Chapter Six
Gramsci’s Path from ‘Ploughman’ to ‘Fertiliser’ of History

My focus in this essay is on the changes that took place in Gramsci’s mind concerning his role in revolutionary struggle when, after three years of work as Italian representative of the Communist International in Moscow and Vienna, deputy to the Italian parliament, and general secretary of the Communist Party of Italy from 1924 to 1926, he became a political prisoner subjected to that ‘grinding attrition’ of prison life whose ruinous effects he openly acknowledged.¹ That something changed in him in prison is certain; but we need to specify it, and to determine, as precisely as possible, whether and how this change affected the way in which he conceived the notion of political will and the relationship between political will and the struggle for a new socialist order.

I refer in the title of this essay to a passage in the Prison Notebooks where Gramsci employs images of the ploughman and of fertiliser to evoke the ‘molecular change’ that his personality had undergone in prison.² The pertinence of this passage to the psychological situation of Gramsci in prison seems clear: instead of being a ‘ploughman’ of history, a role he had played before his imprisonment, he was now acting as a ‘fertilising’ agent, a function to which, he says, he had adapted himself ‘philosophically’. The passage is worth citing in its entirety. Referring presumably to his communist comrades with the pronoun ‘they’, Gramsci expressed himself in these terms:

1. Gramsci 1975, Vol. II, p. 1126. If the notebook from which quotes are taken has not yet appeared in English, I have cited the 1975 Italian edition with the relative volume number, as in this case.
A dialogue. Something has changed, fundamentally. This is evident. What is it? Previously, they all wanted to be plowmen of history, to play the active parts, each one of them to play an active part. Nobody wanted to be the ‘fertiliser’ of history. But is it possible to plow without first manuring the land? So plowmen and fertiliser are both necessary. In the abstract, they all acknowledged this. But in practice? ‘Fertiliser’ here and ‘fertiliser’ there really meant [for many of us] to retreat, to return to darkness, to the ill-defined. Now something has changed, since there are those who adapt themselves ‘philosophically’ to being fertiliser, who know that is what they must be, and they adapt themselves to it. It is like the problem of the proverbial dying man. But there is a big difference, because at the point of death what is involved is a decisive act that lasts an instant; whereas in the case of fertiliser, the problem is a long-term one, and poses itself afresh at every moment. You only live once, as the saying goes; your own personality is irreplaceable. You are not faced abruptly with an instant’s choice on which to gamble, a choice in which you have to evaluate the alternatives in a flash and cannot postpone your decision. Here, postponement is continual, and your decision has continually to be renewed. Therefore, it can be said that something has changed. It is not even a matter of living for one day as a lion or a hundred days as a sheep. You do not live like a lion even for a minute, anything but: you live like something less than a sheep for years and years and you know that you must live that way. The image of Prometheus who, instead of being attacked by the eagle, is devoured by parasites. The Jews were able to imagine Job: Only the Greeks could imagine Prometheus; but the Jews were more realistic, more pitiless, and they also endowed their hero with greater distinctiveness.3

It would be difficult to find a more appropriate metaphor than the one Gramsci used in this ‘autobiographical note’ to characterise his psychological situation and his choice of role during the ten years of his imprisonment. In this passage, Gramsci observes that ‘Nobody wanted to be the fertiliser of history. But is it possible to plow without first fertilising the land?’ Here we have a formulation that evokes the Gramscian theory of ‘war of position’ and of ‘hegemony’ which, from about 1930, he saw as a long and arduous task to be carried out before the triumph of socialism, not after.

In prison, Gramsci found two ways to make himself a ‘fertilising’ agent of revolution. One of these, from 1929 to 1935, was the extraordinarily rich intellectual diary he kept in his cell that became known after World War II as the Prison Notebooks. The other was in the lively but short-lived dialogues he initiated with some of his fellow communist prisoners. Aurelio Del Gobbo recalls that when Gramsci talked about Marxist theory, ‘everyone listened to him and never interrupted him’,4 and Girolamo Li Causi states that ‘the conversations with Gramsci were an inexhaustible source of intellectual and ideological enrichment’.5 As an organiser and man of action, recalled Alfonso Leonetti, ‘you