

(i) History of the Subaltern Classes; (ii) The Concept of "Ideology"; (iii) Cultural Themes: Ideological Material

Antonio Gramsci

(i) History of the Subaltern Classes

Methodological Criteria

The historical unity of the ruling classes is realised in the State, and their history is essentially the history of States and of groups of States. But it would be wrong to think that this unity is simply juridical and political (though such forms of unity do have their importance too, and not in a purely formal sense); the fundamental historical unity, concretely, results from the organic relations between State or political society and "civil society".¹

The subaltern classes, by definition, are not unified and cannot unite until they are able to become a "State": their history, therefore, is intertwined with that of civil society, and thereby with the history of States and groups of States. Hence it is necessary to study: 1. the objective formation of the subaltern social groups, by the developments and transformations occurring in the sphere of economic production; their quantitative diffusion and their origins in pre-existing social groups, whose mentality, ideology and aims they conserve for a time; 2. their active or passive affiliation to the dominant political formations, their attempts to influence the programmes of these formations in order to press claims of their own, and the

(i and ii) From Antonio Gramsci, "History of the subaltern classes" and "The concept of 'ideology.'" In Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (eds. and trans.), *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, pp. 52–3, 57–8, and 375–7. New York: International Publishers, 1971. (iii) From Antonio Gramsci, "Cultural themes: Ideological material." In David Forgacs and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (eds.), *Antonio Gramsci: Selections from Cultural Writings*, pp. 389–90. Translated by William Boelhower. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1985. © 1985 by Lawrence and Wishart.

consequences of these attempts in determining processes of decomposition, renovation or neo-formation; 3. the birth of new parties of the dominant groups, intended to conserve the assent of the subaltern groups and to maintain control over them; 4. the formations which the subaltern groups themselves produce, in order to press claims of a limited and partial character; 5. those new formations which assert the autonomy of the subaltern groups, but within the old framework; 6. those formations which assert the integral autonomy, . . . etc.²

The list of these phases can be broken down still further, with intermediate phases and combinations of several phases. The historian must record, and discover the causes of, the line of development towards integral autonomy, starting from the most primitive phases; he must note every manifestation of the Sorelian “spirit of cleavage”.³ Therefore, the history of the parties of the subaltern groups is very complex too. It must include all the repercussions of party activity, throughout the area of the subaltern groups themselves taken globally, and also upon the attitudes of the dominant group; it must include as well the repercussions of the far more effective actions (effective because backed by the State) of the dominant groups upon the subaltern groups and their parties. Among the subaltern groups, one will exercise or tend to exercise a certain hegemony through the mediation of a party; this must be established by studying the development of all the other parties too, in so far as they include elements of the hegemonic group or of the other subaltern groups which undergo such hegemony. . . .

The methodological criterion on which our own study must be based is the following: that the supremacy of a social group manifests itself in two ways, as “domination” and as “intellectual and moral leadership”. A social group dominates antagonistic groups, which it tends to “liquidate”, or to subjugate perhaps even by armed force; it leads kindred and allied groups. A social group can, and indeed must, already exercise “leadership” before winning governmental power (this indeed is one of the principal conditions for the winning of such power); it subsequently becomes dominant when it exercises power, but even if it holds it firmly in its grasp, it must continue to “lead” as well. . . .

(ii) The Concept of “Ideology”

“Ideology” was an aspect of “sensationalism”, i.e. eighteenth-century French materialism. Its original meaning was that of “science of ideas”, and since analysis was the only method recognised and applied by science it means “analysis of ideas”, that is, “investigation of the origin of ideas”. Ideas had to be broken down into their original “elements”, and these could be nothing other than “sensations”. Ideas derived from sensations. But sensationalism could be associated, without too much difficulty, with religious faith and with the most extreme beliefs in the “power of the Spirit” and its “immortal destinies”, so that Manzoni,⁴ even after his conversion and return to Catholicism, even at the time when he wrote the *Inni sacri*, continued to adhere in principle to the theory of sensationalism, until he learnt about the philosophy of Rosmini.⁵

How the concept of Ideology passed from meaning “science of ideas” and “analysis of the origin of ideas” to meaning a specific “system of ideas” needs to be examined historically. In purely logical terms the process is easy to grasp and understand.

It could be asserted that Freud is the last of the Ideologues, and that De Man is also an “ideologue”. This makes the “enthusiasm” of Croce and the Croceans for De Man even more curious – or would if there wasn’t a “practical” justification for their enthusiasm.⁶ One should examine the way in which the author of the *Popular Manual* [Bukharin]⁷ has remained trapped in Ideology; whereas the philosophy of praxis represents a distinct advance and historically is precisely in opposition to Ideology. Indeed the meaning which the term “ideology” has assumed in Marxist philosophy implicitly contains a negative value judgment and excludes the possibility that for its founders the origin of ideas should be sought for in sensations, and therefore, in the last analysis, in physiology. “Ideology” itself must be analysed historically, in the terms of the philosophy of praxis, as a superstructure.

It seems to me that there is a potential element of error in assessing the value of ideologies, due to the fact (by no means casual) that the name ideology is given both to the necessary superstructure of a particular structure and to the arbitrary elucubrations of particular individuals. The bad sense of the word has become widespread, with the effect that the theoretical analysis of the concept of ideology has been modified and denatured. The process leading up to this error can be easily reconstructed:

1. ideology is identified as distinct from the structure, and it is asserted that it is not ideology that changes the structures but vice versa;
2. it is asserted that a given political solution is “ideological” – i.e. that it is not sufficient to change the structure, although it thinks that it can do so; it is asserted that it is useless, stupid, etc.;
3. one then passes to the assertion that every ideology is “pure” appearance, useless, stupid, etc.

One must therefore distinguish between historically organic ideologies, those, that is, which are necessary to a given structure, and ideologies that are arbitrary, rationalistic, or “willed”. To the extent that ideologies are historically necessary they have a validity which is “psychological”; they “organise” human masses, and create the terrain on which men move, acquire consciousness of their position, struggle, etc. To the extent that they are arbitrary they only create individual “movements”, polemics and so on (though even these are not completely useless, since they function like an error which by contrasting with truth, demonstrates it).

It is worth recalling the frequent affirmation made by Marx on the “solidity of popular beliefs” as a necessary element of a specific situation. What he says more or less is “when this way of conceiving things has the force of popular beliefs”, etc. Another proposition of Marx is that a popular conviction often has the same energy as a material force or something of the kind, which is extremely significant. The analysis of these propositions tends, I think, to reinforce the conception of *historical bloc* in which precisely material forces are the content and ideologies are the form,

though this distinction between form and content has purely didactic value, since the material forces would be inconceivable historically without form and the ideologies would be individual fancies without the material forces.

(iii) Cultural Themes: Ideological Material

A study of how the ideological structure of a dominant class is actually organized: namely the material organization aimed at maintaining, defending and developing the theoretical or ideological “front”. Its most prominent and dynamic part is the press in general: publishing houses (which have an implicit and explicit programme and are attached to a particular tendency), political newspapers, periodicals of every kind, scientific, literary, philological, popular, etc., various periodicals down to parish bulletins. If this kind of study were conducted on a national scale it would be gigantic: one could therefore do a series of studies for one city or for a number of cities. A news editor of a daily newspaper should have this study as a general outline for his work: indeed, he should make his own version of it. Think of all the wonderful leading articles one could write on the subject!

The press is the most dynamic part of this ideological structure, but not the only one. Everything which influences or is able to influence public opinion, directly or indirectly, belongs to it: libraries, schools, associations and clubs of various kinds, even architecture and the layout and names of streets. It would be impossible to explain the position retained by the Church in modern society if one were unaware of the constant and patient efforts it makes to develop continuously its particular section of this material structure of ideology.⁸ Such a study, done seriously, would be very important. Besides providing a living historical model of such a structure, it would accustom one to a more cautious and exact estimate of the forces acting in society. What resources can an innovative class set against this formidable complex of trenches and fortification of the dominant class? The spirit of scission,⁹ in other words the progressive acquisition of the consciousness of its own historical personality, a spirit of scission that must aim to spread itself from the protagonist class to the classes that are its potential allies – all this requires a complex ideological labour, the first condition of which is an exact knowledge of the field that must be cleared of its element of human “mass”.

Notes

- 1 For Gramsci’s use of the term “civil society”, see introduction to *State and Civil Society*, pp. 206–9.
- 2 The last three categories refer presumably to trade unions, reformist parties, and communist parties respectively.
- 3 See note 4 on p. 126.
- 4 Alessandro Manzoni (1785–1873), Italian novelist and poet, brought up on the ideas of the French and Italian Enlightenment but converted to Catholicism in or about 1810.

His major work is the historical novel *I promessi sposi* (The Betrothed) (1827: revised and partly rewritten 1840) in which Enlightenment ideas co-exist uneasily with Catholic Quietism. The *Inni sacri* (Sacred Hymns, or Songs) date from 1812–22.

- 5 The most effective literary propagator of ideology was Destutt de Tracy 1754–1836), because of the ease and popularity of his exposition. Another was Dr. Cabanis with his *Rapport du Physique et du Moral*. (Condillac, Helvétius, etc., are more strictly speaking philosophers.) Link between Catholicism and ideology: Manzoni, Cabanis, Bourget, Taine (Taine is the *chef d'école* for Maurras and others of a Catholic tendency); also the “psychological novel” (Stendhal was a pupil of De Tracy, etc.). Destutt de Tracy’s main work is the *Eléments d’Idéologie* (Paris, 1817–18). The Italian translation is more complete (*Elementi di Ideologia del Conte Destutt de Tracy*, translated by G. Compagnoni, Milan, Stamperia di Giambattista Sonzogno, 1819). In the French text a whole section is missing, I think the one on Love, which Stendhal knew and used from the Italian translation.
- 6 Henri De Man, Belgian Social-Democrat, was the author of a book *Au delà du Marxisme* (Beyond Marxism), frequently referred to and criticised in the *Quaderni* (see in particular MS, pp. 111–14). Croce’s “practical” reason for enthusiasm for De Man lies in their shared opposition to revolutionary Marxism, although strictly speaking Crocean philosophy denies a serious theoretical role to ideological and instrumental thought such as De Man’s.
- 7 For Gramsci’s criticism of Bukharin’s *Popular Manual*, see *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, pp. 419–72.
- 8 In 1916 Gramsci had written of the array of titles in a Catholic bookshop window in Turin: “I admire and envy the priests who succeed in obtaining such visible results with their cultural propaganda. In reality, we do not pay much attention to this slow process of intellectual stagnation by the clergy. It is something impalpable, which slides along like an eel, limp, which does not seem solid, and yet it is like the mattress that resists cannonades better than the walls of Liège” (CT, p. 132; SM, pp. 39–40).
- 9 The term “scission” (sometimes translated as “cleavage”) is drawn from Sorel, who wrote in the *Reflexions on Violence* (Chapter 6 § 1) of “the scission between classes, the basis of all socialism”. It derives from his analogy between socialism and primitive Christianity. For Sorel, Christianity made a distinct “scission” or “rupture” from Judaism while at the same time inheriting its compatible elements. In the same way socialism, in its scission from capitalism, would keep the heritage both of capitalist science and technology and of the “morality of the producers” (i.e. the proletariat), formed through trade union solidarity and struggles (see *Le Système historique de Renan*, Paris 1905, p. 71). Compare Gramsci’s statement of 1920: “Every revolution which, like the Christian and the Communist revolutions, comes about and can only come about through a stirring within the deepest and broadest popular masses, cannot help but smash and destroy the existing system of social organization” (SPWI, p. 331).