3 Gramsci’s Patrimony

I INTRODUCTION

No Marxist thinker, apart from Marx himself, is so universally respected and admired as Antonio Gramsci, one of the originators of what Merleau-Ponty called ‘Western Marxism’, a tradition including Lukács, Korsch, Sartre and Frankfurt School theorists such as Adorno and Marcuse. In their different ways, these thinkers all attacked Marxist positivism for its determinism and its objective materialist theory of history. Marxism, they thought, would have to admit the importance of human agency, of creative human action, of the ‘subjective factor’. Disenchantment with the deterministic modes of analysis championed by classical Marxists began to gather momentum by the turn of the century. Economic depressions had come and gone without producing a general systemic collapse; rather than increased misery, the working classes were experiencing higher living standards and shorter working hours as the capitalist economy expanded; socialist parties, reflecting the demands of their constituents, became less and less revolutionary and more and more concerned with the melioration of conditions within the framework of capitalism. This stabilization of the bourgeois regime evoked grave disquiet within the Marxist community, bound together as it was by the firm belief that capitalism would crumble under the weight of its inherent contradictions. The outbreak of war in 1914, and the subsequent disintegration of proletarian internationalism, further nourished the suspicion that the European masses had ceased to be a revolutionary force. With the ignominious defeats of the post-war rebellions in Germany and Hungary, and the rapid rise of popular right-wing movements, it became progressively difficult to cling to the optimistic Marxist assumption that ‘history is on our side’.

The intellectual grounding of classical Marxism was further undermined by developments in the sphere of science. Einstein’s special theory of relativity, published in 1905, both epitomized and promoted the breakdown of the traditional paradigm of science, which ‘premised an out-there world consisting of a kind of “substance” anterior to any attributes assigned to it’.

If observations were no longer seen simply as reflecting an immanently unfolding order but as depending on the
standpoint chosen by the observer, then science could no longer be a source of certainty. The new philosophy of science, as Gouldner writes, ‘took a romantic turn away from a mirror image epistemology toward a mind-as-lamp epistemology; mechanical models came under attack’. But ‘mirror image epistemology’ formed the basis of Marx’s materialism, which entailed an impulse to assimilate and reduce social relations to the natural sciences. As the old model of science buckled, classical Marxism found itself deprived of a solid intellectual foundation. The ‘crisis of science’ merged with the ‘crisis of Marxism’ and the scene was set for the emergence of ‘humanistic’ or ‘critical’ Marxism, asserting the centrality of human choice and consciousness.

It is against this background of events and trends that we must view Gramsci’s contribution. Gramsci – it should be stated at the outset – bequeathed no ‘finished’ intellectual legacy. Before 1926, when Mussolini’s regime finally felt secure enough to place him behind bars, he was a professional politician and first-class journalist, not a composer of systematic treatises. After building up a formidable reputation with the Socialist Party (PSI), he co-founded the Italian Communist Party (PCI) in 1921. His service to the organization was impressive: in 1922 he went to Moscow as the PCI’s representative on the Executive Committee of the Comintern; in 1924 he was elected to parliament and soon became Secretary-General of the Party. Through sheer force of intellect, the shy and retiring country boy from backward Sardinia had become a leading political figure. He was tried in 1928 and condemned to imprisonment for twenty years and four months. He died in 1937, shortly after being released from prison for reasons of poor health. In a remark which would prove ironic, the Fascist prosecutor declared at Gramsci’s trial: ‘We must prevent this brain from functioning for twenty years.’ This did not happen. The last years of Gramsci’s life were years of intense mental activity, pursued with the aid of only a few books and under the duress of prison conditions in which his always precarious health steadily deteriorated. The result was the *Prison Notebooks (Quaderni del carcere)*, a profound, monumental, tormented, labyrinthine work, consisting of unfinished essays and notes, often elliptical and barely comprehensible. Gramsci, it can be seen, articulated his ideas and doctrines on different planes of expression. His pre-prison work was, for the most part, the ephemeral outpouring of the political diatribist and pamphleteer. Even when dealing with minor or transient issues, he brought a capacious intellect and powerful imagination to the task; but the articles and editorials published before 1926 do not comprise a significant