CHAPTER 5

Redefining Historical Materialism in the Peripheries of Marxism: Georges Sorel and Antonio Labriola between France, Italy, and Germany

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Introduction

This chapter examines a number of complex dynamics of cultural exchange in an episode in the intellectual history of Marxism in the fin de siècle. Between 1895 and 1898 Georges Sorel and Antonio Labriola, with the decisive inter-mediation of a young Benedetto Croce, engaged in an important discussion on the meaning of historical materialism which was, with the opening of the new century, to impact on socialist theory and practice both in France and in Italy. In a time when the undisputed center of gravity of European socialism, in theoretical and in political terms, was the German social democratic party SPD, the striking aspects of this debate were two. First, it occurred largely at the margins of the principal axes of socialist reflection in Europe, and second, it produced a rationale for Marxism at odds with the hegemonic German model. The Marxism outlined most systematically in Labriola’s Del materialismo storico, and informing subsequent works by both Labriola and Sorel,1 refused notions of historical and economic determinism, outlined a thoroughly historicist epistemological stance, and, most importantly, had the potential to emphasize forms of socialist struggle different from the parliamentarianism embraced, practiced, and theorized by German social democracy.

It is difficult to make sense of this heterodox outcome if we remain within the bounds of the established historiographical view on the diffusion of Marxism in the fin de siècle. Starting from the indubitable German centrality in the landscape of European socialism, historians of Marxism have tended to see the dynamics of transmission of the doctrine in terms of an unmediated diffusion model from the German center to various peripheries: “it was almost

1 For the key theoretical texts see Antonio Labriola, Del Materialismo Storico. Delucidazione Preliminare (Roma: Loescher, 1896); Antonio Labriola, Discorrendo di Socialismo e Filosofia. Lettere a Georges Sorel (Roma: Loescher, 1898); Georges Sorel, Saggi di Critica del Marxismo (Palermo: Sandron, 1903).
never a case,” writes, for example, Franco Andreucci, “of ‘national,’ ‘creative’
translations of Marxism, as would happen in the period of the Third Interna-
tional. The Marxism which was exported was mainly the one elaborated by
German social democracy…”2 It is equally difficult, and ultimately mistaken, to
explain the Marxism of Sorel and Labriola as national productions, exclusively
in terms of the French and Italian intellectual fields of the time. This would
not only ignore that the debate between Sorel and Labriola occurred across
national borders, but also that, as with any contribution to Marxist theory in
the period, the production and diffusion of these texts occurred in a funda-
mentally transnational intellectual space in which it was impossible to avoid
engagement with the theorization of the SPD.

The argument I develop here pays attention to the peculiar combination
of centrality and marginality that characterized both the French and Italian
cultural worlds of the period. The theoretical originality of the Sorel–Labriola
debate on historical materialism emerges precisely from the fact that both
France and Italy, though peripheral intellectual spaces in terms of Marxism,
possessed strong autochthonous discourses of social scientific rationality. The
peripherality in terms of Marxism, I argue, must be conceptualized in terms of
the absence in both Latin countries of a Marxist mass party on the scale of the
SPD. This political underdevelopment had decisive intellectual consequences.
To start with, it turned the question of the theoretical justification of Marxism
into a far more important issue than it could have been in Germany. Secondly,
it allowed intellectuals to engage in this theoretical enterprise in conditions
of relative freedom. Thirdly, and crucially, it forced these social scientific ra-
tionales for Marxism to be constructed in relation to national traditions and
debates on social science and its methods.

Though this general dynamic applies to both Sorel and Labriola, it is in-
teresting to highlight the significant differences in the ways in which the two
related to their own national fields. In the case of Sorel, but similar consider-
ations could be extended to Charles Andler and Jean Jaurès, the task at hand
is that of creating a French Marxism. In other words, the effort of theoretical
reinvention is aimed at setting up Marxism as a credible intellectual option in
the national conversation on science and politics, with the intention of secur-
ing a more central position both for the doctrine and for oneself at home. Lab-
riola’s case is rather different. It is true that the theoretical core of Labriola’s
Marxism consists in a re-elaboration of an older tradition of Italian historicism

2 Franco Andreucci, “La Diffusione e La Volgarizzazione del Marxismo,” in Il Marxismo Nell’età
della Seconda Internazionale, ed. Eric Hobsbawm, vol. 2, Storia del Marxismo (Torino: Giulio
Einaudi, 1979), 24.