Labriola: The Role of Ideology

1 Labriola and Gramsci

The relationship between Gramsci and Labriola has been the object of various different and often counterposed readings. This has been the case ever since the first reader, commentator and publicist of Gramsci’s writings, Palmiro Togliatti – whose own reading of this topic was not unvarying. Take, for example, his 1945 polemic with Ernesto Buonaiuti, who had labelled Gramsci’s method ‘unMarxist’, which was then gradually becoming better known thanks to the reprint of Alcuni temi della questione meridionale and the publication of certain excerpts from the Letters and Notebooks which Togliatti himself was advance-publishing in Rinascita. Buonaiuti had counterposed Gramsci to Antonio Labriola, in his view far more a Marxist than the Sardinian writer. Moreover, this Catholic-modernist thinker had been a pupil of Labriola’s at the University of Rome, and we may suspect that he had at least a positive memory – if not necessarily a positive estimation – of his old teacher and his doctrine.

Evidently struck and politically concerned by this counterposition – which was seemingly very unfavourable to Gramsci, who was implicitly painted as an idealist, almost as if to anticipate Croce’s well-known 1947 review of the Letters\(^1\) – Togliatti responded to Buonaiuti:

> scholars of Marxism recognise in Labriola a tendency towards a unilateral, limited and ultimately fatalistic interpretation of the doctrines of scientific socialism. It is this tendency that led Antonio Labriola to make profound mistakes, for example in his appraisal of Italian colonialism and, more generally, meant that his activity as a theorist of socialism in Italy bore little fruit.\(^2\)

Perhaps this is an ungenerous reading, even if faithful enough to a view expressed by Gramsci in the Prison Notebooks, where he broke through the limits of Labriola’s positions on colonial policy in his well-known 1902 interview\(^3\) and

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1 See Croce 1947, pp. 86–8.
2 Togliatti 2001, p. 96.
3 Labriola 1973, p. 957.
the equally well-known anecdote about his stance on the ‘education of the Papuan’, as told by Croce.4 This was also a theoretical judgement, accusing Labriola of a ‘mechanical and rather empiricist way of thinking’.5 It was a harsh analysis, though part of a polemic – the first of the infinite postwar debates on Gramsci – trying to explain why Marxism was not the deterministic and economic theory to which its opponents tended to reduce it. Indeed, Togliatti continued:

Antonio Gramsci, who was an attentive scholar of Labriola, and his pupil in the true sense of that word, corrected this erroneous tendency. The Marxist does not, cannot, reduce analysis of historical and political facts to presenting a simple cause-and-effect relationship between an economic situation and the socio-political situation. But that was how Marxism was here understood by those who knew it only superficially, unaware that for a Marxist this relationship of causality is a very complicated matter, implying action and reaction, interdependence and contrast.6

This appraisal itself suggests the larvae of contradictions since it paints Gramsci as a pupil of a fatalist Marxist, whom the pupil himself would have to – and was able to – correct. Without mentioning the deployment of ‘superficial’ readers of Marxism, which Labriola ends up being objectively assimilated amongst, according to the passage here quoted: which perhaps echoes an old comment of Trotsky’s, who himself passed rather contradictory judgement on Labriola, whom he both praised as a true expert on the materialist dialectic, yet also labelled as affected by a ‘brilliant dilettanteism’.

An ungenerous reading, as we were saying, from Togliatti. The same man who a few years later, marking the 1954 fifty-year anniversary of the Cassino-born philosopher’s death, paid homage to him with a long essay – albeit one that was interrupted and never completed7 – in which the PCI secretary profoundly corrected himself, among other things stating that Gramsci had been ‘the greatest pupil and continuation of Labriola’,8 thus reinforcing the posit-

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4 Croce 1918, pp. 60–1.
5 Q8, § 200: Gramsci 1975, p. 1061; Gramsci 2011, p. 349. In the corresponding C text (Q11, § 1), Gramsci passes even harsher judgement, adding that his ‘mechanical and rather empirical way of thinking’ is ‘very close to the most vulgar evolutionism’, ‘mechanical and retrograde’ rather than ‘dialectical and progressive’: Gramsci 1975, pp. 1368–9.
6 Togliatti 2001, p. 97.
7 See Zanardo 1986.
8 Togliatti 1974, p. 324n. See also my own comments in Liguori 2012, pp. 90 et sqq.