

Subalternity and Language: Overcoming the Fragmentation of Common Sense

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Abstract

The topics of language and subaltern social groups appear throughout Antonio Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*. Although Gramsci often associates the problem of political fragmentation among subaltern groups with issues concerning language and common sense, there are only a few notes where he explicitly connects his overlapping analyses of language and subalternity. We build on the few places in the literature on Gramsci that focus on how he relates common sense to the questions of language or subalternity. By explicitly tracing out these relations, we hope to bring into relief the direct connections between subalternity and language by showing how the concepts overlap with respect to Gramsci's analyses of common sense, intellectuals, philosophy, folklore, and hegemony. We argue that, for Gramsci, fragmentation of any social group's 'common sense', worldview and language is a political detriment, impeding effective political organisation to counter exploitation but that such fragmentation cannot be overcome by the imposition of a 'rational' or 'logical' worldview. Instead, what is required is a deep engagement with the fragments that make up subaltern historical, social, economic and political conditions. In our view, Gramsci provides an alternative both to the celebration of fragmentation fashionable in liberal multiculturalism and uncritical postmodernism, as well as other attempts of overcoming it through recourse to some external, transcendental or imposed worldview. This is fully in keeping with, and further elucidates Gramsci's understanding of the importance of effective 'democratic centralism' of the leadership of the party in relation to the rank and file and the popular masses.

Keywords

Antonio Gramsci; language; linguistics; subaltern social groups; subalternity; subaltern studies; common sense; folklore; hegemony

Introduction

Within Gramsci's legacy, the concept of 'subalternity' and his attention to language politics often take secondary and merely supportive roles to the more

influential themes such as hegemony, passive revolution, organic intellectuals and war of position. Not only are ‘subalternity’ and ‘language’ cast as second fiddles, especially in the English-language literature, but many meticulous scholars will note that Gramsci writes specifically about subaltern groups and language quite late in his prison notes. Indeed, when considering the chronological composition of the *Prison Notebooks*, the two thematically organised ‘special notebooks’ that Gramsci devoted to subaltern groups and language appear towards the end. Notebook 25 (‘On the Margins of History. History of Subaltern Groups’) dates to the period of 1934, and Notebook 29 (‘Notes for an Introduction to the Study of Grammar’), which is Gramsci’s last notebook, dates to the period of 1935. However, the themes of subalternity and language appear throughout the *Prison Notebooks*.¹

Elsewhere, the individual authors of this article have tried to show the profound centrality subalternity and language, separately, to Gramsci’s overall project.² In different ways, we have argued that the examination of subalternity and language in the *Prison Notebooks* illuminates Gramsci’s entire social and cultural theory. This article brings these two perspectives together and discusses the inter-relationships between Gramsci’s lifelong concern with the themes of subalternity (if not the actual term) and language from childhood in Sardinia, through his university studies and pre-prison political activity to his prison writings.

Focusing on the relationships between Gramsci’s analysis of subalternity and his discussion of language reveals a central dynamic in his approach to politics, what might be called the *differentia specifica* of his Marxism, or at least one of the major themes within it. Where various strains of Marxism have seen it as an analytic or ‘scientific discovery’ that needs to be brought from the outside (whether by Marxist experts or party leaders) to enlighten the exploited, Gramsci emphasised the need of intellectual activity to be immersed in the lives and experiences of the masses. Much of Gramsci’s critiques of both

1. Following what has become the standard method, we will cite Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks* by giving the Notebook number preceded by a Q (for ‘Quaderno’ – Notebook in Italian), and then a § prior to the note (or section) number, following the definitive source, Antonio Gramsci (1975) *Quaderni del Carcere*, 4 Volumes, edited by Valentino Gerratana, Turin: Einaudi. The English translation of this critical edition is under way; the first three of five volumes have been published, translated and edited by Joseph Buttigieg and published by Columbia University Press in 1992, 1996 and 2007. Where we followed particular English translations, we will cite them. There are extensive and useful concordance tables available at the International Gramsci Society website: <<http://www.internationalgramscisociety.org/>>.

2. See Green 2002, 2006 and Ives 2004a, 2004b. In these works, our method is philological and pays heed to the chronological construction of Gramsci’s Notebooks, especially Green 2006. Here we will follow a compatible but different method of drawing connections across Gramsci’s research project to reveal dynamics that would otherwise remain obscured.

positivism and idealism rest on the very general position that they both separate the lived experiences of capitalism from the analysis and understanding of it purported to be necessary to overcome it. Gramsci raises this point in his critique of Benedetto Croce's liberal idealism, as well as that of Nikolai Bukharin's positivistic Marxist materialism.³ Of course, Gramsci's well-known and influential detailed analyses of the role of intellectuals, not solely within socialism, but in maintaining bourgeois hegemony, leads him to the focus on the role of 'organic intellectuals' who do not bring political consciousness and organisation from 'without' but work through the experiences, worldviews, fragmented common sense, folklore and languages of subaltern social groups.

As Kate Crehan has explored, while Gramsci had respect for 'peasant culture' and 'subaltern common sense', as she puts it, 'he was never sentimental about it, seeing it both as narrow and parochial, and needing to be transcended...'.⁴ Crehan elaborates that it is 'the inability of subaltern people to produce coherent accounts of the world they live in that have the potential to challenge existing hegemonic accounts... in any *effective way*'.⁵ However, she correctly emphasises that one of Gramsci's major criticisms of Bukharin was that he did not start from an engagement with the fragmentary nature of subaltern common sense. He was thus unable to grasp what, for Gramsci, was essential: the distinction between what Crehan calls 'explicit' and 'implicit conceptions of the world';⁶ what Gramsci discussed as the contrast between thought and action; between a conception of the world 'borrowed from another group' that is affirmed verbally; and that of action, though it may only manifest itself 'occasionally and in flashes' and is perhaps only 'embryonic'.⁷

Crehan goes a substantial way in showing how the 'common sense' of subaltern groups becomes fragmented and incoherent, according to Gramsci, and why this is a political problem and a detriment to political organisation and action.⁸ But she only begins to touch on the notion of how that incoherence and fragmentation can be overcome, that is, what it means to begin from the

3. The first two 'special notebooks' in Gramsci's prison *opus* deal directly with idealism and materialism. Notebook 10 ('The Philosophy of Benedetto Croce') contains Gramsci's critique of Croce's idealism, and in Notebook 11 ('Introduction to the Study of Philosophy'), Gramsci subjects Nikolai Bukharin's positivist conception of Marxism to critique.

4. Crehan 2002, p. 98.

5. Crehan 2002, p. 104.

6. Crehan 2002, pp. 115–19.

7. Gramsci 1971, pp. 326–7, Q11, §12.

8. In contrast to the familiar notion of 'common sense' in contemporary Anglo-American usage, as sound and uncomplicated judgement, the Gramscian notion of 'common sense' draws on the Italian spectrum going from 'senso comune' (common sense) to 'buon senso' (good sense). In this context, 'common sense' refers more literally to beliefs that are common, modes of thought, opinions, and conceptions of the world held by the masses, and 'good sense' has

position of ‘common sense’ and why it is that the process cannot, for Gramsci, be directed from a position outside of common sense or why order and coherence cannot just be imposed through rational analysis.

Similarly, as Fabio Frosini has emphasised, Gramsci explicitly distinguished his own notion of ‘common sense’ in relation to his philosophy of praxis from those of both Kant and Croce, both of whom sought an agreement between philosophy and ‘common sense’. Thus, Frosini notes how Gramsci’s discussion of ‘common sense’ is a critical response to the debates between Croce and Giovanni Gentile in the 1920s and 30s.⁹ Although Croce maintained that he abandoned ‘the traditional distinction between plain thinking and philosophical thinking’, he claimed that ‘the distinguishing feature of philosophy is consistency’ and that ‘[n]on-philosophers are those who are not troubled by inconsistency or incoherence and do not trouble to escape it’.¹⁰ Thus, for Croce, the distinction between philosophical and non-philosophical thinking is not ‘a logical difference in the quality of the thought’ but ‘a purely psychological difference of interest and attitude’.¹¹

Frosini makes an incredibly insightful argument about how Gramsci’s development of the concept of ‘translation’ repositions the relationship between ‘common sense’ and philosophy. We take a different, though not contradictory path, of highlighting and describing the process whereby ‘common sense’ and language change are integral to the process of transforming the fragmented conditions of subalternity.¹² As André Tosel has argued, for Gramsci,

[t]he philosophy of praxis should thus be developed following two axes: On the one hand, as a reformation of common sense by employing the position that all humans are philosophers; on the other hand, as an exposition. . . .

which Tosel explains by quoting Gramsci

more of the English resonance of ‘common sense’ as good practical judgement. See editor’s note in Gramsci 1971, p. 323, fn. 1.

9. See Gramsci 1996, p. 51, Q3, §48; Gramsci 1996, pp. 159–60, Q4, §18; Gramsci 2007, pp. 333–4, 335–6, Q8, §173, §175. Frosini 2003b, pp. 170–6.

10. Croce 1949, 226. Originally published in Italian as Croce 1928.

11. *Ibid.*

12. Frosini 2003a, pp. 6–8. Frosini explores Gramsci’s concept of ‘translatability’ in this context, which is obviously related to Gramsci’s approach to language. Here, we wish to add to Frosini’s focus (also in Frosini 2003b) on Gramsci’s engagement with philosophy – what he astutely sees as the translatability between theory and practice – with our focus on the fragmentation of common sense from the perspective not of philosophers like Croce or Gentile, but the subaltern classes. Boothman’s (2004) discussion of translation is also important here, but well beyond the scope of this essay.

[of] ‘problems’ that arose in the course of the history of philosophy, in order to criticise them, demonstrate their real value (if they still have any) or their importance as links in a chain, and define the new problems of the present time.¹³

Most of the scholarship, including Frosini and Tosel, follows the second of these axes, focusing on Gramsci’s engagement with the traditional intellectual activity of various philosophers and philosophical systems. While these axes are obviously closely related, and not separable projects precisely because of the complex relation between common sense and philosophy, our point here is to focus on the first axis; the reformation of common sense, the difficulties that ‘everyone’ (that is, those in subaltern social groups) faces in philosophising, and how Gramsci’s writings on language and subalternity together are the best indication of what Gramsci means by this.

Thus, we offer a very different interpretation than that of Andrew Robinson who emphasises Gramsci’s notion of transforming common sense, but focusing on Gramsci’s negative assessment of ‘common sense’ as indicating the need to ‘break’ with it and resist the ‘tendency to pander to existing beliefs...’.¹⁴ We are proposing a different and more dialectical overcoming of the fragmentation of subaltern ‘common sense’. As Guido Liguori has shown, for Gramsci, common sense cannot be eliminated but is ‘what is at stake in the struggle for hegemony’.¹⁵ The transformation of the condition of subalternity requires not the elimination of common sense but the critique and transformation of it. Gramsci emphasises this point in his critique of Bukharin, for Bukharin’s attempt at producing a ‘popular manual’ failed because it did not begin from a critique of common sense, but, rather, it reinforced elements of common sense uncritically. In the struggle for hegemony, as Gramsci emphasises, the formation of a homogenous social group must be accompanied by the formation of a systematic philosophy that provides a basis for the criticism of common sense.¹⁶ Thus, the critique of common sense functions as an elementary phase in the struggle for hegemony. In Liguori’s words: ‘Revolutionary theory is born *against* existing common sense’.¹⁷

13. Tosel 1996, pp. 56–7 (translation by Rocco Lacorte); Gramsci 2007, p. 369, Q8, §220.

14. Robinson 2006, pp. 76, 83.

15. Liguori 2006, p. 79.

16. Gramsci 2007, pp. 333–4, Q8, §175.

17. Liguori 2006, p. 78. While it is well beyond the scope of this essay, our position is to insist on the importance of Gramsci’s discussion of ‘immanence’ in the process of transforming common sense to good sense and the philosophy of praxis, see, for example, Thomas 2008, and Ives 2004b, pp. 84–90. See also Frosini 2003b, pp. 143–9. This theme is also connected to Gramsci’s use of ‘immanent grammar’ as synonymous with ‘spontaneous grammar’ discussed below.

Our contention here is that looking at this aspect of Gramsci's discussion of subalternity together with his writings on language provides a crucial insight into his understandings of the dynamics at the core of his political and cultural theory. These questions are obviously important precursors to evaluating any approach to political consciousness and ideology, or, most importantly, the appropriate way to transform conditions of oppression, exploitation and subordination through social and political struggle.

Our point is not to reduce Gramsci's political analysis to questions of unification or differing conceptions of the world, but show how they are intimately tied to questions of political organisation and struggle. As Tullio De Mauro has argued,

... for Gramsci, the economic-productive element is interwoven with the element of invention and cultural elaboration, and both cannot subsist without being woven into the capability of linguistic elaboration and communication and with the construction of life in common in both the ethnic and national dimensions of life.¹⁸

These questions become all the more important with the advent of debates around postmodernism, ideologies of multiculturalism, the 'culture wars', discussions of 'the multitude' *à la* Hardt and Negri, and the complex of economic, social, political and cultural transformations unsatisfactorily described with the term 'globalisation'. Our current contexts provide particular resonances for questions of 'common sense' and fragmentation. It is within these contexts that Gramsci's ideas are so critical for us today and which focus our attention on how Gramsci understands the fragmentation of 'common sense' as shown in his writings on the subaltern and language.

I. The subaltern condition: 'common sense' and fragmentation

In the *Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci develops a critical interpretation of the condition of subaltern groups, in which he surveys the factors that contribute to their subordination, in addition – but not unrelated – to their economic exploitation, such as their modes of thought, worldviews, levels of political organisation, and culture. In his analysis, Gramsci attempts to identify what prevents subaltern groups from acting as effective political agents and from overcoming their subordination. Subaltern groups in modern Italian history, in his view, are characterised by ineffectual political activity. Although the

18. De Mauro 1999, p. 76. See also Frosini 2003b, especially pp. 30–3 and pp. 168–82.

history of their spontaneous political activity, such as peasant revolts and insurgencies, illustrates their discontent and their will to generate political change, the political activity of subaltern groups rarely goes beyond certain limits, and the groups appear to be incapable of achieving permanent victory or maintaining a level of political power. In this sense, Gramsci is grappling with what Frantz Fanon describes as the positive and negative attributes of ‘spontaneity’.¹⁹

One of the major impediments preventing subaltern groups from overcoming their subordination – economic and cultural – is the lack of conscious leadership and organisation to provide the groups with coherence and direction. Gramsci attributes this lack of coherence and direction to the composition of subaltern groups’ culture and consciousness. In Gramsci’s view, the common sense and worldview of subaltern groups in Italy tended to lack the critical elements required to provide conscious and organised leadership. In Notebook 3, §48, Gramsci observes that within spontaneous political movements

there exist a ‘multiplicity’ of elements of ‘conscious leadership’, but none of them predominates or goes beyond the level of the ‘popular science’ – the ‘common sense’, that is, the [traditional] conception of the world – of a given social stratum’.²⁰

Because of this, Gramsci contends that common sense provides inadequate foundations for establishing an effective political movement capable of producing political change. Thus, in Gramsci’s view, common sense is one the factors that hinders the ability of subaltern groups to assert political autonomy and to overcome their subordination. However, his conclusion is not that ‘common sense’ needs to be or can be rejected in its entirety or that there exists some ‘philosophy’ outside of ‘common sense’ by which ‘common sense’ can be judged and corrected. Rather, Gramsci suggests that common sense needs to become critical. As Liguori points out, common sense is constituted by a ‘Janus-faced’ contra-position of fragmentary elements on the one hand and the potential to become critical on the other.²¹ We want to go further along the direction indicated by Liguori’s, Frosini’s and Crehan’s recognition of the nuances of Gramsci’s positive and negative assessments of ‘common sense’ by showing how he relates it to the fragmented conditions of subalternity and subaltern languages and how he sees the movement from there to non-fragmented consciousness and truly popular common language.

19. Fanon 2004, Chapter 2, pp. 63–96.

20. Gramsci 1996, p. 48, Q3, §48. The bracketed insertions are Gramsci’s.

21. Liguori 2006, pp. 74–5.

In other words, the Gramscian notion of ‘common sense’ can be understood as popular social thought or as the common beliefs and opinions held by ordinary people. In some ways, common sense can be understood as the mentality or psychology of the masses.²² Gramsci uses language to develop his notion of ‘common sense’ both metaphorically and literally.²³ Gramsci also sees languages as an important element of ‘common sense’. At times, he goes as far as stating that ‘[l]anguage also means culture and philosophy (if only at the level of common sense)’.²⁴

In his attack on élitist notions of ‘philosophy’, he argues that it is

essential to destroy the widespread prejudice that philosophy is a strange and difficult thing just because it is the specific intellectual activity of a particular category of specialists or of professional and systematic philosophers.²⁵

He then defines ‘spontaneous philosophy’; that is, the intellectual activity of ‘everybody’ as such:

[t]his philosophy is contained in: 1. language itself, which is a totality of determined notions and concepts and not just words grammatically devoid of content; 2. ‘common sense’ and ‘good sense’; 3. popular religion and therefore, also in the entire systems of beliefs, superstitions, opinions, ways of seeing things and of acting, which are collectively bundled together under the name ‘folklore’.²⁶

He continues by referring to ‘language’ again as an indication of intellectual activity, even if unconscious, in which ‘there is contained a specific conception of the world...’, and then poses the question whether it is ‘better to take part in a conception of the world mechanically imposed by the external environment...’, or

to work out consciously and critically one’s own conception of the world and thus, in connection with the labours of one’s own brain, choose one’s sphere of activity, take an active part in the creation of the history of the world...²⁷

22. Colucci 1999.

23. We shall see below how ‘Esperanto’ becomes for him a metaphor of mechanical and artificial worldviews or modes of thought that are imposed on people with little reference to their own life experiences and their own creative input and thus may make ‘sense’ but are not ‘common’ in the literal sense.

24. Gramsci 1971, p. 349, Q10II, §44.

25. Gramsci 1971, p. 323, Q11, §12.

26. *Ibid.*

27. *Ibid.*

Thus, Gramsci's analysis of the fragmentary nature of subaltern common sense is intimately tied to his notions of language and its role in conceiving the world. As Frosini argues, '[l]anguage [*linguaggio*] is not an instrument that can serve us arbitrarily, but it is a concrete real form that thought assumes; indeed, it is the specific historical structure of thought'.²⁸

The implication here is that Gramsci's strategy and approach to how to overcome fragmentation in 'common sense' can be garnered from its metaphorical and direct relation to his approach to language and, specifically, his concern about the effective lack of a national Italian language but also his rejection of particular methods of attempting to create such a language which he saw as unable to achieve a truly popular language.

In using language and linguistics in political and cultural analysis of subaltern common sense, Gramsci is drawing on his university studies in linguistics at the University of Turin with Matteo Bartoli. Bartoli was engaged in debates with the neo-grammarians school from which Ferdinand de Saussure emerged and 'structuralist' linguistics was created.²⁹ In addition, but not disconnected from, his more technical training in linguistics, the context of language politics in Italian society is very important. As a Sardinian born in 1891, Gramsci grew up in the midst of the Italian government's attempt to 'standardise' Italian, that is, create a national Italian language used by its citizens.

Language was a central feature in the process described by Massimo d'Azeglio famous proclamation shortly after the Risorgimento, 'Italy is a fact, now we need to make Italians'. Italian historical linguists estimate that, at the time, somewhere between two and a half and twelve per cent of the population spoke anything that could be considered 'standard' Italian.³⁰ The many dialects were not mutually understandable from north to south. While literary Italian had existed for centuries as a written language, a *truly* common, national language for most Italians did not exist. Moreover, about 75% of Italians were illiterate, with regions like Sardinia having illiteracy rates as high as 90%.³¹

This lack of a 'standard' language, especially in comparison to the powerful nation-states of France and England, if not Germany, was of major political concern for the new nation. In 1868, one of Italy's most renowned authors, Alessandro Manzoni, was appointed to head a government commission on linguistic unification. Having rewritten his classic novel, *I Promessi sposi* [*The*

28. Frosini, 2003b, p. 99.

29. See Boothman 2004, pp. 27–50; Ives, 2004a, pp. 20–37; Ives, 2004b, pp. 43–53; and Frosini 2003b, pp. 38–41.

30. De Mauro 1986, p. 43; and Moss 2000, p. 200.

31. De Mauro 1986, p. 95.

Betrothed], in an Italian closely modelled on spoken, bourgeois Florentine ‘Italian’, Manzoni’s solution was to take Florentine as the ‘standard’ Italian, fund dictionaries and grammar books based on Florentine, and recruit school teachers for all of Italy from the Tuscan region. Gramsci was very critical of Manzoni’s ‘solution’ well before he was imprisoned. In 1918, in the pages *Il Grido del Popolo*, he launched an attack on it, comparing it to Esperanto.³² As we shall see below, central to his criticism is the rejection of any solution to problems of political, social, and cultural fragmentation through the external imposition of a structure, organisation or language. It is this theme that connects Gramsci’s university studies in linguistics, his early pre-prison writings and his mature analysis of subalternity and language.

With these linguistic realities and debates consistently in mind, in his prison writings, Gramsci considered common sense among Italian subaltern groups to be uncritical, unreflective, unsystematic, and operating with an incoherent conception of life and the world. In his view, these characteristics contributed to the subordination of subaltern groups and inhibited them from developing long-term political strategies. The point of his analysis is to understand the ways in which the masses think, conceive the world, and perceive their activity, in order to ascertain what elements prevent them from effectively organising and acting. Ultimately, Gramsci is interested in transforming common sense and developing a ‘new common sense’ and, by extension, a truly transformed language founded upon a critical awareness that will provide the masses with a foundation to transform their conditions. Gramsci suggests that critical awareness develops through a process of critical self-reflection, in which one understands one’s history, position, and activity in relation to dominant and prevailing structures of power. But this critical construction cannot take place without engaging with current ‘common sense’ and its various and contradictory elements. Gramsci stresses that it is necessary for subaltern groups to understand the historical and political origins of their conditions, instead of assuming their circumstances are the result of some sort of natural or spiritual determination or inferiority, which the Catholic Church’s worldview tended to reinforce.

Gramsci describes common sense as a ‘fragmentary collection of ideas and opinions’ drawn from differing philosophies, ideologies, religion, folklore, experience, superstition, and from ‘scientific notions and philosophical opinions which have entered into common usage’.³³ Common sense is composed of a variety of perspectives that often contain elements of truth but also tend to be

32. Gramsci, ‘La Lingua Unica e l’Esperanto’, 16 February 1918, in Gramsci 1985, pp. 26–31.

33. Gramsci 1971, p. 328, Q11, §12; Gramsci 1992, p. 173, Q1, §65. Also see Q1, §89; Q4, §3; and Q24, §4.

disjointed, incoherent, and contradictory. In the words of Marcia Landy, common sense assumes ‘pastiche-like qualities’;³⁴ it contains

fragmentary ideas, a collage of opinions and beliefs, giving the illusion of a coherent worldview and of acting which is not at all coherent and certainly not critical.³⁵

Gramsci’s discussions of common sense often appear alongside his discussions of folklore, and although the two categories often appear synonymous, folklore represents only one of the elements that comprise common sense. To understand common sense, in Gramsci’s view, it is also necessary to understand folklore and its influence in the composition of the masses’ worldview. Although both common sense and folklore contain heterogeneous and contradictory elements, Gramsci contends that they should be studied as one would study a coherent philosophical worldview, since they inform the worldview of the masses. ‘Folklore’, he writes, ‘must not be considered an eccentricity, an oddity or a picturesque element, but as something which is very serious and is to be taken seriously’.³⁶ As Crehan emphasises, for Gramsci, folklore is not primordial or pre-modern, but is always in flux, always being modernised and is tied in some ways to the dominant classes. However,

[t]he instability of folklore and its readiness to absorb elements from the dominant culture are important in that they give folklore a potentially progressive quality.³⁷

In this sense, Gramsci analyses common sense and its composition of multifarious elements as a socio-historical phenomenon, *as if* common sense were a coherent ideology or philosophy, and he attempts to identify and isolate the elements of common sense in relation to their historical and cultural context. His purpose is to ascertain the content and meaning of common sense, to understand how the masses conceive life, the world, and politics, with the point of radicalising common sense and providing subaltern groups with the intellectual tools necessary to confront dominant hegemony, philosophy, and power.

Gramsci often refers to common sense as the philosophy of the people, in that it represents the ‘philosophy of non-philosophers’,³⁸ ‘the philosophy of

34. Landy 1998, p. 4.

35. Landy 1986, p. 57.

36. Gramsci 1985, p. 191, Q27, §1.

37. Crehan 2002, p. 108, and Gramsci 1985, p. 194, Q9, §15.

38. Gramsci 2007, pp. 333, Q8, §173; Gramsci 1971, p. 419, Q11, §13.

the man in the street',³⁹ or 'spontaneous philosophy',⁴⁰ which implies that common sense represents the conceptions of the world and modes of thought practised by non-professional philosophers, namely the masses. Gramsci defines 'philosophy' as a coherent worldview, whereas 'common sense' refers to the popular ways of thinking and speaking among the people.⁴¹ Gramsci compares common sense to philosophy, because common sense operates similarly to a coherent worldview in that it provides a point of reference for thought and action, even though it is incoherent.

However, Gramsci is not taking coherence of a philosophy or worldview as the gold standard or even the sole element of the analytical distinction between 'common sense' and philosophy. Along with his critique of élitist notions of philosophy as a specialised and difficult activity, he argues,

[p]hilosophy in general does not in fact exist. Various philosophies or conceptions of the world exist, and one always makes a choice between them. How is this choice made? . . . is it not frequently the case that there is a contradiction between one's intellectual choice and one's mode of conduct?⁴²

This leads Gramsci to contrast 'thought' and 'action' as displaying 'two conceptions of the world, one affirmed in words and the other displayed in effective action', which is why 'philosophy cannot be divorced from politics'.

Whereas philosophy constitutes a coherent conception of the world and mode of thought, common sense actually represents 'a chaotic aggregate of disparate conceptions, and one can find there anything that one likes'.⁴³ Unlike philosophy, common sense does not follow a uniform conception of life and the world, and it does not exist in a homogenous form.⁴⁴ In Gramsci's words:

Common sense is not a single unique conception, identical in time and space. It is the 'folklore' of philosophy, and, like folklore, it takes countless different forms. Its most fundamental characteristic is that it is a conception which, even in the brain of one individual, is fragmentary, incoherent and inconsequential, in conformity with the social and cultural position of those masses whose philosophy it is.⁴⁵

39. Gramsci 1996, p. 160, Q4, §18; Gramsci 1995, p. 301, Q11, §44.

40. Gramsci 2007, pp. 351–2, Q8, §204; Gramsci 1971, pp. 323, 421, Q11, §12, §13.

41. Gramsci 2007, p. 360, Q8, §213, III.

42. Gramsci 1971, p. 326, Q11, §12.

43. Gramsci 1971, p. 422, Q11, §13. See also Q8, §173 and Dombroski 1989, pp. 12–13.

44. Frosini argues, as do we, that Gramsci's redefinition of 'common sense' highlights that it is not unitary and static but continually being transformed and redefined, that its role in unifying a social group depends on the way that the common sense comes about and that it must be actively utilised that it becomes 'ours'. Frosini, 2003b, pp. 170–6.

45. Gramsci 1971, p. 419, Q11, §13.

One might assume that Gramsci is accepting a general presumption of rationalism and the Enlightenment in favouring coherence and consistency in any worldview or philosophy, whether spontaneous or more systematic. Thus, fragmentation, incoherence and a sort of eclectic amassing of various ideas, values, morals and understandings of the world are problematic and unfavourable in and of themselves.⁴⁶ But, on closer examination, one of Gramsci's most useful contributions to questions of ideology-critique is precisely the notion of why and how such fragmentation is problematic. He does not merely assume that fragmentary common sense is detrimental and coherence and consistency are preferable. Rather, he tries to show how 'common sense' and folklore, together with incommunicable dialects, are practical impediments to effective political organisation, political action and the transformation of society. This is perhaps one place where Gramsci still has much to contribute to debates concerning postmodernism and multiculturalism. The key is to understand how, for Gramsci, fragmentation and incoherence should be addressed. This point is evident in Gramsci's critique of Esperanto and Alessandro Manzoni's strategy for creating a 'standard' Italian language. It provides one example of how, for Gramsci, achieving a systematic and coherent language, or worldview, can be even more detrimental than holding a fragmented worldview.

II. Esperantism and Manzoni – imposing language and culture from above

As we have been describing, one of the crucial questions that runs through much of Gramsci's wide-ranging prison research project is how to transform this fragmentary 'common sense' that is debilitating for subaltern social groups. One of Gramsci's major contributions that has made him so influential across a range of academic disciplines and diverse political struggles is his insistence that transforming of 'common sense' cannot take the form of the *imposition* of a superior worldview or understanding of the world originating outside of the previously accepted 'common sense'. Such responses characterise many so-called progressive attempts, Marxist and non-Marxist alike, to create a more just world by coming up with the 'correct position' or a blueprint that oppressed people should follow. Such approaches exacerbate one of the key elements of the conditions of subalternity – the dissonance between the imposed worldview and the conditions and understandings of those who are supposed to accept it. This reinforces passivity and does not create critical

46. This argument can be taken as a defence of Gramsci in the face of José Nun's critique that he is overly critical of common sense in contrast to philosophy and postulates a 'radical asepsis of common sense, defined as the opposite of philosophy' (Nun 1986, p. 222).

engagement or, as Gramsci quotes Socrates, knowledge of oneself, but takes the meaning of this process for political organisation and collective struggle far beyond anything implied in any of Plato's dialogues.⁴⁷

But Gramsci is no anarchist and has little faith in the effectiveness of purely spontaneous uprisings, specifically because the fragmentary and inadequate understanding made possible by subaltern 'common sense'. He agrees to some degree with Lenin, that the mere conditions of capitalism do not *automatically* lead to political consciousness capable of effective and organised resistance. Given, as we have seen, that Gramsci connects 'common sense' to language, it is possible to see him addressing this question of the fragmentation of subaltern common sense in his analysis of the so-called 'standardisation' of the Italian language.

Just as Gramsci argued that there is a choice, a political choice, to be made among different philosophies or ways of seeing the world (or the elements that make them up), so too he argued that the establishment of a 'written normative grammar' connected to a common language is a 'political act', 'an act of national-cultural politics'. In this context, his argument about language, dialects and the question of a 'standardised' national Italian language parallels his analysis of the effects of fragmentation of 'common sense'. In the last notebook that he started in prison, Notebook 29, Gramsci writes:

it is rational to collaborate practically and willingly to welcome everything that may serve to create a common national language, the non-existence of which creates friction particularly in the popular masses among whom local particularisms and phenomena of a narrow and provincial mentality are more tenacious than is believed.⁴⁸

On the one hand, this statement in favour of a national Italian language might not seem surprising and could tend to reinforce the view that Gramsci posed a harsh critique of the 'backwards' and particularistic parochial worlds of 'common sense', folklore and dialect – and that he simplistically wanted to replace them with a coherent Marxist worldview. On the other hand, this passage contains some enigmas that are productive in illuminating his more nuanced position that emphasises the need to work through 'common sense' and warns of the pitfalls of any imposition of a external worldview however coherence and logical. This passage implies that a common national Italian language, in 1935, does not exist and must be created. It *seems* anachronistic.

47. On Gramsci's Socratic conception of culture, see Gramsci, 'Socialism and Culture' (29 January 1916) in Gramsci 1977, pp. 10–13; 'Philanthropy, Good Will and Organization' (24 December 1917) in Gramsci 1985, pp. 23–6; and Notebook 11, §12.

48. Gramsci 1985, p. 182, Q29, §2.

This description of the non-existence of an Italian common national language is perhaps accurate for 1861 as described above. But, by 1931, the overall level of illiteracy in Italy had fallen to 21.6% and in the ‘South’ was about 38.8%, with these gains from the previous levels of 75% and 90% respectively, being made in some language that could be called a ‘standard’ Italian.⁴⁹ If we are to take Gramsci literally, then, this declaration of the ‘non-existence’ of a ‘common national language’ must mean that he does not consider this ‘Italian’ to be a truly ‘common national popular language’. To explain what he must mean, we can look to his pre-prison writings mentioned above.

In 1918, Gramsci published an article in *Il Grido del Popolo*, ‘A Single Language and Esperanto’, in which he criticises the proposal that the Italian Socialist Party should adopt Esperanto.⁵⁰ In mounting his argument, he equates the notion of adopting an artificial language with that of Manzoni in ‘standardising’ Italian. Manzoni would likely have been appalled by the comparison.⁵¹ Gramsci’s response to Manzoni was that:

not even a national language can be created artificially, by order of the state; that the Italian language was being formed by itself and would be formed only in so far as the shared life of the nation gave rise to numerous and stable contact between the various parts of the nation; that the spread of a particular language is due to the productive activity of the writings, trade and commerce of the people who speak that language. . . . If a single language [i.e. Manzoni’s ‘standard Italian’ based on the dialect of Florence], one that is also spoken in an given region and has a living source to which it can refer, cannot be imposed on the limited field of the nation, how then could an international language [Esperanto] take root when it is completely artificial and mechanical, completely ahistorical, not fed by great writers, lacking expressive richness which comes from the variety of dialects, from the variety of forms assumed in different times?⁵²

At first blush, it seems that, in 1918, Gramsci was against the formation of a ‘common national language’ or certainly any active strategy to create one. But, by 1935, so it seems, he welcomed it and argued that, as quoted above, ‘it is rational to collaborate practically and willingly to welcome everything that may serve to create a common national language’. However, this would be to

49. De Mauro 1986, pp. 58–9.

50. The entire exchange is available on-line at: <<http://www.andreamontagner.it/?p=43>>.

51. Manzoni was a romanticist who rejected the classicists’ attraction to the ‘purity’ of literary Italian. Instead, very influenced by German romanticism, Manzoni upheld actual spoken languages as being ‘living’ languages, as expressive, beautiful, creative and productive. As Bruce Haddock notes, Italian romanticism was not associated with conservative and reactionary views as it was in Germany. Haddock 2000, p. 23.

52. Gramsci 1985, pp. 28–9.

miss the point of both arguments, which go to the heart of the issues of fragmentation of common sense under the conditions of subalternity.

On the one hand, Gramsci is utilising the arguments of G.I. Ascoli, a prominent Italian linguist at the end of the nineteenth century and one of the main opponents of Manzoni, who argued that dialects and previous languages of speakers exert ‘pressure’ on new languages being learned and thus, there is continual pressure that changes the ‘standard’ language being imposed.⁵³ On the other hand, Gramsci is not just making a technical linguistic point about the degree of success of this strategy. He points out that while, from Manzoni’s position, Florentine is a ‘living’ language enabling its speakers to be creative, expressive and productive, for most of Italy it is more like an ‘artificial’ language imposed from the outside that enables little more than mechanical repetition and acceptance of a foreign conception of the world, and, ultimately, the subordination to a culture and philosophy that is not understood as belonging to the speaker herself.

This view is confirmed by what Gramsci wrote to his family members when in prison. On 26 March 1927, Gramsci sent a letter to his sister, Teresina, concerning her son, Franco:

I hope that you will let [Franco] speak Sardinian and will not make any trouble for him on that score. It was a mistake, in my opinion, not to allow Edmea [Gramsci’s niece] to speak freely in Sardinian as a little girl. It harmed her intellectual development and put her imagination in a straitjacket. . . . I beg you, from my heart, not to make this mistake and to allow your children to absorb all the Sardinian spirit they wish and to develop spontaneously in the natural environment in which they were born. . . .⁵⁴

While Gramsci favours children speaking their local languages, he encourages them to learn other languages and is fully aware of the prestige and cultural politics involved in these questions of which languages children learn to speak. In a letter to his son, Giuliano, Gramsci reflects on his own childhood noting how his classmates had great difficulty with speaking Italian, giving him a

53. See Ives 2004a, pp. 24–30; Lo Piparo 1979, pp. 67–102; and Timpanaro 1972. This argument has interesting parallels with much of the work being done by socio-linguists concerning ‘varieties of English’ such as Braj Kachru and others. See Kachru 2005.

54. Gramsci 1994, Volume 1, p. 89. While we may want to reject his distinction here between ‘dialect’ and ‘language’ (e.g. Steinberg 1987, p. 199; Phillipson 1992, p. 38–40), Gramsci may also be thinking of the argument made by his professor, Bartoli, that the role of the Sardinian language had been underappreciated in the history of Italian vernaculars. Moreover, Franco Lo Piparo contends persuasively that Gramsci posits an isomorphic relation between national language and dialect and those of city/country and official culture/folklore. Lo Piparo 1979, pp. 179–89.

position of superiority over them.⁵⁵ He writes that sometimes better knowledge of Italian makes a student ‘seem to be more intelligent and quick, whereas sometimes this is not so, ...’.⁵⁶

It is in Notebook 29 that Gramsci begins to develop the clearest set of concepts that help him theorise the political elements this concern over vernacular languages or dialects and their relations to a common language. The central concepts that he employs are ‘spontaneous’ or ‘immanent grammar’ and ‘normative grammar’. Gramsci uses the phrase ‘subaltern classes’ in a very telling sense when re-defining the traditional concept of ‘normative grammar’ as being made up of ‘reciprocal monitoring, reciprocal teaching and reciprocal “censorship” expressed in such questions as “What did you mean to say?”, “What do you mean?”, “Make yourself clearer” etc’. Here, Gramsci describes a key element in the condition of ‘subalternity’ rather than a method for trying to overcome the power relations between the élite and the subaltern. He writes parenthetically:

[a] peasant who moves to the city ends up conforming to urban speech through the pressure of the city environment. In the country, people try to imitate urban speech; *the subaltern classes* try to speak like the dominant classes and the intellectuals, etc.⁵⁷

While only in its provisional and unfinished form, Gramsci is contrasting the ‘grammatical conformism’ of those in a new situation, here the peasant who has moved to the city, with those whose situation has not changed, the peasant still in the country. However, he also *tries* to *imitate* the dominant classes and intellectuals under very different circumstances. Where the peasant who has migrated to the city seems to succeed in ‘conforming’ to the new environment and speakers, the subaltern classes are not said to ‘conform’ but to ‘try’ to conform and ‘imitate’ – such attempts, he implies, are likely not to be successful, or, if they are successful at an individual level, it will result in the creation of a ‘traditional intellectual’ cut off from her ‘organic’ roots.

While Gramsci is not simply advocating the ‘spontaneous’ or ‘immanent’ grammar of a dialect, which is akin to his notion of ‘common sense’, in that it is fragmented, accepted uncritically and unconscious or seems ‘natural’, he is also not advocating any sort of ‘normative grammar’ where the rules are coherently set out, consistent and non-contradictory. Rather, he is making an argument for a specific method of transforming ‘spontaneous grammar’ into

55. Gramsci 1994, Volume 2, p. 356.

56. Gramsci 1994, Volume 1, p. 240.

57. Gramsci 1985, pp. 180–1, Q29, §2, emphasis added.

‘normative grammar’ through a conscious and critical interaction among the existing ‘spontaneous grammars’. As we saw above with Gramsci’s critique of the fragmentary nature of common sense, here too we have his assessment of how fragmentation in language impedes effective political action. But this cannot be rectified through the imposition of a logically coherent, unfragmented, language. The result of such an external imposition actually reinforces parochialism and narrow thinking but also prevents various subaltern social groups – specifically the southern peasantry and the northern working class – from communicating with each other, developing solidarity with their conditions which are different in many ways but ultimately tied to their mutual subordination by the dominant classes and the uneven development of capitalism. Gramsci’s solution for fragmentation and the incoherent and contradictory characteristics of language usage in Italy is not a simple adoption of Esperanto or some pragmatic language (such as the dialect of Florence) in which communication can occur. The creation of a truly common language requires the interaction and creative engagement among those who speak the diverse dialects, the elements of which will be transformed into a new language and worldview.

III. Transforming subaltern common sense and language from the bottom up

In Gramsci’s writings specifically on Italian language, we find a clear example of his more general argument about fragmentation within common sense and the conditions of subalternity. He is critical of the lack of coherence and the historical process of sedimentation that renders both the common sense of various and diverse subaltern social groups and the vernacular languages they use an impediment to effective political organisation. But this fragmentation cannot be dealt with through the imposition of a coherence based on purely technical logic, abstract reason or Esperanto. Rather, it must be actively grappled with, sifted through, understood and sorted out by the very users of language and holders of ‘common sense’. And these processes are not purely linguistic or in the realm of ideas and consciousness, but are always related to human labour and changing lived experiences. This is why it is so crucial that, in Gramsci’s view, common sense, folklore, and languages are not homogeneous or static, just as ‘the people themselves are not a homogeneous cultural collectivity, but they present numerous and variously combined cultural layers’.⁵⁸ ‘One must keep in mind’, as he writes,

58. Gramsci 1985, p. 195, Q5, §156.

that in every region, especially in Italy, given the very rich variety of local traditions, there exist groups or small groups characterised by their own ideological or psychological impulses: 'every village has or has had its local saint, hence its own cult and its own chapel'.⁵⁹

In other words, in the Italian context, the heterogeneity of common sense is distinguished by the heterogeneity of Italian culture and the lack of national unity.

Thus, common sense assumes specific qualities among various regions and social groups. In addition, common sense changes and adapts to new elements that are absorbed into common practice. As Gramsci writes in Notebook 1, §65 and later re-writes in Notebook 24, §4:

Every social stratum has its own 'common sense' which is ultimately the most widespread conception of life and morals. Every philosophical current leaves a sedimentation of 'common sense': this is the document of its historical reality. Common sense is not something rigid and static; rather, it changes continuously, enriched by scientific notions and philosophical opinions which have entered into common usage. 'Common sense' is the folklore of 'philosophy' and stands midway between real 'folklore' (that is, as it is understood) and the philosophy, the science, the economics of the scholars. 'Common sense' creates the folklore of the future, that is a more or less rigidified phase of a certain time and place.⁶⁰

Here, Gramsci conceptualises what Tosel frames as two axes, mentioned above; the reformation of 'common sense' and critique of traditional philosophy, as a continuum. But our point remains the same: where so much of Gramscian scholarship has detailed the relation between 'common sense' (as the 'folklore of philosophy') and science, economics and philosophy of scholars, our focus is directed towards the other end of the spectrum, between 'real folklore' and 'common sense'. The crucial point here is that, although common sense continually changes, it tends not to be progressive, because it uncritically absorbs new elements from the scholarly end of the spectrum. They enter into

59. Gramsci 1992, p. 128, Q1, §43.

60. Gramsci 1992, p. 173, Q1, §65. Gramsci re-writes this section in Q24, §4 – the 'special notebook' on 'Journalism' – adding 'good sense' to 'common sense' in the first line. This has clear resonances with his 1918 critique of Esperanto which concludes, '[e]ach new social stratum that emerges in history, that organizes itself for the good fight, introduces new currents and new uses into the language and explodes the fixed schemes established by the grammarians for the fortuitous convenience of teaching. . . . New moral and intellectual curiosities goad the spirit and compel it to renew itself, to improve itself, to change the linguistic forms of expression by taking them from foreign languages, by reviving dead forms and by changing meanings and grammatical functions'. Gramsci 1985, p. 31.

common practice, rather than consciously and selectively incorporating specific elements.⁶¹

Agreeing in part with Marx and Engels's famous argument that '[t]he ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas',⁶² Gramsci emphasises that languages and common sense often contain elements of truth but in seemingly contradictory forms with respect to the actual experiences and conditions of the masses. These 'ruling ideas' which, as Marx and Engels note, have 'material force' were formed from the perspective of the dominant groups, and often the dominant groups of previous periods in history.⁶³ Where Marx and Engels do not specify any timeline for the 'ideas of the ruling class', Gramsci notes that, for example, '[p]revious religions have also had an influence and remain components of common sense to this day, and the same is true of previous forms of present Catholicism...'.⁶⁴ Similarly, Gramsci suggests that elements of modern thought and science enter into folklore, but in this process they are 'torn from their context, fall into the popular domain and "arranged" within the mosaic of tradition'.⁶⁵ Thus, although the elements of folklore may change, new elements are incorporated within a traditional worldview.

Gramsci suggests that critical consciousness – established through the process of forming historical consciousness – should provide the foundation for a 'new common sense' (or what he also calls 'good sense'), but the process of developing historical consciousness presents a difficult task for subaltern groups. Due to the contradictory nature of the ensemble of social relations and conditions of exploitation and poverty, subaltern groups are not only prohibited an active voice in dominant discourse; they are also excluded from actively participating in dominant institutions, culture, and politics, and, because of their exclusion, they are placed in a difficult position to develop a critical understanding of the nature of the power relations that form their subalternity. Without participation in dominant institutions, culture, politics, and language, subaltern groups achieve a partial understanding of their position in relation to dominant social and political relations. The stress here is on active participation that enables subaltern groups not only to use the language, institutions and to consume or absorb culture but allows subaltern groups to use them creatively, to add to them, and alter them in relation to their experiences. In this sense, Gramsci is worried about the outcome of institutions,

61. Gramsci 2007, pp. 333–4, Q8, §173.

62. Marx and Engels 1970, p. 64.

63. Gramsci 1971, pp. 419–25, Q11, §13. See also Crehan 2002, pp. 108–10.

64. Gramsci 1971, p. 420, Q11, §13.

65. Gramsci 1992, p. 186. Q1, §89; Q27, §1.

culture, politics and language being ‘imposed’ from ‘above’ or ‘outside’ in a manner that reinforce feelings of inferiority and passivity in subaltern groups.

Gramsci understands this not as an overall condition, in the sense of Theodor Adorno’s ‘administered society’, but as a matter of degree depending on different conditions of various subaltern groups. The least ‘advanced’ subaltern groups, who have been deprived of institutional political participation, face a more difficult task in developing critical consciousness than a more politically organised subaltern group. Thus, the contradictory nature of common sense is not the product of some sort of intellectual or psychological deficiency on the part of the masses. Rather, the contradictory nature of common sense is largely defined by the contradictory nature of the ensemble of social relations, economic exploitation and the various exclusions they produce and reproduce. But Gramsci does not draw the deterministic conclusion from this logic that common sense can only follow and become critical once economic exploitation has ended or social relations have been transformed. Quite the contrary, his point is that such changes require a critical perspective to be elaborated from within common sense. The development of critical consciousness requires the articulation of a ‘historical consciousness’ that is developed autonomously from imposed principles and dominant cultural values. As Gramsci explains:

[s]ince the ensemble of social relations is contradictory, human historical consciousness is contradictory; having said that, the question arises of how this contradictoriness manifests itself. It manifests itself all across the body of society through the existence of the different historical consciousness of various groups; and it manifests itself in individuals as a reflection of these group antinomies. Among subaltern groups, given the lack of historical initiative, the fragmentation is greater; they face a harder struggle to liberate themselves from imposed (rather than freely propounded) principles in order to arrive at an autonomous historical consciousness.⁶⁶

Gramsci suggests that, in the Italian context, the contradictory nature of common sense, along with the lack of a truly popular national language is a reflection of the contradictory nature of the ensemble of social relations, which were largely produced by the incompleteness of the Risorgimento, the non-national popular aspects of Italian intellectuals, and the cultural influence of the Catholic Church. The nature of the Risorgimento, Catholicism, and the function of Italian intellectuals contributed to a passive culture and fragmented dialects that developed among the people, particularly peasants, who were encouraged to accept their subordinated position as natural. The hierarchical authority of the Church and state – through the mediation of

66. Gramsci 2007, p. 321. Q8, §153.

intellectuals – politically and ideologically contributed to the subordination of workers and peasants.

This is one of the central elements of Gramsci's analysis of the Risorgimento as a 'revolution without revolution' or a 'passive revolution' in that the dominant classes consolidated their power and unified the state without a mass base, without exercising active hegemony among the masses, without promoting a national culture, and without fundamentally altering the previous social relations.⁶⁷ He considers Manzoni's attempt to 'unify' Italy linguistically as a similarly 'passive' attempt to artificially impose a superficial solution without altering the numerous dialects of the would-be Italians. In both the Risorgimento of the nineteenth century and the linguistic situation of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the popular masses were not active in the process and were excluded from participation in the state after the Risorgimento. This was because the dominant classes that organised around the bourgeoisie did not exercise hegemony among the masses through the process of promoting a national or homogeneous conception of life and the world. In the period immediately following the Risorgimento, the peasantry actively revolted against the newly instituted administrators and against the usurpation of property, which was met by government suppression supported by both liberals and conservatives. Gramsci argues that a central reason why the spontaneous peasant revolt could not meet this reactionary response was due to its lack of organisation and, as time went on, its inability to connect to the growing power of the urban proletariat concentrated in the north of Italy.

While the parallels in Italy are at the abstract or metaphorical level, Gramsci seems to relate the unsuccessful spontaneous political struggle of the peasantry to the implicit resistance of them to a 'standard' Italian language. In a much more politically charged analysis, Gramsci draws on Ascoli's theory of the 'linguistic substratum' to argue that any such language imposition would not be fully successful and would continually face 'passive' resistance that, while not effective in creating linguistic change itself, would render 'standard' Italian as an outside force that was never truly adopted by the masses.

Because the Risorgimento and 'standard Italian' were not popular movements – but, in the end, actually the juridical suppression of a potential mass movement – they reinforced the non-national popular aspects of Italian culture that actively excluded subaltern social groups from participating in dominant political institutions. For this reason, Gramsci writes that 'in Italy the liberal-bourgeois always neglected the popular masses'.⁶⁸ Related to this issue, as Gramsci began

67. Gramsci 1992, pp. 136–7, Q1, §44; Gramsci 1971, p. 59, Q19, §24.

68. Gramsci 1975, p. 1973, Q19, §3.

to address in his final essay prior to his arrest, ‘Some Aspects of the Southern Question’, the peasantry lacked and continued to lack its own category of organic intellectuals to provide it with coherence and political direction. Ironically, however, as Gramsci points out in the *Prison Notebooks*, ‘it is from the peasantry that other social groups draw many of their intellectuals and a high proportion of traditional intellectuals are of peasant origin’, but such intellectuals do not remain organically linked with the peasantry, such as priests, lawyers, and state functionaries.⁶⁹

The Italian peasantry not only lacked its own category of intellectuals to provide homogeneity and direction, the non-national popular character of Italian culture reinforced the separation of the intellectuals from the masses at large. As Gramsci points out in the ‘special notebook’ on the ‘Problems of Italian National Culture’:

In Italy the term ‘national’ has an ideologically very restricted meaning, and does not in any case coincide with ‘popular’ because in Italy the intellectuals are distant from the people, i.e. from the ‘nation’.⁷⁰

As we have seen in linguistic terms, ‘national Italian’ was also restricted and was unsuccessful becoming truly ‘national’. Gramsci recounts different phases in Italian history when ‘[o]nce again, Italian is a written not a spoken language, a language of scholars, not of the nation’ and this is a central aspect of the increasing ‘split between the people and the intellectuals, between the people and culture’.⁷¹

In turn, the popular masses function within a social and political environment they did not create, in a language that they may learn but one that is not their own and is ‘mastered’ only through submission to the authority of the élite. Because of the cultural tradition of Italian intellectuals, the popular masses lack their own category of intellectuals and their own languages to provide coherence and political direction to their activity. Thus, because of the practical separation of intellectuals from the masses, common sense or the philosophy of the masses gravitates around folklore and traditional conceptions the world.

In Gramsci’s view, it is necessary for subaltern groups to produce their own category of organic intellectuals and linguistic innovations as effectively as dominant social groups create their organic intellectuals, in that the intellectuals remain in contact with, or organic to, the social groups’ life experiences so as to provide organisation, direction, and leadership in the movement to achieve

69. Gramsci 1971, p. 6, Q12, §1.

70. Gramsci 1985, p. 208, Q21, §5.

71. Gramsci 1985, pp. 169, 168, Q3, §76.

political power and hegemony. The necessity of the subaltern to develop their own category of organic intellectuals resolves one of the central issues contributing to the condition of subalternity; that is, that the non-national popular character of traditional Italian intellectuals creates a practical disconnection between intellectuals and the people. Gramsci's well-known discussion of traditional intellectuals includes the crucial linguistic component of this disconnection. Gramsci describes his analysis of 'the relation between the intellectuals and the people-nation' as being studied 'in terms of the language written by the intellectuals and used among them...'. He notes parenthetically that 'the use of Latin as a learned language is bound up with Catholic cosmopolitanism'. Then, in tracing the history of this relationship, he sets out one version of his famous distinction between organic intellectuals (of the fourteenth-century ruling class) and traditional intellectuals,

it is not a stratum of the population which creates its intellectuals on coming to power (this occurred in the fourteenth century), but a traditionally selected body which assimilates single individuals into its cadres.⁷²

It is largely due to this lack of intellectual connection for subaltern social groups that the level of conscious leadership with the subaltern's spontaneous political activity does not move beyond common sense.⁷³ The adoption of some 'artificial' worldview or language, that may be 'coherent' from a logical perspective or 'beautiful' from a given aesthetic perspective, is similarly an ineffective medium for going beyond common sense. Thus, the cultivation of organic intellectuals derived from and practically aligned with subaltern groups has the potential to facilitate the direction and coherence of the groups in their political activity which must include creating a new language. However, the development and cultivation of an independent and organic stratum of intellectuals is itself a difficult task. In Gramsci's words:

... creating a group of independent intellectuals is not an easy thing; it requires a long process, with actions and reactions, coming together and drifting apart and the growth of very numerous and complex new formations. It is the conception of a subaltern social group, deprived of historical initiative, in continuous but disorganic expansion, unable to go beyond a certain qualitative level, which still remains below the level of the possession of the State and of the real exercise of hegemony over the whole of society which alone permits a certain organic equilibrium in the development of the intellectual group.⁷⁴

72. Gramsci 1985, pp. 167–8, 169, Q3, §76.

73. Gramsci 1996, pp. 48–52, Q3, §48.

74. Gramsci 1971, pp. 395–6, Q16, §9.

Here, Gramsci's suggestion that the 'disorganic expansion' of subaltern groups permits 'a certain organic equilibrium in the development of the intellectual group' directly connects to his view of the political party as the 'collective intellectual' or 'modern prince' that facilitates the rearticulation and unification of subaltern worldviews in a 'common language'.⁷⁵

For Gramsci, the party is not a tool to impose an external or transcendental worldview but functions as a practical link between social multiplicity and political unity in which the articulation of a 'collective consciousness' is created that has the potential to challenge dominant hegemony. As Gramsci metaphorically explains:

[a] collective consciousness, that is a living organism, cannot be formed until after the multiplicity is unified through the friction of individuals: neither can one say that 'silence' is not multiplicity. When an orchestra is preparing for a performance, with each instrument tuning up individually, it gives the impression of the most horrible cacophony; yet, it is such preparations that bring the orchestra to life as a single 'instrument'.⁷⁶

In Gramsci's methodological criteria of subaltern analysis, the development of the political party signifies an initial first step in political transformation.⁷⁷ The party provides a vehicle for subaltern groups to represent their views and aspirations, yet the crucial moment in the political activity of subaltern groups occurs when they become aware of the fact that their political goals cannot be fulfilled within the present state and that the state must be transformed.⁷⁸

Posing the question of the state in turn brings the issue of hegemony to the forefront of political struggle. Thus, in addition to the necessity of creating an organic stratum of subaltern intellectuals, developing a mass political movement founded upon critical consciousness requires raising the intellectual level of subaltern groups as a whole and an ever-increasing stratum of the populace, so as to challenge the hegemony and authority of dominant social groups. The struggle to achieve hegemony and political leadership among competing social groups places subaltern groups in the position of an advanced level of self-consciousness and initiative. When the subaltern emerge from their subordinate position and achieve a level of political power, they move from a position of resistance to effective agency. This stage marks the pivotal point in the development of the subaltern in achieving 'integral autonomy'. In Gramsci's words,

75. Gramsci 1975, pp. 1482–3, Q11, §55; Gramsci 1971, pp. 125–33, Q13, §1.

76. Gramsci 1975, p. 1771, Q15, §13.

77. Gramsci 1971, p. 52, Q25, §5. Also see Green 2002, pp. 9–10.

78. Gramsci 1971, pp. 177–85, Q13, §17.

if yesterday the subaltern element was a thing, today it is no longer a thing but an historical person, a protagonist; if yesterday it was not responsible, because ‘resisting’ a will external to itself, now it feels itself to be responsible because it is no longer resisting but an agent, necessarily active and taking the initiative.⁷⁹

In other words, at this point, the subaltern has achieved ‘integral autonomy’ and is no longer subordinate, adopting the language of its rulers, but is active, speaking, and leading.

Conclusion

Gramsci’s analysis of subaltern social groups and language are dominant themes that appear throughout the *Prison Notebooks*, and Gramsci created ‘special notebooks’ for each topic toward the end of his prison project. However, Gramsci directly connected these two overlapping analyses in relatively few of his notes. Moreover, within the vast literature on Gramsci, his wide-ranging influence across many disciplines of study and especially the expansive use of the concept of ‘subalternity’ very little has been done to trace out these relations. We have attempted to bring into relief the direct connections between subalternity and language by showing how the concepts overlap with respect to Gramsci’s analyses of common sense, intellectuals, philosophy, folklore, and hegemony. Moreover, we have argued that, for Gramsci, fragmentation of any social group’s ‘common sense’, worldview and language is political detrimental. However, it cannot be overcome by the imposition of a ‘rational’ or ‘logical’ worldview. Instead, what is required is a deep engagement with the fragments that make up subaltern historical, social, economic and political conditions. We have thus attempted to show how Gramsci provides an alternative both to the celebration of fragmentation fashionable in liberal multiculturalism and uncritical postmodernism as well as other attempts of overcoming it through recourse to some external, transcendental or imposed worldview. In this sense, we hope to have enriched the understanding of Gramsci’s analysis of the Italian situation and the complex process required in contemporary contexts for subaltern groups to overcome their subordination.

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