I. Historicism, anti-historicism, post-historicism

Discussion and research on Gramsci have for a long time been a predominantly Italian issue, or rather a question intrinsic or mainly referring to the history of the Italian Communist Party (PCI). It has seemed obvious then, for a whole generation of studies on Gramsci, to link his legacy to the history of the party that he had helped to found. In turn, this has meant that studies dedicated to Gramsci always had a double register: historical reconstruction and political evaluation walked hand in hand, or rather historical reconstruction was always functional to a given idea of how to use Gramsci’s thought in contemporary contexts. This line of interpretation has been characterised by highly distinctive periods, corresponding almost exactly to the various moments of Italian politics and culture. Yet, at least one unifying trait might be identified in the whole period running from the immediate postwar period until the dissolution of the PCI in 1991. This trait derives from the way in which Togliatti presented, at least from 1949, the question of Gramsci’s legacy as ‘thinker and man
of action’, that is, as a great intellectual – heir to the ‘national’ tradition of Bertrando Spaventa, Antonio Labriola and Benedetto Croce – who was also a Communist politician. The self-evidence of the link between being an intellectual and being a Communist was part of a precise political strategy of Togliatti’s. It aimed to conquer the sympathy and support of Italian intellectuals without asking them to put into question their idealistic and historicist education. Historicism, in fact, worked paradoxically as a meeting point for differentiated philosophical positions; historicism understood, of course, in terms generic enough not to question the theoretical matrix of anyone. Gramsci’s thought itself was thus reduced to a variation of Benedetto Croce’s historicism.

In this way, Togliatti achieved at least two things: first, he linked the name of Gramsci closely to the politics of his own party, and second, at the same time, allowed non-Marxist intellectuals to participate in the elaboration both of Gramsci’s legacy and of the cultural politics of the PCI. The result is what I have called the unifying trait of all readings of Gramsci until the beginning of the 1990s: in the changing interpretations, there was always a remarkable incomprehension of the specific theoretical problem and the related question of a Weltanschauung. What remains alive and vivid of Gramsci is, on the one hand, the exemplary model of a communist fighter and, on the other, his ability to rethink Marxist schemata from a ‘national’ point of view, thus unshackling himself from doctrinal and ‘ideological’ approaches. Gramsci was thus duly entered into the ‘chronicles of Italian philosophy’, becoming a key reference point in the ‘national culture’. It might thus be said that, by imposing a strongly anti-theoretical and ecumenical imprint on the ‘official’ reading of Gramsci, Togliatti fulfilled what Benedetto Croce had anticipated in his 1947 review of the *Letters from Prison* published by Einaudi when he wrote that ‘as a man of thought he was one of us’, in Joseph Conrad’s sense, re-read in the light of a universal, ‘cathartic’ and ‘lyrical’ function of culture and history.

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1 This is the title of an essay of 1949, now published in Togliatti 2001, pp. 131–50.
3 This is the title of an influential work by Eugenio Garin 1955, with numerous later editions.
4 See also by Garin 1958, pp. 3–14. By the same author, see also in the same direction Garin 1967, pp. 119–43; and Garin 1969, pp. 37–73. All these texts are now gathered together in Garin 1997.
5 Croce 1947, p. 86. The expression ‘one of us’ is picked up with approval by Garin 1958, p. 9.