Praxis and the Danger:
The Insurgent Ontology of Antonio Gramsci

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. . . in this imbalance between theory and practice
there was an inherent danger

- Antonio Gramsci

In this essay, I will consider, through Gramsci, some philosophical and political concepts of the Marxist tradition which, because of their linguistic form, are today controversial or unpopular. I will deal particularly with the concepts of orthodoxy, production and totality.

The main purpose of my study is to show how, in Gramsci's vision, Marxism, or the philosophy of praxis, is a new and total, but dynamic, conception of the world whose interest cannot be limited to one or the other sphere of the totality of life. Culture itself, which for Gramsci is wider than philosophy, is the totality of forms that go from production to artistic and poetic creation, from manual labor to philosophical activity. At the end of the present essay, I will propose a new interpretation of today's cursed concept of totality: totality as plenitude. It is not a question of finding a new and better word for an old concept. Rather, what I would like to do is contribute to an understanding of this central and profound concept of the philosophy of praxis while avoiding falling into easy

euphemisms as well as into the danger of weakening and neutralizing the power of the philosophy of praxis itself. I will also suggest, in the last section, a new possible interpretation of the concept of the will which Gramsci claims should be put at the basis of philosophy.

1. Orthodoxy and productivism

Gramsci's thought has been interpreted in many ways. However, what is common to most interpretations is the emphasis on Gramsci's total or almost total distance from Marxist orthodoxy.1 By Marxist orthodoxy one generally understands the economist, productivist reduction of the theory of revolution to the doctrines of the Second International and to trends which are supposedly already present in Marx's *Capital* itself. This means, basically, the idea that the economic sphere strictly and necessarily determines the cultural sphere and that the question of economic growth should emphatically remain a central concern of a revolutionary society. Gramsci opposition to, or distance from, this tendency is apparent not only in the *Prison Notebooks*, but also in his earlier writings. For example, in "The Revolution Against *Capital*," written in 1917, Gramsci states that the main factor in history is human subjectivity, not economic facts (Gramsci, 1990: 34-35). Here Marx's *Capital* is understood as a text which does not break with bourgeois productivism or that, at least, can be used to perpetuate that same productivist logic.2 For now, I will not discuss the validity of this view about *Capital*, a view which does not find in Gramsci its only exponent, but which is instead relatively common. I will only say that, notwithstanding his 1917 article praising the early achievements of the Russian Revolution at the expense of Marxist orthodoxy, Gramsci does not forget, later in prison, to redefine the concept of orthodoxy itself in a way that shows the complexity of his earlier judgment.

In a note from the *Prison Notebooks* to which I will return throughout this essay, Gramsci says that "orthodoxy" (which he puts, but not consistently, in quotation marks) is not following any given thinker or school of thought within or without the Marxist tradition; it is rather the self-sufficiency, autonomy and totality of the philosophy of praxis (Gramsci, 1971: 462). I think that one finds here the kernel of Gramsci's political thought. The philosophy of praxis is a new conception of the world, the possibility of its constitution, and the reality of this possibility. Gramsci here shows to be orthodox and non-orthodox at the same time. He is non-orthodox if by orthodoxy one means the mechanical and merely formal following of an apparently unchangeable paradigm. This paradigm is, notably, the economist and productivist one, but there may be others. Yet he is orthodox if by orthodoxy one means the living, creative Marxism which is the same as the philosophy of praxis and which does not deny human subjectivity and will, but is based on and propelled by them.

Thus Gramsci's philosophy of praxis is not merely one brand of (Western) Marxism, but something more. The fact that it resists being easily classified is not a sign of philosophical or political vagueness, but the proof of its commitment to the idea of totality, for this totality is a complex reality and philosophy must reflect that complexity. The philosophy of praxis attempts to reconstitute Marxism (i.e., the most sophisticated

and powerful theory of social, political and cultural revolution) outside the dichotomies of idealism and materialism, voluntarism and economism, superstructure and base. This "outside," which is philosophical immanence and political clarity, is not an arbitrary third way, a "democratic" alternative to the theory of revolution itself, but the place of synthesis where what is valuable in the philosophies of the past and present (Gramsci's present as well as our own, if Gramsci's project is to be continued) is superseded, in a Hegelian sense, by a future, possible philosophy which posits itself as radically different, and autonomous, from the forms that have kept it from becoming actual. The synthetic, or dialectical, actualization of the philosophy of praxis does not have to wait for a vanguard party to seize State power in order to start its long process of revolution. This is, basically, the criticism Gramsci has of Bordiga, more than of Lenin. The *transition* to communism is not to be left to a future eventuality. Rather, the future is already contained in the present; contained as a process, not as an event.

The philosophy of praxis is synthetic in the sense -- among others -- that it brings together, under the same *ensemble*, the commonality and specificity (singularity) of thinking, the objective and the subjective. It aspires, not to a seat within a pluralism of voices, but to the univocity of a transfigured totality. This totality announces itself first as difference, then as antagonism and autonomy, and finally -- when it actually totalizes itself -- as the destruction of the forms and forces which it counters and which counter it. For it belongs to the concept of totality not to have parts outside itself. This is, again, the meaning of true orthodoxy for Gramsci, that is, "the fundamental concept that the philosophy of praxis is 'sufficient unto itself,' that it contains in itself all the fundamental elements needed to construct a total and integral conception of the world, a total philosophy and theory of natural science, and not only that but everything that is needed to give life to an integral practical organization of society, that is, to become a total integral civilisation" (Gramsci, 1971: 462).

Of course, today, this manner of speaking is unpopular, and Gramsci is rather used to construct a democratic pluralism which goes under the name of radical democracy; I mean today that the theory of revolution has been discredited and the concept of totality has become identical with that of totalitarianism. The world is consequently divided into "democratic" and "totalitarian" systems, and so are philosophies. The words "democracy" and "democratic" are used to speak thoughtlessly of countries (notably, the US and Western Europe) whose values and standards are, in practice, far from meeting the concept these words should refer to. What is more, totalitarianism has almost become synonymous with communism. Few are those who distinguish between communism and sovietism. Thus, Marxism, the theory of revolution, if it wants to survive, has to weaken its positions and renounce its ambitious aspirations, renounce revolution precisely, and become palatable to a more liberal (or neo-liberal) and weaker thinking. Gramsci's philosophy of praxis in particular (due perhaps to the fragmented nature of its exposition) is being used to show that difference can come about without upsetting too much the established order of things. The philosophy of praxis is then relegated to the cultural sphere, it becomes the "philosophy of culture," as if this phrase did not already describe, and necessarily so, all philosophy, all theory and practice. Gramsci's distance from a bureaucratic and dead orthodoxy, rather than be looked at as a measure of his coherence

and of his unrelenting revolutionary stance, is considered a bit conciliatory and less threatening. As if shifting the fulcrum of the struggle from the base to the superstructure (but there is no forgetfulness of the importance of the economic moment in Gramsci), from the State to civil society, from production and circulation to philosophy and education, that is, from economics to politics and history, were a sign of the abandonment of the revolutionary project -- a project, to be sure, whose aim is not the simple amelioration of the condition of the oppressed, but the construction of a radically new totality. The opposite is true. Gramsci's concepts (notably, that of hegemony, but others as well) are tools for a radical change of society and the world; they are instruments of freedom. The subjective change that must occur through the work done at the cultural, educational and political level -- the level that in Gramsci goes under the name of civil society -- is a change in the direction of living labor, which stops being, to use an expression of Mario Tronti's, "a force *inside* capital" and becomes, not only "a force *against* capital" (Tronti, 1966: 80), but also a force for itself, for its own edification.

Then we have to reinterpret the concepts of culture and education. In the light of the philosophy of praxis, they are nothing but living labor trying to break free from the forces of domination and subsumption, to organize and build a future philosophy and a future society. For living labor knows that is possible, even though this knowledge is often enmeshed in common sense and backward thinking, such that it is often difficult to see that this possibility is in fact a reality. Already with the factory councils in Turin, Gramsci shows his deep and unusual understanding of the importance of the subjective side of the struggle.[3] This is probably due to the fact that Gramsci understood what was already present in Marx: the difference between living labor and productive labor. For Gramsci, labor (or work) -- and this is to be found in a note on education -- is what mediates "the relations between the social and the natural orders" (Gramsci, 1971: 34), it is "man's theoretical and practical activity...[which] provides a basis for the ... development of an historical, dialectical conception of the world, which understands movement and change, which appreciates the sum of effort and sacrifice which the present has cost the past and which the future is costing the present, and which conceives the contemporary world as a synthesis of the past, of all past generations, which projects itself into the future" (34-35). Gramsci is here speaking of the basis of the primary school. However, we can also understand here Gramsci's idea of living labor as distinguished from the merely economist and productivist view. Labor is not primarily a category of political economy, but a category of ontology, which has its basis in ... education. It should then be clear why education and culture are not mere superstructural attachments to a general theory of society, but fundamental elements of the theory of revolution. They are based on labor, which we will interpret as a univocal social concept, not delimited to the economic sphere. In this sense, we will also try to understand the meaning of this concept in the work of Marx.

It is certainly unusual to draw a parallel between Marx's concept of living labor and Gramsci's more cultural and superstructural categories, especially if one refers to the *Grundrisse* which Gramsci had obviously not read.[4] Yet, in order to understand Gramsci's non-productivist view of the philosophy of praxis, it may be important, especially in the light of Gramsci's above-mentioned article on the Russian revolution as

a revolution against *Capital*, to see to what extent Marx himself can be said to remain on the terrain of the productivist logic of capital. The question is not one of pure marxiology, but a political one. In other words, it is not a question of establishing a line of continuity between Marx and Gramsci for the sake of reintroducing the negative concept of orthodoxy which, as we have seen, Gramsci rejects. Rather, it is a question of understanding clearly that Gramsci's philosophy of praxis is not a weaker type of Marxism -- one which may be more acceptable to postmodernity and postmodernism with their antiessentialist programs. Indeed, Gramsci's philosophy of praxis remains a theory of revolution as well as a description of historical materialism emphasizing the historical, subjective dimension of the concept. It is democratic not because it "democratizes" (which is often a euphemism for "weakens" or "neutralizes") Marxism, but rather because the concept of true democracy belongs, essentially and fundamentally, to the Marxist theory of revolution. But this is a higher form of democracy, that is, to paraphrase Gramsci, democracy as a "total and integral organization of society." It is not the partial democracy which commonly, and vulgarly, describes the world's most advanced countries today. Here one has to recall Lenin who drastically, but pointedly, says: "Democracy for an insignificant minority, democracy for the rich -- that is the democracy of capitalist society" (Lenin, 1976: 106). Then Lenin goes on to speak of the withering away of this kind of democracy, or, as he sees it (and not altogether wrongly) of democracy in general -- democracy being an ideological construct most often in the service of domination than of freedom. For Lenin, true democracy is communism, and there is no doubt that this holds true for Gramsci as well. For the latter, the difference between the illusion of democracy and true democracy becomes evident in the instructional/educational process. He criticizes the modern type of schooling, based on specialization and vocational learning, for being democratic only in appearance and in words: "The multiplication of types of vocational school thus tends to perpetuate traditional social differences; but since, within these differences, it tends to encourage internal diversification, it gives the impression of being democratic in tendency. The labourer can become a skilled worker, for instance, the peasant a surveyor or petty agronomist. *But democracy, by definition, cannot mean merely that an unskilled worker can become skilled. It must mean that every 'citizen' can 'govern' and that society places him, even if only abstractly, in a general condition to achieve this*" (Gramsci, 1971: 40; emphasis added).

Let us go back, after this brief digression, to the concept of living labor and its relation to Gramsci's philosophy of praxis. In the *Grundrisse* (as well as elsewhere), Marx distinguishes between living labor and productive labor, even though he sometimes treats them as identical, creating thereby some confusion -- a confusion which becomes more evident in the writings of many Marxists. Gramsci, on the other hand, understood that labor -- which remains, as we have seen, at the center of society even when the spell of productivism is broken -- is not only inside and against capital, but also outside it. It is in its being outside that its subjectivity is recuperated. But let us first look at the question of living labor in Marx.[5] Indeed, what is often overlooked is that, in Marx, by the phrase "living labor" two things are meant: one is the labor power which is sold as living, useful labor by the worker to the capitalist and which, once sold, remains living and useful only to the capitalist, not to the worker for whom it has become a mere exchange value; the

other is the worker himself, the original owner of this living labor, which he was compelled to regard as exchange value and to actually exchange for a wage, that is, for the possibility of reproducing it, but again only in order to exchange it one more time. However, the worker is not his labor power. What becomes a commodity is this labor power, not the worker himself. Yet, this labor power is not a commodity like all others, for it carries with it some (a substantial part) of the subjectivity of its original owner, i.e., the capacity to apply itself to an object and transform it. Living labor as the labor power employed by capital, that is, *productive* labor, is, yes, "living," but on its way to the scaffold. Even though it is a special commodity -- that is, neither a Bible nor brandy, but a commodity endowed with subjectivity and power -- it is a finite thing nonetheless. The principle of its reproduction does not lie within itself, but in its original owner, in the subject that has alienated it; it does not lie in living labor as labor power, but in living labor as the worker. But the subjectivity of the worker is not confined to his labor power. True, once the worker has parted with his labor power, he remains deprived of something vital: what is objectified during production is his own subjective power (which is, to be sure, an objective entity), which he has to reproduce only in order to exchange and objectify again. Hence, alienation. Marx explains all this very well. However, what is usually overlooked is that the subjective power of labor employed by capital as labor power (productive labor) does not exhaust the subjectivity of the worker. The worker, and this is something Marx stresses, remains *free* -- paradoxically and tragically free, but free nonetheless. It is in this freedom -- a *double freedom* for Marx (1977: 272 and 874), or rather a double negation which I would like to call the condition of *neither...nor* -- that the worker is able to organize: in this freedom, not at the instant of production. It is here that production gives way to action, and productivism is transformed into activism. The worker has sold one part of his subjective power. This power has become productive labor (productive of capital, that is). Now the worker is free, so to speak, to do whatever he wants. True, capital is not only a mode of production in the strict economic sense, but "a general illumination, which bathes all the other colours and modifies their particularity" (Marx, 1973: 107). Under capital, all time is the time of capital. Yet, what capital does not need, notably, the excessive subjectivity of the worker, remains outside capital as capital's own negation and as the worker's possibility of transcendence and freedom. This is a positive freedom, unlike the double freedom of *neither...nor* which excludes the worker both from being part of the means of production and from owning them. The *neither...nor* of double exclusion is transformed into a *neither...nor* of resistance and refusal, of antagonism and autonomy toward the construction of a positive, but radically different, totality.

It is at this juncture that the philosophy of praxis must be located, where productiveness ends and the possibility of creativeness and action begins. This means: not at the point of production, but in its interstices. This is the place of synthesis, of education and living culture. The reduction operated by the market of the worker to labor power and of living labor to productive labor -- a reduction whereby subjective time is congealed into the object, transformed into value and surplus-value -- cannot easily take away from the worker all of his subjectivity. Of course, it will try to do so through the various techniques of control and of rationalization of the labor process. Gramsci is very much aware of this, as it appears from his observations on Americanism and Fordism.

There, he speaks of Taylor as having the purpose of "developing in the worker to the highest degree automatic and mechanical attitudes, breaking up the old psycho-physical nexus of qualified professional work, which demands a certain active participation of intelligence, fantasy and initiative on the part of the worker, and reducing productive operations exclusively to the mechanical, physical aspect" (Gramsci, 1971: 302). And he adds: "But these things, in reality, are not original or novel: they represent simply the most recent phase of a long process which began with industrialism itself" (*ibid.*).

With the emphasis on living labor as individual and collective subjectivity exceeding the capacity of capital, another observation can be made. Even under real subsumption, that is, under the regime of relative surplus-value which completely and repeatedly revolutionizes the mode of production,6 capital cannot become a totality, for it always needs its negation, labor, outside it, which it posits and does not posit at the same time (Marx, 1973: 401). Indeed, particularly under real subsumption, when necessary labor is greatly reduced, capital cannot avoid creating a mass of superfluous labor, which is still living, yet cannot become productive. This labor remains at the margins of the spiral movement of capital, as a witness to the partiality of the latter. The concept of totality, on the other hand, can only be understood in terms of the difference between the capitalist and the communal mode of production. The former needs to dominate what it includes and excludes at the same time; this is why labor is nothing but a factor of production under capital. The latter, on the other hand, is labor that returns to itself, to its immediacy and difference. This difference is a totality. And this totality is positive freedom. Totalitarianism, instead, a mere partiality, is the underlying ideology of capitalism, for it is the imposition, on the whole *ensemble* of social relations, of a partial will: the abstract and irrational will of capital. It is then not a surprise that the former socialist countries were, as the ideologues of the "democratic" West are fond of repeating, totalitarian. They were operating within a higher order of the logic of capitalism and productivism. However, if living labor accepts to get rid of its aspiration to the totality, as some writers who fear the "essentialism of the totality" suggest,7 then it will also have to accept the continuous domination of capital and be content with remaining what capital is not, whether at capital's center or periphery. Accepting this is what in traditional Marxist terms goes under the name of reformism. It means rejecting the theory of revolution *tout court*, and not, euphemistically, advancing toward a new model of "democratic revolution." The power of living labor, its hegemony, cannot be partial. For Laclau and Mouffe, for example, with Gramsci the concept of hegemony changes from a principle of representation to one of articulation (1985: 65) and makes thus possible, indeed "entails the idea of *democratic pluralism*" (71). However, what seems to be overlooked is that this hegemony is counter-hegemonic. Thus, it remains to be seen if this democratic pluralism also includes the forms which must be destroyed by a politics of antagonism which is not merely discursive and liminal as the one contemplated by Laclau and Mouffe (1985: 122-127). As for Gramsci, with his renewed8 concept of orthodoxy, "[a] theory is 'revolutionary' precisely to the extent that it is an element of conscious separation and distinction into two camps and is a peak inaccessible to the enemy camp." And he continues: "To maintain that the philosophy of praxis is not a completely autonomous and independent structure of thought in antagonism to all traditional

philosophies and religions, means in reality that one has not severed one's links with the old world, if indeed one has not actually capitulated" (1971: 462).

2. Production and creative production

In the preceding section, I have tried to show that the distance of the philosophy of praxis from productivism, together with its self-sufficiency, autonomy and totality, clears the ground for a theory of revolution that is not limited to the cultural sphere, nor to the economy, but covers the whole spectrum of social organization and activity.9 The generic time of this revolution is the present, and its specific time is to be seen in those moments in which living labor is not absorbed in the valorization of capital, but is left free to its condition of double negation. In these moments, in which productiveness gives way to creativeness, living labor becomes living culture and begins to "exercise its own hegemony over traditional culture" (462). Living labor away from the site of production is not productive. In this sense, it is able to form a bloc with the living labor that, by not being productive, is considered unproductive.10 However, productive and unproductive labor are merely categories of capital. Outside capital, productive and unproductive labor are living labor which, in itself, is *neither productive nor unproductive*. It is rather creative. The creativeness of this living labor has nothing to do with the production of commodities and surplus-value. Creative living labor is rather the creator of society, culture and history. This means that, outside the production of capital, there is a lot to be done,11 and it can and will be done by a living labor which is either excluded from exchange or is able to withdraw, totally or partially, from it and organize. It is in fact obvious that a change cannot be effected by simply continuing producing and valorizing capital. Of course, the regime of creative labor does not entail the end of production *tout court*, but the end of production as an end in itself, of capitalist production, that is, of productivism.

In Gramsci's notebook dealing with questions of literary criticism, we find a very interesting note in this respect. There Gramsci posits the difference between creative, poetic labor or activity and practical, instrumental activity. He says that there are periods in which all or most of the subjective power of labor is, in a society, directed toward productivism only. But he asks the question as to what happens to the excessive subjectivity of the worker, that is, the creative, poetic activity which would be lost in productivism and instrumentality. At first sight, it seems that, in such a society, the very nature of the practical field would change, acquiring a poetic and epic spirit. In reality, Gramsci says, it is evident that the subjective power of labor is here merely channeled through and into bureaucratic and repressive forces which neutralize its creative and poetic dimension. Only the living labor which remains outside this logic will be able to create a living culture. I quote the whole passage for its importance:

> It should be pointed out that in certain periods of history, the greatest creative minds of a nation can be absorbed in practical work. During such periods all of the best human energies are, in a certain sense, concentrated in work at the base and one cannot yet talk about superstructures. [It seems that] a whole sociological theory has been constructed on this basis in

> America, to justify the absence in the United States of a flourishing of artistic and humanistic culture. This theory, if it is to have at least a semblance of justification, must be able to point to an extensive creative activity in the practical field, even if the following question remains unanswered: if this "creative-poetic" activity exists and is vital, stirring up all of man's vital forces, energies, will and enthusiasms, how is it that it does not stir up literary energy and create an epic? If this does not occur, one can legitimately suspect that only "bureaucratic" energies are involved, not universally expansive forces but brutal and repressive ones. Is it possible to believe that the slaves who were whipped into building the pyramids saw their work in a lyrical light? What needs to be pointed out is that the forces which direct this huge practical undertaking are not only repressive with respect to instrumental work (which is understandable), but are universally repressive. This is typical and explains why in America for example, a certain literary energy can be observed in those who reject the organization of a practical activity which is passed off as "epic" in its own right (Gramsci, 1985: 114).

From the passage above it should be clear that creative production does not necessarily exclude instrumental production. The question is, to put it mildly, one of emphasis. We see that Gramsci even finds "understandable" a certain "repression" in instrumental labor. This thought is also expressed in the section on "Americanism and Fordism" where Gramsci argues against Trotsky's idea of the militarization of work; yet he finds the latter's preoccupation with the principle of coercion adequate (Gramsci, 1971: 301). But in the above passage, notwithstanding the reference to slave labor, Gramsci is speaking of the specifically capitalist mode of production, that is, of capitalism in its phase of real subsumption. At this stage, when even the sexual instinct is controlled and regulated (Gramsci, 1971: 297), the repressive forces become universal and the possibility of autonomous creativity becomes antagonistic and marginal.

Another observation to be made is that under the regime of productivism, the poetic and practical dimensions of human activity -- distinguished in Western culture since Greek philosophy and perhaps theoretically reunited, before Marx's critique of political economy, only in the work of Vico -- reach a stage of full and complete separation. It must be noted that Gramsci's quest for a literature or creative work that accompanies the practical achievements of humankind does not go in the direction of German Romanticism and its aspiration to poetry and the work of art as an elitist substitute for mere production. Rather, for Gramsci the question is to reunite what has been separated in the politics of world history. In other words, it is not in the division of production and creation, that is, in the division of labor, that the answer must be looked for, but in the overcoming of this division. The work of art can very well be, from the producers' point of view, a work of mere production, as the Pyramids attest. However, the point is moving toward a conception of labor that brings together production and creation. Indeed, the critique of productivism does not entail a critique of production as such; no more than the critique of individualism entails a critique of the individual or individuality.12 The unity of production and creation is the unity of structure and superstructure: a configuration of

the historical bloc. In the logic of productivism, the superstructure (i.e., human will and subjectivity) is completely absorbed and lost in the structure, politics and culture are reduced to the economic sphere, creation disappears in mere production. However, the overcoming of productivism does not entail the disappearing of the structure, the economy, or production as such. In reality, if it is true that the economic base determines in important ways what is not merely economic, it is also true that an economic structure is not a metaphysical given but a mechanism which is willed by the subject for specific reasons and to specific ends. The economic structure is itself constructed by a superstructure understood, with Gramsci, as will and subjectivity. In this sense, an alternative form of production still fulfills some structural functions in society but it does not reduce society to those functions, nor does it turn production into productivism.

When production is conceived "in relation to the interests of the class which is as yet still subaltern." then a "split" (*scissione*) and a "new synthesis" occur that make subjective "that which is given 'objectively'" (Gramsci, 1971: 202). Productivism ends, and production becomes creative production. Gramsci defines the objective element of production as "the junction between the requirements of technical development and the interest of the ruling class" (*ibid.*). This is what the individual worker, powerless as an individual, thinks of objective production. However, the collective worker can, for Gramsci, change this objectivity to subjectivity. It is difficult to see here a residue of productivist orthodoxy in Gramsci.13 Rather, one should see here Gramsci's attempt to clarify the ambiguity inherent in the concept of production. This ambiguity has to do with the fact that the word "production" is used to speak of production in general, as a necessary condition for human life, and of production under the capitalist mode: capitalist and specifically capitalist production. In the Introduction to the *Grundrisse*, Marx distinguishes clearly between the "common elements" of all production and the "essential differences" that qualify any given mode (Marx, 1973: 85). Capitalism is, of course, not the only way in which production has occurred, even though -- and this is Marx's main point in his critique -- for bourgeois political economy the essential, historical difference of capital turns into a metaphysical category. There was production before capital, and there will be production after capital passes away. The overcoming of capital is the overcoming of an essential difference, not of a general necessity. Therefore, maintaining the notion of the necessity of production is not at all remaining open to a productivist logic. Even though it may appear paradoxical, production which is a means, rather than an end in itself, is production with creation. It appears paradoxical because when we say that, under capital, production is an end in itself, we lose sight of the limit of this expression. In fact, under capital the end of production is the making of surplus-value and profit. Thus, it is capitalist production (i.e., the production and valorization of capital) that is an end in itself, not production proper. In Volume II of *Capital*, we read: "The production process appears simply as an unavoidable middle term, a necessary evil for the purpose of money-making" (Marx, 1978: 137). On the other hand, creative production -- under the communal mode of production -- does not mean that the usefulness of what is produced no longer counts; that is, it is not, or does not have to be, disinterested production. The creative (or even poetic) aspect of production does not mean that all products of (material or immaterial) labor are works of art, at least not according to the way we usually understand the concept of a work of art. Rather, what it means is that by

operating the split away from objectivity toward subjectivity the gap between work of art and mere production narrows; and the gap between conception and execution may even disappear. The result of subjective labor may very well have, and it should, its usefulness outside itself, outside mere contemplation. But usefulness itself must be redefined. It is this redefinition that does not belong to the field of production, of the economy and of the structure; it rather belongs to the field of action or, which is the same, of praxis.

The confusion in the concept of productive labor is, as Isaak Rubin wrote in 1928, "an unclear idea of Marx's own views" (Rubin, 1972: 259). In his section on productive labor, Rubin quotes from the first volume of *Capital*: "Capitalist production is not merely the production of commodities, it is, in its very essence, the production of surplus-value" (Marx, 1977: 644). Rubin, who like Gramsci had not read the *Grundrisse*, quotes from the sections on productive labor in Volume I of *Theories of Surplus Value* where Marx repeats the arguments one finds in the *Grundrisse* as well. Fundamentally, productive labor is that which produces capital. According to Marx, "Only bourgeois narrow-mindedness, which regards the capitalist forms of production as absolute forms -- hence as eternal, natural forms of production -- can confuse the question of what is *productive labour* from the standpoint of capital with the question of what labour is productive in general; and consequently fancy itself very wise in giving the answer that all labour which produces anything at all, which has any kind of result, is by that very fact productive labour" (Marx: 2000: 393).14 Rubin explains that "Marx throws out as useless the question of what kind of labor is productive in general" because "[e]very system of production relations, every economic order has its concept of productive labour" (Rubin, 1972: 260). Thus, "Marx confined his analysis to the question of which labor is productive from the standpoint of capital, or in the capitalist system of economy" (*ibid.*). Then Rubin goes on to speak of the difference between the production and the circulation of capital, which adds confusion to the question of productive labor, and says that, for Marx, only one type of labor "is 'productive' not because it produces material goods, but because it is hired by 'productive' capital, i.e., capital in the phase of production" (269). Thus, "[t]he labor of salesmen is not productive, not because it does not produce changes in material goods, but only because it is hired by capital in the phase of circulation" (*ibid.*). On the other hand, "[t]he labor of the clown [in the service of the circus entrepreneur] is productive because it is employed by capital in the phase of production" (*ibid.*). This analytic distinction seems to leave even Rubin unsatisfied. We enter here a scholastic question, a source of confusion which cannot be clarified but must be left to itself. At the end of his study, Rubin himself says that perhaps the term "productive" was not the best choice to speak of the difference between labor hired by capital in the phase of production and labor hired by capital in the phase of circulation (275).

However, Rubin, whose interest lies more in giving a social and cultural dimension to political economy as against mere economics than in performing a critique of political economy itself, also leaves unsolved the question as to why labor which is not productive (i.e., neither productive nor unproductive, but creative) should not be given theoretical and political consideration. He does not see, therefore, that Marx's definition is one-sided, or, as Antonio Negri says, "*heavily reductive*" (1991: 64). It is of course true that if one considers all labor productive labor one may -- as did the political economists Marx

wanted to refute -- lose sight of the essential difference and the historical character of capital. But for bourgeois political economy that was not a mistake; it was rather a precise and deliberate political endeavor. Yet, by reducing all living labor to either productive or unproductive labor, one risks reducing the political, insurgent potentiality of subjective labor. Indeed, the confusion Rubin points out in relation to the difference between labor hired by capital in the phase of production and labor hired by capital in the phase of circulation (the latter being unproductive) becomes interesting only if one looks at the phase of circulation in a broader way than political economy does and translates it into the superstructural level. In this sense, circulating is not capital as capital, but capital as transfigured and segmented into the many life manifestations of its own regime, running throughout civil society.

It is in this sense that education, culture, the family, and all the other elements of civil society are related, and yet unrelated, to the productivist logic of capital. The fact that one part of living labor is employed by capital and becomes productive may render the other part unproductive, but no less living. Furthermore, to go back to Gramsci, when the action of the "collective worker" operates the "split" and the new synthesis which makes subjective what was objective, living labor stops being productive of capital, it returns to itself as creative labor, or as productive, but in a different sense of the word. It is in this movement that Gramsci's insurgent ontology -- which has a lot to do with the factory movement, but is not limited to it -- clearly defines itself: in this radical inversion of the subjective and objective functions. For Marx, capital represents, in relation to the worker, "the social productive power of labor," while the productive labor of the worker represents, in relation to capital, "only the labour of the *isolated labourer*" (2000: 394). In reality, the question, for the theory and practice of revolution, is not merely one of inversion. As Gramsci says: "The nexus [between the technical development and the interests of the ruling class] can be dissolved; technical requirements can be conceived in concrete terms, not merely separately from the interests of the ruling class, but in relation to the class which is as yet still subaltern" (1971: 202). The dissolution of the nexus, the subjectivization of the social power of labor, cannot be accomplished without bringing capitalist production to ruin. Consequently, productive labor must stop being productive in the capitalist sense; it must become the subject of its own collective and social power, against the objective nexus of technology and political power that confronts it. It must come back to itself, to its difference, which is not merely the separation of antagonism (even though this represents a necessary phase), but the constitution of a new totality.

3. The subject of labor

I have suggested above that the dissolution of the nexus that links living labor to the objective conditions of technology and power in the factory can exemplify the passage from a regime of mere production to a regime of creative production. The latter would serve as a general paradigm, within and without the factory; it would cover, in other words, all labor which, under capital becomes either productive or unproductive. This new regime would be led by the subjectivity of the collective worker and therefore of the working community as a whole. The relation between the collective worker and the community is drawn by Gramsci in a section of his critique of Bukharin's *Popular*

Manual where he addresses Bukharin's lack of understanding of the dialectical passage from quantity to quality. There he says that Marx has "demonstrated that in the factory system there exists a quota of production which cannot be attributed to any individual worker but to the ensemble of the labour force, to collective man." And he continues: "A similar process takes place for the whole of society, which is based on the division of labour and of functions and for this reason is worth more than the sum of its parts" (Gramsci, 1971: 469). Of course, this does not mean that the ultimate subject of labor is not the individual worker in the factory or the individual person in the community. Rather, what this does is show, first of all, that labor is a univocal concept which runs throughout the whole of society and is not limited to the factory; secondly, it shows that the recuperation of subjectivity cannot be simply an individual or group issue and endeavor, but is related to the community as a whole; I mean the working community, made up of individuals who are employed or unemployed, who perform material or immaterial work. This community is antagonistic to the objective forms of technology and power which, as we will see in a moment, are forms of the State and which take, in the factory, their clearest configuration. This antagonism tends toward autonomy and the reconstitution of difference.

This difference cannot be the result of the formation of enclosed and self-centered identities that play the game of a more and more invisible and subtle power. It must rather be the destruction of these forms of power and the constitution, in the open, of difference itself as the subject and substance of new material and social relations. In fact, if the philosophy of difference only engenders a politics of identity -- as it is often the case today -- the relations of power, based on the uneven distribution of labor and wealth, remain untouched within each constituted identity and within the relationship between the sum total of constituted identities and the national or supranational powers. Here difference does not bring about, nor is it the result of, a new conception of the world. To the contrary, it points to the increased sophistication and better working of the old conception.

The subject of labor, the antagonistic community present in the factory and in society as a whole, is the working class, as a unity of actually-working and non-working individuals. The not merely external analogy Gramsci draws in his critique of the *Popular Manual* can be seen as an echo of arguments already developed in his earlier political writings. In "The Instrument of Labor," Gramsci starts by saying: "The communist revolution achieves autonomy for the producer both in the economic and in the political field" (1990: 162). In this article, the relation between the Factory Council and society (in the struggle that moves from being against capital to being against the State) is immediately evident. The dialectical passage from quantity to quality in the formation of the community of workers -- the passage for which he criticizes Bukharin in the *Quaderni* -- is here stated in its concrete, political meaning: "The working class draws conclusions from the quantum of positive experience amassed personally by individuals, acquires the character and mentality of a ruling class and organizes itself as such; in other words, it sets up political Soviets and establishes its dictatorship" (*ibid.*). For Gramsci, the instruments of labor -- which he defines alternatively as "the apparatus of production and exchange" (164) and as "the system of economic and social relations" (166) -- are no

longer property of capital, but of the State (165). The State "has become the agent of the instruments of labor as they fragment and fall apart" (166). However, the working class, with "its newly-won autonomy and its newly-won awareness of self-government" (*ibid.*) is the real subject of labor: "The Factory Council is the foundation for its positive experiences and its appropriation of the instruments of labour. It is the solid foundation for the process which must culminate in the workers' dictatorship and the conquest of State power -- a power which can then be used to eliminate chaos, the cancer that threatens to suffocate, corrode and dissolve human society" (166). Here we see the movement described by Gramsci's concept of historical bloc: the movement from the base to the superstructure, from the economy to politics and society. It is also clear that, when the working class appropriates the instruments of labor, it affirms its collective subjectivity in defense of human society as a whole. This cannot happen if the nexus of technology and political power of capital, the State, or the supranational entities in our own days, is not dissolved and their control over labor neutralized. Of course, Gramsci wrote this article in 1920, before the failure of the Factory Council movement. Yet, as we have seen in the first section of this paper, his call for antagonism and autonomy did not change in his prison writings; rather, it became the center of his philosophy of praxis and insurgent ontology. Nor has his call for antagonism and autonomy lost meaning in our own days.

To be sure, today the concepts related to the subject of labor -- the concepts of labor and subject themselves, but also of the individual and the community -- are understood in a different historical light, made different particularly by the collapse of the Soviet Union and of the Socialist bloc and by the consequent seemingly non-viability of communist discourse. A recent survey of the history of the concept of labor and of its status today, as well as the attempt to offer an alternative, can be found in Dominique Méda's *Le Travail. Une valeur en voie de disparition* (1995). After describing labor as an "invention" of modernity, which comes in the 18th century as an answer to the "great fear" that envelops Europe from the end of the Middle Ages up to the 17th century (295),15 Méda -- who does not mention Gramsci -- calls for a renewed *praxis* able to displace the centrality of labor. This *praxis*, which is rather informed by the philosophy of Habermas, consists in the concept of the public sphere, where time is liberated from labor making it possible for the individual to have access to "other modes of sociability, other means of expression, other ways . . . of acquiring an identity or participating in collective management" (Méda, 1995: 301). This public sphere -- the space for action and interaction -- is not to replace production and labor, but to be placed alongside them. Of course, from the point of view of the philosophy of praxis one agrees with Méda's contention that production does not exhaust all human activity and time. Yet, the problem is that in Méda's view production and action are merely juxtaposed, and one is left to wonder how the articulation between the two spheres would happen. Méda's book, which is good for its historical survey and for its stimulating polemical moments (notably, against liberalism and the philosophy of Rawls), does not seem to consider the question, implicit in its object of study and explicitly presented by Gramsci, as to the necessity of dissolving the objective nexus between technique and political power. Without the recognition and dissolution of this nexus (which is the same as Marx's theory of subsumption), it is difficult to see how the working class can even have access to a public sphere that remains on the other side of

the objective nexus itself, related to the interests of the dominant class, and in relation to which the working class cannot but be antagonistic.

In Méda's book there is no trace of the antagonism between labor and capital, and of the former's quest for autonomy. Labor is seen as an "invention" (in itself a dubious concept) of the economists who "for the first time, give it a homogeneous meaning" (Méda, 1995: 65). And this labor is time: "its essence is time" (*ibid.*). Of course, Méda is aware of the fact that in Smith and the other political economists (indeed up to Marx and his critique of political economy, she claims), the concept of labor that prevails is productive labor. Here labor, one should rather say, is not "invented," but it is displaced from its ontological terrain and channeled into the categories of political economy. Thus, political economy, or even mere economics, can become the social science *par excellence*. But in Méda's account, the ontologization of labor is still part of the general invention of its concept, for it is with Hegel and Marx that labor becomes "an ideal of creation and of self-realization," or, in other words, "the essence of man" (Méda, 1995: 92-129). Thus even alienation is a consequence of this invention (106). But at the end of her book, without returning on the concept of alienation (which of course impedes the full realization and activity of the individual), Méda finally recognizes that "Marx had perfectly understood, in his time, what is at stake in today's expression of 'full activity'" (309). This *full activity* is the "development, alongside labor, of other activities, whether collective or individual, such that everybody may become, as Marx desired, multi-active" (*ibid.*). Furthermore, Méda stresses that for Marx -- and this is her own position too -- the concept of full activity "must be applied not to society as a whole, but to each individual, who would dispose, at the same time, of laboring time [un temps d'emploi] and of time for other activities which would belong neither to employment nor to labor" (*ibid.*). It is difficult to see how Méda justifies this latter judgement on Marx with her previous one according to which Marx is the most exceptional and rigorous exponent of productivism (166). Her ambivalence in relation to Marx depends on the fact that a critique of labor such as the one she presents is forced to see labor in the light of productivism only, for it wants to deny its univocity and ontological power. Such a critique, instead of finding in Marx a critique of productivism (notwithstanding Marx's own ambiguities, as we have seen), reduces the concept of labor to the economic base and frees the superstructure as the only place of creativity and action. The difference is that now, instead of being in a vertical position, one above the other, superstructure and structure, action and production, are in a horizontal position, one alongside the other; yet they are still far from forming an historical bloc, far from being united in insurgent and constitutive *praxis*.

In the philosophy of praxis, labor is not merely a moment of the base. At the level of production, labor -- which is already praxis, that is, engaged and involved in the political movement that tends to transform society as a whole -- is the subject that antagonistically confronts the objective ensemble of forces of production and State power. The opening up of a public space of discussion must be, for that which is at the same time included in and excluded from public view, the result of a revolutionary process and of an unrelenting revolutionary will, not the silent companion of production. This means that the question as to what labor is cannot be solved by separating once again, or juxtaposing, production and action, but by seeing production as one of the moments of

human creative activity. Labor would be the subject and substance not merely of production, but of all creative activity. Of course, this labor would not be productive of capital. But this should not be a problem; it should rather be the aim of a theory of revolution.

For Gramsci, labor, if understood narrowly as economic production, is not, of course, "the essence of man"; rather, "man" (or real men and women in the world) are the subject of labor understood as praxis. And praxis is precisely the process that does away with the narrow conceptual separation of structure and superstructure. This can be seen in Gramsci's definition, not immediately of labor, but of technique. To be sure, the two are the same, for Gramsci always resists, on the one hand, the reduction of labor to a merely technical moment; on the other, he widens the concept of technique as to cover the whole process and movement of praxis. He says that "by technique one should understand not only the *ensemble* of scientific ideas applied industrially (which is the normal meaning of the word) but also the 'mental' instruments, philosophical knowledge" (Gramsci, 1971: 353). Technique is labor, that is, the modality of interaction between a subject and an object, be the latter nature, a machine, a thing or an idea. This interaction can have the form of material production, but it is not limited to it. Indeed, it is through this same interactive modality that history, culture, and the institutions of the State and of society are born. What the philosophy of praxis requires is that the outcome of this interaction be universally valid rather than limited to the interests of the dominant class. This universality, as we have seen, entails a totality. Its subject (the producer in the field of production, the spontaneous thinker in the field of thought; but these may be two aspects of the same individual) finds in itself the measure of its agency and of its interest. In other words, the subject of labor *must become* a subject by appropriating the method and power of its own activity, from the site of production as production to the highest moments of free and disinterested creativity.

4. Praxis and the danger. The meaning of "Absolute Historicism"

Praxis is a word for unity. Gramsci says: "Unity is given by the dialectical development of the contradictions between man and matter" (1971: 402). However, the word "unity" must also be properly understood. Like totality, unity is a Hegelian concept. But in the *Science of Logic* Hegel calls 'unity' an "unfortunate word" because of its externality and abstractness. He says that "[u]nity, even more than identity, expresses a subjective reflection; it is taken especially as the relation which arises from *comparison*, from external reflection" (Hegel, 1989: 91). Because of this, the essence of unity is its indifference in relation to the two objects compared, whose unity it is. Hegel continues: "When this reflection finds the same thing in two *different objects*, the resultant unity is such that there is presupposed the complete *indifference* to it of the objects themselves and is a procedure and a determining external to them" (*ibid.*). Furthermore, Hegel says that the two terms which are compared are often opposites, so their unity appears as a further, but external, term. This cannot be what the concept of praxis stands for. Hegel continues by saying that "it would be better to say only *unseparatedness* and *inseparability*, but then the affirmative aspect of the relation of the whole would not find expression" (*ibid.*). In the *Encyclopedia Logic*, he says that "what has to be grasped is the

unity *in* the diversity" (Hegel, 1991: 143), that is, a concrete and dynamic unity, which is pure becoming in Hegel, praxis in Marx and Gramsci.

The unity of praxis is then not the result of the juxtaposition of two otherwise unrelated terms, but the involvement of one of them -- the one which is "humanly objective" and thus already "historically subjective" (Gramsci, 1971: 445) -- in the subjective activity of the other. In this sense, praxis is, as Marx put it in his *Theses on Feuerbach*, "*human sensuous activity*." For Gramsci, when he studies the unity in the constituent elements of Marxism (economics, philosophy and politics), praxis becomes the unitary center in philosophy, as value is in economics and the relationship between the State and civil society is in politics. Value is described as "the relationship between the worker and the industrial productive forces" (1971: 402), and praxis as "the relationship between human will (superstructure) and economic structure" (403). By describing this unity as an active relationship, Gramsci appears to understand the philosophical difficulty expressed by Hegel. The word "relationship" breaks with the externality of the word "unity." In each of these three relationships, which cover the whole spectrum of social life, we find the same determinations: the form of class distinction and antagonism. The worker, human will and civil society belong together; so do the industrial productive forces, the economic structure and the State.

This unity is not the result of a likeness of the terms; it is not an alliance, but the antagonistic relationship that comes from developing contradictions. The will, for example, could not be understood as an unqualified and generic will, but as a rational and concrete will, as Gramsci says elsewhere (1971: 345, 360). It is the revolutionary will of the worker confronted by the objective nexus of production as well as the will of the subaltern classes whose history is "intertwined with that of civil society" (Gramsci, 1971: 52). It is from the point of view of the subaltern classes that the philosophy of praxis develops as an insurgent ontology where production is but one moment of the revolutionary and creative effort to reconstitute the world in its totality. Without this effort, and its positive result, it is difficult to see how any discourse taking place in the public sphere could be truly democratic. Indeed, in a world in which there are children who cannot, and will never learn how to, read and write (and this even in the advanced countries), it is difficult to see what the benefits of a pacified public sphere would be. The danger is not only that of an "imbalance between theory and practice" (Gramsci, 1971: 301). There is also the danger of believing that this is no longer a problem and of confusing the unity *in antagonistic diversity*, to paraphrase Hegel, for a pacified and harmonious one. Thus value, praxis itself, and the relationship between the State and civil society, the unitary centers of the constituent elements of Marxism for Gramsci, are no longer seen in their historicity;16 the necessity of their passing away is forgotten, and the fact that they have originated out of contradictions and struggle is canceled. From being an insurgent ontology, the philosophy of praxis is transformed into a form of discourse that deepens, as it covers up, the gap between living labor and capital, civil society and the State, common sense and philosophy.

Let us go back to the question with which we began, that of the meaning of the essence of Marxism, the philosophy of praxis, and its "new orthodoxy." In that section,

Gramsci says: "At the level of theory the philosophy of praxis cannot be confounded with or reduced to any other philosophy. Its originality lies not only in its transcending of previous philosophies but also and above all in that it opens up a completely new road, renewing from head to toe the whole way of conceiving philosophy itself" (1971: 464). We have seen that, even at the level of theory, the unitary center of the philosophy of praxis is praxis itself, a disappearing mediation which takes the form of the relationship of structure to superstructure, their unseparatedness and inseparability, to recall Hegel. Yet, the affirmative aspect of this relationship lies in the fact that the superstructure is human will itself, human subjectivity, and not merely a set of formal laws or a series of more or less established institutions. This is indeed the living affirmative aspect of the relationship and of philosophy. It is what Gramsci also calls *historical bloc*, defined in many ways, but basically as the unity of structure and superstructure. The concept of historical bloc is also what defines the essence of man (that is, of the individual human being); it is the activity of human will. Gramsci says: "Man is to be conceived as an historical bloc of purely individual and subjective elements and of mass and objective or material elements with which the individual is in an active relationship" (1971: 360). We see that Gramsci never exits the subjective/objective paradigm, but he always gives predominance to the subjective aspect of it. However, this does not make Gramsci a philosopher of the superstructure, confining him to the sphere of culture as opposed to a harder, more basic and real sphere of production. Rather, what this means is that the superstructural sphere, human will and subjectivity, actively reaches into the sphere of production. Or, as Aronowitz and Di Fazio say: "Management's control over the workplace is an activity of politics" (1994: 357). Indeed, Gramsci's "superstructural" philosophy shows how well he understood Marx's critique of Feuerbach and of "all hitherto existing materialism." Basically, Gramsci understood the necessity of conceiving reality from the point of view of praxis without falling into either idealism or ultramaterialism. The philosophy of praxis is then not a philosophy of the subject as a separate entity from the object. It is a philosophy of the subject that always engages the object, is involved in the movement of the object, and involves the latter in its own movement. In this sense, it is a synthetic philosophy.

We have seen that the philosophy of praxis tends toward a totality. The concept of totality necessarily excludes the partiality of heterogeneous forms. We have also seen that, far from being a totalitarian concept (for totalitarian is the imposition of a partial rather than universal and total will), totality is an essentially and truly democratic concept. Totality, as conceived by the philosophy of praxis -- as commonality and universality -- is not the denial of singularity and difference, but their exaltation. Indeed, it does not belong to the concept of singularity and difference to be partial entities: fragmented, alienated, disintegrated. Rather, it belongs to their concept to be full entities, constituted by common and specific elements at the same time. To be an individual means to be a total individual. It is only the ideology of the dominant class that can ask people to be content with just one part or fragments of what essentially belongs to them.

This totality is what Gramsci also calls *absolute historicism* -- an expression with which he describes the philosophy of praxis. In the note on the concept of "orthodoxy," he says: "The philosophy of praxis is absolute 'historicism,' the absolute secularization

and earthliness of thought, an absolute humanism of history" (1971: 465). "The absolute secularization and earthliness of thought" stands for a philosophy which has cut its ties with religion and the ontotheological modality of Western metaphysics. It is the rejection of all transcendence, the affirmation of an immanence which is not of metaphysical origin, lying beyond history or beneath the earth. Of course, the philosophy of praxis is not interested in discovering the metaphysical principle of the physical world. It is interested in history and in what Vico called the "world of nations." Its ontology is a political ontology. This means that its concept of immanence has to do with human creative activity and its interaction with the "humanly objective," which Gramsci also calls the "historically subjective" or "universal subjective" (1971: 445). It has to do with the secular earth. In this sense, it is an "absolute humanism of history," that is, history made by human beings, by their living labor that produces objects of consumption as well as creates the social and political world; that creates, in a word, culture. Then the concept of totality is the concept of plenitude. It has nothing to do with the totalitarianism of a partial will; it is rather the plenitude of being in its history and historicity -- a secular and earthly plenitude.

5. The rational will

I do not say that something is contingent,
but that something is caused contingently

-John Duns Scotus

I have often mentioned Gramsci's concept of the will, and I have said that this will is concrete and rational. The rationality of the will is the same as its historicity (Gramsci, 1971: 346), and it represents for Gramsci the step the philosophy of praxis takes away from classical German philosophy which had introduced the will as creativity but in an idealistic and speculative manner that led toward solipsism (*ibid.*). In the philosophy of praxis, the will is rational in the sense that "it corresponds to objective historical necessities, or in so far as it is universal history itself in the moment of its progressive actualization" (345). This will then is the totality or plenitude of absolute historicism. It is the action of men and women in the world, able to modify the order of things. For Gramsci, the will is also the superstructure (1971: 403), and, as possibility, it is freedom (360).

We have seen that in his 1917 article on the Russian revolution, "The Revolution against *Capital*" (Gramsci, 1990: 34-37), Gramsci praised the freedom of human subjectivity against economic determinism. Here, the rational will is presented by Gramsci as a "collective, social will." This will "becomes the driving force of the economy and moulds objective reality, which lives and moves and comes to resemble a current of lava that can be channeled wherever and in whatever way men's will determines" (35). This description of the objective/subjective paradigm in its historicist, interactive mode -- where the objective is nature, the laws of economics, the analysis of the human intellect, etc., and the subjective is the will -- points to the contingency and freedom of the will. Indeed, contingent is the will, not the event produced by it, be it the

Russian revolution or the construction of communism. Or, at least, the event is not a primary contingent: "The Bolshevik Revolution consists more of ideologies than of events" (Gramsci, 1990: 34). There is here a redefinition of the concept of contingency, which is in line with Gramsci's ability to think the interaction of subject and object, superstructure and structure, without reducing the relationship to one of the two terms and without compromising their inseparability. This does not mean that, as Laclau and Mouffe claim, "the contingent only exists within the necessary" (1985: 114). The opposite is true: necessity exists within contingency, in the sense that the event can be looked at as necessary after it is caused, but it is caused contingently.

I do not know whether Gramsci was aware of Duns Scotus's philosophy of the will. Yet, the similarity between Scotus's and Gramsci's conception of the will is remarkable, notwithstanding the differences. Duns Scotus also speaks of the will as a rational faculty and, within the discourse of Medieval philosophy, gives the will priority over the intellect. Of course, for Scotus rationality does not mean historicity, but still the relationship of similarity between the two thinkers holds. This is not due to their emphasis on the concept of freedom, typical of any philosophy of the will, but to the fact that, in their conceptions, the freedom of the will does not lead toward an arbitrary, absolutely spontaneous and irrational modality of action. The will is rather the rational faculty *par excellence*. It is that without which the objective forces of nature would be completely blind and change would occur in a completely deterministic way.

Duns Scotus says: "by 'contingent' I do not mean something that is not necessary or which was not always in existence, but something whose opposite could have occurred at the time that this actually did" (1987: 55). This means that at the time of the occurrence of the event there was a plurality of possibilities; at that time it was not necessary that this event, rather than its opposite or still a different one, occurred. In its occurrence, the event does not become necessary, but actual. Scotus continues: "That is why I do not say that something is contingent, but that something is *caused contingently*" (*ibid.*). The opposite of "necessary" is then not "contingent," but "caused contingently" or, as we shall see, "possible." Herein lies the possibility of change. As Scotus says: "something can be changed, for something is possible ('possible' being defined as contrary to 'necessary')" (1987: 44). Possibility, not contingency, is the opposite of necessity. And possibility is to be found at the level of the will and of its freedom. Furthermore, possibility includes the concept of plurality, for at the level of the possible an event could occur, but its opposite could also equally occur, and so could many others. It is indeed the level of the modality of the *could*. However, the occurrence of one of them takes away the possible occurrence of the others, and the present/future *could* become a past *could have*. What was caused contingently becomes, by necessity, a fact. However, this is so only at the level of the recognition of the event. There is no necessity at the ontological level.

In his critical reading of Aristotle, Duns Scotus distinguishes between the intellect and the will, which he considers both as active potencies.[17] The intellect "falls under the heading of 'nature', for it is of itself determined to understanding and does not have it in its power to both understand and not understand; or as regards propositional knowledge where contrary acts are possible, it does not have the power to both assent and dissent"

(Duns Scotus, 1986: 141). The will, on the other hand, "can perform either this act or its opposite, or can either act or not act at all" (139); it "acts freely, for it has the power of self-determination" (142). For Scotus, without this distinction and without recognizing the power of the will, everything would be left to determinism. He says: "Indeed, if -- to assume the impossible -- the intellect and its subordinate powers alone existed, without a will, everything would occur deterministically after the manner of nature, and there would be no potency sufficient to accomplish anything to the contrary"(149).

If we look at Gramsci even through this far too cursory excursus into the philosophy of Duns Scotus, we perceive the similarity in their conception of the will. I am convinced that this similarity is not apparent and superficial. Indeed, notwithstanding their differences and the fact that philological continuity cannot be established, this similar conception of the will reaches into the essence of the philosophical problems both Gramsci and Scotus are dealing with. Fundamentally, the fact that, as Milton says, "reason also is a choice" (*Paradise Lost*, III, 108). Gramsci's emphasis on the will, on human subjectivity and freedom, on the "superstructure," both in his early political writings and in his later notes in prison, would then seem to stem out of a philosophical tradition of which he was perhaps relatively unaware, but that he nonetheless felt deeply. It is not my intention to prove, in this essay, the validity of this comparison -- which for me is based on an intuition that I have not yet worked out, but to offer a suggestion for a future line of interpretation. It may be that through this we will come to a better understanding of Gramsci as a philosopher, of his pessimism of the intellect and optimism of the will. And it may also be that a rethinking of the concepts of the will, contingency, freedom and the possibility of change will give us some alternatives, not only at the level of philosophy, but of politics as well; or rather, at the level of the philosophy of praxis's insurgent ontology, where philosophy and politics become one and the same process in the much needed construction of a different and truly democratic world.

Notes

1 See, for instance, Carl Boggs's very good study of this question, *The Two Revolutions: Gramsci and the Dilemmas of Western Marxism* (1984).

2 In reality Gramsci says that "if the Bolsheviks reject some of the statements in *Capital*, they do not reject its invigorating, immanent thought" (1990: 34).

3 On the Turin movement, cf. Boggs (1984) and, particularly, Cammett (1967).

4 The *Grundrisse* was first published in the original German version in 1953. A previous limited edition in two volumes had appeared in the Soviet Union in 1939 and 1941. Gramsci died in 1937.

5 For the question of living labor in Marx, fundamental is the work of Antonio Negri, particularly his lessons on the *Grundrisse* (Negri, 1991). I have also studied this question in a separate essay (Gullì, 1999).

6 See the unpublished sixth chapter of *Capital* (Marx, 1977: 1019-1038; particularly, p.1035).

7 Cf. Laclau and Mouffe (1985: 192).

8 This is Gramsci's own word.

9 As I will show below, the theory of revolution is based on the concept of labor not as a category of political economy, but of ontology. One should here look at the early years of revolutionary Cuba and at the writings of Ernesto Che Guevara whose thought shares great similarities with Gramsci's. In "Socialism and Man in Cuba" (1965), Che Guevara says: "Man begins to become free from thinking of the annoying fact that one needs to work to satisfy one's animal needs. Individuals start to see themselves reflected in their work and to understand their full stature as human beings through the object created, through the work accomplished. Work no longer entails surrendering a part of one's being in the form of labor power sold, which no longer belongs to the individual, but represents an emanation of themselves, a contribution to the common life in which one is reflected, the fulfillment of one's social duty" (Guevara, 1997: 205-206).

10 For Marx labor which is not productive is not the same as unproductive labor. It is rather labor before its division into the categories of political economy and capital (Marx, 1973, 308).

11 On this point, see Aronowitz and Di Fazio (1994: 351-354). They say: "If there is work to be done, everyone should do some of it." For instance, "Everyone would assume the responsibilities of producing and maintaining public goods, so no able citizen would be freed of the obligation of work" (353).

12 On the question of the individual and individuality, cf. Gramsci (1971: 360).

13 See Boggs (1984: 278-279). This is indeed my only criticism of Boggs' otherwise very good study. After speaking of Gramsci's "downplaying of economics" as "a conscious effort to escape, on the conceptual level, the seemingly relentless logic of capital," Boggs says: "Yet Gramsci remained uncritically wedded to certain orthodox productivist assumptions. He fully accepted the Enlightenment faith in progress through industrialization, and shared the view of both Kautsky and Lenin that the transition to socialism would require a developed scientific and technological infrastructure inherited from the bourgeoisie" (278). I am not saying that Gramsci did not believe this was

necessary, but I wonder whether it could be otherwise. The problem does not lie in using the inherited infrastructure or not, but in the modality of this use. When used by "the class which is as yet still subaltern," this infrastructure ceases to be a means of domination and exploitation and becomes one of the necessary elements for the construction of a new society. The point is to see whether Gramsci also thought of inheriting and using, in the construction of communism, the capitalist relations of production, but this does not seem to be the case. The "split" and the "new synthesis" mentioned by Gramsci answer this question sufficiently well. As I have said in a previous note, I find Gramsci's thought rather close to Che Guevara's in this respect. For Che Guevara too the point is not ending production as such, but eliminating "the old categories, including the market, money, and, therefore, the lever of material interest" (1987: 184). Yet work, even with its "coercive aspects" (207), would continue. But these "coercive" aspects would be the result of a new self-discipline, not of an external discipline. They would be part of that process of self-education and self-transformation of the revolutionary subject described by Peter McLaren in his study of Che Guevara's and Paulo Freire's revolutionary pedagogy (McLaren, 2000). This self-transformation is in a relation of dialectical unity with social transformation (76). And it is indeed hard to imagine that a revolution does not make use of a country's or the world's already developed scientific and technological infrastructure to enhance the dual transformation.

14 It seems to me that the difference between *Theories* and the *Grundrisse* is that in this latter Marx speaks more categorically of *productive* labor as an exclusive modality of capital, calling labor which is productive in general "not productive."

15 The translation of passages from Méda (1995) is mine.

16 For the historicity of the philosophy of praxis, cf. Gramsci (1971: 404-407).

17 Even though Aristotle "distinguished, not between nature and will, but between irrational and rational potencies, understanding 'rational' apparently as referring only to the intellect" (Duns Scotus, 1986: 141), the former distinction was implicit, according to Scotus, in Aristotle's assumption that "there were two incidental or *per accidens* efficient causes: chance, which is reducible to nature; and fortune, which includes purpose or will" (139). There was, then, properly speaking, no will in Aristotle's philosophy, thus no potency in this sense. He only spoke of *prohaeresis*, that is, desire or choice (Duns Scotus, 1986: 142). However, for Scotus one has to speak of the will here.

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