

# The Philological Turn in *Gramsci's Laboratory*

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## *Under Review*

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Alvaro Bianchi. *Gramsci's Laboratory: Philosophy, History and Politics*. Trans. Sean Purdy. Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2021. Paperback, pp. 305, \$30.00. ISBN: 9781642594218

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Since the late 1940s, Antonio Gramsci's prison writings have generated widespread attention across the globe. Scholars and critics working in diverse fields of inquiry have drawn concepts from the *Prison Notebooks* to examine politics and culture across national contexts. According to the Gramscian Bibliography, maintained by the Fondazione Gramsci in Rome, his writings have been published in thirty-two languages and have generated a massive secondary literature of over 23,000 books and articles. However, the publication and translation of his prison manuscripts has been complex. The first Italian edition of the prison notebooks was published in anthological form between 1948 and 1951. This abridged edition of Gramsci's manuscripts excluded his first-draft notes and minimized the fragmentary and provisional nature of his original texts, which generated critical debates regarding textual and political manipulation. Yet, these early anthologies established a basis for the initial translations of the *Prison Notebooks* in other languages, including English, Spanish, German, and Portuguese. Gramsci's complete *Prison Notebooks* appeared in print for the first time in 1975 with the publication of the Italian critical edition *Quaderni del carcere*, edited by Valentino Gerratana, which provided a reliable representation of the original manuscripts in

chronological order, reflecting all of their complexity and fragmentariness. Gerratana's critical edition not only supplanted the early anthologies of the *Prison Notebooks*, becoming the authoritative text of Gramscian scholarship, it also prompted new translations in multiple languages. His pioneering work initiated a "philological turn" in Gramscian studies—one that emphasizes the diachronicity and temporal unfolding of Gramsci's ideas and concepts in relation to their historical context. This philological turn was further enriched by Gianni Francioni's groundbreaking book *L'Officina Gramsciana* (The Gramscian Workshop) (1984), which provided a systematic dating of Gramsci's notes across all the notebooks, allowing one to examine the complex way in which he wrote. Since the 1990s, the philological-historical method of studying Gramsci's work has expanded internationally, as scholars outside of Italy reinterpret his ideas in relation to evolving social and political contexts.

Alvaro Bianchi's book *Gramsci's Laboratory: Philosophy, History and Politics* is an ideal illustration of the internationalization of the philological turn in Gramscian studies. First published in Portuguese in 2008, the book provides a contribution to the growing reorientation of Gramscian studies in Brazil, which has relied on outdated editions of the *Prison Notebooks* and exhibited a lack of understanding of the political and intellectual context in which Gramsci wrote. In this superb English translation by Sean Purdy, published in the Historical Materialism Book Series, Bianchi reconstructs Gramsci's laboratory, demonstrating how the "effective contextualization" of his thought allows one to trace the innovative ways he developed his concepts, the multiple sources of his reflections, and their place in history (3). Throughout the book, Bianchi demonstrates how engaging with the multiple paths of Gramsci's investigations allows one to develop a rich understanding of his concepts, while also appreciating the primary focus of the relationship between philosophy and politics, precisely in the realm where theory and practice merge with politics (4). For Bianchi, in this sense, the "conceptual excavation" of Gramsci's writings is not simply a scholastic project but essentially a political one. With the rigorous reconstruction of Gramsci's laboratory, as he explains, "it is possible to find a living thought capable of informing a renewed theoretical and political practice engaged in social emancipation projects" (3).

In the opening part of chapter two, Bianchi describes the intellectual "laboratory" Gramsci created in the pages of the *Prison Notebooks*. After Fascist authorities arrested him in November 1926, Gramsci explained in a series of letters to his sister-law-law, Tatiana Schucht, his plans to study in prison, focusing on the history of Italian intellectuals. After filing several petitions, he obtained permission to write in his cell in early 1929.

On the first page of Notebook 1, dated February 8, 1929, he outlined sixteen “main topics,” which detailed specific themes related to the history of intellectuals, while also identifying new topics of study. From February 1929 to May 1930, he worked on translations and four “miscellaneous notebooks” that addressed topics revolving around his initial research plans. However, in early 1930, as Bianchi explains, following Francioni’s research, Gramsci’s work took on a more politicized direction, which was motivated by the political situation: “the dilemmas of the struggle against fascism; the sectarian turn of the Communist International, [. . .] and the increasing Stalinisation of the Soviet Union” (10). By the end of 1930, Gramsci outlined an expanded research program in Notebook 8 with a list of twenty planned “principal essays” under the heading “Loose notes and jottings for a history of Italian intellectuals.” In March and April 1932, Gramsci’s work took on a new stage of development. He returned to the research plan in Notebook 8 and mapped out a revised program of study under the heading “Regrouping of subjects” with ten main topics. Following those topics, he began to assemble what he called “special notebooks,” in which he organized, rewrote, and revised previously written miscellaneous notes according to monographic themes. By mid-1935, when he stopped working on his notebooks due to poor health, he had composed seventeen special notebooks. This was in addition to eight miscellaneous notebooks, four mixed notebooks (miscellaneous notes, monographic blocks of notes, and/or translations), and four notebooks of translations and language exercises.

The details of the composition of Gramsci’s manuscripts were largely erased in the first Italian anthologies of the *Prison Notebooks*, as Bianchi explains in the second part of chapter 2. Under the direction of Palmiro Togliatti, the General Secretary of the Italian Communist Party (PCI), Felice Platone prepared Gramsci’s notebooks for publication. He arranged the notes according to dominant themes and removed Gramsci first draft notes and other documentary details that appeared in the original manuscripts. In addition, Togliatti removed passages he considered politically compromising, and he had the preface to the first volume frame the notebooks in relation to the contributions of Lenin and Stalin (22). As Bianchi makes clear in later chapters and explicitly states in the preface, “Gramsci was never Stalinist” (XI). The purpose of framing Gramsci’s legacy in such terms, Bianchi explains, was to safeguard Togliatti’s position and to legitimize the PCI (22–3). This presentation of the *Prison Notebooks* had a global impact. As noted above, the early Italian anthologies were the basis for translations in other languages, including the Portuguese and Spanish translations in Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s. However,

the Mexican publishing house Era published a Spanish translation of Geratana's critical edition in 1981, and in the 1990s the Brazilian publisher Civilização published a six-volume critical-thematic edition of the notebooks in Portuguese, which improved upon previous translations yet still did not reproduce all of Gramsci's first draft notes (31).

In chapters 3–7, Bianchi demonstrates how engaging with the diachronicity of Gramsci's first draft notes and their second draft versions in the special notebooks provides insights into his concepts. Bianchi organizes each chapter according to dialectical themes Gramsci addressed in his investigations: "Materialism/Idealism," "Structure/Superstructure," "State/Civil Society," "War of Movement/War of Position," and "Revolution/Restoration." Each chapter provides an entry point into how Gramsci approached his research, while also providing descriptions and corrections to some of Gramsci's major concepts. Not only does Bianchi engage with the primary texts of the Gerratana edition and Francioni's dating, he engages with the thinkers that motivated Gramsci's reflections, and he impressively draws upon the relevant secondary literature across multiple languages, including Italian, Portuguese, Spanish, French, and English.

As Bianchi shows, Gramsci's writings on materialism and idealism were motivated by what he perceived as a "double revision" in Marxism, in which the influence of idealism and positivist forms of materialism had de-radicalized the practical aspects of Marxism by separating philosophy from practical activity (chapter 3). Gramsci devoted his first two special notebooks on these concerns: Notebook 10 "The Philosophy of Benedetto Croce" and Notebook 11 "Introduction to the Study of Philosophy." In these notebooks, Gramsci articulated his conception of Marxism as a "philosophy of praxis," while also criticizing Croce's speculative idealism and the crude economic determinism of Nikolai Bukharin, which Gramsci associated with Soviet Marxism. In Gramsci's view, Croce and Bukharin both separated philosophy from politics, which was apparent from their misinterpretation of Marx's structure-superstructure metaphor from Preface to the *Contribution to Critique of Political Economy* (chapter 4). Croce, for instance, as Bianchi explains, constructed and then criticized a crude materialist interpretation of the structure functioning as a "hidden God" determining the superstructure (114). Gramsci, in contrast, viewed the structure-superstructure metaphor in dialectical and political terms, in which both the economic structure and the socio-political ensemble of the superstructure are determined by political forces. In this discussion, Bianchi also corrects the commonly misunderstood concept of "historical bloc" as a formation of class alliances. Bianchi captures the radical implications of Gramsci's intended meaning of the concept as both an analytic

and strategic concept: "In its original sense, the historical bloc was conceived as a critical tool aimed at interpreting historical relations, those that were, therefore, concrete and moving, existing between the structure and superstructure, objective conditions and subjective conditions, material forces of production and ideologies" (119).

In response to the influential work of Norberto Bobbio, who portrayed Gramsci as a theorist focused primarily on superstructures and a proponent of an "organized" civil society, Bianchi examines Gramsci's concept of the "integral state" in chapter 5. Gramsci theorized the integral state as a unity of political society and civil society, as a unity of coercion and consent. The analysis of the integral state, as Bianchi explains in chapter 6, serves as a foundation to formulate political activity. Following from this, Bianchi examines Gramsci's notions of war of movement and war of position," which he used as metaphors to describe different forms of political struggle. In modern states, political activity consists of the struggle to generate support among the masses through institutions of civil society (the war of position) to reinforce political leadership in securing power in political society (war of movement). In this discussion, Bianchi examines how Gramsci's unity of war of movement and war of position addresses similarities and differences with Trotsky's notion of permanent revolution. To deepen this analysis, Bianchi examines Gramsci's concept of "passive revolution" in the final chapter (chapter 7). Gramsci adopted the concept from Vincenzo Cuoco, who view the Neapolitan Revolution of 1799 as a passive revolution, where the masses were "indifferent and inert" (Cuoco as quoted by Bianchi, 228). Gramsci utilized the concept to interpret the Italian Risorgimento and the founding of the modern Italian state as a passive revolution, in which the Northern bourgeoisie and Southern landowners consolidated their power without a mass base and without exercising hegemony. In contrast, Gramsci viewed the French Revolution as an active revolution in which the Jacobins exercised revolutionary hegemony by advancing the interests of the bourgeoisie and gaining the consent of allied and subaltern classes in the movement of acquiring state power.

*Gramsci's Laboratory* provides an excellent illustration of how a philological-historical approach to studying the complete *Prison Notebooks* and the context of Gramsci's thought can produce new insights and rich interpretations. Though Bianchi wrote the book as an intervention in the Brazilian context, the book itself represents an example of the philological turn in the internationalization of Gramscian studies, as scholars across national contexts reinterpret Gramsci's integral texts. Indeed, it is in part due to the complexity and open nature of his thinking that his texts

generate multiple readings and interpretations. But it is also due to the fact that the ideas and methods he conceived in his laboratory continue to provide insights into contemporary issues and struggles outside his time and space, as scholars and activists across the globe return to his work to understand the past and to transform the present and future.

### References

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