

## 1. Two very different yet related scholars

Comparing the intellectual output of two scholars is always a hard effort because you have to deal with the complexity of a thought expressed in its specificity. *A fortiori*, it is difficult to compare two historically and culturally different scholars. Specifically, the aim of this paper is to identify the connecting elements in the intellectual production of Antonio Gramsci and Charles Tilly, two authors who lived in different historical and social contexts and were, in many ways, culturally distant. Gramsci was a communist political leader who wrote from the cell into which he had been imprisoned by the Italian fascist regime between 1926 and 1937. Tilly, instead, operated in a democratic context, the United States, in the second half of the twentieth century. Whereas the first is mainly concerned with identifying the historical conditions for the construction of a revolutionary process in the West within a Marxist perspective, the latter is interested in studying social change starting from the phenomena of conflict and mobilization, but within a liberal democratic frame. Two authors seemingly incomparable but actually united by a common reaction to a certain evolutionistic sociology that has its roots in the mechanistic positivism of the nineteenth century, culminating in the form of the structural-functionalist paradigm in the twentieth century. Both are interested in the dynamics of conflict expressed by an organized civil society that reacts to the dominant system of power. Both finally identify in history, and especially in historical comparison, a basic analytic tool for social scientists in the prospect of tracing some regularities and limited generalizations. We will focus on these aspects of analogy, always trying to historically contextualize the thought and the intellectual production of these two scholars.

In order to understand the relevance of Antonio Gramsci's social theory, it must be contextualized in the broader historical framework of theoretical Marxism. Strongly influenced at a young age by Antonio Labriola's Marxism (Badaloni 1975; Paggi 1979), Gramsci soon developed a critical attitude towards the kind of determinist Marxism as expressed by the principal leaders of the Second International, such as Kautsky, as well as by some theorists of the Bolshevik revolution, such as Plekhanov and Bukharin. In fact, from Kautsky to Stalin, a whole generation of Marxist thinkers had supported the argument that the historical process obeyed specific laws of necessity, so that it was possible to imagine the transition to socialism as an automatic process, inscribed in history. The masses of workers were *de fac-*

to deprived of their subjectivity in the revolutionary process. Such interpretation of Marx's historicism in an evolutionary key presupposes the historical irrelevance of class action carried out by the proletarian masses.

Antonio Gramsci, by providing a different interpretation of Marxist theory, counters the automation of evolution with the collective will of the masses. Not incidentally, Marx himself in his eleventh thesis on Feuerbach states: «The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to change it» (Marx 1958, vol.2, 405). Gramsci, through Marx, emphasizes the human element that realizes itself through the organized action of civil society. Also Marx certainly risked ending in some forms of determinism, by predicting the capitulation of the capitalist system under the influence of the contradictions expressed by the system itself; yet, in his work, he would always stress the aspect of driving force represented by the political consciousness of the masses. Karl Kautsky, on the contrary, long considered the guardian of Marxist orthodoxy, offers a mechanistic interpretation of Marx in stating that: «Marx and Engels recognized that revolutions are not made at will. They come with inevitable necessity, when the conditions which render them necessary exist, and are impossible so long as those conditions, which develop gradually, do not exist» (cited in Fried, Sanders 1964, 436). Kautsky's view clearly denies the role of human intervention in the historical process, thus rejecting the possibility of historical alternatives. Such an objectivist theory of history is also central to the thinking of Plekhanov and Bukharin in the process of Marxism Bolshevization. As Salamini observes (1981, 4-5), «From a theory of capitalism structure and development, [it] becomes the theory of the creation of new historical formations, that is, new forms of human organizations and institutions». Gramsci's aim is, therefore, to restore the unity between political theory and praxis.

Leninism had already represented, in a certain way, a valid response to the mechanicism of the Second International, by emphasizing the party's role of political leadership, but had been unable to explain the failure of the revolutionary perspective in the West. According to Gramsci, the core of the problem does not lie so much in the non-realization of the objective historical conditions, as in the absence of a subjective realization of the objective conditions for social transformation. It is precisely this insistence on the subjective elements in Marx's theory that differentiates Gramsci from Lenin. According to the Gramscian perspective, social transformation is a fun-

ction of the creative role of the masses and of their political ability to articulate a revolutionary consciousness. From this point of view, the intellectuals' role becomes crucial. The Italian philosopher states that «every revolution has been preceded by an intense labor of criticism, by the diffusion of culture and the spread of ideas amongst masses of men» (Gramsci 1977, 12). The basic themes of his writings, therefore, concern the clear rejection of mechanistic and economic interpretations of Marx's doctrine and the adherence to a fully historicist and humanist form of Marxism. Marxism is for Gramsci not only an economic science, but first and foremost a worldview that points to an intellectual and moral reform of society. This goal is unattainable without the collective will created in political praxis. The process of social reformation is, therefore, the result of the historical transformation of the “economic class” into a “historical class” that takes place in the dialectical relationship between the masses and the intellectuals.

Revolution is for Gramsci primarily a process of cultural reform. Therefore both intellectuals and the party, interacting with the popular masses, must work toward the development of a political consciousness and a collective will, corresponding to the elaboration of a historically grounded ideology of transformation. If the aim is the revolutionary seizure of power, it is also true that the subaltern classes, in order to be successful, must work towards creating the conditions for transformation, aiming to be an ideologically hegemonic class well before becoming the dominant social group. The socialization of the means of material production is only one aspect of the revolutionary process, which must be associated with the socialization of the means of cultural and intellectual production. As Buci-Glucksmann observes (1979), Gramsci's thought goes beyond the mere culturalistic reinterpretation of classical Marxism, and this makes of him a theorist of political forms of transition defined by the dialectical relationship between social forces. From this point of view, we believe that the Gramscian categories can be articulated into the framework of a sociology of political praxis. The general sense of political praxis is the affirmation of the collective will, which becomes the hermeneutic canon of Gramscian historiography but, as Salamini observes (1981, 22), the structure of this praxis «is a dialectical unity of objective and subjective elements, of structural and superstructural activities, of materialism and idealism. Its major protagonists are the masses, the intellectuals, and the party. Its point of direction is the creation of hegemony».

Charles Tilly, on the other hand, is very attentive to the need to develop historically rooted social theories. Theories are for him a kind of working tool kit whose usefulness can certainly vary, yet, they contains the key to loosen recurrent explanatory knots. They provide always useful instruction even when they are bad instructions. In fact, «some of those instructions are worthless, some are misleading, and some are good. But it is normally better to have a bad tool than none at all» (Tilly 1981, 11). Also a bad theory can, in fact, suggest useful pathways and produce shared modes for the resolution of important issues. In this regard, Tilly makes the example of the social differentiation theory developed by Durkheim. Although, he says, it has shown its ineffectiveness, it has been a beacon for sociological analysis by providing important tools for historical interpretation:

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, Emile Durkheim elaborated a theory of social differentiation and its consequences. The theory includes, among other things, a sort of race between differentiation and shared beliefs: If society's shared beliefs accumulate faster than it differentiates, change is orderly; if differentiation proceeds faster than shared belief, disorder (suicide, industrial strife, protest, sometimes even revolutions) results. Durkheim's theory is bad [...] it not only generates invalid historical analogies (for example, between individual crime and collective protest) but also misstates the causal similarities among situations (for example, different streams of rural-to-urban migration) that are, in fact, analogous. (ibid.)

But there are also some good theories. Tilly, in this regard, makes the example of the theory of dual power developed by Leon Trotsky. The Russian intellectual, in his attempt to explain the social conditions of revolutionary phenomena, states that a prerequisite for revolution is the existence of an alternative concentration of power in the dominant system of power (Trotsky 1965). A sort of counter-government to which people can divert their obedience when the existing government demonstrates its incompetence and intolerance. This approach is undoubtedly correct and it proves to be not only a good theory but a historically grounded theory. Not by chance, Trotsky carries out his analysis through a comparative study of three revolutionary phenomena, the English Revolution of the seventeenth century, the French Revolution of 1789, and the Russian Revolution of 1917. The selection of three case studies limits the theoretical domain of Trotsky's assertions since his conclusions are not applicable, as he himself admits, outside a context characterized by a strong, autonomous and centralized national state. Such restrictions on the possibility of extending generalizations are in fact the price that all theories rightly accepting the challenge of historical contextualization have to pay. It is evident that the potential role that

the social sciences can play in the context of historical research is undoubtedly important. Alternatively the social sciences risk becoming a large gallery of theories and concepts relating to completely abstract causal analogies and potentially unnecessary to the understanding of historical and social phenomena.

## **2. Against evolutionary sociology and structural-functionalism**

In order to develop their ideas, both scholars react to the theoretical paradigms of their times. Whereas Gramsci, consistent with the evolutionistic conceptions of the social science in the nineteenth century, strongly opposes Marxist determinism, Tilly harshly criticizes the functionalist paradigm, which is the natural continuation of nineteenth-century evolutionism. In particular, Charles Tilly feels compelled to question the approach of Durkheim who, with his emphasis on differentiation processes seen as the peculiar traits of modernity, would strongly influence the subsequent development of social theory in a functionalistic sense.

Sociology and Marxism, for Gramsci, have reached a state of stagnation. They have abandoned their original ideological function dissolving in the positivist framework. Sociology has become the science of the particular, engaged in producing detailed descriptions and sterile classifications. It has become an a-moral, a-political and a-historical science. It represented an attempt to create a method for historical-political science subordinated to evolutionistic positivism, an effort to describe and classify historical and political facts in accordance with the logic of natural sciences. It therefore represents the effort to experimentally obtain the evolutionary laws of human society, in order to produce predictions on the future of humanity. Yet, Gramsci observes, sociological laws have rarely had a causative significance, yet they risk falling into tautology by describing an event or a series of events and, through a mechanical process of abstract generalization, they risk turning a mere relationship of similarity into a law (Gramsci 1977a, *PN11*, 159-163).

Actually, everything is born from a need, which Gramsci does not hesitate to define «somewhat childish and naïve» way to solve the practical problem of the predictability of historical events. Since the natural sciences seem to have the ability to predict the evolution of natural processes, also sociology has been regarded as scientific only when it was able to predict the