



Frassinelli, P. (2003). A Note on Intellectual Labor. *Workplace*, 10, 165- 171.

PIER PAOLO FRASSINELLI

## A NOTE ON INTELLECTUAL LABOR

When one distinguishes between intellectuals and non-intellectuals, one is referring in reality only to the immediate social function of the professional category of the intellectuals, that is, one has in mind the direction in which their specific professional activity is weighted, whether towards intellectual elaboration or towards muscular-nervous effort. This means that although one can speak of intellectuals, one cannot speak of non-intellectuals, because non-intellectuals do not exist. ...There is no human activity from which every form of intellectual participation can be excluded: homo faber cannot be separated from homo sapiens.

—Antonio Gramsci, Selections from the *Prison Notebooks*

Antonio Gramsci is the Italian Marxist thinker whose international fame is mainly, and deservedly, associated with his path-breaking study of the relation between cultural phenomena and the mechanisms through which the hegemony of the dominant social groups is produced, reproduced and contested. In the lines excerpted above a prior theoretical issue is raised, that of finding a workable criterion to test the limits of the category "intellectual," which would in turn provide Gramsci with the basis for his analysis of the crucial function, in modern capitalist societies, of particular groups of intellectuals as ideological mediators.

1.2 By way of relativizing the opposition intellectual/non-intellectual Gramsci doesn't mean—as in many a brand of philosophical idealism, from Kant to Croce (199)—that philosophizing or pure intellectual speculation represent a higher development of what can be found in a latent form in every individual's spontaneous spirituality. For Gramsci, all social subjects are intellectuals not in as much as they have certain intellectual or spiritual "instincts," which as a radical historicist he posits as "a primitive and elementary historical acquisition" (199), but because of the intellectual investment involved in the activities that they perform in society; investment whose different degree of specificity and specialization is a historical product of the polarization between "manual" and "intellectual" activities within that social division of labor which Marx and Engels had seen as lying at the root of the development of class society.

1.3 Thus, as he turns his view to the Taylorist "mechanization of the worker" in mass industrial production—the "supposedly" ultimate form of expropriation of the "human content" of labor (308)—Gramsci observes that in fact "purely mechanical labor does not exist and...even Taylor's phrase of the

'trained gorilla' is a metaphor to indicate a limit in a certain direction: in every physical work, even the most degraded and mechanical, there exists a minimum of technical qualification, that is, a minimum of creative intellectual activity" (8). Even in the most extreme modern manifestation of what Marx had described as the process through which in capitalist production "labor loses all its characteristics of art," or "skill," to become "more and more abstract and irrelevant, ... more and more a *purely abstract activity*, a purely mechanical activity, ... activity pure and simple, regardless of its form" (Marx 1976, 297), labor remains an activity that cannot be performed without the involvement of a "minimum" of intellectual investment. And for Gramsci, as Giorgio Baratta has noted in a fine essay, this "minimum" is in fact quite a lot (Baratta, 108). For it allows him to work out one of the central revolutionary theses of the *Prison Notebooks*, which is that of the elaboration of a theoretical and practical model of intervention towards a mass intellectual development: "The problem of creating a new stratum of intellectuals consists... in the critical elaboration of the intellectual activity that exists in everyone at a certain degree of development, modifying its relationship with the muscular-nervous effort towards a new equilibrium, and ensuring that the muscular-nervous effort itself, in so far as it is an element of a general practical activity, which is perpetually innovating the physical and social world, becomes the foundation of a new and integral conception of the world" (9). Hence Gramsci's distinction—which is based on his early experiences with the weekly *Ordine Nuovo* and the organization of the Factory Councils in Turin—between "traditional" types of intellectuals, "men of letters, philosophers, artists," and a new type of "organic" intellectual activity that "through its active participation in practical life" becomes a directive and organizing element in the struggle for hegemony (10).

1.4 For Gramsci, therefore, the key to unpack the dichotomy intellectuals/non-intellectuals is not to be found in the intrinsic nature of intellectual activities, since the postulate that all activities are to some extent "intellectual" would make the distinction redundant in the first place. The key is rather in the social function that a certain professional group or category performs. What is commonly meant by "intellectuals" are historically formed, specialized professional ranks identified on the basis of their position within the whole ensemble of hierarchized social relations into which class societies are divided. The corporatist self-recognition, or "*esprit de corps*," of traditional strata of intellectuals as "autonomous and independent of the dominant social group" (7) is thus reconfigured as a product of the elements of historical continuity and the privileged social position that this social group has come to identify itself with. And while Gramsci points out that this mode of self-identification of traditional intellectuals ultimately corresponds to a "social utopia," he hastens to add that the import and political and ideological consequences of this utopia are in no way negligible. As he states, "the whole of idealist philosophy... can be defined as an expression of that social utopia" (7-8).

## II

2.1 Among the effects of the present phase of global economic restructuring—tendency to the unification of the world market, automation of control in industrial production and reorganization of labor and machines, redefinition of the international division of labor, new regulation of public spending, including cuts in State expenditure on education, and so on (Pala)—we can definitely include, for many sectors of traditional intellectuals, the shattering of the material basis for that "social utopia."

2.2 Let's take the world of the academia. In 1998 the World Bank—just to pick up an authoritative source—published a paper on "The Financing and Management of Higher Education: A Status report on Worldwide Reforms," whose rhetoric is an exemplary instance of current dominant thinking in the administration of higher education. It asserted that decision making "will shift not only from government, but from higher education institutions—and especially from faculty—[and from] inappropriate curricula unrelated to the needs of the emerging economies. Performance budgeting will undoubtedly [be tied] to acceptance of principles of rational actors who respond to incentives." "Entrepreneurship on the part of institutions, departments and individual faculty," the report cheerfully concludes, "is already growing almost everywhere—adding revenue to institutions and benefit to society" (quoted in McMurty, § 5-6).

2.3 As this argument goes, immediate choices in higher education are to be made forcibly and these are to conform to a macroeconomic dimension that superimposes the paradigm of competitive criteria, efficiency and enterprise culture and practices. In Italy, where I come from, a comprehensive reform of the academic system has recently been launched, which entails the introduction of a new valuation method (credit system); a new segmentation of the curriculum, including shorter foundation degrees; an extension of the autonomy of—that is, increased competition between—individual universities; novelties in the juridical and economic status of academic staff, including the proposal of a first three year contract, renewable for a further three years, before tenure is awarded. This has coincided with a dramatic rise of student tuition fees and the introduction (i.e. the rationalization and extension, under the heading of "apprenticeship," of what has so far been a largely unregulated practice) of forms of low-paid, contingent and part-time teaching done by research students and even by graduates and "external" teachers with an approved "scientific curriculum." It is further established that for the latter there must be a time lapse of at least three years between graduation and the involvement in teaching activities (see Vasapollo *et al.*). All this is presented as the beginning of a transition from the old centralized, State university—the Althusserian ISA—to something that, in the words of many supporters, strives to emulate the model of the US autonomous, corporate, private university. Although strong elements of continuity with the old patronage mechanisms that are so deeply ingrained in the Italian higher education system still survive in form of a compromise formation accommodating the old and the new. This manifests itself first and foremost in the perpetuation of the practice of privileging "internal" career paths: "support" from a member of the professoriate in your local institution remains the safest bet to make your way up the heavily hierarchized Italian academic career ladder.

2.4 However, the arguments used by politicians, journalists, CEOs, analysts and university administrators to assert the need for a fundamental transformation of the Italian academic system are catchphrases like: "the university must be conceived and managed like an enterprise," "strong elements of autonomy and competitiveness must be introduced in the system," "the criterion to evaluate the new education system must be that of excellence," *et cetera* (quoted in Ceserani; my translation). The word excellence, in particular, is now repeated in an obsessive manner, and, with its distinctive meritocratic, elitist flavor, has symbolically displaced the catchwords of the movements for progressive reform and democratization of the Italian academic system in the 60s and 70s: "education is a right" and "mass university."

2.5 These arguments and rhetoric are of course an expression of the now arch-familiar *post-ideological* mantra: the self-assertion of the one actually existing ideology, which no longer feels the need to justify itself as such, and thus speaks with the dry language of economic pragmatism: performance budgeting, incentives, entrepreneurship, revenue, benefit, competitiveness, excellence, quality assurance and so on. The proclaimed and widely advertised ethos, if this is the right word, of the new dominant model of higher education seems to amount to a series of slogans taken wholesale from the *koiné* of finance and business. As ideologies are over and done with, we are left with a totalizing, one-dimensional, objective reality: the market.

2.6 The point here, to go back to Gramsci, is that today for that most typical group of traditional intellectuals, academics—and in particular, in the present context, academics in the humanities—sustaining the "social utopia" of a position autonomous and detached from the centers of political and economic power is becoming an increasingly contradictory undertaking. For one thing, detachment and autonomy are enforced on them in the form of growing marginalization. And the crisis of the project of liberal and humanistic education, which accompanies the increasing corporatization of the university, is not specific to Western countries either. In the global South the terms in which this issue is debated are, in fact, not that different from the familiar ones. Although of course the situation here is exacerbated by the grossly unequal appropriation/expropriation of resources along geopolitical lines and the dramatic polarization of wealth and poverty, as well as by the neocolonialist remapping of the world, fuelled by distance online learning, as divided into high-tech "providers" of higher education and "receiving" countries. As David Johnson writes, commenting on "Shakespeare and Education in Africa," WTO and

World Bank structural adjustment policies in this continent have meant, *inter alia*, "the energetic promotion of vocational and technical education above a general 'literary' education" (229). As a result, the "culture wars" over the literary canon, the choice between Shakespeare and Soyinka, which divided African university teachers in literature departments until a few years ago, have now been displaced by new kinds of confrontations, in which "much smaller literature departments are likely to watch university administrators make choices between Soyinka (with Shakespeare as a possible ally) and applied electronics" (231).

2.7 This has obviously to do with the difficulty in transforming literature departments into units for production of commodifiable knowledge and research. As academia gets more and more integrated into the market and the instrumental reason of corporate pragmatism and professionalization, efficiency and technocratic specialization become the privileged, if not absolute, standards of value, the humanities and particularly disciplines such as literature or philosophy are perforce due to find their relevance put under serious question.

2.8 In a suggestive essay addressing these issues, Romano Luperini proposes that we read the new waves of philosophical and theoretical idealism that have followed one another in the last three decades or so precisely from this perspective: as the kind of knowledge produced by professors of humanities progressively becomes socially irrelevant, they "discover the ontological value of language, its superior and sacred character: in their studies, language has become 'absolute' (in the etymological sense of the word: 'untied' and 'disconnected' from any social context or need). In literary theory this phenomenon is all too evident: between structuralism and post-structuralism—many a *querrelle* notwithstanding—there is this strong element of continuity...Social separation of professors [of humanities] is transformed...in separation and ontologization of their object of study, self-promotion and ideological compensation" (Luperini 139; my translation). From this perspective, then, the social and material roots of the "linguistic mysticism" of much recent theory reveals itself as a last bastion of conservative resistance, the hanging on to an older set of social relations, a sort of sublimation of the loss of social importance of this group of traditional intellectuals and a fetishization of the one commodity that they are deputed to produce. That is, in short, what after Raymond Williams we may call a "residual" ideological and theoretical position (Williams, 121-127).

2.9 The new, emergent keyword is in fact "crisis": crisis of criticism, of reading, of the book, of thought. To social marginalization is now added relegation to the fringes of, and even, in the worst cases, expulsion from the academic institution itself. In Italy, courses in the humanities are now cancelled because they don't achieve the number of students required by the parameters imposed by the Government. Lectureships in modern languages and literatures are turned into lectureships in language *or* literature, with literature teaching posts rapidly decreasing because their end products, degree holders with a literary training, are less appealing to the market. In the characteristically crass expression of the Italian Prime Minister, Silvio Berlusconi, all that students need to learn today is what he calls the "three 'i': inglese, internet, impresa" (English, Internet, Enterprise).

2.10 Indeed, in this context, Gramsci's own theorization about the role of the traditional intellectual—with his (gender connotation intended) aura of self-referential autonomy covering up his actual function in the complex machinery of ideological mediation within the struggle for hegemony in civil society—is itself the representation of an increasingly residual and, as has been said, marginal formation. Unsurprisingly, most critical reactions tend to be quite pessimistic. To quote from a pamphlet produced by a group of Italian researchers: "The fundamental difference between the old way of conceptualizing the organization of labor, society, culture, education and the university," and the new "totalizing system" based on the principle of "enterprise-like flexibility, consists in the total cooptation of human resources, labor and non-labor, teachers and students, through the negation of science and culture as such...To realize the transformations imposed by the neo-liberal restructuring models,...it's necessary that human intellectual

capital becomes sheer exchange value within a system where thought, knowledge and communication are directly subsumed into production." (*Vasapollo et al.*, 2-3; my translation).

2.11 I do think that the sentiments expressed by the tone of this passage are no doubt fully understandable, but it also seems to me that the notion of something like "culture and science as such," to which it looks back in a somewhat nostalgic mode, is an ambiguous one. For it seriously risks reproducing, in the form of backward projection, precisely that social utopia of which Gramsci exposed the contradictory material and social foundations. As Gramsci writes in one of the excerpts quoted at the beginning of this note, behind the appearance "of the intrinsic nature of intellectual activities," lurks the hierarchy of social relations within which these activities have their place in society (8). And it is, to say the least, difficult, especially against an historical background like the Italian one, to disentangle this image of the old way in which "culture and science as such" had not been negated yet, from a corporatist defense of a privileged social position.

2.12 Albeit in a different context, Gramsci wrote something a good deal more interesting about the vocationalization and precocious professionalization of education, and the triumph of instrumental reason within it. He questioned them not in the name of concepts such as "the cultural independence of intellectuals" (*Vasapollo et al.*, 3)—a definition that is at best equivocal—but rather in terms of the promises of upward mobility and the distorted notion of democracy that these promote. As he puts it in a passage where he criticizes the reform of education by the Mussolini Government, vocational education 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." It can turn unskilled workers into skilled workers, but, Gramsci adds, "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 [*sic*], even if only abstractly, in a general conditions to achieve this" (40). And if this statement might perhaps appear as a liberal stance for the education of critical citizenship that doesn't aim to upset the social formation in which this would take place, one page later Gramsci takes care to dispel any ambiguity about his understanding of the term democracy by describing it as the "moving towards the transcendence of class divisions" (41).<sup>1</sup> This for Gramsci corresponds to the closing of the gap between "intellectual" and "manual" activities, that is, to the overcoming of the social division of labor that lies at his foundation.

2.13 I have taken this detour through some of Gramsci's ideas because the particularistic, or, in Gramscian terms, corporatist argument that may, however inadvertently, lie behind the academic claim for the autonomy of culture and intellectual activities, troubles me for reasons that I hope to have explained with sufficient clarity. Though there is another, parallel dimension to the "utopia" of culture's autonomy, whose positive side should not be over-hastily discounted. This is the implicit critique or refusal of narrow utilitarianism and economic pragmatism, the indictment of a suffocating and increasingly all pervasive instrumental reason that this utopia carries with itself. Quite a few of us, after all, have chosen to dedicate our energies to subjects such as literature, theory or philosophy, instead of, say, finance or accounting, even if it makes little economic sense, precisely as an instance of this refusal. It's the negation, at present, of the conditions to pursue free, fulfilling, creative intellectual labor for the many, not our aspirations to it, that is at issue here.

2.14 So, it's not that those of us who feel so inclined should not pursue their vocation to become laborers in the vineyards of high culture, and even less that we shouldn't fight for things like freedom of research, teaching or critique, dignified working conditions or a decent remuneration: so long as we don't turn these struggles into a sheer self-interested promotion of the particularity of our caste position. And here I move at last to the two "modest proposals," in the Swiftian way, with which I want to conclude this note.

2.15 The first one is the suggestion that maybe there are some political opportunities to be grasped in the withering of the aura that used to surround certain specialized intellectual activities; in the weakening of the perception that, in Edward Said's words, "the status of university or school as well as what goes along

with them intellectually as well as socially, is different from other sites in society like the government bureaucracy, the workplace, or the home" (Said, 68; Said here, contrary to my argument, is reiterating this idea); in the proletarianization (to use an old-fashioned word) of a whole stratum of cultural workers. They might not manifest themselves in the way most of us would have liked, but these processes seem to go some way towards offering an opportunity to close that gap of which Gramsci wrote.

2.16 The second proposal, and here I depart from Gramsci to adopt a more "economistic" take on things, is that we tactically appropriate the rhetoric of the market forces. That is, to put it a bit provocatively, that those of us who are at the receiving end of the ongoing neo-liberal restructuring models *claim* that in fact our intellectual activities, skills, and the efforts that it has taken us to acquire them, are considered as fully commodified labor. For at least we could then demand to have it paid its full price (this demand, in terms of its proposition, is somewhat different from the notion of a "living wage," but never mind, "a rose by any other word would smell as sweet").

2.17 Put like this, it might indeed sound a bit too economistic. Maybe, an element of resistance that this kind of suggestion would encounter is the idea that it feeds into the dominant outlook of economic pragmatism which reduces everything to a commodity and quantifies every human activity in terms of its market value. And some of us would probably object that our capacity to learn, teach, do scholarly work or interesting research isn't to be reduced to a mere commodity. It all depends on the verbal mode one uses. The present tense here would qualify a moral attitude, noble perhaps, but unlikely to help us in the way of resistance. For in the actually existing social and economic system, when labor is not considered as a full commodity, it is downgraded to a coerced, servile activity. Such as, for example, all those activities that workers placed at the lowest echelons of the academic career ladder find themselves doing as "apprentices" or under the demeaning circumstances marked by the survival of academic patronage. The right English phrase here, I believe, is "shouldn't," which establishes the right relation between the recognition of how things actually are and how we would like them to be.

## References

- Baratta, Giorgio. "Lo 'spirito popolare creativo': Alle origini dei *Quaderni* di Gramsci." *Allegoria* 32 (1999): 101-114.
- Ceserani, Remo. "L'università vuol far l'americana. Virtù, promesse e vizi realizzati nella riforma relativa al funzionamento degli atenei." *Il Manifesto*. 5 January 2000.
- Gramsci, Antonio. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. Ed. and trans. by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith. London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1971.
- Johnson, David. "From the Colonial to the Post-colonial: Shakespeare and Education in Africa." *Post-colonial Shakespeares*. Ed. by Ania Loomba and Martin Orkin. London and New York: Routledge, 1998. 218-234.
- Laclau, Ernesto and Chantal Mouffe. *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. London: Verso, 1985.
- Luperini, Romano. "Il linguaggio del potere e il potere del linguaggio." *Allegoria* 13 (1993): 135-140.
- Marx, Karl. *Grundrisse. Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy (Rough Draft)*. Trans. by Martin Nicolaus. London: Pelican Books, 1973.

McMurty, John. "At The Edge of a New Dark Age: The Corporate Takeover of Higher Education." COMER Publications. <<http://www.sympatico.ca/truegrowth/mcmurty.html/>>.

Pala, Gianfranco. "Dopo aprile viene maggio. Per la critica dell'ideologia del post-fordismo (e via posteggiando)." *La Contraddizione* 55 (1996): 72-82.

Said, Edward. "Identity, Authority and Freedom: The Potentate and the Traveller." *Pre/Texts* 3.1/2 (1991): 67-81.

Vasapollo, Luciano, *et alii*. *Profitto o Scienza? La controriforma universitaria al servizio degli interessi aziendali*. Rome: Cestes-Proteo, 2000.

Williams, Raymond. *Marxism and Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The implicit polemical objective here are of course certain recent interpretations of Gramsci's thought that have rewritten and sanitized his notion of hegemony as a radical version of liberal pluralism (see, for instance, Laclau and Mouffe, 65-71).

Thanks to Luigi Cazzato, Maggie Ronayne and the editors of *Workplace* for their comments and suggestions.

Pier Paolo Frassinelli did undergraduate and graduate study at the universities of Pisa, Italy, Manchester and Southampton, UK. He has recently been appointed as Andrew W Mellon Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa.