CHAPTER 3

The Plan, Structure, and Themes of the Prison Notebooks

First Impressions

The first encounter with Antonio Gramsci’s prison notebooks in Valentino Gerratana’s critical edition can be disconcerting for the unsuspecting contemporary reader.¹ This is above all for reasons of a formal kind, such as the relatively fragmentary character of the texts, the reiteration of some reflections, and the variety of themes dealt with. On reviewing the titles of the notes and reflections contained in the notebooks, the reader might be reminded of a kind of zibaldone in the style of Giacomo Leopardi – i.e., a miscellany of various kinds of writings.²

Indeed, in the three volumes in which Gerratana published the prison notebooks, we find notes of greatly varying lengths alongside what can properly be considered essays and more elaborate studies which deal with a wide range of subjects. In the notebooks, there are entries consisting of the criticism of books read by the author, as well as reflections on problems of daily life, but also other series of notes of a theoretical character in which Gramsci progressively elaborates an original concept of ideology (which is not strictly Marxian); there are entries which deal with the history of intellectuals, and others, for example, which are dedicated to the law of value as it was formulated by the classical economists and by Marx; there are fairly detailed methodological reflections on the relations between science, the conception of the world, religion, philosophy and common sense, but also more specific considerations on the importance of folklore; there are notes on philology and literary criticism, and outlines of economic theory or political economy; there are drafts which we could include under the heading of political science or contemporary sociology, and others which are strictly paedagogical, or which deal with the theory of education.

At first glance, this vast range of subject matter can give an impression of dispersion or lack of focus. Indeed, given that the notes, outlines and almost monographic essays that are contained in the notebooks were the fruit of

¹ Gramsci 1975.
studies carried out in prison, and were to a great extent conditioned by the precarious state of health of their author, such dispersion is understandable. Furthermore, it is well known that Gramsci was not a specialist in any of the particular sciences established according to academic divisions, but someone who carried out studies in philology at university, left his university career unfinished, and then dedicated all his energies for more than ten years to journalism, to political life and to organisation of the workers.

In spite of all this, however, we should not deceive ourselves on this score: the prison notebooks are not only the spontaneous result of necessity in adversity, nor is everything in them a mere dispersion or fragmentedness resulting from the dire conditions for study and from the fact that they were written in captivity. Nor do they have the labyrinthine character of Leopardi’s *Zibaldone*. In Gramsci’s decision to write the notebooks, there was a very deliberate work plan. Furthermore, although this plan could not be completely realised in practice due to circumstances beyond the control of Gramsci, its results still reveal a kind of red thread which ran through the prisoner’s initial programme.

If we disregard for a moment the chronological ordering of the entries in the notebooks (i.e. the dates on which each of the notes were written or rewritten), these results can still be grouped thematically, as was done by the first editors of the prison notebooks, as follows: 1) On historical materialism and its comparison with the philosophy of Benedetto Croce; 2) On intellectuals and the organisation of culture; 3) On the *Risorgimento*; 4) On Machiavelli, politics and the modern state; 5) On literature and national life; 6) On the past and present.3

**Pros and Cons of the Critical Editions of the Prison Notebooks**

The publication of the notebooks according to the themes treated in them – in other words, by placing the emphasis on various of the essential matters which preoccupied Gramsci in prison for didactic reasons – obscures a dimension which is no less important for the comprehension of their content, namely the evolution and the rhythm of the thinking of their author, or the gradual turn of

3 These are the titles of the six volumes of the prison notebooks in the edition published by Giulio Einaudi, in Turin, between 1948 and 1951. This edition was promoted by Palmiro Togliatti, and it was undertaken under the direction of Felice Platone. The first thematic edition of the *Quaderni del carcere* is inseparable from the political and cultural vision of Palmiro Togliatti, that is to say, from the place that the latter attributed to Gramsci in the political and cultural history of the *Novecento*. 