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Dizionario gramsciano / Gramsci Dictionary: Positivism

Abstract

This is the abstract of the entry on "Positivismo" (translated into English) published in the Dizionario gramsciano (Gramsci Dictionary).

Keywords

Positivism; Southernists; Bukharin's Manual; Nature of Scientific Laws; History and Anti-History; De Sanctis.

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Pasquale Voza

In the *Notebooks* Gramsci refers above all to the ‘sociologists of positivism’ who were consolidating and even theorizing the ‘already widespread opinions’ regarding the ‘poverty’ of the South, which they attributed to factors such as the ‘organic inability of men, their barbarism, their biological inferiority’ instead of to causes of a socio-historical nature (Q1§44, p. 47; Gramsci 1992, p. 334).¹ Already in *Some Aspects of the Southern Question*, he had singled out critically the ‘ideology’ of the South as ‘the ball and chain which prevents the social development of Italy from progressing more rapidly’ and had further pointed to the Socialist Party as one of the vehicles of this ideology, claiming that it had given ‘its blessing and “Southernist” literature’ to the clique of writers who made up the so-called positivist school: the Ferri’s, Sergi’s, Niceforo’s, Orano’s and their lesser followers’, concluding that ‘once again “science” was used to crush the wretched and exploited; but this time it was dressed in socialist colours, and claimed to be the science of the proletariat’ (Gramsci 1973, pp. 137-58, here p. 140; Gramsci 1978 p. 444; alternative translation in Gramsci 1994, p. 316).

As well however as the ‘sociologists of positivism’ Gramsci intended to put at the centre of his attention and reflection the question of ‘philosophical positivism’ (for the expression see Q3§53, p. 334; in English Gramsci 1996, p. 54). In this context, what he claimed about De Man is of significance: the latter ‘in reality, remains a pedantic specimen of the Belgian laborite bureaucracy’ who ‘thinks he has made great discoveries because he repeats the description of empirical fact as if it were a scientific discovery’ (Q4§31, p. 450; Gramsci 1996, p. 171-2).

Gramsci furthermore links scepticism with ‘vulgar materialism and positivism’ and speaks of the ‘incapacity’ of positivistic philosophy to ‘explain the world’ (Q5§3, p. 572; Gramsci 1996, p. 298).

¹ We follow the by-now international standard of quoting Valentino Gerratana’s 1975 Critical Edition of the *Quaderni del carcere* by using Q followed by a paragraph number and then the page number; details of this and all other references are contained in the *Bibliography*.

What Gramsci claims in Notebook 7 about Bukharin's *Manual* on historical materialism (Bukharin 1925 and 1926) is of great importance; the book itself is the object of recurrent, decisive and detailed criticism throughout the *Notebooks*. He notes that the way in which the question of an objective reality of the outside world is posed by Bukharin is 'superficial and irrelevant to historical materialism', going on to note ironically that it was precisely the catholic religion that, against idealism, maintained quite clearly the thesis that "reality" exists independently of the thinking individual' (Q7§47, p. 894; Gramsci 2007, pp. 194-5): in actual fact, he asserts, through the Jesuits and in particular the neo-scholastics, the Church 'has sought to absorb positivism' to strengthen its thesis. So too, in a short paragraph in Notebook 8, in supporting the necessity for 'a new *Anti-Dübring*' which would now take on the form of 'an *Anti-Croce*', he explains such a work could encapsulate out 'not only the polemic against speculative philosophy but also, implicitly, the polemic against positivism and mechanistic theories' (Q8§235, p. 1088; Gramsci 2007, p. 378 and also 1971, p. 371).

Within these reflections, the fact that Francesco De Sanctis's break 'from speculative idealism' and his embrace 'of positivism and "verism" in literature (sympathies for Zola)' are seen by Gramsci as an attempt to react to the conflict between 'science' and 'life' (in other words, again using De Sanctis's language, between the 'ideal' and the 'real'), which in the Italian tradition was a 'weakness in the national and state structure' (Q9§42, p. 1122; cf. Gramsci 1985, p. 216).² It should further be noted that, in reference to the discussions on history and anti-history in the wake of Adriano Tilgher's booklet (entitled in fact *Storia e Antistoria*), as well as Croce's speech at the Oxford Philosophical Congress of 1931, Gramsci observes that these discussions are none other than the 'representation in the terms of modern culture of the discussion that took place at the end of the last century' on 'whether history and nature proceed by "leaps" or only by gradual and progressive evolution' (Q8§203, pp. 1062-3; Gramsci 2007, p. 351; cf. the corresponding 'C' text of Q10II§28, p. 1404; Gramsci 1995, p. 369). Lastly, in his reiterated criticism of Bukharin's *Manual*, Gramsci tends often to

² The phrases here quoted by Voza from Q9§42 are repeated, in the same form, in the rewritten 'C' text of Q23§8; in English see Gramsci 1988, pp. 212-16, here p. 216. Our translation reproduces 'national and State', as in the manuscript of the *Notebooks*, rather than Voza's gloss of 'national-popular', used however in the same lines by Gramsci (trans. note).

emphasize in variously articulated forms the juxtaposition with positivism. For example, on Notebook 11 he claims that the ‘concept itself of “science”, as it emerges from the *Popular Manual*, has to be ‘critically destroyed’ since it ‘is taken root and branch from the natural sciences, as if these were the only sciences or science *par excellence*, as decreed by positivism’ (Q11§15, p. 1404; Gramsci 1971, p. 438). Elsewhere Gramsci refers to the so-called ‘orthodox’ Marxists who, linked essentially to the ‘particular cultural current of the last quarter of the last century (positivism, scientism)’ believed that they had founded a Marxist ‘philosophy’, identifying it in essence ‘in traditional materialism’ (Q16§9, pp. 1854-5; Gramsci 1971, pp. 388-9).

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