in the postwar period? (Q6§42; *PN*, Vol. 3, pp. 34-5 and *SCW*, p. 271).

This usage of the term populism, albeit originating from its own semantic domain, aims at defining a political phenomenology at one and the same time “élitist-bourgeois” (though striving to show the popular features) and right-wing, hence anticipating the future developments of the political lexicon.<sup>38</sup> It will then be of interest to look at the passages in which Gramsci’s reasoning becomes more articulated and intent on the explication of the reasons for populist positions. In a different passage from Notebook 6,<sup>39</sup> Gramsci starts from an article by Alberto Consiglio<sup>40</sup> published in “Nuova Antologia” (April 1, 1931) entitled *Populism and the New Tendencies of French Literature*.<sup>41</sup> Consiglio classifies as populist writers who seem to “address popular readers, or who write works based on popular subjects”.<sup>42</sup> We are dealing with a type of leftist literature influenced by communist culture, which aims at representing the life of working-class people “in an extremely objective manner and through cold accounts”, whose ambition was therefore to be read by proletarians. As well as to Gide and Mauriac, Consiglio also refers to Romain Rolland, Duhamel, Chamson, Prévost, Thérive, Carco, Guéhenno. And yet, in his view, theirs are at the end of the day intellectualistic experiments capable of attracting only the interest of intellectuals. To be sure, he believed that “the people was and still is absent from true art”.<sup>43</sup> The difference between them and the serialized literature of the likes of Ponson du Terrail and Dumas could not be bigger, as the latter aimed at being read by the élite, though appealing mainly to the people. “Populism” is then here

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<sup>38</sup> A still tentative research in need of further confirmations into Italian dictionaries of the first four decades of the century, shows that the term “populism” was never included, not even in the authoritative *Enciclopedia Treccani*. Here it was absent till 1958, whereas the *Dizionario enciclopedico italiano* (published by Treccani) of the same year has it only in reference to the Russian and the North American movements.

<sup>39</sup> A. Gramsci, *Quaderni del carcere*, cit., Q6§171, pp. 820-1; in English *PN* Vol 3, p. 127.

<sup>40</sup> Alberto Consiglio (Napoli, 1902-1973), journalist and writer, was a member of the PNM (National Monarchist Party) after WWII.

<sup>41</sup> A. Consiglio, *Populismo e nuove tendenze della letteratura francese*, in “Nuova antologia”, 1 April 1931, pp. 380-9.

<sup>42</sup> “Nuova Antologia”, 1 April 1931, p. 381.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 388.

intended as the tendency to speak of the people as well as the will to be read by the people. We are still within the limits of the established political meaning of the term, given that the viewpoint is still that of the communist left, though not yielding any truly emancipatory result.

The comparison with Italy is very significant: Consiglio had referred to the “polemical attitude” of Strapaese and Stracittà (“Super-Country” and “Super-City”) which – he wrote – “focused respectively on parochial literature and on the serial novel”.<sup>44</sup> Hence, we are not just dealing with a “rural” or traditional populism, but also with an urban and modern one (as in the intentions of Stracittà).

Gramsci overtly stretches Consiglio’s interpretation (which rather aimed at criticizing a literary tendency hegemonized by leftist ideologies):

faced with the growth of the political and social power of the proletariat and its ideology, some segments of the French intellectual set are reacting with these movements “toward the people”. In that case the effort to get closer to the people signals a revival of bourgeois thought, which does not want to lose its hegemony over the popular classes, and, in order to exercise this hegemony better, it embraces a part of proletarian ideology. (Q6§168 p. 820; in English *PN* Vol. 3, p. 126)

What Consiglio considered a futile intellectualism was for Gramsci a tendency deserving of being taken seriously also from a political point of view:

This would constitute a return to “democratic” forms that are more substantial than the “formal” democracy of the present time. It remains to be seen if a phenomenon of this kind is also of great historical importance and whether it represents a necessary transitional phase and an episode in the indirect “education of the people”. It would be interesting to construct a list of “populist” tendencies and analyze each one of them: one might “discover” one of Vico’s “ruses of nature” – that is, how a social impulse, directed toward one goal, achieves its opposite. (*loc. cit.*)

In this context it is worth noting the interesting analysis carried out by Fabio Frosini. He reminds us that Gramsci’s interpretations of phenomena which he never considered populist – although they

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<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 382.

would become paradigmatic instances of populism (such as Bonapartism or Boulangism) – exemplify the ruling class’s specific modality of reaction to the growing frailty of the “trench war” strategy adopted by liberalism in order to keep down the working class. The result is a dynamic populist war: a passive revolution that promises inclusion and radical changes to the people, and while ultimately maintaining class division and exclusion, is thus put into operation.<sup>45</sup> We should not ignore, however, that in the above passage Gramsci seems to argue that populism, albeit intended as a bourgeois cultural-political attitude, an attitude which allows one to look at the people from just another hegemonizing social position, can even in the end be taken to stand for a transitional stage towards the overcoming of the bourgeoisie itself, that is, a supersession of a merely formal democracy.

The passage may indeed be fruitfully re-read in the light of another, in which Francesco De Sanctis’s literary criticism is taken into account. In Notebook 23 (1934) Gramsci seems to allude to a positive use of the term “populism”. De Sanctis, to be sure, in the last phase of his intellectual career, focused on naturalism and *verismo* which were for Gramsci, in Western Europe

the “intellectualist” expression of a more general movement of “going to the people”. It was a populist expression of several groups of intellectuals towards the end of the past century, after the democracy of 1848 had disappeared and after large masses of workers had emerged with the development of large urban industry. (Q23§1, pp. 2185-6; *SCW* pp. 91-3, here p. 92)

The lack of “faith” and “culture” denounced by De Sanctis in *La scienza e la vita* needed a “coherent, integral and nationwide ‘conception of life and man’”. This implied a unification of the intellectual class but also

a new attitude towards the popular classes and a new concept of what is “national”, different from that of “historical Right”, broader, less exclusive and, so to speak, less police-like. (Q23§1, pp. 2185-6; *SCW* pp. 92-3)<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> F. Frosini, “Pueblo” y “guerra de position” como clave del populismo. Una lectura de los “cuadernos de la cárcel”, in *Cuadernos de ética y filosofía política de Antonio Gramsci*, n. 3, 2014, pp. 63-82.

<sup>46</sup> [The *SCW* translation omits the adjective “historical” from the text, though then going on to explain it in a footnote – editorial note]

Here we find again the analysis of the *national-popular* which a young Asor Rosa would blame Gramsci for, as he considered the intellectual guilty of allowing himself to be soaked up in the moderatism of the Italian tradition. And yet, Asor Rosa<sup>47</sup> mentions only one single instance of Gramsci's use of the term "populism", that is, a passage from Notebook 15 written in 1933 (Q15§58, pp.1820-2; in English *SCW*, pp. 99-102) regarding an article by Argo (probably the pseudonym of Luigi Chiarini, and certainly not Vittorio Ciampi<sup>48</sup>) published in *Educazione fascista*.<sup>49</sup> The article is a critical analysis of an essay by Paul Nizan published in *La Revue des Vivants*.<sup>50</sup> Argo blamed Nizan for having fostered the idea that a revolutionary work of art could only be characterized by a "proletarian revolution". Argo thought that Fascism was revolutionary too, and that working-class life could not be reduced to class conflict. Without dealing with this aspect, and formally granting some kind of reason to Nizan's position (then still in line with Stalin's positions),<sup>51</sup> Gramsci discusses the "only sensible objection" formulated by this fascist author, which he then uses to trigger a wider reflection on "the impossibility of going beyond a national and autochthonous stage of the new literature and the 'cosmopolitan' dangers of Nizan's conception" (Q15§58, p. 1820; *SCW* p. 100). From this perspective, according to Gramsci, Nizan's many criticisms of French intellectuals needed to be revised, and among them he places those which are referred to "populism". For Argo "populism" was to be intended in terms of the "popular picturesque" of

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<sup>47</sup> A. Asor Rosa, *Scrittori e popolo*, Roma, Samonà e Savelli, 1965, pp. 271-2; 1979 edition p. 220.

<sup>48</sup> Valentino Gerratana, in his name index to the *Notebooks* refers to a certain Vittorio Ciampi who used the pseudonym Argus. However, in two different sources quoted in "Indice biografico degli italiani", he appears to have been born in 1920 (in Lucera). Gerratana, in a note to a comment by Gramsci on Nizan, refers to a "contributor to 'Educazione fascista' who signed himself Argo", but he does not mention Ciampi. Even Asor Rosa spoke of a "certain Argo" (1988 edition, p.180). Argo should in fact be identified with Luigi Chiarini. R.Ben-Ghiat (*La cultura fascista*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2000, pp. 57-58) contends that Luigi Chiarini was in charge of the columns *Idee d'oltre confine*, which hosted Argo's piece discussed by Gramsci. I owe this last detail to Dr. Luisa Righi of Fondazione Gramsci di Roma.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. Argo, *Idee d'oltre confine*, "Educazione fascista", March 1933, pp. 264-8.

<sup>50</sup> P.Nizan, *Letteratura rivoluzionaria in Francia*, in "La revue des vivants", September-October 1932, now in P.Nizan, *Letteratura e politica. Saggi per una nuova cultura* (ed. S. Suleiman), Verona, Bertani editore, 1973, pp. 34-42.

<sup>51</sup> Gramsci stressed that Nizan's critical positions on the *Le Monde* group had to be re-read, as it had been considered "socialdemocratic" and "radical-socialist", and therefore rehabilitated by Stalin in the context of his new frontist perspective. See F. Fè, *Paul Nizan. Un intellettuale comunista*, Roma, Savelli, 1973, pp. 34-7.

Thérive, Pallu, Prévost and Bost<sup>52</sup> (again Gramsci uses the term “populism” with reference to a literary semantic), which still has a strong political significance. Accordingly, we cannot dismiss such literature without highlighting what roots it in a historically-determined popular reality, not to speak of revolutionary and internationality political objective, which is yet another aspect. However, according to Nizan the bourgeoisie “sees the proletarian as alien and at the same time so frail, so uncultivated”.<sup>53</sup> And he added: “we are not in need of human truth, but of revolutionary truth”.<sup>54</sup> Such a position was for Gramsci unacceptable.

As Gramsci wrote, it is impossible for the “new literature” not to “manifest itself ‘nationally’ in relatively hybrid and different combinations and alloys” (Q15§58, p. 1820; *SCW* p. 100). What should be stressed here is the fact that Gramsci uses the word “cosmopolitan” in a negative sense. In a similar vein he had exposed the intellectuals’ distance from life from the Renaissance onwards: and yet, if he did that it was not because he wanted to expose its universalism, but rather its failed rootedness in the socio-historical context, which in the end jeopardized the very essence of that universalism. Nor was the communist intellectual inclined to favor a unique progressive line: what he preferred to envisage was a series of temporal social layers (hence the break in the linearity of development, in the Marxist tradition, as articulated and emphasized by Laclau, and condemned by Asor Rosa as the mark of a revolutionary inadequacy in Gramsci). The artist should look at society as it is and not as it should be, which is the task of the politician. This further shows that Gramsci’s idea of politics transcended reality, even popular reality. Almost surprisingly he sets up politics as a dimension of what has to be, against art, which (in line with De Sanctis and Croce) represents the world as it is. And yet, even in Art there is room for transcending. This is why Gramsci avoids referring to some sort of mirroring (as Asor Rosa seemed to believe), preferring to talk of elaboration:

The premiss of the new literature – he added in fact – cannot but be historico-political, popular: it must aim at elaborating that which already exists, whether polemically or in some other way does not matter. What does matters,

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<sup>52</sup> See Argo, *cit.*, pp. 267-8.

<sup>53</sup> P. Nizan, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

though, is that it sink its roots into the humus of popular culture as it is, with its tastes and tendencies etc., and with its moral and intellectual world even if it is even backward and conventional. (Q15§58, p. 1822; *SCW* p. 102, translation slightly modified)

To be sure, Gramsci did never refer to popular culture in ruralist or traditionalist terms. He also spoke of urbanized subjects, vulnerable to the influence of the same cultural industry which would be analysed by Horkheimer and Adorno fifteen years later, and which Nizan seems not to take seriously:

Nizan does not know how able to deal with so-called “popular literature”, that is with the success of serial literature (adventure stories, detective stories, thrillers etc.) among the national masses, a success that is assisted by the cinema and the newspapers. And yet, it is the question that represents the major part of the problem of a new literature as the expression of an intellectual and moral renewal, for only from the readers of serial literature can we select a sufficient and necessary public for creating the cultural base of the new literature.

It appears to me that the problem is this: how to create a body of writers who are, artistically, to serial literature what Dostoyevsky was to Sue and Soulié or, with respect to the detective story, what Chesterton was to Conan Doyle and Wallace etc. With this aim in mind, one must abandon many prejudices, but above all it should be remembered that one cannot have a monopoly but also that one is faced with a formidable organization of publishing interests. The most common prejudice is this: that the new literature has to identify itself with an artistic school of intellectual origin, as was the case with Futurism. (Q15§58, pp. 1821-1822; *SCW* pp. 101-102)

The forms of the industrialization of culture have to be looked at with much care and without biases. Unlike Nizan, Gramsci’s position is closer to the one enucleated by Walter Benjamin and Fredric Jameson, aiming at a political overturning of the serialization of art, as a path towards a new civilization. It also seems to anticipate some of Umberto Eco’s intuitions. Fabio Dei has devoted a number of convincing reflections to this, stressing how Italian demology forgot to account for Gramsci’s suggestions as regards popular culture. Folklore was seen as detached from an urban mass culture which devoured tradition in the same ineluctable and homologating device. This discipline was then confined to

a “patrimonialistic and identitarian”<sup>55</sup> conception of popular culture, unable to provide analytical tools capable of overcoming the negative mark assigned by the reflections of Adorno and Pasolini to phenomena connected to market “neo-populism”.

A possible re-evaluation of “populism” can be found in relation to an imaginary that is detached from the concrete dimension of Italian folklore. This is further explicated in Notebook 6, which collects Gramsci’s notes between 1930 and 1932.<sup>56</sup> Here Gramsci links the “exaltation of the idealized ‘peasant’ by populist movements” back to a specific source, utopian literature, given the references to wild and primitive eras. Unsurprisingly Gramsci considers such an attitude inadequate to a mature political consciousness. And yet, he stresses that utopian literature as the source of inspiration for a specific populist literary taste, “has been quite important in the history of the dissemination of sociopolitical views among determinate masses and hence in the history of culture” (Q6§157, p. 812; *PN* Vol. 3, p. 118 and *SCW* p. 237)

This is why we can conclude that the term “populism” was not a mark of ill fame for Gramsci, but rather encapsulated, as praxis or representation of the real, a number of elements useful in the development of emancipatory politics. Such an analytical openness is at the basis of his judgment on phenomena which – as already argued – were not at that time defined “populist” in political jargon but constitute nowadays the classical paradigms of populism. I am here referring to Boulangism,<sup>57</sup> but also to Caesarism and Bonapartism.<sup>58</sup> It was again Fabio Dei who stressed how, by analysing the phenomenon, Gramsci was far from considering it irrational, or influenced by the illusionistic practices of power, but rather wished to understand its internal rationale by means of which the interests of the ruling class were shared with the needs of the subaltern.<sup>59</sup> To understand as much, in line with Gramsci, can also

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<sup>55</sup> See F. Dei, *Gramsci, Cirese e la tradizione demologica italiana*, *cit.*, p. 517; *Popolo, popolare, populismo*, *cit.*

<sup>56</sup> Gramsci, Q6§157, pp. 811-2; in English *PN* Vol. 3, p. 118 or *SCW*, p. 237.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid*, Q4§38, p. 464 (in English *PN* Vol. 2, pp. 186-7; and Q13§18, pp.1596-7 (in English *SPN*, pp. 166-7).

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid*, vol. I, pp. 464 (*cit. supra*) and Q4§66, 511 (in English *PN* Vol. 2, pp. 239-40); Q6§97, p.772 (in English *PN* Vol 3, pp. 82-3), Q9§136, pp. 1197-1198; Q13§23, p. 1608 (in English *SPN*, pp. 214-5; Q13§27, pp. 1619-22 (in English *SPN* pp. 219-22); Q14§23 pp. 1680-1 (in English *SPN* pp. 222-3).

<sup>59</sup> F. Dei, *Popolo, popolare, populismo*, *cit.*

prove to be useful in rebuilding the basis for a type of politics which aims at being “popular” and not “populist” (in the sense the term has acquired in the second half of the Twentieth Century).

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