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# Subalterns, Religion, and the Philosophy of Praxis in Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*

Fabio Frosini

Translated by Derek Boothman

*The purpose of this essay is to reconstruct the relationship between subalterns, religion, and philosophy in Antonio Gramsci's Prison Notebooks. With the birth of mass society—that is, with the entry onto the political scene of the popular masses, and above all of the peasantry—politics entered directly into relation with irrational passions bound up with the religious mentality, and hegemony was constructed not thanks to the institution of a “filter” for the passions (as was the parliament of “notables”) but through the mastering of those “passions” using forms of Caesarist and charismatic democracy. In Gramsci's view, the political action of the subaltern classes had to confront this new form of hegemony by recognizing the value of the profound content of religious ideas (which always indicate the need for a unification of theory and practice) and by working on a “translation” of those ideas into the forms of self-organization and self-emancipation.*

**Key Words:** Fascism, Antonio Gramsci, Philosophy of Praxis, Political Myth, Religion

In this contribution I want to propose a reconstruction of the relationship between “subalterns” and the “state” in Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* from the point of view of the concept of “religion.” As we shall see, the concept of religion is interpreted by Gramsci in an original way. In fact, for him religion lies at the root of all political activity and at the same time is the content that mainly characterizes Marxism as a “philosophy of praxis.” To unravel these nexuses, I want first (section 1) to reconstruct the way in which Gramsci presents the relationship between subaltern classes and the modern state—in particular, the situation that began to be created in Europe after the Great War. The drive by subaltern classes to give themselves forms of autonomous organization was challenged by an equivalent intervention by the state, which “entered” into society to prevent the masses from organizing themselves autonomously and thereby mounting a hegemonic challenge. Following from this, I will then (section 2) show how, according to Gramsci, fascism's “occupation” of society and its reorganization of society on a corporative basis was not an abnormal exception but became the European model for restructuring bourgeois hegemony. Through the categories of “intellectuals” and—linked to this—of “bureaucracy,” Gramsci tried to think through the fundamental traits of the new politics during the crisis of parliamentarism and as politics shifted to the articulation of society. In order to be able to think through this new

form of politics, in section 3 I see Gramsci as having recourse to the category of “religion”—derived from Benedetto Croce—as the equivalent of any conception of the world having “a conformant ethic.”<sup>1</sup> The use of this category allows him to consider simultaneously two distinct but connected moments: the irruption of the masses into political life, with the irrational and impassioned aspects that this involved, and the impassioned nature of philosophy at the moment when it ceases to be simple *individual* speculation and becomes a historical fact, a *collective* mentality. The final two sections are dedicated to exploring the implications of the use of this wider concept of religion. On the one hand (section 4), I show how Benedetto Croce made this concept of religion functional to a recovery of bourgeois hegemony in the presence of the broad, politically active popular masses, insofar as religion allows a connection between philosophy and common sense, rationality, and irrationality in a renewed form of national unity. On the other hand (section 5), I reconstruct the way in which, in the *Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci frees himself from his youthful ideological subalternity to Croce and redefines religion, inasmuch as it is a conception of the world, in the terms of a Sorelian-style “myth.” In this way, on the one hand he subtracts myth from irrationalism, and on the other he breaks asunder the Crocean representation of a “religious” type of national unity. Redefining religion as a political myth makes it possible to shift the whole discourse onto a practical level, and in this way subaltern classes are able to recover a space in which they can conceive their own autonomous organization.

## A Reciprocal Siege

In a text written in June 1930<sup>2</sup> and entitled “History of the Subaltern Classes,” Gramsci focuses on the notion of the “modern State” in relation to subaltern classes.<sup>3</sup> In Gramsci’s view, the modern state is characterized by the fact of *including* subaltern classes within a unitary political space. Gramsci contrasts this modern state to ancient and medieval polycentrism, with its coexistence of a plurality of juridical ordinances and social statuses, its juxtaposition of “different races,” and its superposition and stratification of jurisdictions, competences, and prerogatives. The “territorial and social centralization (the one is but a function of the other)” of the modern political space is comparatively homogeneous and of univocal nature (Q3§18, Gramsci 1975, 302–3; 1996, 24). In this notion of the state as Gramsci outlines it, there is an evident convergence between

1. See Gramsci (1995, 390) and also Gramsci’s point of reference—i.e., Croce (1932, 21; 1933, 18): “Now he who gathers together and considers all these characteristics of the liberal ideal does not hesitate to call it what it was: a ‘religion.’ He calls it so, of course, because he looks for what is essential and intrinsic in every religion, which always lies in the concept of reality and an ethics that conforms to this concept. It excludes the mythological element, which constitutes only a secondary differentiation between religion and philosophy.”

Note that citations of content from the *Prison Notebooks* in this essay generally list the critical edition (Gramsci 1975) of the Istituto Gramsci, by notebook and section number, and then one of the various English translations from which the English quotations are taken. Any alterations from the English translations are noted. Citations of the works of Croce and others likewise often list first the original source and then an English translation.

2. For the dating of texts in the *Prison Notebooks* (*Quaderni del carcere*), see Cospito (2011, 896–904).

3. For an analysis of the concept of the subaltern in the *Prison Notebooks*, see Francioni and Frosini (2009), Green (2011), Zene (2011), and Liguori (2015a, 2015b).

modern monarchical absolutism and the process that culminated in the French Revolution (and then in Napoleon), seen together as moments of a homogeneous dynamic process—the bourgeoisie’s assertion of itself as the dominant class.

But the inclusion of subalterns in the state is ambivalent. If the modern state abolishes the “State as a federation of classes” (Q3§18, Gramsci 1975, 303; 1996, 25) by suppressing the autonomous statuses of subaltern groups and subjugating them to the same juridical discipline, thereby making possible the development of the bourgeoisie as the dominant class, at the same time this unification makes it possible for subaltern groups to undertake political action since now the processes of corporative and trade-union self-organization, followed by the politics of subaltern groups, are no longer limited within defined spaces. Instead, they potentially involve the entire national society: “Certain forms of the internal life of the subaltern classes are reborn as parties, trade unions, cultural associations.” And it is for this reason that, as Gramsci observes, the politics of inclusion must, at the same time, always and also be one of neutralization. Gramsci ends this section with a reference to fascism (“the modern dictatorship”), which “abolishes these forms of class autonomy as well, and tries hard to incorporate them into the activity of the State: in other words, the centralization of the whole life of the nation in the hands of the ruling class becomes frenetic and all-consuming.”<sup>4</sup>

With fascism, then, the modern intertwining of inclusion and neutralization underwent no *essential* change as compared with previous history but was intensified and became more dramatic as a direct reflection of the degree of self-organization reached by subaltern classes. Gramsci clarified this point of view in a text dating to August 1931 in which the current situation was described as an organic connection between a “war of position” and “hegemony.” In other words, in the twentieth century—and especially after 1917 and the war—thanks to the coupling of “inclusion + neutralization,” the state’s policy of exercising hegemony had to take on the form of a “war of position”: namely, a struggle that ranged over all locations in society. The government of the masses—that is, the organization of all aspects of the life of the entire population—became one of the essential tasks of the state, which thus “entered” into society, thereby redefining the distinction between “public” and “private.”<sup>5</sup>

The birth of “mass society” was interpreted by Gramsci (Q6§138, 1975, 802; 2007, 109) as the advent of a partially new form of hegemony, a hegemony that possessed a pervasive and wide-ranging character: “The war of position,” he wrote, “calls on enormous masses of people to make huge sacrifices; that is why an unprecedented concentration of hegemony is required and hence a more ‘interventionist’ kind of government that will engage more openly in the offensive against the opponents and ensure, once and for all, the ‘impossibility’ of internal disintegration by putting in place controls of all kinds—political, administrative, etc.” This massive process of organizing the whole of society, insofar as it is a form of “attack” on the popular masses, takes the

4. For a comment on this text see Frosini (2012c, 71–2). In the second draft of this text (Q25§4, Gramsci 1975, 2287), written in 1934, “all-consuming” is replaced by “totalitarian,” which Gramsci places in inverted commas in order to emphasize the technical nature of the word.

5. See De Felice (1977) and Portantiero (1981, 10–22, 42–59, 161–71).

form of a “war of siege [*assedio*],” which in this passage Gramsci contrasts with a “war of maneuver.” The masses are “besieged,” but this takes place precisely because of the degree of self-organization attained by the masses themselves, for whom “the siege is reciprocal, whatever the appearances; the mere fact that the ruling power has to parade all its resources reveals its estimate of the adversary.”<sup>6</sup> Expressing this in other terms, the state has to besiege the masses because the masses are besieging the state. Not only is there a process of the “statalization” of society—in the sense of its becoming bureaucratically more rigid—but also intertwined with this is a process of the socialization of politics: that is, of the internalization of the contradictions of society inside the public structures of the state, which in consequence becomes in part “a house divided against itself” and pluralized through the presence within it of huge politicized and mobilized masses.<sup>7</sup>

The attempted absorption of the forms of class autonomy within the state therefore has the consequence of annulling the “autonomous” character of these forms of organization but does not change the fact that the masses are “organized.” In short, the expansion of the state changes the nature of both public and private spheres, and the borderline between state and civil society, which had previously seemed to be annulled, returns to constitute itself in a fragmentary way inside the articulations of the totalitarian state (which is in fact a state-society in the double sense that it “invades” society but is also modified by it). In this way, throughout the whole fascist organization of social life, just as in the totalitarian party, different currents are reformed and class conflict is reproduced.<sup>8</sup>

### Fascism, Bureaucracy, and the “Intellectuals”

In Gramsci’s view, fascism provided the “model” for reorganizing bourgeois hegemony in Europe.<sup>9</sup> This point is obvious in the above quoted text on the nexus between the war of position and hegemony, written in August 1931, and it was made explicit later, in April 1932, when Gramsci (Q8§236, 1975, 1089; 2007, 378) wondered whether fascism was “the form of ‘passive revolution’ specific to the 20th century just as liberalism was the form of ‘passive revolution’ specific to the 19th century.” Far from considering it a terrorist dictatorship, this regime was for Gramsci the source of

6. In two texts written in May–June 1933, Gramsci (Q15§47, 1975, 1807–8; Q15§59, 1975, 1822–4; 1971b, 104–6) went as far as defining the “trade-union phenomenon” (i.e., the complex processes of the self-organization of subaltern classes) as the origin of the crisis of bourgeois hegemony that broke out after the war, a crisis expressed on the one hand in the decadence of parliamentarism and on the other in the more general economic crisis.

7. See Portantiero (1981, 22).

8. See Rossi and Vacca (2007, 108–9). Gramsci (1971a, 486; 1978, 331) and Togliatti had already formulated this idea in the intervention of the political commission of the Lyon Congress in 1926: “It is necessary to examine the stratifications of fascism itself: for given the totalitarian system which fascism tends to install, it will be within fascism itself that the conflicts which cannot express themselves in other ways will tend to re-emerge.”

9. On this assessment of Gramsci’s, see De Felice (1977), Mangoni (1977), and Frosini (2012a). In general, see also Maier (1975) and De Felice (2007).

inspiration for all the types of regimes that in Europe, with different and even opposed modalities, posed the question of the reorganization of bourgeois hegemony.

“Passive revolution”<sup>10</sup> consists in the capacity to repropose *in a new form* that intertwining of inclusion and neutralization that in the nineteenth century was realized by the liberal state. In the era of liberalism, the goal of including and neutralizing the masses was reached in Gramsci’s (Q1§47, 1975, 56–7; 1992, 153–4) view through the extremely broad development of organizations in civil society, promoted in the private form by the bourgeois class. In the presence of a massive movement of self-organization by the popular classes (a “trade-union phenomenon”),<sup>11</sup> this policy could no longer prove effective. The fascist response consisted, as we have seen, in what Gramsci called a “more ‘interventionist’ form of government” united in an “unprecedented concentration of hegemony.” The situation of “siege” is precisely what comes from a greater aggressiveness and dynamism combined with an increased concentration of hegemonic politics, with a progressive superposition between the activity of the state and private intervention.<sup>12</sup>

The whole of society is now “organized”—in other words, articulated in hegemonic institutions: “Nobody is unorganized and without a party, provided that organization and party are understood broadly, in a nonformal sense” (Q6§36, Gramsci 1975, 800; 2007, 107). This self-organization, which subaltern classes had attempted to realize from the end of feudalism onward, is now brought to its completion by the adversary.<sup>13</sup> We are undoubtedly dealing here with a “revolution” whose “passive” character lies in the heteronomous nature of its realization. In fact, the bourgeoisie appropriates to itself some of the basic demands of the working classes, such as the need to overcome the anarchy of market society, and realizes this in its own way by maintaining the division of society into classes:

A passive revolution takes place when, through a “reform” process, the economic structure is transformed from an individualistic one to a planned economy (*economia diretta*) and when the emergence of an “intermediate economy”—i.e., an economy in the space between the purely individualistic one and the one that is comprehensively planned—enables the transition to more advanced political and cultural forms without the kind of radical and destructive cataclysms that are utterly devastating. “Corporativism” could be—or, as it grows, could become—this form of intermediate economy that has a “passive” character. (Q8§236, Gramsci 1975, 1089; 2007, 378)<sup>14</sup>

10. On this category see Kanoussi (2000, 66–81), Voza (2004), and Thomas (2006).

11. See note 6 above.

12. Not by chance was it only after August 1931 (when he wrote Notebook 6, §138, on the “reciprocal siege”) that Gramsci began to append explanatory adverbs to the adjective “private” when referring to the organisms of civil society (specifications such as “so-called” or “commonly called”), which emphasize civil society’s real character of being “public-State.” See Gramsci and Schucht (1997, 791; and see Q8§179, Gramsci 1975, 1049; 2007, 338; Q12§1, Gramsci 1975, 1518–9; 1971b, 12).

13. See Gramsci (Q1§43, 1975, 35–6; 1992, 131): “The current corporativism, with its consequent diffusion of this social type [namely, “the factory ‘technician’” and the “trade-union organizer”] on a nation scale in a more systematic and consistent way than the old trade unionism could have achieved, is in a certain sense an instrument of moral and political unity.”

14. For the first of these expressions (“*economia secondo un piano*”) I adopt the translation by David Forgacs, “planned economy” (see Gramsci 2000, 265), and not “economy according to a plan,” proposed

In order to “organize” society on a mass scale, fascism has to develop its own bureaucratic apparatus, enormously. For Gramsci, however, this proliferation of the bureaucratic structure is not an abnormal characteristic of the Italian state. It reflects a long-term trend in bourgeois society in general, which after the Great War underwent a strong acceleration in all countries. On this subject Gramsci drew from a number of Max Weber’s reflections<sup>15</sup> regarding the situation in which Germany found itself at the end of the war, and Gramsci transferred these to the case of Italy.<sup>16</sup>

According to Weber (1919, 23; 1994, 220), the increase in the organization of society corresponds both to a growth in the extension and degree of autonomy of the bureaucracy as a specialized administrative stratum (*ceto*)<sup>17</sup> and also to the entrance en masse of the masses into political activity. The consequence of this dual process of the bureaucratization and massification of politics is the crisis of the centrality of parliament. The parliamentary mediation of social interests is replaced by processes of a “Caesaristic” nature: that is, the direct investiture of a “chief” by the “masses.” Different from the case of democracy of a liberal type, in which it was just a few “notables” gathered together in parliament who chose a political leader, now there is a direct passage, through acclamation or plebiscite, from the “masses” to the “chief” (Weber 1919, 124–5; 1994, 220–1).

For this reason, bureaucracy as a politically “non-responsible” power and Caesaristic democracy as an antiparliamentary and “plebeian” power (Weber 1919, 124; 1994, 220), by bringing about a crisis of parliament, favor the advent of a process of political selection no longer based on a rational assessment but on “faith” and on the “purely emotional and irrational” nature of the masses (Weber 1919, 139; 1994, 230; see also Portantiero 1981, 11–9).

These reflections of Weber’s started from the standpoint of a reorganization and reform of the power of parliament vis-à-vis the bureaucracy (and therefore also the government) and the masses of the ruled. The importance of these reflections, from Gramsci’s point of view, is to have clearly shown the nexus between the processes of the socialization of politics, the massification of society, and the growth of the bureaucratic apparatus. Gramsci’s perspective, however, goes much wider. The phenomenon of bureaucracy cannot be isolated from the overall reorganization of the bourgeois hegemonic model. As we have seen, the decadence of parliament does not in fact imply for Gramsci an irreversible crisis of bourgeois hegemony, and neither is this decadence due to the growth of the bureaucracy. Rather, the reason for the crisis of the parliamentary institution lies in the fact that political mediation has been shifted elsewhere.

The category of “intellectuals”—which Gramsci (Q4§49, 1975, 476; 1996, 200) redefines as the ensemble of those who in a given society have an “organizational’ or

by Joseph A. Buttigieg (see Gramsci 2007, 378), because in the latter the allusion to contemporary debates becomes less visible. I prefer to leave the second expression, “*economia diretta*,” in Italian since it is the Italian translation of the French “*économie dirigée*” and of the English “planned economy.” Forgacs’s (“command economy”) and Buttigieg’s (“administered economy”) translations tend to hide this fact. See the unsigned article “*Economia diretta*” (1932; a report of the World Social Economic Congress held in Amsterdam in August 1931), which is the source for Gramsci’s statement in Notebook 8, §236.

15. Beside the English translation (Weber 1994), I also make reference to an Italian translation of Weber’s (1919) *Parlament und Regierung im neugeordneten Deutschland* since it is the one used by Gramsci.

16. See Gramsci (Q3§319, 1975, 388; 1996, 105–6; 1971b, 227–8).

17. See Weber (1919, 21–63; 1994, 145–77).

connective” function, both in the public sphere (as bureaucracy) and in the private one (as promoters of activity in civil society)—helps us interpret this shift in the locus of “politics.”<sup>18</sup> This is because intellectuals, different from the Weberian bureaucracy, are not independent of politics, while on the other hand neither do they come into classic parliamentary politics. Only if we reduce politics to parliamentary mediation will it be possible for bureaucratic activity to appear as something completely antithetic to political activity in the real sense, and only then will the growth in the powers of the “administration” turn out to favor the unleashing of demagogic processes. In actual fact, from the Gramscian point of view, between bureaucracy in the strict sense and professional politicians (in the Weberian sense of *Beruf*), there is indeed no antithesis. Rather, they connect up organically on the level of the new type of politics inaugurated after the First World War.

### Masses, Religion, and “Orthodoxy”

A consequence of great importance for the institution of a new relationship between the masses and politics is, as we have seen through the reading of Weber, the fact that *faith* and *irrational passions* become determining elements of political life. This problematic is taken up again in the *Prison Notebooks*, but from a standpoint opposed to that of Weber. If it is true that the presence of the masses in public life implies the end of the filtering role played by the parliament of “notables,” then what one must rely on in Gramsci’s view is not, as Weber (1919, ch. 3) asks, a parliament that has been renewed and is therefore capable of reestablishing that filter in the new situation. The presence of the masses within politics does however represent *progress* as compared with the previous situation, even if this presence opens the path to Caesarist processes and produces a constant oscillation between “democracy” and “demagogy” (see Q6§97, Gramsci 1975, 771–2; 2007, 81–3). What one has to rely on, according to Gramsci, are the new forms of representation that the masses of subalterns incessantly try to build, a process that now happens *inside* the hegemonic apparatuses of the post-liberal state.<sup>19</sup>

In essence, while Weber puts us on our guard against the dominion of irrational passions—since the perspective that he adopts is that of the dominant class, which asks itself the question of how to neutralize the political action of the popular masses—Gramsci’s interests go to the possibilities opened by this new fact in the history of the modern state. The question of interest to him is how it may be possible to “translate” those irrational passions into organized political action—in other words, how to overthrow bourgeois hegemony. In consequence, as well as the relation between religion and *politics*—which is also present in Weber’s thought<sup>20</sup>—in Gramsci’s work one finds something missing in Weber’s: that is to say, the relation between religion and *philosophy* (i.e., between the irrational and reason).

18. See Portantiero (1981, 47–59).

19. Relevant here are Gramsci’s reflections on the relation between “self-government” and bureaucracy. See Gramsci (Q8§55, 1975, 974; 2007, 268; Q13§36, 1975, 1632–5; 1971b, 185–90).

20. In prison Gramsci read with interest Weber’s (1931–2) *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*.

It is in this perspective, which one may define as “historical-political,” that we must insert Gramsci’s interest in religion.<sup>21</sup> This interest can be traced back to his Turin period. For Gramsci, religion is in fact and above all that which orders the way of thinking, and thus of acting, of the broadest popular masses: to a great extent peasants, who in that period—and not only in Italy—constituted the great majority of the population. The growth of the importance of religion in public life went hand in hand with the appearance on the historical scene of the masses of the “uneducated” and with the concomitant increasing loss of control over them by the Catholic Church.<sup>22</sup> It is because the peasant masses became politically active that the liberal compromise entered into crisis. That compromise consisted (in Italy, but also in part this was the situation in other European countries) in a clear division of society between a small minority of active citizens, who constituted the lay and liberal ruling class, and the majority of the population left to the hegemony of the Catholic Church and immersed in a culture that was still “medieval.”<sup>23</sup>

Right from the war years, the idea is clear in Gramsci’s thought that the religious history of modern Europe is a secular dispute for ideological control over the peasant masses—that is, over the nation. In an article of 1916, “The Syllabus and Hegel,” he singles out the Protestant heresy as having set off the process of secularization that—beginning with Luther and passing through Hegel, with thanks to the ferocious lesson of mass Realpolitik given by the experience of the First World War—would become part of the common heritage of the whole of Europe (Gramsci 1980a [1916], 70–1). The process of secularization is, however, not interpreted by Gramsci as the disappearance of religion but as its substitution in favor of a secular *Weltanschauung* that he defines as “faith.” “In reality, every man has his religion, his faith, that fills his life and makes it worthy of being lived” (71).

As may be seen, Gramsci, in taking over a proposal of Benedetto Croce,<sup>24</sup> here broadens the meaning of the terms “religion” and “faith,” transforming them into the synonyms of (respectively) a conception of the world and a system of convictions that drive to action and that are impervious to rational critique. In so doing, the critical analysis of religion changes guise: it is not of interest to give formal or theological definitions of what religion is.<sup>25</sup> Religions are nothing other than the attempt to attribute a certain “form” to this universal experience that is the search for coherence of thought and action, for unity of theory and practice.

21. See Portelli (1974), Luporini (1979), Fulton (1987), and Adamson (2013). See also Lombardi Satriani (1970), Cristofolini (1976), Sobrero (1976), Frosini (2003, 168–82), Boninelli (2007), and Liguori (2009).

22. See, for example, Gramsci (1982 [1918]).

23. See Gramsci (Q4§3, 1975, 472; 1996, 141): “Marxism had two tasks: to combat modern ideologies in their most refined forms; and to enlighten the minds of the popular masses, whose culture was medieval.”

24. See Croce (1931, 23–5, 45, 102–4) on “faith” as thought that becomes “action”; Croce (1931, 283; 1945, 110) on religion as “every mental system... every concept of reality, which, transformed into faith, has become the basis for action and also the light of moral life”; and Croce (1932, 21; 1933, 18) on religion as “the concept of reality and an ethics that conforms to this concept.” As Croce states, the idea stems from Goethe.

25. “Formal definitions of religion are of little significance for Gramsci. Religions for him are not fixed entities but dynamic forces that are constantly changing as they both shape and respond to a wide complex of historical events and processes” (Adamson 2013, 471).

From this set of assumptions Gramsci develops an extremely original Marxist approach to the religious factor<sup>26</sup>—so original that Marxism itself falls under the concept of “religion” in that it is a “philosophy” (i.e., a “conception of the world”) and not a “science.” The Marxist critique of religion is always therefore for Gramsci also a self-critique of Marxism itself. Insofar as Marxism is a “religion,” it takes part by full right in the religious conflict that runs through modernity in the sense that Marxism, like traditional religions, addresses itself to the masses and tries to give an answer to their demand for coherence between thought and action. But the response given by Marxism has not only to be different and original but also collocated on a completely new plane. In fact, all religions have given a confessional answer to that need for coherence (i.e., a response that is theoretical), which is succinctly expounded within some type of orthodoxy. In doing so, these religions have “blocked” the energy that comes from the demand for coherence, reducing it to a given cultural form.

If, as one reads in the *Prison Notebooks*, Marxism is not solely a new philosophy but a philosophy that renews from head to toe the *mode itself* of doing philosophy—since it puts itself forward as a mass philosophy that is not only an individual elaboration but also a collective praxis, an organized political will (in a single expression: a “philosophy of praxis”)<sup>27</sup>—then it cannot be proposed as a new orthodoxy that simply substitutes itself for the old religious beliefs. Quite the contrary, Marxism has to make its constant reference point the lack of an *already written* orthodoxy.<sup>28</sup> Orthodoxy must be redefined as the coherence of Marxism with itself: that is, with the need to be autonomous and independent of any other conception of the world. This coherence with itself can be found solely if the identity of Marxism is not sought in some type of theory but precisely in that unity of theory and practice that lies at the basis of all “religions.” This is the sole guarantee of not falling back into some form of revisionism, which for Gramsci is the signal of the fact that the movement of the emancipation of subalterns has come to a stop and handed over its own leadership to the bourgeoisie.<sup>29</sup>

In the critique of religion, then, Marxism must simultaneously criticize the orthodoxy of others and also put a brake on the temptation, inside itself, to give itself an orthodoxy: the two movements, criticism and self-criticism, are conditioned in the sense that only if Marxism succeeds in keeping the perspective of the unity of theory and practice open inside itself will it also be able to convincingly propose itself to the popular masses saturated in a religious mentality.

## “Faith” and “Good Sense” in Croce’s Thought

We have said that in 1916 Gramsci took Benedetto Croce’s proposed definition of religion—namely, a “conception of the world.” For Croce, then, there was no qualitative difference in a proper sense between philosophy and religion. There remained,

26. See, in general, La Rocca (1996).

27. See Gramsci (Q4§11, 1975; 1996, 152–3); see also Thomas (2009, 244–306) and Frosini (2010, 50–111).

28. See Gramsci (Q4§14, 1975, 435–6; 1996, 155–6). And see, in its rewritten form in translation, Gramsci (1971b, 462–3).

29. See Gramsci (Q4§3, 1975, 421–5; 1996, 141–5).

however, the politically important fact that the supersession of mythological religion in the direction of philosophical religion could come about, in his opinion, only for restricted circles of the population. For the popular masses, the “mythological” conceptions continued to exercise their “role of protecting civilization,” for which religion was “necessary for the people” (Desidera 2005, 34).

Taking over this conception, the young Gramsci limited himself, so to speak, to not sharing the consequence, and he hoped for a sort of extension of philosophy among the people and therefore for a mass supersession of religion (the above-mentioned article, “The Syllabus and Hegel,” goes in this direction). There remained in his thought, however, the idea—of Crocean origin—that the mass of people is an “amorphous mass that eternally floats outside any spiritual organization” and for this reason “is good prey to all: to the witch doctors when mystery descends, to the socialists when effects demonstrate the organic sterility of war. It is the human material necessary for creating history, *material to be precise and not consciousness*, which in itself creates nothing, if the spark of intelligence does not bring it to life and ignite it” (Gramsci 1980b [1916], 175; emphasis added).

The idea of a basic passivity in the popular masses—an idea that connects to that of their basic “irrationality”—and of religion as their “mentality” is not new. Gramsci finds it in Croce’s thought, and it is present as we have seen in Weber’s, who claimed that the popular mass is characterized by an extreme fluidity of opinions and by the inability to think beyond the narrow space of the present.<sup>30</sup> But this negative image of the popular mass as passive and irrational is a commonplace—with few exceptions—of modern political thought. In this thought the popular mass (*vulgus*, *plebs*, *multitudo*, *populace*) is internally divided into many different opinions that the mass follows on the basis of their attractiveness and not their credibility; it is attracted by novelty; it is always on the lookout for a “chief,” whom it is ready to abandon when faced with the first difficulty. Furthermore, the mass is often compared to the sea in a storm or to a chameleon, and its mode of being is defined by the lack of any firmness and coherence.<sup>31</sup> Just through this internal incoherence and irrationality, only a “myth,” such as religion, is able to give form to the *multitudo*, reducing this multiheaded hydra to obedience.

Against this background, by coining the category of “faith,” Benedetto Croce showed that he had understood perfectly—as Weber had done, moreover—the new political centrality of the popular masses in the world that had emerged from the war. But different from Weber, who markedly opposed the rationality of philosophy to the irrational religious passions of the world of the people, with “faith” Croce instituted an intermediate term between reason and the passions, between philosophy and religion. If faith is the result of philosophy, the hardening of philosophy into a “prejudice” that pushes people into action, then the result is that between philosophical thought and faith (and therefore between philosophers who think critically and the people who

30. See Weber (1919, 139–40; 1994, 230–1): “The *danger* which mass democracy presents to national politics consists principally in the possibility that *emotional* elements will become predominant in politics. The ‘mass’ as such (no matter which social strata it happens to be composed of) ‘thinks only as far as the day after tomorrow.’ As we know from experience, the mass is always exposed to momentary, purely emotional and irrational influences ... as far as national politics are concerned, the *unorganised* mass, the democracy of the street, is wholly irrational.”

31. See Villari (1987, 1–48).

act fanatically) there is no *qualitative* gap. Consequently, truth is not something aristocratic; it is not “something extraneous to the human multitude,” which therefore cannot be considered as an “irredeemable and almost animal-like vulgus” (Croce 1926, 210).

Philosophy must therefore not propose for itself the task either of rejecting common sense or of transforming common sense to make it critical. The task of philosophy must instead consist in finding once more the “agreement” between what philosophy discovers through its means and the results of popular wisdom. These “agreements” between philosophical propositions and the popular wisdom deposited “in proverbs and common sayings”<sup>32</sup> are not for Croce the point of departure for a labor of reforming the masses’ way of thinking; on the contrary, they are the point of arrival: the demonstration that *social unity* is guaranteed by this universal circulation of truth.

“Faith,” as an intermediate category between philosophy and religion, and the agreement between philosophy and popular proverbs are the two pillars that support social unity. The latter of these describes the universal circulation of truth, which thus can be one and only one, independent of class points of view, while the former states a guarantee of the fact that the fanatical and impassioned action of the masses is not something extraneous as regards that sole philosophical truth but may rather be absorbed within it. But Croce knew well that this absorption does not come about spontaneously. A further category has therefore to be “invented,” able to explain the way in which the unique truth in reality imposes itself in practice. This category is “good sense,”<sup>33</sup> understood by Croce as “the *trait d’union* between theory and practice” (Escher Di Stefano 2003, 218). Good sense is the result of the coherent elaboration of common sense so that it becomes assimilable by philosophy, and vice versa, so that it may assimilate the teachings of philosophy.

This architecture of categories has an equivalent in political terms. At the political level, the intertwining of “faith” and “good sense” means that the role of “filter,” the disappearance of which had been given attention by Weber with the end of the parliament of “notables,” has now to be handed over to the intermediate category “good sense.” The “man of good sense,” Croce claims, is a figure that stands between the man of the people, who acts as prey to the passions, and the philosopher; this person in a nutshell is the good bourgeois, the respectable person, the representative of the moderate middle class.<sup>34</sup> The category of faith is not therefore pure irrationality. Within itself, it mediates passion and reason since the prejudice that faith represents has already been mediated through the moderating activity of the man of good sense. The filter, which is no longer in parliament, now finds itself assigned to this figure who is active in society. Croce’s whole discourse is directed toward the bourgeoisie as a class capable of the ideological leadership of society. Independently of the political regime—whether the liberal state or the fascist one—Croce was engaged in

32. “One derives great satisfaction (or at least I derive such) in being able to recognize the substantial agreement of proverbs and common sayings with the highest and most difficult philosophical propositions” (Croce 1926, 210).

33. There is “no greater satisfaction for the philosopher than to find his philosophemes in the sayings of good sense” (Croce 1926, 211).

34. See Croce (1931, 195–6).

constructing the premises for the possibility of bourgeois hegemony to be exercised once again over the popular masses after the post–First World War crisis.

It is important to note, however, that Croce firmly denies that this directive element, this “man of good sense,” is the “good bourgeois.” It is the self-same category of “bourgeoisie” that Croce, in a 1928 essay, argues is an “ill-defined historical concept.” For if we attempt to identify the “bourgeois,” at the end what we find before us is an element that “mediates” conflicts, and the mediation of a conflict cannot belong to the sphere in which the conflict arises. Thus, the element that directs the economic sphere—the world of labor—must carry out this mediation on the basis of moving within the sphere of ethics. “Therefore, the ‘middle class,’ of which we are speaking here is a ‘class not a class,’ similar to that ‘general class,’ to that *allgemeine Stand*, to which Hegel granted the ‘general interests,’ *die allgemeine* [sic] *Interessen* as a sphere of activity belonging to it and as its own business” (Croce 1931, 338; 1945, 180). But, Croce (1931, 338; 1945, 180–1) adds, “I say ‘similar’ and not completely ‘identical’ because Hegel, letting himself be influenced, as elsewhere, by the conditions of the Germany of his time, attributed economic stability to that class in the comforts granted to it by fortune or by the stipends furnished by the State, and he assigned it solely to the ‘service of the government’ (*dem Dienst der Regierung*).”

Croce here brings to its conclusion a dual operation. On the one hand, he frees “bourgeois” from where it belongs socially. In denying that the bourgeoisie is a class and claiming that it is nothing other than the ensemble of men of “good sense,” he denies that the ideological and organizational labor carried out by the bourgeoisie in civil society responds to the interest of one side: it is instead carried out in the name of the universal (or better, in the name of social unity). On the other hand, Croce distinguishes within ideological and organizational activity the labor undertaken by the state bureaucracy in the strict sense from that undertaken by a wider “informal bureaucracy.” There therefore exists, he claims, a ruling class that is not a social class, which acts in the name of universal interests and which exerts its political action not only inside the bureaucracy but also outside it.

### From “Religion” to “Myth”

From the above, not only does it emerge that there is a close relationship between Croce’s reflection regarding religion, faith, and myth on the one hand and his reflection on the state and on the informal bureaucracy on the other; it also emerges that all these aspects of his thought belong to the problematic space opened up by the war, with the unheralded protagonism of the masses and the “double siege” situation, described already in section 1. Confronting fascism, Croce developed a renewed liberal proposal, which attempted to suggest a complementarity between the bureaucracy in the strict sense and that sort of informal bureaucracy constituted by the ensemble of men of good sense, who are active in all realms of society, with the aim of reducing the “irrational” activity of the popular masses to the common measure of bourgeois “reason.” In other words, the main proposition he put forward was not the problem of an alternative to the fascist regime. His main preoccupation was rather the one which he *shared* with fascism, that of finding a new method of government, appropriate to the situation

created after the war, in order to contain and repel the siege of state power by the popular masses. To this end is addressed his analysis of religion as the matrix of social unity and of the role of the “general class” in society—in short, his theorization of a new intertwining of “public” and “private,” typical of the new political situation.

It is for this reason that in the *Prison Notebooks* Gramsci decided to reconstruct and make a careful critique of Croce’s thought, since Croce was the liberal philosopher who in his eyes offered the strongest and most solid guarantee of the continuity of bourgeois power in Italy. Croce had begun his activity as a theorist with a series of essays, published at the end of the nineteenth century, that constituted his critique of Marxism and that were among the main contributions—together with those of Bernstein and Sorel—to the revisionist movement in Marxism.<sup>35</sup> In Gramsci’s view, he never in actual fact ceased to be a “revisionist” (in a very broad sense) since in every phase of his intellectual activity he posed the problem of how to realize the passive absorption of the demands of the popular masses in order to avoid their being able to become a hegemonic force.<sup>36</sup>

With the First World War, all became more difficult. Croce responded to the new situation with the development of a historiographical conception—“ethico-political history”—that implied a conception of philosophy that in part was new and more attentive to the problem of the unity of “the concept of reality and an ethics that conforms to this concept”<sup>37</sup> and to which, to be exact, he gave the name “religion.” For this reason, when in 1932 Croce published his *History of Europe in the Nineteenth Century*,<sup>38</sup> Gramsci judged it to be “a tract of passive revolutions” since it demonstrated how Jacobinism had been absorbed and metabolized by liberalism. What value can this presentation have in today’s world? Fascism, Gramsci (Q8§236, 1975, 1088–9; 2007, 378) observes, in effect presents itself as the position whose purpose is that of saving the old world by absorbing the novelties proposed by the popular classes, by the new Jacobinism. It is “the form of ‘passive revolution’ specific to the 20th century.” Croce’s *History of Europe* could, in consequence, function as a “model” for the possible developments of fascism.

Beyond any doubt Croce’s book, which celebrated nineteenth-century liberalism as the “religion of liberty,” was welcomed in numerous critical reviews by fascist intellectuals. Gramsci (Q10I§2, 1975, 1261; 1995, 468) notes, however: “But one would have to see whether Croce is not setting himself this very task in order to get a reformistic activity from above that would weaken the antitheses and reconcile them in a new, ‘transformistically’ obtained legality.” In this way, Croce would contribute to “strengthening fascism by indirectly providing it with an intellectual justification after having helped to purge it of a number of secondary characteristics” (Q10I§9, Gramsci 1975, 1228; 1995, 349–50) and would thereby act as the “channel between the stabilization of capitalism, to which social democracy tended in Europe as from the immediate post-war period, and the stabilization put into operation in Italy by fascism” (Rossi and Vacca 2007, 53).

35. See Croce (1921; the first edition dates to 1900).

36. See Gramsci (Q10§3, 1975, 1214–5; 1995, 335–6).

37. Summarizing his previous reflections, this is the definition of religion given by Croce in 1932 in his *History of Europe* (see notes 1 and 24 above).

38. Of this work Gramsci was able to read only the first three chapters. See Frosini (2012b, 65).

This judgment finds its conclusion in the letter of 6 June 1932 that Gramsci wrote to his sister-in-law Tat'jana (Tatiana) Schucht: "Placed in a historical perspective, of Italian history naturally, Croce's efforts appear to be the most powerful machinery for 'adjusting' the new forces to their vital interests (not only immediate but long-range as well) that the dominant group now possesses and that I believe it properly appreciates despite some superficial appearances" (Gramsci and Schucht 1997, 1023; Gramsci 1994, 182; translation slightly modified). In essence, Gramsci was maintaining that Croce was—from the point of view of the subaltern classes in Italy, and despite his pompous self-definition as the leader of antifascism—the main obstacle to oppose in the struggle for hegemony in Italy since the "revisionist" role that he fulfilled succeeded in inserting into the bourgeois power bloc those new social forces that had been brought into life by the experience of the war and (above all) the economic transformations of the postwar period. To tear these forces away from that power of attraction was an essential task to be achieved in the context of any hypothesis of struggle against the fascist regime.

For the reasons that we have expounded in this section, Gramsci maintained that a central point of attack in order to neutralize Croce's revisionist intervention was in fact religion. This interest of Gramsci's emerges clearly in a passage of the *Prison Notebooks* written between February and November 1931. Gramsci (Q7§39, 1975, 888; 2007, 189) here observes that the "myth," according to Sorel's formulation, "is nothing other than the [Crocean] 'theory of passions' articulated in less precise and formally coherent language." And rewriting this after a time lapse of a year and rethinking his thesis, Gramsci (Q10II§41, 1975, 1308; 1995, 390) defines the Sorelian theory of the myth as "Croce's 'passion' studied in a more concrete manner, it is what Croce calls 'religion,' i.e. a conception of the world with a conformant ethic, it is an attempt to reduce the conception of ideologies in the philosophy of praxis, exactly as seen through the eyes of Crocean revisionism, to scientific language."

As one can see, there is a very marked shift in position that took place over the course of 1932, the year in which Gramsci began the Notebook on "The Philosophy of Benedetto Croce." From this vantage point, it comes out clearly to Gramsci that Croce has "reduced" Marx's theory of ideology to just its critical-destructive aspect, bringing politics down to a "passion." Indeed, for Croce the whole of public political life does not belong to the sphere of ethics but to that of economics: that is, to the terrain on which the struggle takes place for the attainment of the "useful." Faced with this restrictive definition of politics, Sorel, while setting off from Croce's revisionism, took back some aspects of the concreteness of ideology, renewing the nexus between passion, polemical representations, and collective political will, but he stopped short of an understanding of the role of the political party.<sup>39</sup> Only if "the political parties" are understood as "the crucible where the unification of theory and practice, understood as a real historical process" (Q11§12, Gramsci 1975, 1387; 1971b, 335), takes place—only then will it even be possible to subtract politics from being confined within "passion," and only then will the process become possible whereby "reason" itself (and therefore "history") will *emerge from* struggles rather than being the premise of those struggles.

39. See Gramsci (Q13§1, 1975, 1556–7; 1971b, 127–9).

In other words, only then will the process of the autonomous constitution of subaltern classes in hegemonic classes become possible.<sup>40</sup>

The “myth” becomes for Gramsci the true incarnation of what Croce calls “religion.” The myth is its true incarnation because, different from religion, it finds its place explicitly within politics. One might say that while religion expresses (in Crocean language) the directive function of the bourgeoisie as “universal class,” and while politics reduced to “passion” expresses the dominated classes’ impossibility for self-emancipation, in the myth Sorel has in some way fused together these two moments. But Sorel considered the myth an irrational fact,<sup>41</sup> and this is linked up with his refusal of the political party and of the role of intellectuals. Against this, for Gramsci the myth can grow and develop only within a political organism that is capable of organizing itself in a democratic manner.

This helps explain why the myth in Gramsci’s thought, different from Sorel, is not an irrational fact. It is inside the political party that the “fanaticism” of action is mediated with “reflection” in a concrete hegemonic practice of mass training for the role of leadership, and this finds its verbal expression in the concept of “intellectual and moral reform,” which—Gramsci (Q8§21, 1975, 953; 2007, 248) goes on to make explicit—is the “terrain for a subsequent development of the national popular collective will rooted in a complete and accomplished form of modern civilization.” And that is to say that the party is the place in which the collective will, stimulated by the myth, organizes *itself* and takes on a critical form, without however ceasing to be religious. However paradoxical this may seem, the only true response to the masses’ demand for religion lies in an active participation in this process of the self-organization and self-education of subalterns in the art of government.

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40. Croce, according to Gramsci, reduces politics to “passion” insofar as he intends to make impossible even the thought that the subaltern classes, whose action is “impassioned” because it is of a “defensive” nature, may ever come out of this state. “In consequence, one can say that, in Croce, the term ‘passion’ is a pseudonym for social struggle” (Q10§56, 1975, 1350; 1995, 392).

41. See Sorel (1999, 113).

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