Introduction: a message in a bottle

In the *Prison Notebooks* Antonio Gramsci proposes the distinctive notion of a ‘philosophy of praxis.’ The interpretation of the significance of this suggestive formulation has constituted a fertile field of discussion both of Gramsci’s approach to philosophical questions in his prison writings and, more broadly, the nature of Marxist philosophy. Indeed, in the early years of the reception of the *Prison Notebooks*, the notion of a philosophy of praxis was sometimes understood as a merely formal device to evade prison censorship, or a ‘code word’ by means of which Gramsci disguised his true references. This reading marked both the early years of the Italian debate (following the publication of a thematically organized edition of the *Prison Notebooks* in the late 1940s and early 1950s) and then the Anglophone and subsequently international debate in the wake of publication of *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* in 1971. According to this interpretation, the notion of a philosophy of praxis could be ‘deciphered,’ or perhaps even effectively ‘replaced,’ by the term ‘Marxism’; in its turn, ‘Marxism’ was assumed to be a more or less stable body of doctrine in accord with the main lines of the version of Marxist orthodoxy that emerged in the later years of the Third International. Gramsci’s proposal of a philosophy of praxis was thus argued to signal his fundamental allegiance, in however modulated a form, to the ‘actually existing’ Marxism that dominated the official communist parties throughout much of the twentieth-century.

For other interpretations, however, the philosophy of praxis was thought to indicate a distinctly ‘heretical’ dimension of Gramsci’s Marxism due, perhaps, to the excessive influence of Italian neo-idealism upon his intellectual development, either in the form of the liberal
Benedetto Croce’s philosophical system or, more menacingly, in the activist dimensions of the fascist Giovanni Gentile’s ‘actualism.’ Some critics, both Marxist and non-Marxist alike, even went so far as to signal the notion of the philosophy of praxis as symptomatic of Gramsci’s effective departure from the Marxist tradition, with the elaboration of a philosophical conception incompatible with the materialist conception of history that recalled more closely themes from the subjectivist tendency of classical German idealism, perhaps those of Fichte and Schelling even more than those of Hegel. For these readings, then, the notion of a philosophy of praxis indicated a dimension of Gramsci’s thought that, more or less implicitly or explicitly, in a more or less nascent or developed state, pointed beyond or outside of the Marxist traditions.

Another line of scholarship sought to draw attention to the specific, substantive elements within the Marxist traditions that Gramsci aimed to valorize and to elaborate further by means of the notion of a philosophy of praxis. There were some early significant attempts in this direction in the early years of Gramsci’s reception, both in Italy and in other linguistic zones. Above all, however, it was the publication (in Italian) of the critical edition of the *Prison Notebooks* in 1975, under the editorship of Valentino Gerratana, that provided scholars with more detailed knowledge of the development of Gramsci’s carceral researches, thus allowing scholars to study the emergence and progressive development of Gramsci’s central concepts. This was followed by the pioneering work of Gianni Francioni which emphasized the importance of studying the diachronic development of Gramsci’s concepts throughout the different phases of the writing of the *Prison Notebooks*, from 1929 to 1935, situated firmly in their historical, cultural and political context. Central to Francioni’s study was the demonstration that the vocabulary of the *Prison Notebooks* is not fixed in definitive meanings, but displays significant developments – modifications and specifications as well as sometimes even revisions and radical transformations – across the articulated chain of concepts that Gramsci both appropriated from other thinkers and reworked and coined himself. Francioni’s approach has more recently given rise to a rich season of philological and contextualist studies, particularly in Italy. This scholarship has argued that a diachronic reading of the *Prison Notebooks* reveals that Gramsci’s proposal to develop a philosophy of praxis was an attempt to inherit critically central elements of Marx’s critiques of philosophy, of ideology and political economy.

At the same time, these readings have also emphasized that the philosophy of praxis proposed in the *Prison Notebooks* should not be understood simply as Marxism as such, conceived as a finished system