CHAPTER 9

Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937)

For Gramsci, at the most basic level, 'all men are "philosophers"' precisely because of the '"spontaneous philosophy" which is proper to everybody' (1971, 323). This spontaneous philosophy or 'conception of the world' (*concezione del mundo*) is found most obviously in the ways in which we describe the world, that is, through language. Shared descriptions between individuals constitute a 'common sense' (*senso comune*) that becomes sedimented in the form of the quasi-natural 'facts' and beliefs that guide our daily practices. Common sense helps bind a social formation together and gives individuals a 'natural' disposition with which to encounter the world.

Much of common sense's strength and persistence is due to its seemingly spontaneous or self-evident nature; we *feel* like certain beliefs and facts are either the product of our own intellect or that they are so self-evidently true that they do not require questioning. Despite these deceptive appearances, however, Gramsci stresses that all apparently natural beliefs, or conceptions of the world, that we hold, are nevertheless historically determined; common sense is no exception. The question, therefore, is of uncovering 'of what historical type is the conformism, the mass humanity to which one belongs' (1971, 324–6).

This, for Gramsci, is the role of philosophy in a more advanced sense. Philosophy too is to be understood as a particular 'conception of the world' and, in this respect, exists on the same spectrum as common sense. However, philosophy can be distinguished from spontaneous common sense on two fronts: coherence and critique. Philosophy, unlike common sense, is, on the one hand, the name for coherent and non-contradictory world views. On the other hand, it is the tool by which one can uncover the presuppositions that lie behind one's own common-sense beliefs. In this way, we can read Gramsci as part of the same critical tradition as Kant, insofar as the 'Enlightenment attitude' entails unfettering ourselves from our 'self-incurred immaturity'. Thus, philosophy might take the form of

the critique of political economy, or the science of climate change, or the historical analysis of race; each sets out to deploy the most coherent account of its object over and against whatever common beliefs we might 'naturally' hold on the topic.

While it might be easy to perceive an intellectual elitism in this position, for Gramsci the situation is not so simple. He argues that each set of common sense 'facts' contains within it some embryonic 'good sense' – what he calls 'the healthy nucleus that exists in "common sense"' (1971, 328). Good sense, which is more akin to the English 'common sense', signifies a more accurate and penetrating world view hidden in amongst the fragments of everyday *senso comune*. The good sense in amongst common sense might, for example, identify an injustice in the world ('one rule for them and another rule for us'), a particular mechanism of politics ('the system is rigged') or class divide ('they are only out for themselves'), albeit couched in incoherent claims or expressed as a partial truth.

Gramsci saw that this has implications for political practice. He argues that if one wants to bring about a new, more coherent, popular world view, one *has to* start with common sense, uncover the truths and discard the contradictions found there. Thus, common sense requires philosophy for its reformation and, in turn, philosophy requires common sense for its starting point and living basis. Far from being disregarded as nonsense or as regrettable stupidity, then, 'common sense is a site of political struggle' (Hall and O'Shea 2013, 10) whereby the good sense enclosed within it needs to be 'made more unitary and coherent' (Gramsci 1971, 328). Only in this way, for Gramsci, can a 'new common sense and with it a new culture' emerge (1971, 424). The relationship between philosophy, common sense and good sense is properly political then: establishing and maintaining a widespread common sense on a range of issues is to dispose whole populations in a particular way, and ultimately this is a key part of what Gramsci calls 'hegemony'.

At the time in which Gramsci was writing, the term 'hegemony' had been used in revolutionary Marxist texts to signify short-term tactical class alliances (Anderson 1976, 15). Deploying the term in a novel way, Gramsci expands the concept to encompass broader processes of the reproduction of consent, both as a field of struggle for power and as the fabric of social reality. In his work, hegemony is conceived as a historically specific mixture of consent and coercion, although these two concepts are separated for analytic purposes and do not map so neatly onto lived practice. Gramsci is mindful not only of the fact that consent on its own is not sufficient unless it is buttressed by a coercive framework, but also that there is no purely coercive or consensual practice in social reality. For instance, education could be conceived in terms of the institutional cultivation of consent, yet it also functions as a coercive frame of discipline. Or, prisons would appear to be primarily coercive instruments of domination, yet processes of carceral punishment also work to instil consent to the existing economic and political structures.

Gramsci enjoys the rare merit of being read by Marxists and non-Marxists alike, and this is in part due to the unique mixture of influences upon his work. As an heir of Machiavelli, Gramsci explores the impact of politics as an autonomous field with its own principles. Unlike Machiavelli, however, Gramsci's political writings are angled towards the revolutionary transformation of society rather than providing an amoral handbook for remaining in power. This differentiates him at once from modes of thought that conflate politics and theology, which prefigured much of fascist discourse, as well as the economic reductionism of Marxist orthodoxy. While 'fundamental classes' have economically discernible interests, proletarian revolution cannot simply be explained in the phraseology of *Capital*. The conquest of political power requires cultural legitimacy, which would include a viable economic programme but also the ability to disarm 'common sense' dispositions and assumptions that maintain the status quo. In this way, arranging apparently disparate common-sense beliefs into a coherent programme is both a philosophical and a political activity, involving the analysis of world views and the concentration of force. Such an endeavour must adapt itself to given situations (as Machiavelli knew), and this has the consequence that homogeneous strategies cannot be applied across heterogeneous societies.

Despite recognizing the relative autonomy of politics and culture from economic mechanisms, Gramsci does not reiterate a liberal faith in the expansion of civil society as a parameter of 'freedom'. Rather, he discusses it as a variation of the practice of bourgeois power and uses an East/West dichotomy to demonstrate certain nuances involved. In the West, Gramsci explains, the power of the state is more diffuse, as its legitimacy is entrenched in the 'outer ditches' of civil society. This was an underlying reason for the failure of revolutionary assaults on the state in Western Europe. On the other hand, the East is characterized by a heavily centralized state which exercises rule in a more directly vertical fashion. The East/West antinomy is more of a theoretical distinction than a geographic description and implicates different strategic approaches for political success. It is one example of the theoretical creativity, against all the odds, of the practitioner of the 'pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will'.[1]

Onur Acaroglu and Will Stronge

Note

1 The motto 'pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will' appears numerous times in Gramsci's writings (e.g. 1971: 175), along with the pages of the journal *L'Ordine Nuovo*. It is usually attributed to Romain Rolland.

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EXCERPTS

Antonio Gramsci, *The Prison Nvotebooks*

(Excerpts 1–4 are from Gramsci, A. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. Q. Hoare and G. N. Smith, International Publishers, New York. PP. 125–7, 169, 238, 323.)

The study of philosophy

Some preliminary points of reference

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. It must first be shown that all men are "philosophers", by defining the limits and characteristics of the "spontaneous philosophy" which is proper to everybody. This philosophy is contained in: 1. language itself, which is a totality of determined notions and concepts and not just of words grammatically devoid of content; 2. "common sense" and "good sense"; 3. popular religion and, therefore, also in the entire system of beliefs, superstitions, opinions, ways of seeing things and of acting, which are collectively bundled together under the name of "folklore".

Having first shown that everyone is a philosopher, though in his own way and unconsciously, since even in the slightest manifestation of any intellectual activity whatever, in "language", there is contained a. specific conception of the world, one then moves on to the second level, which is that of awareness and criticism. That is to say, one proceeds to the question—is it better to "think", without having a critical awareness, in a disjointed and episodic way? In other words, is it better to take part in a conception of the world mechanically imposed by the external environment, i.e. by one of the many social groups in which everyone is automatically involved from the moment of his entry into the conscious world (and this can be one's village or province; it can have its origins in the parish and the "intellectual activity" of the local priest or aging patriarch whose wisdom is law, or in the little old woman who has inherited the lore of the witches or the minor intellectual soured by his own stupidity and inability to act)? Or, on the other hand, is it better 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, be one's own guide, refusing to accept passively and supinely from outside the moulding of one's personality?

Note I. In acquiring one's conception of the world one always belongs to a particular grouping which is that of all the social elements which

share the same mode of thinking and acting. We are all conformists of some conformism or other, always man-in-the-mass or collective man. The question is this: of what historical type is the conformism, the mass humanity to which one belongs? When one's conception of the world is not critical and coherent but disjointed and episodic, one belongs simultaneously to a multiplicity of mass human groups. The personality is strangely composite: it contains Stone Age elements and principles of a more advanced science, prejudices from all past phases of history at the local level and intuitions of a future philosophy which will be that of a human race united the world over. To criticise one's own conception of the world means therefore to make it a coherent unity and to raise it to the level reached by the most advanced thought in the world. It therefore also means criticism of all previous philosophy, in so far as this has left stratified deposits in popular philosophy. The starting-point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is, and is "knowing thyself" as a product of the historical process to date which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory.

Note II. Philosophy cannot be separated from the history of philosophy, nor can culture from the history of culture. In the most immediate and relevant sense, one cannot be a philosopher, by which I mean have a critical and coherent conception of the world, without having a consciousness of its historicity, of the phase of development which it represents and of the fact that it contradicts other conceptions or elements of other conceptions. One's conception of the world is a response to certain specific problems posed by reality, which are quite specific and "original" in their immediate relevance. How is it possible to consider the present, and quite specific present, with a mode of thought elaborated for a past which is often remote and superseded? When someone does this, it means that he is a walking anachronism, a fossil, and not living in the modern world, or at the least that he is strangely composite. And it is in fact the case that social groups which in some ways express the most developed modernity, lag behind in other respects, given their social position, and are therefore incapable of complete historical autonomy.

Note III. If it is true that every language contains the elements of a conception of the world and of a culture, it could also be true that from anyone's language one can assess the greater or lesser complexity of his conception of the world. Someone who only speaks dialect, or understands the standard language incompletely, necessarily has an intuition of the world which is more or less limited and provincial, which is fossilised and anachronistic in relation to the major currents of thought which dominate world history. His interests will be limited, more or less corporate or economistic, not universal. While it is not always possible to learn a number of foreign languages in order to put oneself in contact with other cultural lives, it is at the least necessary to learn the national language properly. A

great culture can be translated into the language of another great culture, that is to say a great national language with historic richness and complexity, and it can translate any other great culture and can be a world-wide means of expression. But a dialect cannot do this.

Note IV. Creating a new culture does not only mean one's own individual "original" discoveries. It also, and most particularly, means the diffusion in a critical form of truths already discovered, their "socialisation" as it were, and even making them the basis of vital action, an element of co-ordination and intellectual and moral order. For a mass of people to be led to think coherently and in the same coherent fashion about the real present world, is a "philosophical" event far more important and "original" than the discovery by some philosophical "genius" of a truth which remains the property of small groups of intellectuals.

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Prediction and perspective

Another point which needs to be defined and developed is the "dual perspective" in political action and in national life. The dual perspective can present itself on various levels, from the most elementary to the most complex; but these can all theoretically be reduced to two fundamental levels, corresponding to the dual nature of Machiavelli's Centaur — half-animal and half-human. They are the levels of force and of consent, authority and hegemony, violence and civilisation, of the individual moment and of the universal moment ("Church" and "State"), of agitation and of propaganda, of tactics and of strategy, etc. Some have reduced the theory of the "dual perspective" to something trivial and banal, to nothing but two forms of "immediacy" which succeed each other mechanically in time, with greater or less "proximity". In actual fact, it often happens that the more the first "perspective" is "immediate" and elementary, the more the second has to be "distant" (not in time, but as a dialectical relation), complex and ambitious. In other words, it may happen as in human life, that the more an individual is compelled to defend his own immediate physical existence, the more will he uphold and identify with the highest values of civilisation and of humanity, in all their complexity. [1933–4: 1st version 1931–2.]

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The modern prince

Brief notes on Machiavelli's politics

3.1 The basic thing about *The Prince* is that it is not a systematic treatment, but a "live" work, in which political ideology and political science are fused in the dramatic form of a "myth". Before Machiavelli, political science had taken the form either of the Utopia or of the scholarly treatise. Machiavelli, combining the two, gave imaginative and artistic form to his conception by

embodying the doctrinal, rational element in the person of a *condottiere*, who represents plastically and "anthropomorphically" the symbol of the "collective will". In order to represent the process whereby a given collective will, directed towards a given political objective, is formed, Machiavelli did not have recourse to long-winded arguments, or pedantic classifications of principles and criteria for a method of action. Instead he represented this process in terms of the qualities, characteristics, duties and requirements of a concrete individual. Such a procedure stimulates the artistic imagination of those who have to be convinced, and gives political passions a more concrete form.

Machiavelli's *Prince* could be studied as an historical exemplification of the Sorelian myth — i.e. of a political ideology expressed neither in the form of a cold utopia nor as learned theorising, but rather by a creation of concrete phantasy which acts on a dispersed and shattered people to arouse and organise its collective will. The utopian character of *The Prince* lies in the fact that the Prince had no real historical existence; he did not present himself immediately and objectively to the Italian people, but was a pure theoretical abstraction — a symbol of the leader and ideal *condottiere*. However, in a dramatic movement of great effect, the elements of passion and of myth which occur throughout the book are drawn together and brought to life in the conclusion, in the invocation of a prince who "really exists". Throughout the book, Machiavelli discusses what the Prince must be like if he is to lead a people to found a new State; the argument is developed with rigorous logic, and with scientific detachment. In the conclusion, Machiavelli merges with the people, becomes the people; not, however, some "generic" people, but the people whom he, Machiavelli, has convinced by the preceding argument—the people whose consciousness and whose expression he becomes and feels himself to be, with whom he feels identified. The entire "logical" argument now appears as nothing other than auto-reflection on the part of the people — an inner reasoning worked out in the popular consciousness, whose conclusion is a cry of passionate urgency. The passion, from discussion of itself, becomes once again "emotion", fever, fanatical desire for action. This is why the epilogue of *The Prince is* not something extrinsic, tacked on, rhetorical, but has to be understood as a necessary element of the work — indeed as the element which gives the entire work its true colour, and makes it a kind of "political manifesto".

3.2 The modern prince, the myth-prince, cannot be a real person, a concrete individual. It can only be an organism, a complex element of society in which a collective will, which has already been recognised and has to some extent asserted itself in action, begins to take concrete form. History has already provided this organism, and it is the political party — the first cell in which there come together germs of a collective will tending to become universal and total. In the modern world, only those historico-political

actions which are immediate and imminent, characterised by the necessity for lightning speed, can be incarnated mythically by a concrete individual. Such speed can only be made necessary by a great and imminent danger, a great danger which precisely fans passion and fanaticism suddenly to a white heat, and annihilates the critical sense and the corrosive irony which are able to destroy the "charismatic" character of the *condottiere* [. . .]. But an improvised action of such a kind, by its very nature, cannot have a long-term and organic character. It will in almost all cases be appropriate to restoration and reorganisation, but not to the founding of new States or new national and social structures (as was at issue in Machiavelli's *Prince*, in which the theme of restoration was merely a rhetorical element, linked to the literary concept of an Italy descended from Rome and destined to restore the order and the power of Rome).

3.3 An important part of *The Modern Prince* will have to be devoted to the question of intellectual and moral reform, that is to the question of religion or world-view. In this field too we find in the existing tradition an absence of Jacobinism and fear of Jacobinism (the latest philosophical expression of such fear is B. Croce's Malthusian attitude towards religion). The modern Prince must be and cannot but be the proclaimer and organiser of an intellectual and moral reform, which also means creating the terrain for a subsequent development of the national-popular collective will towards the realisation of a superior, total form of modern civilisation.

These two basic points — the formation of a national-popular collective will, of which the modern Prince is at one and the same time the organiser and the active, operative expression; and intellectual and moral reform — should structure the entire work. The concrete, programmatic points must be incorporated in the first part, that is they should result from the line of discussion "*dramatically*", and not be a cold and pedantic exposition of arguments.

Can there be cultural reform, and can the position of the depressed strata of society be improved culturally, without a previous economic reform and a change in their position in the social and economic fields? Intellectual and moral reform has to be linked with a programme of economic reform— indeed the programme of economic reform is precisely the concrete form in which every intellectual and moral reform presents itself. The modern Prince, as it develops, revolutionises the whole system of intellectual and moral relation, in that its development means precisely that any given act is seen as useful or harmful, as virtuous or as wicked, only in so far as it has as its point of reference the modern Prince itself, and helps to strengthen or to oppose it. In men's consciences, the Prince takes the place of the divinity or the categorical imperative, and becomes the basis for a modern laicism and for a complete laicisation of all aspects of life and of all customary relationships. [1933–4: 1st version 1931–2.]

EXCERPT 4

Ilitch, however, did not have time to expand his formula — though it should be borne in mind that he could only have expanded it theoretically, whereas the fundamental task was a national one; that is to say it required a reconnaissance of the terrain and identification of the elements of trench and fortress represented by the elements of civil society, etc. In Russia the State was everything, civil society was primordial and gelatinous; in the West, there was a proper relation between State and civil society, and when the State trembled a sturdy structure of civil society was at once revealed. The State was only an outer ditch, behind which there stood a powerful system of fortresses and earthworks: more or less numerous from one State to the next, it goes without saying — but precisely necessitated an accurate reconnaissance of each individual country.

Antonio Gramsci, *Revolution against "Capital"*

(Gramsci, A. 1987, "Revolution against 'Capital'" in *Selections from Political Writings: 1910-1920*, ed. Q. Hoare, Lawrence & Wishart, London, pp. 34–7.)

The Bolshevik Revolution is now definitively part of the general revolution of the Russian people. The maximalists up until two months ago were the active agents needed to ensure that events should not stagnate, that the drive to the future should not come to a halt and allow a final settlement — a bourgeois settlement — to be reached. Now these maximalists have seized power and established their dictatorship, and are creating the socialist framework within which the revolution will have to settle down if it is to continue to develop harmoniously, without head-on confrontations, on the basis of the immense gains which have already been made.

The Bolshevik Revolution consists more of ideologies than of events. (And hence, at bottom, we do not really need to know more than we do.) This is the revolution against Karl Marx's *Capital*. In Russia, Marx's *Capital* was more the book of the bourgeoisie than of the proletariat. It stood as the critical demonstration of how events should follow a predetermined course: how in Russia a bourgeoisie had to develop, and a capitalist era had to open, with the setting-up of a Western-type civilization, before the proletariat could even think in terms of its own revolt, its own class demands, its own revolution. But events have overcome ideologies. Events have exploded the critical schemas determining how the history of Russia would unfold according to the canons of historical materialism. The Bolsheviks reject Karl Marx, and their explicit actions and conquests bear witness that the canons of historical materialism are not so rigid as one might have thought and has been believed.

And yet there is a fatality even in these events, and if the Bolsheviks reject some of the statements in *Capital*, they do not reject its invigorating,

immanent thought. These people are not "Marxists", that is all; they have not used the works of the Master to compile a rigid doctrine of dogmatic utterances never to be questioned. They live Marxist thought – that thought which is eternal, which represents the continuation of German and Italian idealism, and which in the case of Marx was contaminated by positivist and naturalist encrustations. This thought sees as the dominant factor in history, not raw economic facts, but man, men in societies, men in relation to one another, reaching agreements with one another, developing through these contacts (civilisation) a collective, social will; men coming to understand economic facts, judging them and adapting them to their will until this becomes the driving force of the economy and moulds objective reality, which lives and moves and comes to resemble a current of volcanic lava that can be channelled wherever and in whatever way men's will determines.

Marx foresaw the foreseeable. But he could not foresee the European war, or rather he could not foresee that the war would last as long as it has or have the effects it has had. He could not foresee that in the space of three years of unspeakable suffering and miseries, this war would have aroused in Russia the collective popular will that it has aroused. *In normal times* a lengthy process of gradual diffusion through society is needed for such a collective will to form; a wide range of class experience is needed. Men are lazy, they need to be organised, first externally into corporations and leagues, then internally, within their thought and their will [. . .] need a ceaseless continuity and multiplicity of external stimuli. This is why, *under normal conditions*, the canons of Marxist historical criticism grasp reality, capture and clarify it. *Under normal conditions* the two classes of the capitalist world create history through an ever more intensified class struggle. The proletariat is sharply aware of its poverty and its ever-present discomfort and puts pressure on the bourgeoisie to improve its living standards. It enters into struggle, and forces the bourgeoisie to improve the techniques of production and make it more adapted to meeting the urgent needs of the proletariat. The result is a headlong drive for improvement, an acceleration of the rhythm of production, and a continually increasing output of goods useful to society. And in this drive many fall by the wayside, so making the needs of those who are left more urgent; the masses are forever in a state of turmoil, and out of this chaos they develop some order in their thoughts, and become ever more conscious of their own potential, of their own capacity to shoulder social responsibility and become the arbiters of their own destiny.

This is what happens under normal conditions. When events are repeated with a certain regularity. When history develops through stages which, though ever more complex and richer in significance and value, are nevertheless similar. But in Russia the war galvanized the People's will. As a result of the sufferings accumulated over three years, their will became as one almost overnight. Famine was imminent, and hunger, death from

hunger could claim anyone, could crush tens of millions of men at one stroke. Mechanically at first, then actively and consciously after the first revolution, the people's will became as one.

Socialist propaganda put the Russian people in contact with the experience of other proletariats. Socialist propaganda could bring the history of the proletariat dramatically to life in a moment: its struggles against capitalism, the lengthy series of efforts required to emancipate it completely from the chains of servility that made it so abject and to allow it to forge a new consciousness and become a testimony today to a world yet to come. It was socialist propaganda that forged the will of the Russian people. Why should they wait for the history of England to be repeated in Russia, for the bourgeoisie to arise, for the class struggle to begin, so that class consciousness may be formed and the final catastrophe of the capitalist world eventually hit them? The Russian people — or at least a minority of the Russian people — has already passed through these experiences in thought. It has gone beyond them. It will make use of them now to assert itself just as it will make use of Western capitalist experience to bring itself rapidly to the same level of production as the Western world. In capitalist terms, North America is more advanced than England, because the Anglo-Saxons in North America took off at once from the level England had reached only after long evolution. Now the Russian proletariat, socialistically educated, will begin its history at the highest level England has reached today. Since it has to start from scratch, it will start from what has been perfected elsewhere, and hence will be driven to achieve that level of economic maturity which Marx considered to be a necessary condition for collectivism. The revolutionaries themselves will create the conditions needed for the total achievement of their goal. And they will create them faster than capitalism could have done. The criticisms that socialists have made of the bourgeois system, to emphasize its imperfections and its squandering of wealth, can now be applied by the revolutionaries to do better, to avoid the squandering and not fall prey to the imperfections. It will at first be a collectivism of poverty and suffering. But a bourgeois regime would have inherited the same conditions of poverty and suffering. Capitalism could do no more *immediately* than collectivism in Russia. In fact today it would do a lot less, since it would be faced *immediately* by a discontented and turbulent proletariat, a proletariat no longer able to support on behalf of others the suffering and privation that economic dislocation would bring in its wake. So even in absolute, human terms, socialism *now* can be justified in Russia. The hardships that await them after the peace will be bearable only if the proletarians feel they have things under their own control and know that by their efforts they can reduce these hardships in the shortest possible time.

One has the impression that the maximalists at this moment are the spontaneous expression of a *biological* necessity – that they *had* to take

power if the Russian people were not to fall prey to a horrible calamity; if the Russian people, throwing themselves into the colossal labours needed for their own regeneration, were to feel less sharply the fangs of the starving wolf; if Russia were not to become a vast shambles of savage beasts tearing each other to pieces.