

## Gramsci, politics, philosophy

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Higor Claudino OLIVEIRA

Mestre e doutorando em Serviço Social pela  
Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ).

E-mail: [hclaudino18@gmail.com](mailto:hclaudino18@gmail.com)

<https://orcid.org/0009-0005-7354-8004>

### RESUMO:

O presente artigo examina a concepção de política em Antonio Gramsci, entendida como uma das contribuições mais originais do marxismo no século XX. Argumenta-se que a novidade central do pensamento gramsciano não reside apenas em categorias consagradas como sociedade civil, bloco histórico ou a distinção entre Oriente e Ocidente, mas sobretudo em sua redefinição da esfera política em contraposição tanto ao marxismo vulgar da Segunda Internacional quanto ao chamado “marxismo-leninismo” (isto é, stalinismo), dominante na Terceira Internacional. Três pontos preliminares orientam a discussão: primeiro, as acepções atribuídas por Gramsci ao conceito de política; segundo, o tratamento do vínculo causal entre as relações de produção econômicas e a política; e, por fim, a compreensão ontológica da ideologia como momento constitutivo da política. Sustenta-se que, ao conceber a política como catarse e a ideologia como realidade ontológico-social, Gramsci encaminhou uma resposta não empirista e não idealista ao problema central da teoria democrática: a construção do conceito de vontade geral e de vontade coletiva.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Antonio Gramsci. Marxismo. Política. Ideologia. Democracia.

### ABSTRACT:

This paper examines Antonio Gramsci's conception of politics, understood as one of the most original contributions of twentieth-century Marxism. We argue that the novelty of Gramsci's approach lies less in his well-known categories – such as civil society, historical bloc, and the distinction between East and West – than in his redefinition of the political sphere *vis-à-vis* both the reductionist outlook of the Second International and the so-called “Marxism-Leninism” (i.e., Stalinism) that dominated the Third International. Three preliminary aspects guide our discussion: first, the meanings Gramsci attributed to the concept of politics; second, his analysis of the causal nexus between economic relations of production and politics; and third, his ontological understanding of ideology as a constitutive moment of politics itself. We suggest that by conceiving politics as *catharsis* and ideology as a social-ontological reality, Gramsci offered a non-empiricist and non-idealist response to the central problem of democratic theory: the construction of a general and collective will.

**KEYWORDS:** Antonio Gramsci. Marxism. Politics. Ideology. Democracy.

### Introduction

In this essay we set out to discuss the thought of Antonio Gramsci, the Italian thinker who, in our view, stands as the greatest Marxist theorists of the twentieth century. To do so, we must first undertake a preliminary task: to define what *politics*, or the *political sphere*, means for Gramsci. We believe that the *novelty* of this concept – perhaps even more than the equally innovative theoretical-political notions Gramsci elaborated, such as *civil society*, *historical bloc*, and the distinction between West and East – constitutes the true inflection point of his thought, not only in contrast to the vulgar Marxism of the Second International, but above all *vis-à-vis* the so-called “Marxism-Leninism” (a pseudonym for Stalinism), which became the prevailing *forma mentis* within the Third International and, after its dissolution in 1943, within what came to be known as the International Communist Movement.

We address here three preliminary – or, one might say, methodological – dimensions of Gramsci’s thought. First, we will shed light on the different meanings that the Italian thinker ascribed to the concept of politics; second, we will examine the way in which, in his effort to clarify the specificity of this concept, he approached the causal nexus between social relations of production (that is, the economy) and politics; and, finally, we will analyze his understanding of the ontological-social status of ideology as an ineliminable moment in the construction of his concept of politics. As the reader will see, we *suggest* in our concluding remarks the following hypothesis: that in elaborating politics as *catharsis* and ideology as an ontological-social reality, Gramsci charts a path that avoids both empiricism and idealism in addressing the central question of democratic theory – namely, the construction of the concepts of *general will* and *collective will*.

## Politics in Gramsci

The most striking feature of Gramsci’s thought is that he tends to view all spheres of social being through the lens of their relations to politics. Throughout the *Quaderni*, one frequently finds observations asserting that everything is politics – that is, philosophy, history, culture, and even *praxis* in general. In this regard, Buzzi’s (1967, p. 187) formulation seems particularly apt: “Politics constitutes the central core of Gramsci’s thought, the element that gives meaning and articulation to all of his historical inquiries and philosophical reflections”.

To understand this claim, however, one must note that Gramsci (1996) employs the concept of politics in two senses, which we may call *broad* and *narrow*. In its broader sense, politics is virtually synonymous with freedom, universality, with every form of *praxis* that, transcending the mere passive reception or manipulative use of immediate data, consciously orients itself toward the totality of human relations, both subjective and objective. According to this broad sense, Gramsci could assert that all domains of social being are traversed by politics – that is, they contain the element of freedom, or

universality, as an ineliminable real or potential dimension. This becomes clearer if we observe that, in this sense, Gramsci (1996, p. 1244) treats politics as synonymous with *catharsis*:

The term catharsis can be employed to indicate the passage from the merely economic (or egoistic-passional) moment to the ethical-political moment, that is, the higher elaboration of structure into superstructure in the consciousness of men. This also signifies the passage from the “objective to the subjective” and from “necessity to freedom”. The structure, from an external force that crushes man, that assimilates him to itself, that renders him passive, is transformed into a means of freedom, an instrument to create a new ethical-political form, a source of new initiatives.

What is sketched here is the moment of the “leap” from economic determinism to political freedom. At this level, Gramsci’s catharsis is the process by which a class transcends its immediate economic-corporate interests, rising to a “universal” dimension. The class thus ceases to be a mere economic phenomenon and becomes a conscious subject of history, capable, as Gramsci (1996, pp. 1244-1245) notes, of generating new initiatives. One could say that here Gramsci gives his personal formulation to Marx’s (1968, pp. 86-88) idea of the passage from a class in itself to a class for itself, and/or to Lenin’s (1988, pp. 145-149) conception of raising trade-unionist consciousness to the universal political consciousness of class. Without such catharsis, no social class become a national class capable of cementing a historical bloc – and thus cannot achieve hegemony in society. In other words, it cannot construct a national-popular collective will.

Yet the Italian Marxist does not limit his application of the concept of catharsis – and this of politics in its broad sense – to this process alone. Going beyond Marx and Lenin, Gramsci suggest that every form of praxis, even those not directly related to the formation of class consciousness, contains the potentiality of the “cathartic moment” – that is, the possibility of passing from mere manipulation (from passive reception of reality) to the sphere of totality, thereby enabling a transformation of reality. In other words, this implies the passage from an egotistic-passional, particularist consciousness to a universal consciousness: a consciousness of participation in the human genus or in the formation of a *volonté générale*.

Gramsci (1992, pp. 1563-1564) even registers this passage withing the sphere of politics understood in its narrow sense (a sense we shall clarify shortly). This appears in his distinction between, on the one hand, “great politics”, which “comprises the questions linked to the foundation of new States, with the struggle for the destruction, defense, conservation of certain organic economic-structural relations”; and, on the other hand, “small politics”, corresponding to the partial and everyday issues that arise within an already established structure. Small politics could thus be identified with repetitive, passive praxis, which suffers determinism rather than exercising it; whereas great politics – which, as Gramsci

(1992, p. 1577) observes, “cannot but concern itself with the ‘ought-to-be’ [*dover essere*], understood, of course, in a non-moralistic sense” – corresponds to the moment of teleology, of freedom.

In its narrow sense, by contrast, Gramsci’s concept of politics takes on its usual meaning – that is, the set of practices and institutions directly involving the State and relations of power. In its first sense, as catharsis, politics could be understood as an ineliminable moment of the ontological structure of social being; in this second sense, by contrast, it appears as something *historically transient*. Thus, Gramsci is no – let us say – a political scientist *tout court*, but rather a *critic of politics*; and this, we would argue, in the same way that Marx was not a crude economist, but rather a *critic of political economy*.

How, then, can we draw this parallel? It is well known that Marx (1973; 1976; 2007) investigates the laws of capitalism not only in order to concatenate them and demonstrate their internal relations, they synchronic-systematic (or logic) structure, but also to reveal that this structure is neither natural nor eternal; it has a historical genesis, with pre-capitalist presuppositions, and contains internal contradictions that point toward its overcoming – toward post-capitalism. Gramsci (1992, p. 1598), following Marx’s path, adopts a similar position with regard to politics in its narrow sense:

The fundamental innovation introduced by the philosophy of *praxis* [that is, Marxism] in the science of politics and history is the demonstration that there does not exist an abstract, fixed and immutable “human nature” [...]. Therefore, political science must be conceived in its concrete content (and also in its logical formulation) as an organism in “development”.

This is, without reservations, the very method Marx applied to classical political economy. And one may argue that the historicity of politics in Gramsci does not concern only its internal structure: it is the political sphere as such (in its narrow sense) that, for the author of the *Quaderni*, possesses a historical character. In other words, the political sphere is an element that *arises* in time, since, in principle, politics exists only where there are rulers and ruled, leaders and led – a division that, as Gramsci (1996, pp. 1599–1600) indicates, ultimately originates in the division of society into classes, and thus in a fact that has not always existed and will not always exist. Moreover, this political sphere must *disappear* in time, in the “regulated society”, the name he gives to communist society, in which the division into classes will have been overcome.

In this regulated (or self-regulated) society, Gramsci supposes that social organisms – what he calls civil society – will absorb not only the economy, in the sense of subjecting its spontaneous and “natural” laws to the conscious and planned control of the associated producers, but also the State in its strict sense (the ensemble of coercive and bureaucratic apparatuses), since the functions of this “separate body” would be reabsorbed into the consensual relations that characterize civil society. The complete

socialization of politics – the conversion of every individual into a citizen participating in the self-government of society – would, at the same time, dialectically imply the elimination of politics as an autonomous, fetishized sphere. Hence, Gramsci believes as little in the *homo politicus*, defined by an innate will to power (*Wille zur Macht*), as Marx believed in the *homo economicus* and its supposed natural character. Both sought to demonstrate the *historicity* – and, as such, the transcendability – of behaviors that many theorists insist on eternalizing, inscribing them into human nature once and for all.

Thus, if understood in its broad sense, as catharsis, politics appears in Gramsci as an ineliminable moment of all human *praxis*: in declaring that “everything is politics” the Italian Marxist is pointing to an essential aspect of the ontology of social being, the moment of articulation between subjectivity and objectivity, between teleology and causality, determinism and freedom. And if understood in its narrow sense (as synonymous with the political sphere as a set of objectifications distinct from the social totality), politics will be dialectically superseded – that is, preserved/negated/elevated to a higher level in the regulated, or communist, society.

### **Economy, politics, historicity**

We believe that, in both cases, and in full accord with the method of Marxian historical materialism, Gramsci does not place subjective above objective – something he does at times, as we shall see, when addressing specifically philosophical themes – nor, consequently, does he place politics above economics. In order to make this point clear, however, another terminological clarification is required: again following Marx (1973. 1976b, pp. 19-539), Gramsci does not conceive of the economy as synonymous with the technical relations of production. It is precisely for this reason that he directly critiques both Bukharin (1971; 2011) and Loria (2024). To put it briefly, this conclusion between economy and technique is not limited to those two authors: it is, in fact, characteristic of the principal exponents both of the “Marxism” of the Second International and of the so-called Marxism-Leninism of Third International provenance. One need only recall Colletti’s (1969, pp. 61-147) remarkable essay, which sheds light on this problem.

For Gramsci, the economy does not appear as the mere technical production of material objects, but rather as the mode through which human beings, in association, produce and reproduce not only those objects but their overall social relations. Against Bukharin and Loria, Gramsci (1996, p. 1439) insists:

The conception of the “technical instrument” is entirely mistaken in the *Popular Manual* [that is, Bukharin’s *Treatise on Historical Materialism*]. Apparently, it was precisely Loria

who first arbitrarily substituted [...] the expression “material forces of production” and “ensemble of social relations” with the expression “technical instruments”.

At this point, it seems clear that Gramsci fully recovers the meaning of Marx’s critique of political economy – namely, the rejection of conceiving the economy as something isolated from the social totality, from the ensemble of social relations. On the basis of this conception of economy, Gramsci does not deny what Engels (1989, *passim*) called the “determination in the last instance” (*Bestimmung in letzter Instanz*) of the social totality by the material infrastructure of society. A well-known passage in the Marxist tradition is Gramsci’s (1996, p. 1051) formulation of this problem: “Structures and superstructures from a ‘historical bloc’, that is to say, the complex, contradictory whole of superstructures is the reflection of the ensemble of social relations of production”.

As can be seen, the material infrastructure here is defined as the *ensemble of social relations*, and it is this ensemble that exercises determination in the last instance. The relation between economy and politics is not one between two fetishized “factors” alienated from one another: the causality to which Gramsci refers is a dialectical one – namely, the determination of the parts by the whole. In this sense, we may say that Gramsci would agree with the statement made by the young Lukács (1960, p. 47):

What distinguishes Marxism most decisively from bourgeois science is not the predominance of economic motives in the explanation of history, but the point of view of totality. The category of totality – the all-determining supremacy of the whole over the parts in every domain – constitutes the essence of the Marxist method, one which Marx took from Hegel and transformed in an original way, making it the foundation of a wholly new science.

This dialectical understanding of the relation between economy and politics is evident in Gramsci’s (1996, pp. 1561-1562) concrete analyses – for example, in his reflections on the “correlation of forces”, which he considers as indispensable presupposition for guiding political action. The Italian Marxist begins by establishing the *objective* moment of this correlation, which occurs at the level of economic relations and which, in principle, is independent of human will and, in Gramsci’s (1996, p. 1578) terms, can “be measured through the system of the exact or physical sciences”.

That is to say, in any given society one can determine the class composition of its economically active population (the number of factory workers, service workers, etc.), or the ratio between urban and rural populations, and so on. Only after this preliminary work does the properly political examination of the correlation of forces begin. At this level, subjective elements play, within the limits set by objective parameters, a decisive role. What ultimately counts here, according to Gramsci (1996, p. 1580), is “The degree of homogeneity, self-awareness, and organization attained by the various social groups” – that is,

those elements resulting from conscious actions, from the role of organized political subjects, among which Gramsci, following Lenin, emphasizes the political party. Hence the great importance attributed in Gramsci's work to the concept of ideology and to the role of ideological phenomena in political *praxis*, as we shall see later.

On a more general level, the same acknowledgement of the determining role of economic relations appears in Gramsci's (1996, p. 1589) discussion of catharsis, which he expands:

The cathartic process coincides with the chain of syntheses resulting from dialectical development. (One must recognize the two poles between which this process oscillates: that no society sets itself tasks for whose solution the necessary and sufficient conditions do not already exist or are in the process of emerging; and that no society dies until it has expressed the entirety of its potential content.)

In other words, the cathartic process, the moment of freedom, of teleology, of the “ought-to-be”, of subject's initiative, does not occur in a vacuum. It unfolds withing objective economic determinations that constrain (but do not annul) the sphere of freedom, the creative role of political *praxis*. For Gramsci, then, the economy determines politics not through the mechanical and fatalistic imposition of univocal results, but rather by conditioning the range of alternatives available to political actions.

There is yet another problematic in which Gramsci reveals an original conception of the relations between economy and politics. “Original”, we would argue, not so much in relation to Marx and Engels, but *vis-à-vis* the thinkers associated with the Second and the Third Internationals. Marx (1973; 1976a; 2007) *consistently* emphasized that the process of socialization of production, which leads to the progressive reduction of socially necessary labor time, is not only irreversible and independent of human will, but also implies a progressive retreat of natural barriers (an expansion of the scope of human freedom over against the surrounding natural environment). Lukács (1980), in his *Ontology*, reiterated this point at length. Moreover, it has often been noted that the socialization of production, inasmuch as it allows for the reduction of the working day and concentrates large human groups with shared interests, underlies the process of socialization of political participation, of the creation of multiple collective political subjects. It underlies, in short, the creation and strengthening of what Gramsci (1992, *passim*) called civil society.

This means that if the process of socialization of production corresponds to a tendential retreat of natural barriers, the corresponding socialization of politics implies what we might call a *tendential retreat of economic barriers*, with the consequent expansion of autonomy and determining power of political *praxis* over the totality of social life. The more political life is socialized, the richer and more articulated civil

society becomes, the more social processes are determined by teleology (by the organized collective will) and the less they are governed by the automatic, spontaneous causality of the economy.

Gramsci (1974, p. 121) grasped this historical-ontological fact, placing it at the basis of his formulation of the specific strategy of transition to socialism in Western societies. Already in 1926, before his imprisonment, he observed:

In the advanced capitalist countries, the ruling class possesses political and organizational reserves that it did not possess, for example, in Russia. This means that even the most severe economic crises do not have immediate repercussions on the political level.

And in the *Quaderni*, once the concept of civil society enabled him to give greater concreteness to that 1926 intuition, Gramsci (1996, p. 1614) openly polemicized against the economistic catastrophism he attributed to Rosa Luxemburg:

We have advanced further [...] “civil society” has become a very complex structure, resistant to the “incursions” of the immediate economic element (crises, depressions, etc.); the superstructures of civil society are like the system of trenches in modern warfare.

Gramsci thus perceived, against vulgar Marxism, that the relations between economy and politics are not given once and for all: the articulation between these two spheres, and the greater or lesser determining power they exert on one another, depends on the concrete specificities of a given social formation, and is therefore a *historical* phenomenon. Here, intuitively, Gramsci anticipates a law that Lukács would formulate systematically many years later: the *ontological priority* of one sphere over the other – of being over consciousness, of the economic base over the superstructures (that is, the fact that without being there is no consciousness, without the economic base there are no superstructures) – does not necessarily imply a fixed, eternal logical or causal hierarchy between them. If the primitive savage is entirely powerless in the face of the destructive consequences of a natural catastrophe (a drought, a flood, etc.), the same is not true in a society where the socialization of production, allowing for the development of technological resources to combat such catastrophes, has forced a greater retreat of natural barriers. In the same way, Gramsci might say, one cannot compare the determining role of economic phenomena in a social formation lacking a civil society, where human beings are atomized and act essentially according to egoistic-passionate spontaneity, with their role in a formation where a structured civil society – serving as mediation and filter between the economic sphere and the objectifications of the State in the strict



sense, what Gramsci calls “political society” (*società politica*) or the “coercive-State” (*Stato coercitivo*) – erects a series of trenches and fortifications between the economic and the political. In short: in a situation in which there has been a greater retreat of economic barriers.

At this precise theoretical juncture, we believe Gramsci does not merely recover Marx’s dialectical vision, but effectively develops it further. If Marx, Engels, and Lenin, unlike the theorists of the Second International and the euphemistically named “Marxist-Leninist”, generally indicated the mediations between economy and politics – avoiding, in most cases, economistic mechanism –, none of them systematically indicated how those mediations themselves are historically conditioned. That is, none of them specified how those mediations shift (becoming weaker or more complex) according to the concrete socio-economic formation – depending, for instance, on the greater or lesser degree of socialization of politics and autonomy of civil society within that formation<sup>1</sup>. Naturally, this degree of socialization of politics is itself determined, *in the last instance*, by the degree of socialization of production, by the economic relations. Hence why the retreat of economic barriers is only tendential, never implying – as in the case of the retreat of natural barriers – their complete elimination. It is precisely for this reason, we would argue, that Marx (1973, pp. 942-944), in referring to communism, affirmed that the expansion of the “realm of freedom” does not eliminate but merely reduces, within time, the presence of the “realm of necessity”.

This decisive ontological-social discovery of Gramsci regarding the historical relation between economy and politics is not only at the basis of his key concepts of political theory: it also represents a development of historical materialism itself as a general theory of society. And if, with Lukács, it is correct to affirm that Marxism is an *ontology of social being*, one may also say that in Gramsci’s thought we find the elements of a historical-materialist ontology of political *praxis*.

### **Ideology, political *praxis*, and the philosophical limits and strengths of Gramsci**

It is also from the “focal point” of political *praxis* that Gramsci develops his specifically philosophical reflections, which occupy a substantial portion of the *Quaderni* and had concerned him since his youth. This – let us say – “politicism” allows him, on the one hand, to arrive at a fruitful theory of the socio-ontological character of ideology and its relationship to political *praxis*, which cannot be fully understood if not related to the symbolic-axiological sphere (that is, the ideological sphere); but, on the

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<sup>1</sup>To avoid being unfair: in a footnote of *Capital*, Marx provides an indication (though not a systematic one) that he also conceived of the relationship between economy and politics as historically mutable. Recognizing the dominant importance of religion in the medieval period and of politics in the ancient world, Marx (1973, p. 91) writes: “What is clear is that neither the Middle Ages could live off Catholicism, nor the ancient world off politics. On the contrary, it is the way in which they gained their livelihood that explains why, in one epoch, politics played the principal role, and in another, Catholicism”.

other hand, it leads him into highly problematic positions when he addresses certain concrete philosophical issues. These positions, which we might call *idealist*, are most evident in Gramsci's (2007) remarks involving questions of gnoseology and the ontology of nature, but they do not, in our view, affect the accuracy or fertility of his insights on the level of social ontology.

We would summarize the problematic aspect of Gramsci's philosophy by saying that, in correctly rejecting a deterministic and fatalistic interpretation of Marxism – one that denies the role of the subject (*praxis*) in the formation of social objectivity –, Gramsci ends up also denying scientific knowledge itself. By this we mean the kind of knowledge whose essential task is to reproduce reality and its alternatives as objectively as possible, avoiding any extraneous intrusion of the knowing subject into the reality that is to be known. At this specific point, Gramsci comes close to a Marxist current that, we would say, found its chief exponents in the Lukács of *History and Class Consciousness* and in Korsch (2008), who gave us *Marxism and Philosophy*.

Yet the fact that science (including the social sciences) must be *de-anthropomorphizing* – that is, must strive to grasp the object without projecting into it the desires or interests of the knowing subject – does not mean that the subject itself is not, *ontologically*, part of the objective structure of social being that science seeks to reproduce. Vulgar materialism, with which Marxism is often confused, ignores this second aspect of the problem: generalizing to the ontological subject (the acting subject) what is valid only for the gnoseological subject (the knowing subject), it ends up eliminating the active role of the subject altogether in the construction of social life, affirming that humanity merely reflects and registers a reality that unfolds entirely independently of human will. (This is precisely Bukharin's position, which, as we have already noted, Gramsci criticizes extensively in the *Quaderni*.)

By contrast, the current we may call *historicist*, of which Gramsci is a part, tends to fall into the opposite unilateralism. By affirming the indissoluble connection between knowledge and *praxis*, the necessary socio-historical conditioning of all knowledge, Marxist historicism ends up identifying knowledge in general with ideology, denying the possibility of an objective (scientific) representation of social reality. If human beings are part of the process of social being, then, according to this tendency, all knowledge of this reality will necessarily be ideological: it will reflect not so much something that exists outside the consciousness and will of the knowing subject, but rather the aspirations and projects of the acting subject. In its cruder and more debased version, this position leads to the claim that there exists a bourgeois science and a proletarian science.

In truth, although the gnoseological relation does not in any way exhaust the link between subject (humanity) and object (the social), there is no incompatibility between the possibility of science (an objective and universally valid knowledge) and the omnipresent reality of *praxis* (teleological or projective

action). On the contrary: the necessity of objective knowledge – that is, knowledge that clarifies the causal (objective) connections upon which teleology (the subjective project) will operate – is demanded by the very nature of *praxis*. It is because a hunter must carry out his work efficiently that he must choose the type of stone suitable for making his spear, scraper, or knife, based on its objective properties (hardness, porosity, shape, etc.). In this simple form of *praxis*, the possibility and necessity of science are already present. And although in more complex forms, this same structure is reproduced at higher levels of *praxis*. For example, it is because he intends to adequately illuminate the *praxis* of the proletariat in its struggle for emancipation that Marx objectively investigates, as a process of natural history, the laws of the production and reproduction of capital. That the theoretical results obtained by the German philosopher were later transformed into ideology, into values that oriented the action of thousands, does not in any way negate the objective and scientific character of those results.

Thus, the organic connection between science and ideology, at the ontological level, does not cause scientific discoveries to lose their objectivity: the law of the tendential fall of the rate of profit operates with the same objectivity as the law of gravity, even though, unlike the latter, it results from the interaction of countless singular teleological projects and can be altered (if capitalism itself is transformed) by the action of a collective, organized human subject. It is therefore problematic, in our view, when Gramsci (2007, p. 319) asserts that “The philosophy of *praxis* [Marxism] itself is a superstructure”. That is, when he argues that Marxism is an ideology that differs from other ideologies only by being less circumstantial and more enduring. What makes Marxism a *sui generis* philosophy is the fact that it is a science which, at the same time and almost inadvertently, serves as the basis for constructing an ideology, a value system (a worldview) that proposes and illuminates a political *praxis*.

Moreover, Gramsci (2007, p. 531) does not limit himself to denying scientific knowledge-object status only to Marxism, to a *sui generis* social theory: for him, “science [including the natural sciences] is also a superstructure, an ideology”. This is, we would say, a consequence of Gramsci’s very conception of objectivity. For Gramsci (2007, pp. 378–379), to affirm the existence of an objective reality independent of the knowing subject is not only vulgar materialism but even mysticism:

The concept of “objective” proper to metaphysical materialism seems to signify an objectivity that also exists outside of humanity; yet, when one asserts that a reality would exist even if humanity did not exist, one is either speaking metaphorically or falling into a form of mysticism.

Furthermore, the Italian thinker maintains that all objectivity can be directly identified with human subjectivity. Again, in his own words, Gramsci (2007, p. 379): “Objective always means ‘humanly objective’, which corresponds exactly to ‘historically subjective’; that is, objective would mean ‘universal

subjective””. With such a position, it becomes difficult to explain not only the objectivity of the law of gravity before it was discovered and became, therefore, a universal subjective, but even the specific objectivity of social facts. We may ask, not without curiosity, whether the law of the tendential fall of the rate of profit (even if it is a human objectification and not a natural objectivity) must wait to become a “universal subjective” before it constitutes an objective, socio-ontological reality, one that decisively impacts and determines the behavior of people who have never heard of it.

It seems to us that Gramsci does not perceive with sufficient clarity the epistemological distinction between science and ideology, with the result that all human knowledge is transformed into an expression of class or group subjectivity, historically conditioned. We believe this limitation of Gramsci’s thought stems from the fact that, being entirely concentrated on elaborating an ontology of political praxis, he examines knowledge only in its direct relation to *praxis* – that is, as knowledge implicit in every human action, from the simplest to the most complex and demanding. And at this point, despite the limits and problems this entails in the field of gnoseology, Gramsci does succeed in identifying decisive determinations for the socio-ontological clarification of the relationship between knowledge and politics, between consciousness and political praxis. In our view, this relationship – which transforms all knowledge (even that of scientific origin; consider, for example, heliocentrism) into ideology – is decisive for a proper understanding of both political *praxis* in general and ideology itself as a socio-ontological reality. Put differently: when viewed from the angle of its insertion into *praxis*, all knowledge, insofar as it forms a set of values that impels action, is indeed ideology; and, conversely, there is no *praxis* (particularly political *praxis*) that does not mobilize some stock of knowledge and values for its realization. In this sense, Gramsci’s concept of politics would not be complete without a theory of ideology.

Gramsci (2007, p. 378) strives to elaborate such a theory in the *Quaderni*:

It is the unity between a conception of the world and a doctrine of conduct appropriate to it. [...] For this reason, philosophy cannot be separated from politics: on the contrary, one can demonstrate that the choice and critique of a conception of the world are themselves political facts.

This identity between philosophy and ideology, between worldview and politics, leads Gramsci rightly to claim that every person is a philosopher: every person manifests in their actions, through language, common sense, beliefs, etc., a conception of the world. Without such a worldview, however crude or contradictory, humans simply could not act or orient themselves within their immediate environment. Thus, for Gramsci, the task of the philosophy of *praxis* – as a higher ideology, because coherent and organic – is to critique those confused and contradictory worldviews, still marked by egotistic-passionate, corporative, or individualist elements; it is to promote an intellectual and moral

reform, disseminating among the masses a new, superior culture, radically secular and immanentist, that contributes to the formation of a new hegemonic historical bloc, cemented by a national-popular collective will. If ideology is decisive in orienting human practice, then the critique of ideology, the battle of ideas, becomes a decisive moment in the struggle to forge that collective will, in the struggle to overcome the old relation of hegemony and build a new one.

Therefore, for Gramsci, ideology, the forms of human social consciousness, goes beyond the merely epistemological level and articulates directly with practice, with politics. It is interesting to observe that the definition of ideology in the later Lukács (1980, p. 349) is not radically different:

Even though it is a form of consciousness, ideology is by no means identical to consciousness of reality; rather – as a means of confronting social conflicts – it is eminently oriented toward *praxis*, sharing with it, naturally within its own specificity, the orientation toward transforming reality (and the defense of a given reality against attempts at change has the same practical structure).

And there is another similarity worth noting. Gramsci sees in philosophy, as the higher form of ideology, in contrast to the superficial and fragmentary ideologies of daily life (folklore, common sense, etc.), the elements that allow for universalization, that is, the cathartic passage from the egotistic-passionate moment (corporative or individualist) to the ethical-political moment (hegemonic-universal). Likewise, in his unfinished *Ontology*, the later Lukács (1980, p. 351) reveals a similar line of thought:

These generalizations [which are realized through ideology], oriented toward practical-political purposes, even if produced at their starting point by intellectual and emotional stimuli of an individual nature, constitute the medium that allows political praxis to transcend the immediate class interest and become a socially universal movement.

Thus, both Gramsci and the Hungarian philosopher refuse to analyze ideology solely from a gnoseological point of view, as mere false consciousness in contrast with adequate consciousness (science). Both analyze ideology as a real force, as an ontological fact, one that alters human life even when its cognitive contents do not adequately correspond to the reproduction of reality. There is no hegemony (or construction of a national-popular collective will) without ideology: the formation of a historical bloc, of a collective political subject, cannot occur without the movement by which egotistic-passionate interest is cathartically transformed into universal-political interest. And, although grounded in economic realities (in the class structure of a given social formation), it is at the level of ideology that this movement actually unfolds.

## Final considerations

It seems to us that by closely linking ideology and the construction of collective will, while simultaneously proposing a materialist foundation for the universalizing process of catharsis, Gramsci offered a response that was neither empiricist nor idealist to a question that Rousseau was perhaps the first to formulate clearly, but to which he responded, we would say, in an ethical and utopian manner: the question of constructing the concept of the *general will*, without which it is impossible to elaborate a democratic theory that dialectically surpasses liberalism.

The perception of ideology as a socio-ontological reality is one of the moments in which Gramsci reveals himself close to Marx and distant from the economistic, empiricist positions which, even within Marxism, deny or minimize the role of ideologies in social transformations. It is enough to recall Marx's maxim, often reiterated by Gramsci (1992, *passim*): theory becomes a material force as soon as it grips the masses. Yet at the same time, insofar as he grounds the universalizing catharsis (the construction of what he calls a national-popular collective will) in concrete class-economic bases, the Italian Marxist also managed to overcome the idealist and normatively abstract impasses that mark Rousseau's construction of the *volonté générale*.

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