Chapter Eight

The Current Relevance and Universality of Gramsci

Gramsci died in 1937, more than seventy years ago. It is, therefore, reasonable to ask whether he is still relevant, or, on the contrary, if he is just a ‘classic’ thinker, at a remove from contemporary problems. I believe there are countless reasons for us to affirm Gramsci’s current relevance without denying his status as a ‘classic’. It is hard to find a single field in social thought – from the humanities to philosophy and literary criticism – to which Gramsci did not greatly contribute. His thought extended to all these fields, proposing new themes, providing new answers to old themes, showing new paths for research and analysis. His contribution was decisive for Marxists, but it was also important for non-Marxist thinkers. Anyone who knows the history of liberation-theology is aware that this important trend – very significant in Latin America, in spite of the Vatican’s repression – was profoundly influenced by Gramsci’s reflections. There is no lack of examples.¹

¹ I recommend the wonderful online Gramsci bibliography, compiled and organised by John M. Cammett, with the help of Maria Luisa Righi and Francesco Giasi, comprising some 15,000 works on our author, half of them in languages other than Italian, written by scholars from different backgrounds and theoretical and ideological leanings. This bibliography, regularly updated, can be found at <http://www.fondazionegramsci.org>. 
Gramsci’s relevance is not merely every classic thinker’s ‘relevance’.\(^2\) Certainly, given the current neoliberal hegemony, there are no few people who wish to mummify him – even on the Left. They wish to reduce him to nothing more than a ‘classic’ thinker: he could be relevant, but only insofar as every classic thinker is relevant. Surely Machiavelli and Hobbes are also relevant: anyone who has read *The Prince* or *Leviathan* is aware that many insights from these books are still significant for today’s world. But Gramsci’s relevance is not like this: even though he is already a ‘classic’ in Gerratana’s sense, the present relevance of the author of the *Prison Notebooks* – unlike that of Machiavelli and Hobbes – derives from the fact that he was the interpreter of a world that essentially remains the same today.

One of Gramsci’s central themes was twentieth-century capitalism: its crises, its contradictions, as well as the political and social morphology created by this social formation, in regard to which the problems he discussed are still present, even if, in many cases, under new guises. The first movements to try to effectively overcome capitalist society were among his main interests. As we have seen, a large part of his work is devoted to an attempt to conceptualise the paths of the socialist revolution in the ‘West’, as he called it. For the very reason that capitalism and its contradictions are still present, socialism remains a central issue on the contemporary political agenda. This is why Gramsci is an interpreter of *our time*: his relevance, therefore, is not the same as that of Machiavelli or Hobbes. The apparently laudatory movement that aims at making him a mere ‘classic’ hides a deception: it is the movement of those who do not wish to break with Gramsci (usually for opportunistic reasons) but yet intend to disqualify him as a privileged interlocutor in the political debate of our time.

### 8.1. Another socialist model

One of the main reasons for Gramsci’s relevance lies in his original thoughts on socialism. Of course, someone could reply that his socialism shows his backwardness, and not his relevance. Indeed, today we are faced not simply with the crisis, but with the clear failure of so-called ‘actually-existing socialism’. Its collapse began in 1989 with the fall of the Berlin Wall and very soon led to its abandonment by all Eastern-European countries, and, eventually, the USSR itself. ‘Historical communism’, as some have called it, somewhat inadequately – that is, the movement that began with the Bolshevik victory

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2. ‘The interpreter of *his own time* who remains relevant in *all times* is “classical”’. Gerratana 1997, p. 11.