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Ciliberto e Vacca: The Philosophical Autonomy of Marxism

Abstract

This is the Abstract of the double review in English by Alessio Panichi of the volumes *In cammino con Gramsci* ('On the Road with Gramsci') by Giuseppe Vacca (Roma, Viella, 2020) and *La fabbrica dei Quaderni. Studi su Gramsci* ('The Workshop of the Notebooks. Studies on Gramsci') by Michele Ciliberto (Pisa, Edizioni della Normale, 2020). The former analyses Gramsci's elaboration of the philosophy of praxis, and the latter looks how Gramsci's reading of the national history and cultural tradition of Italy informed the concepts developed in the Prison Notebooks.

Keywords

Philosophical autonomy of Marxism, role of intellectuals, hegemony, Reformation-Renaissance, Italian history

The Philosophical Autonomy of Marxism: Hegemony, Philosophy of Praxis and the Reform-Renaissance Nexus

Alessio Panichi

I. The two-year period 1919-20 was without doubt fortunate for studies on Gramsci, since it saw the publication of a substantial number of contributions which, in their differing viewpoints and goals, have together shed new light on the Gramsci's thought, both before and during the prison years, as well as dealing with the history of his past and ever more global current reception. To cite just a few significant examples, recent publications include the collectively authored *Revisiting Gramsci's Notebooks* (Antonini, Bernstein et al. 2019), reviewed at length in this journal by Gianmarco Fifi (Fifi 2020); Francesca Antonini's fine volume *Caesarism and Bonapartism in Gramsci. Hegemony and the Crisis of Modernity* (Antonini 2020), which has the merit of investigating with philological rigour and seriousness two of the key categories of Gramsci's thought, thus offering an important contribution to understanding them; last, here, is another collectively authored volume, *Gramsci in the World*, (Dainotto and Jameson (eds.) 2020) which is good illustration of how the interest in the *Notebooks*, and therefore their decades-long fortune, have been and continue to be fed by issues born on the terrain of political and cultural struggle both in post-war Italy and in other 'provinces' of the 'great and terrible world'. These examples could easily be extended and, in summing up, it would perhaps be worthwhile to dedicate a precise and careful review of them to shed light on the main directions of contemporary Gramsci studies, in debt to a large extent to the excellent work undertaken over the last fifteen years¹ in compiling the *National Edition* of Gramsci's writings (Gramsci 2007-present).

In any case these contributions over the last two years remain of undoubted value for their variety and historiographical importance, and to them we must here add two collections of essays of special value, which we here examine and compare, and which aim at

¹ In confirmation of this decade-and-a-half's work, cf. Francioni and Giasi (eds., 2020).

identifying their specificity and similarities, their differences and their parallels. The two volumes both date to 2020: Giuseppe Vacca's *In cammino con Gramsci (On the Road with Gramsci: 2020a)*, with an essay by M. Mustè; and Michele Ciliberto's *La fabbrica dei Quaderni. Studi su Gramsci (The Workshop of the Notebooks. Studies on Gramsci: 2020)*. The choice of devoting attention to these two volumes is justified not only by their external and, one might say, formal concordance – both are collections of writings, previously published in various places – but also because of the relations of friendship and collaboration that have long united the two authors. Indeed, only a few years ago, this had an outlet in their joint editorship of an important anthology of the speeches and writings of Palmiro Togliatti on the philosophy of praxis, or more precisely on Gramsci's wide-ranging undertaking to rethink Marxism. This took place in the wake of the October revolution and in the light of a critical measuring up to the national tradition at the same time as arguing for Marxism's philosophical autonomy as against Croce's reduction of it to an interpretative canon of history.² However, proceeding in an orderly fashion, we first take the volume by Vacca, comprising three essays, published between 1977 and 1991,³ with another two on Gramsci that follow on (Vacca, 2012 and 2017 [English edition: 2020c] respectively, with the Spanish edition in press), which together find themselves in a dialogic relation and thus form a sort of 'Gramscian triptych'.

II. In the first of the three essays, *La 'questione politica degli intellettuali' nei Quaderni del carcere (The 'Political Question of the Intellectuals' in the Prison Notebooks)*,⁴ Vacca spotlights how Gramsci's overall reflections, animated by the desire to reformulate and enrich Marxist theory, develop under the joint stimulus of precise events and historical-political factors. It is first of all the

² Cf. F. Frosini (2002), p. 5; id. (2004), p. 94.

³ The three essays are also testimony to an overall change in historical and cultural climate since, as Fabio Frosini has pointed out, they are chronologically placed 'at the epicentre of a two-fold transformation: on the one hand they cover the leap from the last traces of the "glorious three decades" to the start of the "neoconservative revolution"; on the other hand, they go from the last attempt at a "use" of Gramsci's thought within the PCI (the Florence Conference of 1977) to the emergence of an almost unknown scenario, in which the absence of direct political referents went hand-in-hand with the complete revolution in the Gramscian corpus, with the beginning of the *National Edition* of his writings' (Frosini, 2020).

⁴ Originally published in Franco Ferri (ed.), 1977.

case that the October Revolution and the birth, in Europe and in the world, of the first workers' State could not but have its bearing on the 'theoretical status of Marxism'. This simultaneously throws light on the theoretical and practical limits of the Marxism of the Second International, showing its inadequacy for facing the tasks posed by the then-contemporary situation. Secondly, there was the need to go back and reconstitute the fabric of political action after the defeat at the European level of the working-class movement, a defeat whose causal process had to be analysed and born in mind in carrying on the organizational and analytical work. Last, the awareness, well-rooted in Gramsci's mind, of the profound differences between West and East in Europe, between Italy and Russia, the in-depth investigation of which constitutes 'one of the fixed points of all his research and a cardinal principle of his optic and his revolutionary theory' (Vacca, 2020a, pp. 16 and 34). Vacca, then, is of the opinion that Gramsci, in clearly seeing this ensemble of factors, linked the development of Marxism to two organically connected theoretical-political options. On the one hand there was the once-and-for-all rejection of economism which, as well as impeding its development, made Marxist theory subaltern to 'to the new currents of bourgeois culture' depriving it *ipso facto* of that philosophical autonomy whose importance Vacca oftentimes stresses. On the other hand, there is the adoption of the Leninist conception of hegemony, which develops and makes actual Marxism both 'in the field of historical science, and on the terrain of political strategy' (Vacca, 2020a, pp. 35-6).

It goes without saying that this second option places at the centre of Gramsci's reasoning both the role of the intellectuals, which Vacca does not hesitate to define as 'determinant', and 'the elaboration of the overall culture and of the hegemonic apparatuses through which one class, justifying its own function on the terrain of production, becomes the "governing class" of the whole of society' (Vacca, 2020a, p. 46).⁵ On this subject Vacca makes one of a number of clarifications which, in relation to different thematic nodes, run through the volume and respond to those who in his view hold mistaken and misleading interpretations of Gramsci's thought. In this case, the clarification regards the key concept of

⁵ On the role of intellectuals as 'functionaries' or as 'underlings' of hegemony, see G. Cospito (2004) p. 90; id., 2007, pp. 268-9.

organic intellectual, which for Vacca ‘cannot be confused, as commonly happens, with the notion of a party intellectual’ and – what is more important – it acquires its sense ‘if referred to the relations of intellectual groups with the fundamental classes and to the implementation of their technical expertise’. In other words, to be ‘an intellectual category organic to a class means incorporating technical expertise and carrying out leading functions specific to a specific mode of production with the goal of guaranteeing overall social reproduction’ (Vacca, 2020a, pp. 49-50).

In the first essay, then, Vacca deals with the centrality of the theory of hegemony and of the role of the intellectuals in Gramsci’s reconstruction of Marxism, forged in the furnace of the most recent developments of the history of Europe and Italy. In the second essay, as one deduces from the title *From Historical Materialism to the Philosophy of Praxis*,⁶ Vacca takes up this subject again, with different accents, and places it in relation to the idea of the philosophy of praxis, singled out as the point of arrival of this effort of reconstruction. It should further be noted that Vacca’s investigation again moves from the history-theory nexus or, to express this better, from the theoretical and epistemological implications of the historical changes set in motion by the Bolshevik Revolution.

For his reconstruction of Marxism, Gramsci sets off from the fact that, for the first time in history, in a given territory the subaltern classes, here led by Lenin, had given birth to a State of their own. At the theoretical level, this is retranslated into the ‘epistemological’ importance of the ‘theoretical-practical principle of hegemony’. From this, Gramsci extracts a number of elements for [...] re-elaborating the *epistemological* categories of historical materialism and bot by chance adopts the term of ‘philosophy of praxis’ (Vacca, 2020a, pp. 96-7).

In actual fact, the history-theory nexus explains for Vacca not only the process of formation of the philosophy of praxis, the background against which it takes shape and from which it emerges, but also its goal and, consequently, the basic motives that drove Gramsci into adopting it. These are motives which, Vacca claims, go back to the ‘crux of Gramsci’s research programme’, i.e. to the conviction that if historical materialism wishes again to rebuild the strategical and theoretical efficacy of its categories, it

⁶ First published in Vacca (1985)

must free itself of the shackles of economism and, above all, 'have a clear notion of its *own historicity*'. The main task of the philosophy of praxis is precisely to impart this notion through, so to speak, a two-fold conceptual movement. On the one hand, this involves the liquidation of 'any residual transcendentalism', and on the other it involves regaining the 'integral *historicity* of the categories'. In short, the philosophy of praxis, conceived by Gramsci as a 'critical task, immanent in the historical development of Marxism is functional to the attainment of a precise goal: 'to bring back into action the genetic and functional connection of the categories with the historical conditions of their validity', thereby guaranteeing the *critical* and *historico-social* nature of these categories themselves (Vacca, 2020a, pp. 97, 102-3).

The emphasis placed on an aim of this type, which is the key to the second essay, seems to drop away in the third and last chapter of the book, *The Notebooks and the Politics of the Twentieth Century*, reproduced from the author's 1991 volume, *Gramsci e Togliatti* (Vacca, 1991, pp. 5-114). Here Vacca's focus of attention shifts to the linkage between three theoretical elements that had already emerged previously. These are the philosophical autonomy of Marxism, the philosophy of praxis and the conception of hegemony, where the author focuses on the peculiarities that distinguish it, using a number of clarifications and observations. One must point out here, to avoid misunderstandings, that in this case too, Vacca starts from the observation that Gramsci's prison reflections, at least from a certain point in time onward, develop along the two traditionally intertwined directions of historical analysis and political-programmatic elaboration. Indeed Vacca points out that the *Notebooks*, from the middle of 1930 onward, are 'directed in the main to investigating the basic limits of the workers' movement and to elaborating the bases (and a number of essential directions) of a new programme, aimed first of all at the international communist movement'.⁷ Once having carried out this investigation and reached the conclusion that the defeat of socialism depended in the last analysis on the 'absence of a philosophical autonomy', in other words on the fact that it had not defined 'its own political basis' Gramsci puts at the foundation of this programme the develop-

⁷ On the relation between Gramsci and international communism, see Capuzzo and Pons (eds), 2020.

ment of the philosophy of praxis, which thus goes to constitute ‘the general horizon and the programmatic objective’ of the *Notebooks*. Furthermore, in refining and deepening his own analysis, Vacca goes on to say that Gramsci roots this development in the theoretical and practical plane of hegemony, configured as the indispensable condition for Marxism to attain ‘a complete philosophical autonomy’ (Vacca, 2020a, pp. 111-4, 120-21).

It has just been remarked that Vacca dedicates part of the chapter to clarifying certain particular characteristics of the relation between Gramsci and Lenin, confirming and enriching what was stated in *La ‘questione politica degli intellettuali’ nei Quaderni del carcere*, and offers an interpretation that locates this concept in a wider historico-political context, correlating it with the vexed question of the relation between ethics and politics. In the first place, Vacca writes that, when Gramsci notes the need to ‘elaborate a conception of politics in the form of hegemony’, and to ‘specify its new contents’ he indicates Lenin as his point of departure and takes on board, as compared with Marx and Marxism, the ‘innovative value’ of the Russian leader’s idea of hegemony. At the same time however, rather than believing that Gramsci’s theory of hegemony is once-and-for-all exhausted in that of Lenin, Vacca scales down the importance of this connection to the great advantage of another ‘source’: ‘the theory of hegemony to which he [Gramsci] turns in the *Notebooks* is not so much the one elaborated by Lenin or in the debates of the Communist International between 1923 and 1924, as instead that developed by European political science after 1870’ (Vacca, 2020a, pp. 112-13, 115).⁸

In the second place, the author warns against maintaining, as often happens, that Gramsci’s theory of hegemony may be reduced

⁸ That Gramsci renders precise a conception of politics not entirely in line with Lenin is confirmed by Vacca in regard to the theory of the party, on which he concentrates in polemics with those interpretations that, relying on this theory, denounce the totalitarian nature of Gramsci’s thought. Vacca, however, could not be clearer: ‘Different from the classical Marxist theory of the party, or from that of Lenin/Kautsky or from “Western Marxism” for Gramsci there is no expressive relation between class and party. The party is not the “bearer” of “class consciousness” “from outside” [...] In the *Notebooks* the expressive relation between class and party is explicitly denied’ (Vacca, 2020a, p. 260). Gramsci’s leaning towards attributing to the term ‘hegemony’ a different meaning from the one ‘crystallized’ in the various forms of Marxism is highlighted by Giuseppe Cospito (2004, p. 74) and 2009 (p. 269: in English 2018, p. 25) where we read that Gramsci, convinced of the need to return to the ‘original sources’ of Marxism, attributes the paternity of the concept of hegemony to Lenin. Cf., further, Frosini (1999), pp. 106-8; id., 2002, pp. 40-41; id., 2004, p. 110; id., 2009b, pp. 458-9.

to underlining the importance of consent in the exercise of political direction. If such were the case, if – that is – Gramsci limited himself to ‘wishing to call attention to consent’ we should be dealing with ‘a theoretically banal call and (in an “author” like Gramsci) the fact of his speaking of a “doctrine of hegemony” would be a mere display of rhetoric’. For Vacca, the question is different. Without denying the decisive value of consent, Vacca interprets the theory at issue as a ‘programme of hierarchical subordination of politics-as-power to politics-as-hegemony’, in other words as an ‘attempt to resolve the antinomy between ethics and politics bound up with the role of the State in the “constitution of the modern”’. This is an attempt that may be crowned with success only to the extent that politics-as-hegemony, contrary to the doctrine of the State-as-force and founding itself on the principles of ‘relationality and reciprocity of the subjects’, puts into effect the ‘coordination of the general interests of the dominant group with those of the subordinate groups’ (Vacca, 2020a, pp. 118, 162, 168-9).

III. In a nutshell, we may say that the interpretational framework that Vacca offers hinges around three essential points: 1) the October revolution and the defeat of the (Italian and European) workers’ movement convinced Gramsci of the need to rethink categories of Marxist theory with the aim of preserving its analytical strength and guaranteeing its strategic-political efficacy in a changed scenario; 2) this rethink had to lead Marxism to the awareness of the historicity of its categories and to the attainment of philosophical autonomy, in the absence of which any road to communism was blocked or showed itself to be a blind alley. Both goals could be reached as a result of developing the philosophy of praxis, whose basis was grounded in the doctrine of hegemony, formulated by Gramsci on the basis of Lenin’s teachings and – to a larger extent – of the more recent developments of European political science.

As compared with this interpretative framework, the volume by Michele Ciliberto, comprising six essays written between 1980 and 2013, show significant affinities and important differences which emerge from the start. Here critical points and historiographical considerations are intertwined with clearly-defined autobiographical annotations; this should come as no surprise given that the autobiographical component of intellectual experiences is one of

Ciliberto's hallmarks (cf. Ciliberto, 2019). In his introduction, therefore, on a par with Vacca, Ciliberto shows that at the origin of Gramsci's prison reflections there are problems of a historico-political nature, just that these problems – and this is the point – relate most of all, if not exclusively, to people and affairs of the old Italy. We are dealing in fact with the 'reasons for the defeat undergone at the hands of fascism' (cf. Antonini, 2021)⁹ and with the 'analysis of Italian history from the time of ancient Rome' with the goal of 'understanding what had happened and was happening, penetrating, so to speak, down into the furthest roots of Italy's long crisis in order to take up again the initiative and also reorganize one's own side on the plane of theory' (Ciliberto, 2020, p. 17).

The choice of bringing together the pages of the *Quaderni* and juxtaposing them to the history of Italy defines the first essay, *La fabbrica dei Quaderni (Gramsci e Vico)*,¹⁰ which is also the first contribution, chronologically, that Ciliberto made in respect of Gramsci. Here Ciliberto states that 'an essential problem' of the *Notebooks* is that of coming to terms, in a profound and systematic way, with the Italian national tradition going from Vico to Gentile by way of Spaventa and Croce. This had to be aimed not just at defining the physiognomy and authentic roots 'over and above the "autobiography" of idealism', but also at carrying out a process of revision of Marxism, or rather, of certain of its currents and tendencies. Putting it succinctly, in the *Notebooks*, the 'distancing from idealist "history" is interlinked with a movement of thought that, at the same time, subjects the philosophy of history of maximalist socialism and of "orthodoxist" Marxism' to organic revision. From this point of view, Ciliberto finds himself on the same wavelength as Vacca in the sense of underlining how, at the end of this process of revision, Gramsci reaches an interpretation of Marxism as a philosophy of praxis, as well as defining its specificity and autonomy with respect to both 'the whole speculative tradition of the modern world' and to the Italian one (Ciliberto 2020, pp. 24-6, 34). To express this in the words of Eugenio Garin, the echo of whom resounds through Ciliberto's volume, Gramsci 'immersed himself wholly in the most lively cultural tradition of Italy' and the

⁹ Cf. F. Antonini, 2021, cit., p. 152: 'In a certain sense, it can be said that the entire analysis in the *Prison Notebooks* is shaped by Gramsci's will to understand the causes of the success of the Mussolini's dictatorship (and, as a consequence, of the failure of the workers' movement)'.

¹⁰ Originally published by Ciliberto (1980) under the title *Come lavorava Gramsci (variant vichiani)*.

‘philosophy of praxis, if rejecting any speculative mystification, also refuses any Esperantism; it translates Marxism into Italian, in other words it responds to the requests that had long been maturing in Italian history in a manner appropriate to those requests’ (Garin, 1997, pp. 52, 60).¹¹

Ciliberto enquires further into the reasons that drove Gramsci to carry out such a ‘movement of thought’ and provides a different answer from Vacca’s. Ciliberto’s response goes back to the particularities of the phase of Italian history, to be precise to the ‘need for a political initiative against fascism’, resting on the assumption that in the *Notebooks* the theoretical analysis is ‘constantly stimulated by problems of a political nature’,¹² in as much as that between the analysis and the problems there is not always comparison or concordance. He goes on to say that in the prison writings ‘politics and theory tend to move according to a quite intricate process on homogeneous planes, at levels, in the course of a work characterized by elements that may even of asymmetry, of non-correspondence’ (Ciliberto, 2020, pp. 68-71). This does not detract from the fact that Gramsci’s interpretation of Marxism as a philosophy of praxis attests to the wholly political matrix of his theory. If indeed it is true that this interpretation is still the outcome of an intellectual labour, i.e. of ‘a point of arrival of the research undertaken [...] between 1930 and 1935, in which an essential part is played by the “rediscovery” of Antonio Labriola’, to whom one may trace that locution ‘philosophy of praxis’,¹³ then it is also equally true that this

¹¹ See also Garin (1997), pp. 52, 60.; cf. *ivi*, pp. 53-4: ‘Faced with traditional culture, to the entire events of a country such as have emerged in the present situation, faced with the present culture, the philosophy of praxis tends, not to radical rejections or to partisan choices, but to an overall vision, the most comprehensive possible, capable of understanding the roots of each of the contrasting terms [...] In these terms the elaboration carried out by the philosophy of praxis becomes one with the history of Italy, of its intellectual groups, not groups isolated in their ideas or their writings, but seen in their relation to the real forces at work, and with those of the people whose voice only rarely seems to come over or be heard and conserved’. On the presence of Gramsci in Garin’s work and thought, cf. Santucci (1996, pp. 364-75), Sasso (2009, pp. 329-77), Frosini (2011a, pp. 245-66), Vacca (2011, pp. 273-305).

¹² It should then come as no surprise that in his *Introduction* Ciliberto writes that Gramsci ‘was always a political being and it was with a political objective that he wrote the *Notebooks*, subordinating the historical dimension to the political centre of his reflection [...] In Gramsci theory is always the predicate and a form of revolutionary praxis, and it is for this reason that theory acquires centrality in the “system” of the *Notebooks*’ (Ciliberto, 2020, p. 17). On this aspect of Ciliberto’s reading cf. Vacca (2020b, 9 August 2020; Cf. Garin (1997) pp. 48-9.

¹³ On the importance of Labriola and in particular his *Discorrendo di socialismo e di filosofia* (Labriola 1898; and Labriola *Socialism and Philosophy*, 1906), cf. Frosini (2002, pp. 4-5, 11-19) *id.*, (2009, pp. 93-7). See also Dainotto (2009b, pp. 312-3) and, again, Frosini (2009a, p. 448). Yet

research contains the input from the political question of the Constituent Assembly, which, in Ciliberto's view, 'has two fundamental consequences in the *Notebooks*'. On the one hand, it stimulated Gramsci to rethink critically the 'cultural forms of bourgeois hegemony in Italy – from Vico to Croce' and, on the other, it induced him to polemicize against those types of maximalist or 'orthodoxist' Marxism accused of weakening or dousing the capacity for political and theoretical autonomy of the modern proletariat, capacities that Gramsci clearly and explicitly asserted (Vacca, 2020a, p. 160),¹⁴ making them – *nota bene* – into the real driving force of his 'movement of thought' (Ciliberto, 2020, pp. 48, 70, 96-7).

The proletariat as original and autonomous subject of the transformation of society: this is the fundamental lever of the critique of the Italian national tradition and of the philosophy of the history of the socialist traditions. They converge in the reduction – or in the dissolution – of the dimension of theory and of the political initiative of the modern proletariat (Ciliberto, 2020, p. 97).

The basic thesis of the first essay – the existence of an organic link between the elaboration of the philosophy of praxis and the reflection on Italian history – also forms the background to Ciliberto's fourth contribution (*Renaissance and Reformation*)¹⁵ and may be considered, at least as a possible hypothesis, an established factor in Ciliberto's interpretation. However that may be, he throws light on this area right from the start, as if to clear the field of eventual misunderstandings: the various references to the oppositional coupling Reformation-Renaissance, taken over from Croce's *History of the Baroque Age in Italy*¹⁶ and which accompany the

again of this latter author, see Frosini (2011b, pp. 67-79). An overall and precise reconstruction of the history of this concept is found in Musté (2018).

¹⁴ Cf. what is said by Vacca (2020, p. 160) for whom Gramsci's conviction on these capacities goes back to the *Ordine nuovo* period: 'Already in the pre-prison writings the conception of the party as *part* of the working class [...] had its origin, for the "ordinovists" in the demonstration – which they by now argued was established thanks to the Turin Council movement as well as the October Revolution and other council experiences – that the working class was capable of historical initiative, in other words it was capable of the autonomous elaboration of a response to the problems of production and of the organization of society'.

¹⁵ Originally (*Rinascimento e Riforma*) in Ciliberto (1991) pp. 759-88.

¹⁶ Croce (1929), pp. 11-12: 'The movement of the Renaissance remained an aristocratic movement and one of elite circles, and even in Italy, which was both mother and nurse to the movement, it did not escape from courtly circles, it did not penetrate to the people or become custom and 'prejudice', in other words collective persuasion and faith. The Reformation, on

Notebooks like a *basso continuo*, do not stem from historiographic preoccupations or interests since they are found at the intersection of two different but correlated questions. One is of a historico-political nature, ‘pivoted around the definition of the characters inherent in our national history, considered from the point of view of its arrival point. The other is of a theoretical nature, centred on the ‘delineation of the constitutive features of the philosophy of praxis, understood as the “modern intellectual and moral reform”’,¹⁷ able to gather and bring to maturity the ‘fruitful seed both of the Renaissance and of the Reformation’ (Ciliberto 2020, pp. 159-60)¹⁸. Both questions, while bearing their differences in mind, originate for Ciliberto from the same nucleus of reflections, which – for purely methodical and expositional reasons – may be sub-divided into three sub-nuclei. First there is the conviction – common to many parts of Italian culture between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries – that the Reformation was ‘a crucial moment in the constitution of modern civilization’. And this in Gramsci’s view was because without this ‘going to the people’ that distinguishes the movement for reform ‘the process of nationalization of the intellectuals and of the masses’ and hence the ‘formation of the State-nation’ is not possible. Further, there is the thesis that the state of crisis and decadence in which Italy was found was due to the missing encounter in its history between the Renaissance and the Reformation, which therefore impeded the development in Italy of ‘a national culture’ and a ‘modern nation-State’ in other word of ‘a process of nationalization of the intellectuals and of the masses in the unity of a modern State structure’.¹⁹ Last, we have the idea that in the Italian cultural tradition there is

the other hand, did indeed possess this efficacy of popular penetration, but it paid for it with a retarding of its intrinsic development, with the slow and often interrupted maturation of its vital germ’ [words of Croce quoted by Gramsci: see Gramsci, 1975, Q16§9, p. 1585 (in English, Gramsci 1971, p. 393) – trans. note]. Cf. Frosini (1999, pp. 93-5); id., (2002, p. 94); id., (2004, p. 173); id., (2008, pp. 145-6); id., (2009, p., 707); Dainotto (2009c, p. 713); Frosini (2012, p. 66).

¹⁷ For the expression ‘intellectual and moral reform’ see Frosini (2009d), pp. 710-12.

¹⁸ The ‘task of Marxism’, as Frosini writes, in line with Ciliberto’s observations, lies in synthesizing ‘historically, politically and not abstractly, in reality and not just in principle, the two moments of the Renaissance and the Reform’ (Frosini, 1999, cit., p. 179). Dainotto is on the same wavelength as Ciliberto and Frosini in his dictionary entry (Dainotto 2009c) on the *Renaissance (Rinascimento)*, cit., p. 713. Cf. Frosini (1999) cit., pp. 91-2; id. (2008, p. 163); id., *Riforma*, (2009c, pp.707-8); and id., (2012, p. 70).

¹⁹ For an analogous interpretation cf. Frosini (1999, p. 93).

someone who intuited the need for marrying the moment of reformation and that of renaissance with the aim of ‘constructing’ a ‘new form of statehood’ and thus of civilization. This ‘someone’ was Niccolò Machiavelli, whose intuition consisted in a ‘decisive contribution to modernity, up to Marx, up to the philosophy of praxis’, which, Ciliberto goes on to say, is able to overcome the historical hiatus between Renaissance and Reformation, thereby giving birth to a moral and intellectual reform, precisely because it brings back and at the same time develops radically this intuition (Ciliberto, 2020, pp. 174, 176, 182-3, 199-200). The philosophy of praxis proceeds from Machiavelli, then, but

radicalizes its basic motif and goes beyond this by posing the problem of the integral resolution of the State in society, of political society in civil society. It is in this revolutionizing development that its originality resides, even in regard to Machiavelli [...]. It is he who is the authentic precursor of Marx, and Marx is his authentic heir, the real successor (Ciliberto, 2020, p. 186).²⁰

This idea of Machiavelli – one of the various images of him in the Notebooks – may strike the reader for its distance from the ‘real truth of affairs’, for its flavour of an anti-historical forcing, but it is just this which allows us to feel, however briefly, another salient aspect of Ciliberto’s interpretation. This is the one that appears fleetingly in the last-but-one chapter, *Cosmopolitismo e Stato nazionale* (*Cosmopolitanism and National State*) (initially Ciliberto, 1999), and is shown to the full in the last chapter, which bears the eloquent title *Gramsci e Guicciardini. Per una interpretazione ‘figurale’ dei Quaderni* (*Gramsci and Guicciardini. Towards a symbolic interpretation of the Notebooks*) (initially Ciliberto, 2013). In the fifth essay Ciliberto comments in passing that the reader of the *Notebooks* runs up against ‘great symbolic “myths” – deployed on the historiographic plane – more than specific historical analyses’ (Ciliberto, 2020, p. 207). In his sixth chapter Ciliberto, developing and making this observation specific, argues that Gramsci worked by means of figures and tropes which ‘must not be judged on the historical plane, but as principles that engender his political theory. At this level they are decisive, while they do not have particular consistency from the historical and historiographic point of view’. Put differ-

²⁰ On the role of Machiavelli as the model for the philosophy of praxis cf. Frosini’s remarks (Frosini 2002, pp. 103-4).

ently, Machiavelli and the other ‘great protagonists of the *Notebooks*’ are figures that ‘have to be deciphered without looking for what they are not and cannot be, but exploring their critical and hermeneutic potentialities’ (Ciliberto 2020, pp. 233, 249).²¹ It is worth the trouble of extending this type of exploration to the other “figures” of the *Notebooks*, who, while not entering the ranks of his ‘great protagonists’, play an important role – or in any case one worthy of interest – under the profile of political theory. Here I am thinking particularly of Giordano Bruno and Giovanni Botero, but most of all of Tommaso Campanella, who in Gramsci’s eyes represented, even impersonated, two natures characteristic of the history of Italy: the accentuation, due to the Counter-Reformation, of the ‘cosmopolitan character of Italian intellectuals’ and ‘their separation from national life’ (Gramsci 1975, Q3§141, p. 399; Gramsci 1996, p. 117); and the manifestation, found in utopian literature, ‘of the “modern” spirit, that is essentially opposed to the Counter-Reformation’ itself. As Gramsci writes, re-echoing, consciously or not, a certain nineteenth-century image of this Dominican friar as a conspirator and revolutionary:²² ‘All of Campanella’s work is a document of this “underhanded” effort to undermine the Counter-Reformation from within’ (Gramsci 1975, Q25§7, p. 2291; Gramsci 2021, p. 53, and alternatively 1985, p. 239).²³

IV. This is certainly not the right place to go in depth into a theme of this type, on which I propose to return in further work dedicated to analysing the references to Campanella in the prison and in the pre-prison writings. It behooves me to conclude however by recapitulating what has been written in the previous sections: the volumes by Vacca and Ciliberto agree in conferring centrality on the re-elaboration of Marxism – or a certain type of Marxism – in terms of the philosophy of praxis both in underscoring how this re-elaborative path responds to the aim of

²¹ Cf. E. Garin (1997, p. 59): ‘In the “figure” of Machiavelli, perhaps better than in any other of his writing, Gramsci has fixed his thought, and his distance not only from Croce but from the type of culture that Croce embodied’.

²² On the history of this image – and of many others the ‘comprise’ the centuries-old fame of Campanella – see the book (in many aspects important) by L. Addante (2018). For going deeper into Campanella’s political thought, including its relations with the culture of the Counter-Reformation, readers are referred to my publication (Panichi 2015).

²³ On the subject of the Counter-Reformation in the *Notebooks*, which it is worthwhile to analyse systematically, see R. Dainotto (2009a).

guaranteeing to Marxist thought due theoretical and practical autonomy, emancipating it ‘from the decisionist and contractualist roots of bourgeois thought’ (Frosini, 2020 and Cospito, 2004). These two authors grasp and set store by the causal connection between the historical processes taking place, the consequent need to rethink politico-strategic initiative, and the prison reflections – almost in confirmation of the fact that for both of them Gramsci, while not having had ‘luck in the immediate struggle’ (Gramsci, 2015 [1996¹], pp. 448-9, and 2020, pp. 627-8; 1994, vol. 2, pp. 58-9), in prison maintained the intellectual posture and the outlook on the world of the political combatant. Certainly, Vacca and Ciliberto look at this connection from different angles: the former considers above all Leninist political theory and the lack of success of the working-class and socialist movement while the latter privileges national above European and international history, concentrating on the tradition of thought extending ‘from Vico to Spaventa, to Croce and to Gentile’ (Ciliberto, 2020, p. 47); concentrating on the reorganization of the anti-fascist struggle through the agency of the Constituent Assembly; concentrating on the origin of the decadence of the country and the absence in its ‘molecular tissue’ of those principles that inform modernity. These visual angles however integrate mutually and combine to hand back the image of a Gramsci who, as theoretician and political militant, is careful to understand the movement of reality – Italian as much as both European and extra-European – and analyse its long-term dynamics and processes of change. And all this in the awareness, as precious now as it was then, that mistaking the analysis means neither more nor less than mistaking political direction.

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