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# Subalternity and the Mummification of Culture in Gramsci's "Prison Notebooks"

## **Abstract**

Gramsci's concept of mummification is rarely remarked upon in the literature and has not received the systematic treatment afforded to other concepts in his lexicon. Locating the term in the semantic field of subalternity, this article explores the connection between mummification and passivity. The origins and development of the concept of mummification are traced in Gramsci's thought, suggesting an important role in explaining the passive constitution of the subaltern. Mummification describes an embalming process through which certain forms of culture, positive and legitimate when created, become degenerate through a process of repetition in changed circumstances. The dual nature of mummification is examined, imposed from above through strategies of dispersion wrought by the dominant groups, or emerging from below through the 'intellectual laziness' characteristic of 'Lorianism'.

The different terrains upon which the term is used in the *Prison Notebooks* are analysed (parties, social groups, common sense, culture), proposing that these aspects of mummification are ultimately 'translatable' aspects of a unitary phenomenon. It is argued that the concept of mummification helps to articulate the intimate relationship between the dialectical poles of hegemony and subalternity in Gramsci's thought. The concept is able to perform a critical function by making an incision between forms of culture that are historically opportune and those that are anachronistic, the reactionary form of the 'living dead'. In our crisis-ridden situation, of zombie banks and vampire capital, this study of mummification is a timely consideration of the Sardinian thinker's contribution to these themes of political monstrosity

## **Keywords**

Life, Lorianism, Mummification, Passivity, Subaltern

# *Subalternity and the Mummification of Culture in Gramsci's "Prison Notebooks"*

Robert Jackson

## *1. Introduction*

In his entry for *Subalterno, subalterni* in the *Dizionario gramsciano*, Joseph Buttigieg points out that Antonio Gramsci had «recognised rather late in the course of his work [in the *Prison Notebooks*] the importance of the study of the specific characteristics of subalternity in the social and political order» (Liguori, Voza 2009, p. 826, my translation). It could be argued that, on the whole, anglophone Gramscian studies has been similarly delayed in its appreciation of the full richness and originality of Gramsci's theory of subalternity. The understandable historical reasons for this situation have been well documented elsewhere, notably the limited picture of Gramsci's thought on this theme in the popularly available English anthologies of his writings (Green 2011, 388)<sup>1</sup>.

As a consequence, Gramsci has often been portrayed in the English-language literature simply as a theorist of hegemony. For example, in the deployment of his ideas in the field of International Relations referred to as the "Neo-Gramscian school", the subaltern social groups are not a particular focus for investigation<sup>2</sup>. Despite the popularisation of the term "subaltern" in recent decades, the notions of hegemony and subalternity have seldom been articulated as belonging to a single axis, as an ensemble of relations between the dominant classes and the subaltern social groups. Even in the field of "Subaltern studies" that is directly concerned with its eponymous concept, the pro-

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Francesca Antonini for her very helpful and insightful comments on this article.

<sup>2</sup> Thus, the term "subaltern" appears only a few times in one of the school's most important texts (Gill 1993).

ductive re-invention and application of this concept has at the same time limited the expansive meaning of the Gramscian term.

While Peter Thomas indicates the possibilities arising from such «creative developments of [Gramsci's] original project» for contemporary purposes, he notes that these developments also carry an inherent danger of failing to comprehend «the progression and development of Gramsci's thought considered as an integral project» (Thomas 2009, pp. 44-45). Thus Marcus Green argues that the particular development of the term by the practitioners of "Subaltern studies" «confines Gramsci's conception of subalternity to strictly class terms and fails to consider the theoretical foundation and radical implications of his original conception» (Green 2011, p. 388).

As Buttigieg explains, formulating a reductive definition of the term "subaltern" is not a productive endeavour due to the fact that it is precisely the dispersed, multiple and heterogeneous character of the subaltern social groups that is characteristic of their existence (Liguori, Voza 2009, pp. 826-827). It is rather the intimate relationship between the dialectical poles of hegemony and subalternity that plays an increasingly significant role in Gramsci's political thought as developed through the various phases of his work in the *Prison Notebooks*. An understanding of the full significance of the experience of subalternity requires an account of its constitutive interpenetration and its conflictual tendencies with the hegemonic project of the ruling group. As a committed thinker and political practitioner, the distinctive disintegration of the subaltern groups in society as well as the traces of the development of their autonomy were matters of deep concern for Gramsci.

### 1.1. Aims

This article seeks to contribute towards a reconstruction of the wider semantic field of subalternity in Gramsci's thought. In particular, it will explore the resonances of this notion with other concepts in Gramsci's theoretical framework, articulating the manifold interconnections between subalternity and the concepts of passivity and mummification. While the former has been examined in the *Dizionario gramsciano* (Liguori, Voza 2009, p. 628) and as part of the broader his-

torico-political constellations of Gramscian concepts, the concept of mummification is rarely remarked upon in the literature and has not received the systematic treatment afforded to other concepts in the Gramscian lexicon. It would be useful to apply the achievements and rigorous textual analysis of Gramscian scholarship in recent decades, particularly in Italy (e.g. Frosini 2010, Cospito 2011a), to a critical study of the genesis and development of Gramsci's conception of the mummification of culture. I will therefore gather textual evidence of this innovative concept and its cognates in Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*.

This article will argue that the mummification of culture contributes to the passive constitution of the subaltern, and will explore how this poses an obstacle to the development of the autonomy of subaltern social groups. It is an important element of understanding the difficulties facing a "modern Prince" in the "passage" from spontaneous political action into conscious and disciplined leadership. For Gramsci, the phenomenon of «spontaneity» is a «multifaceted phenomenon» and, historically, does not exist in a «pure» form (Q 3, § 48; Gramsci 1975a, p. 328; Gramsci 2011, vol. 1, p. 48)<sup>3</sup>. The question of this "passage" from one to the other is in fact part of a complex research project into the question of the «real political action of the masses» (ibid.).

The dual nature of mummification will be explored, whether it is imposed from above in order to maintain social groups in their subaltern position, through the strategies of dispersion wrought by the dominant groups, or whether it emerges from below through a passive activity of "intellectual laziness". In the latter case, it could be associated with the passivity characteristic of certain intellectuals in the form of "Lorianism", the reliance on a quasi-scientific sociology, «mental laziness and a superficiality in political programmes» (Q 11, § 25; Gramsci 1975a, pp. 1429-1430; Gramsci 1971, p. 429).

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<sup>3</sup> References will henceforth be given in the text using the standard abbreviation system (notebook Q, note §, page number of Gramsci 1975a), followed by the reference to the English translations, where available.

### 1.1. Methodology

In response to the general argument that I am advancing, it might be objected that the concept of mummification in Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* is simply a colourful metaphor rather than a functional concept. It could be suggested that the mummification of culture does not play a significant role in the core of his theoretical framework. Weighing in favour of these concerns, the concept appears only eleven times in the carceral writings, as we will see later. Perhaps there is a danger, as the Sardinian himself might warn us, of inadvertently reconstructing a monstrous sea serpent from the «little bone of a mouse» (Gramsci 1975b, p. 314; Q 1, § 26; Gramsci 1975a, p. 22; Gramsci 2011, vol. 2, p. 116).

At the same time, the importance of metaphor in Gramsci's thought should not be underestimated. Indeed, as Gramsci states, «the whole of language is a continuous process of metaphor, and the history of semantics is an aspect of the history of culture; language is at the same time a living thing and a museum of fossils of life and civilisations» (Q 11, § 28, Gramsci 1975a, p. 1438; Gramsci 1971, p. 450). Thus, Peter Thomas reminds us that metaphors «represent not Gramsci's "starting-points", but a very particular type of conceptual – or even "mythical", in the Sorelian sense – summary of his previous research, prior to undergoing further elaboration» (Thomas 2009, p. 164).

While bearing in mind the risks of drawing hasty conclusions from limited evidence, I would suggest that the episodic appearance of the concept of mummification (and indeed the above use of fossilisation) belies the role that it plays in his thought. But, if a method is grounded in philological work, and some awareness is maintained of an inevitable element of "dilettantism", it is hoped that the reading will not do excessive violence to the distinctiveness of the *Prison Notebooks* themselves.

## 2. *The mummification of culture*

### 2.1. *Origins of the concept in Gramsci's pre-prison writings*

I will turn first to study more closely the concept of mummification in the Gramscian lexicon. Gramsci's pre-prison writings will not be closely analysed here, but it should be noted that the concept of mummification appears in at least one of these texts. The first use of the term by Gramsci that I have established is contained in a text entitled *The Dead that Speaks* [Morto che parla]<sup>4</sup>, published in «Avanti!» on 4 January 1917 (Gramsci 1980, p. 681). In this piece, Gramsci writes a stinging indictment of the Torinese politician, socialist and Freemason Donato Bachi<sup>5</sup>, who had fallen out of political favour in Turin. Gramsci paints a picture of Bachi continuing to hawk his «mummified carcass» around town in order to make his voice heard from under his political «tombstone»:

A corpse circulates in civic life. Stenches of pestiferous stink reach the nostrils of those unfortunate enough to have to remain in its vicinity; but the corpse imperturbably *continues to speak and to write* (Gramsci 1980, p. 681, my translation).

Here the process of mummification describes Bachi's political and intellectual decay. On the one hand, it enables a politically “dead” person to have an after-life. On the other hand, it becomes monstrous through the putrefying decay of its bodily form. Gramsci goes on to develop this theme of the “dead” that will not remain buried and cannot accept the fading of its former glory and authority. Gramsci argues that this is an instructive phenomenon. The exceptional crisis conditions of the war gave an appearance of contemporaneity to a politician like Bachi, despite the fact that it was time to consign him to the “dungheap” of history.

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<sup>4</sup> This is also an image from “La Smorfia Napoletana”, a popular method of interpreting symbols in dreams and converting them into numbers. “Il morto che parla” represents the number 48.

<sup>5</sup> Later Bachi's would set up an anti-fascist review called «Tempi nuovi». His sons Emilio and Guido would play a role in the resistance, and their connections to Primo Levi have recently been documented (Luzzatto 2016).

At this point in Gramsci's thought, the concept of mummification is a useful metaphor, but does not seem to be an issue of major concern for him. It is enough, in Gramsci's opinion, to write about this episode and then lay it to rest. This could be contrasted with his later use of mummification in the *Prison Notebooks* where it seems to pose a rather more intractable problem. The concept of mummification, or perhaps the cognate term fossilisation<sup>6</sup>, resurfaces in Gramsci's thought during his stay in Russia 1922-1923. It can be found in his well-known letter to Leon Trotsky (8 September 1922) in response to the latter's request for information about the futurist movement in Italy for his book *Literature and Revolution*<sup>7</sup>. Gramsci replies:

The workers, who saw in futurism the elements of a fight against the outmoded academic culture of Italy, fossilised [mummified?] and distant from the masses of the people, now have to fight for their freedom, weapons in hand, and are little interested in old disputes (Gramsci 2014, p. 123).

Like the piece in «Avanti!» from 1917, this passage uses the concept of mummification/fossilisation to analyse the anachronistic character of an element in a situation. However, in this passage it is the “outmoded academic culture”, rather than an individual, that is mummified. As Gramsci recognises, the futurists and other contemporary avant-gardes contributed to the struggle against this mummified/fossilised culture. The integral connection between the cultural and political renovation is problematised by Gramsci using this notion of mummification/fossilisation. The concept simultaneously diagnoses

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<sup>6</sup> Derek Boothman points out that the original of this letter has not yet been found, and therefore we cannot be certain of the exact metaphor deployed here (Gramsci 2014, p. 54, n. 36). The Italian text given in *Socialismo e Fascismo* is translated from Russian (Gramsci 1967, p. 527, n. 1). In the English *Selections*, Hoare and Nowell Smith translate the passage as «[...] mummified and alien to the popular masses [...]», but their source text is not stated (Gramsci 1971, p. 93, n. 66).

<sup>7</sup> The proximity of the appearances of mummification in the *Prison Notebooks* to his critical reflections on Leon Trotsky also merits further examination (e.g. Q 4, § 52; Q 22, §§ 11-12). Gramsci's concept of mummification is arguably stimulated by a simultaneously overt and subterranean influence posed by Trotsky's political thought. It is notable that Emanuele Saccarelli employs the imagery of mummification and the embalming process in his study of Gramsci and Trotsky in the period of the 1920s and 1930s (Saccarelli 2007, pp. 23, 29, 34, 152).



a separation from history and a separation from the living creative forces of the popular masses.

The new phase of struggle after the war, with the workers' armed and the incorporation of many of the futurists into the fascist movement (Gramsci 2014, p. 123), meant that this historical moment of identification had passed. In the *Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci would return to the theme of the Futurists by comparing them to a revolt by a generation of schoolboys, who «created a small ruckus in the nearby woods, and were brought back under the rod of the forest warden» (Q 1, § 124; Gramsci 1975a, p. 115; Gramsci 2011, vol. 1, p. 211). Their significance could perhaps be interpreted as a kind of performative representation of the desire of the subaltern groups to emerge from conditions of passivity<sup>8</sup>. The passage displays Gramsci's sensitivity, also found in Trotsky's writings, to the dangers of mechanically subsuming the sphere of artistic and literary production to the class struggle conceived in narrow economic terms.

We may find further clues to the origins of Gramsci's use of the concept of mummification in the biographical details of his life at this time. Just over a month after writing to Trotsky, on 16 October 1922 Gramsci, Jul'ka Schucht and an unknown friend sent a postcard to Jul'ka's sister, Evgenija Schucht<sup>9</sup>. This postcard is of interest to the current study as it is illustrated on the reverse side with various Egypt-related images (including pyramids, a sphinx, etc.). The card bears the inscription: «The sphinx is that thing that/you find in Egypt; and you,/dog-tired, will find it too/in Ivanovo Voznesensk» (Gramsci 2014, p. 125). As Derek Boothman notes, «Ivanovo-Voznesensk's city museum had various Egyptian relics, including mummies, hence the reference to pyramids» (ibid., p. 177, n. 34). Further study of Gramsci's

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<sup>8</sup> It may be of interest to compare Gramsci's reflections with the fated example of the revolt of the Rouen schoolboys in Sartre's *L'Idiot de la famille*, which has resonances for the generation of 1968 (Sartre 1988, pp. 1337 ff.).

<sup>9</sup> Gramsci met Jul'ka in September 1922.

time in Russia might help to establish whether his interest in these themes was renewed by the exhibits in Ivanovo Voznesensk<sup>10</sup>.

### 2.2. Mummification in the "Prison Notebooks"

I will now examine the appearances of the term mummification [*mummificarsi*] in Gramsci's prison writings. There are eleven appearances of the concept and its various cognates [*mummificati, mummificatore, mummificata, mummificate*] in the critical edition of the *Prison Notebooks*<sup>11</sup>. I have numbered them as follows:

- 1) Q 4, § 52; Gramsci 1975a, p. 492: *Americanism and Fordism* (November 1930);
- 2) Q 7, § 77; Gramsci 1975a, p. 910: *The Intellectuals, The Political Parties* (December 1931);
- 3) Q 8, § 28; Gramsci 1975a, p. 958: *Political terminology, Theorists, doctrinaires, ... etc.* (January/February 1932);
- 4&5) Q 13, § 23 (twice); Gramsci 1975a, p. 1604: *Observations on some aspects of the structure of political parties in periods of organic crisis* (May 1932-November 1933);
- 6) Q 14, § 47; Gramsci 1975a, p. 1705: *Characteristics of Italian culture* (December 1932);
- 7) Q 15, § 61; Gramsci 1975a, p. 1826: *Introduction to the study of philosophy* (June/July 1933);
- 8) Q 16, § 9; Gramsci 1975a, p. 1864: *Some problems for the study of the development of the philosophy of praxis* (June/July 1932-Second half of 1934 from July/August);

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<sup>10</sup> The forthcoming research project *Gramsci in Russia* by Craig Brandist and Peter Thomas may help to shed some light on this (<https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/bakhtin/projects/gramsci> [Accessed: 29/01/16]). We might also speculate that Gramsci's early interest in these themes was piqued by the presence of the collections of the *Museo Egizio* in Turin.

<sup>11</sup> I have retained the standard Gerratana notation for referencing notes, but I have also traced the dates of these appearances using the latest scholarly work by Giuseppe Cospito on the chronology of their composition, e.g. Q 4, § 52 is from November 1930 (Cospito 2011, p. 898). For reasons of time it was not possible to analyse the entire semantic field of mummification, however a wider study could systematically incorporate a number of related terms, e.g. embalming, fossilisation, petrification, ossification, stagnation, habitude, being anachronistic, etc.

9) Q 20, § 4; Gramsci 1975a, p. 2094: *Integral Catholics, Jesuits, Modernists* (July/August 1934–first months(?) 1935);

10) Q 22, § 12; Gramsci 1975a, p. 2170: *Taylorism and the mechanisation of work* (Second half 1934 from July/August);

11) Q 28, § 17; Gramsci 1975a, p. 2336: *G. A. Fanelli* (First months 1935).

From the above list, we can see that Gramsci's use of the concept of mummification ranges over topics from *Americanism and Fordism*, the intellectuals, political parties, Italian culture, the study of philosophy and the development of the philosophy of praxis, Catholicism, Taylorism and the mechanisation of work, and a note on G. A. Fanelli<sup>12</sup>. As was Gramsci's practice, some notes that appear in earlier notebooks are reworked and reappear in later ones<sup>13</sup>. Among the eleven occurrences of the concept of mummification we find two pairs of such texts. Appearance (1) is in a "first version" on *Americanism and Fordism* from Q 4 in November 1930, which is re-worked as a "second version" text, becoming appearance (10) on *Taylorism and the mechanisation of work* in Q 22 during the second half of 1934. Appearance (2) is in a "first version" on *The Intellectuals. The Political Parties* from Q 7 in December 1931, and reappears in a new form in appearance (4) studying the structure of political parties in periods of organic crisis in Q 13 (written during May 1932–November 1933).

In the periodisation of the *Notebooks* offered by Fabio Frosini (2003, pp. 23–29), appearances (1), (2) and (3) are situated in the first phase of his work in which he establishes expanding lines of research, highlights themes, and collects research material for a project of dauntingly ambitious scope (Thomas 2009, p. 113). The following two appearances, (4) and (5) are found in the first set of "special notebooks", those dedicated to a single topic, which were written between 1932 and 1933 during Gramsci's remand in Turi prison. These notes, as well as ap-

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<sup>12</sup> Giuseppe Attilio Fanelli, the editor of the absolute monarchist newspaper «The Savoy», «Il Sabaudò» (Gentile 2005, p. 249).

<sup>13</sup> The former were designated as A-texts by Valentino Gerratana, with the latter referred to as C-texts (see Buttigieg's *Preface* in Gramsci 2011, vol. 1, p. XV). I will here follow the convention of referring to "first" and "second versions".

pearance (6), are drawn from a second phase of his work, from mid-1932 to March 1933, in which Gramsci sought to systematise his notes from the previous phase. Thomas suggests that this phase «may be regarded as the “living soul” of the *Prison Notebooks*», although warns us in doing so against premature ascriptions of «completeness» to these unfinished works (Thomas 2009, p. 114). Appearance (7), as well as a further four appearances in “special notebooks”, (8), (9), (10) and (11) are from the third phase of his writings, which starts in mid-1933. The last three or perhaps four of these appearances are from his period at the Quisisana clinic in Formia (Buttigieg in Gramsci 2011, vol. 1, pp. 37-38)<sup>14</sup>.

It is clear, therefore, that Gramsci deploys the concept of mummification in every phase of his prison writings. It could be said that the concept appears with increasing frequency in the third phase of work. We find it present right up until he is forced to cease work from ill health in 1935. While it is difficult to discern particular trends in the context of its usage at this level of abstraction, we could say that Gramsci is particularly concerned with the process of bureaucratization in the notes related to the structure of political parties. Gramsci is grappling, not simply the creation of bureaucratic cadre within an organisation, but with a wider cultural phenomenon of the separation of an organisation from the animating effect of the cultural life of the popular groups. The later notes seem to flesh out this conception of mummification by addressing the questions of Italian culture, the philosophy of praxis and religion<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup> In the *Dizionario gramsciano*, the concept of mummification does not have its own entry, but many of the appearances of the term above are present in the definition of other related terms, such as the entries: a) *Arrogance of the party* [Boria di partito] - appearance (4), (Liguori, Voza 2009, p. 79); b) *Europe* - appearance (7), (ibid., p. 289); c) *Mechanicism* - appearance (1), (ibid., p. 525); d) *Internal politics* - appearance (6), (ibid., p. 649); e) *Psychology* - appearance (10), (ibid., p. 674); f) *Represented/representatives* [Rappresentati-rappresentanti] - appearance (2), (ibid., p. 692); and g) *Weber, Max* - appearance (6) (ibid., p. 905).

<sup>15</sup> From this we can see that the appearances (3), (8), (9) and (11) have not been referenced in the *Dizionario*, and (5) has been used only in an earlier version of the text. The first three appearances, (1), (2) and (3) were published for the first time in the second and third volumes of Buttigieg’s critical English edition of the *Prison Notebooks* (Gramsci 2011). Appearances (4), (5), (7), (8) and (10) are to be found in the *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* edited by Hoare and Nowell Smith (Gramsci 1971, which also contains a translation of the appearance in the letter to Trotsky). Ap-

### *3. Analysis of mummification*

Mummification is an innovative concept in Gramsci's work that has a wide field of application. Generally speaking this is conceived of as «mummification of culture», where “culture” has to be understood in a broader than usual sense, including not only its application to political parties but also to various manifestation of “common sense” [*senso comune*]. Mummification provides a way of describing the embalming process through which certain forms of culture, which were something positive and legitimate when created, become pejorative and degenerative through a process of repetition in changed circumstances (Q 8, § 28; Gramsci 1975a, p. 958; Gramsci 2011, vol. 3, p. 254). This process, while apparently stubborn, is not something inevitable. Indeed, for Gramsci, one of the most important questions concerning political parties is its «capacity to react against the force of habit, against the tendency to become mummified and anachronistic» (Q 12, § 23; Gramsci 1975a, p. 1604; Gramsci 1971, pp. 210-211). It is therefore necessary to make a historical study of the conditions in which mummification becomes possible.

#### *3.1. Terrains of mummification: parties, social groups, common sense, culture*

In the *Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci applies the concept of mummification in a variety of different contexts. In each of these contexts, the terrain on which mummification operates seems to vary quite significantly, although we might suggest that these are ultimately “translatable” aspects of a unitary phenomenon.

Firstly, as we have seen above, Gramsci refers to the process of mummification in relation to political parties. This is the case in various appearances of the concept, (2), (4) and (5), where the process affects the ability of parties «to influence the situation at moments which are historically vital for their class» (Q 13, § 23; Gramsci 1975a, p. 1604; Gramsci 1971, p. 211). For Gramsci, French political parties

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pearance (9) can be found in Derek Boothman's *Further Selections* (Gramsci 1995), however appearances (6) and (11) have so far received no published English translation.

provide a particularly rich vein for such research, since they are «historical-political documents of the various phases of past French history» (ibid.).

Secondly, in appearances (1) and (10), Gramsci refers to the process of mummification negatively, in instances when it is not effective. Thus, when discussing the process of adaptation that takes place within the individual worker under conditions of the mechanisation of work, he argues that in such conditions the brain of the worker «far from being mummified, reaches a state of complete freedom» (Q 22, §12; Gramsci 1975a, p. 2170; Gramsci 1971, p. 309). Having overcome the “crisis of adaptation” required to take on this type of labour, Gramsci suggests this combination of mental freedom and a lack of satisfaction with mechanised work can lead to a non-conformism, a fact that has not gone unnoticed by the industrialists. This indicates the important role that industrial labour might play in a possible demummification of culture.

The third use of mummification relates to the social group from which the bureaucracy was drawn in Wilhelmine Germany, the Junkers. Thus, Gramsci describes them in appearance (6), as «a social class despite being mummified and mutilated» (Q 14, § 47; Gramsci 1975a, p. 1705, my translation). This suggests that the mummified state of this social group makes it a milieu ripe for the crystallisation of bureaucratic cadre. In the same vein, Gramsci’s study of the Catholic Church critically assesses the opinion that it possessed «inexhaustible virtues of adaptation and development» (Q 20, § 4; Gramsci 1975a, p. 2093; Gramsci 1995, p. 82). In appearance (9), he examines the historical processes by which it assumed «the mummified shape of a formalistic and absolutist organism» (Q 20, § 4; Gramsci 1975a, p. 2094; Gramsci 1995, p. 82). Gramsci gives a multifaceted analysis of the conditions which limited the Church’s possibilities for avoiding this tendency towards rigidity.

Fourthly, Gramsci refers to the mummification of ideas or ideologies themselves. In appearance (8), Gramsci recognises that conservatives are effective in criticising, what he calls, «the [abstract and] utopian character of the mummified Jacobin ideologies» (Q 16, § 9; Gramsci 1975a, p. 1864; Gramsci 1971, p. 399). But, Gramsci argues

that the philosophy of praxis is best placed to understand the preservation of an ideological form without the content of its «circumscribed activity in specific circumstances» (ibid.). It is only the self-critical application of the philosophy of praxis that is able to discern the «real» value that Jacobinism has had as «an element in the creation of the new French nation», and thus to link it to a «post-Jacobin» hegemony (Frosini 2014), a claim to the conquest of the historical past, as well as «the beginnings of a new civilisation» (Q 16, § 9; Gramsci 1975a, p. 1864; Gramsci 1971, p. 399).

Finally, Gramsci applies the concept of mummification to popular culture in appearance (7). He discusses the constitution of the philosophy of praxis as the «result and crowning point» of a cultural process that arises from the disintegration of Hegelianism and which is «different in character from its predecessors, a process in which practical movement and theoretical thought are united (or are trying to unite through a struggle that is both theoretical and practical)» (Q 15, § 61; Gramsci 1975a, p. 1825; Gramsci 1971, p. 417). This new conception of the world is no longer limited to great philosophers, but is «capable of modifying (even if the result includes hybrid combinations) popular thought and mummified popular culture» (ibid.).

### *3.2. (De-)mummification, the “democratic philosopher” and the philosophy of praxis*

If the philosophy of praxis is able to modify mummified popular culture, could we also suggest that it is able to facilitate its demummification? A project of the de-mummification of culture would seem to require something along the lines of an inventory of the «infinity of traces» that form a composite personality (Q 11, § 12; Gramsci 1975a, p. 1376; Gramsci 1971, p. 324). The process of forging a coherent unity within a personality cannot be limited to the individual but is a collective project. Thus, creating a new culture is not about «individual “original” discoveries», but the diffusion and socialisation of truths in a critical form, «to make them become the basis of vital actions, an element of co-ordination and intellectual and moral order» (Q 11, § 12; Gramsci 1975a, p. 1377; Gramsci 1971, p. 325). It is the

movement of the subaltern groups from an economic-corporate phase to the articulation of an ethico-political phase, becoming, as Thomas points out, «a genuine class, architect and *faber* of an historical epoch» (Thomas 2009, p. 152).

Yet, Gramsci says that cultural processes are personified in the creation of intellectuals, and «one should not talk about popular cultures in this connection, since with regard to these one cannot speak of critical elaboration and process of development» (Q 15, § 61; Gramsci 1975a, p. 1826; Gramsci 1971, p. 417). It seems that the popular masses themselves cannot articulate directly the critical elaboration required to give birth to a new way of conceiving the world. For this, the process must be personified in intellectuals and ultimately great philosophers. For Gramsci, initial leadership «cannot come from the mass [...] except through the mediation of *élite* for whom the conception implicit in human activity has already become to a certain degree a coherent and systematic ever-present awareness and a precise and decisive will» (Q 11, § 12; Gramsci 1975a, p. 1387; Gramsci 1971, p. 335).

Another way of discussing this problem might be Gramsci's attempts to reformulate in more "democratic" terms the relationship between knowledge and non-knowledge<sup>16</sup>. The process of mummification seems to address the riddle of how the elaboration of the philosophy of praxis can maintain an organic connection to the popular groups that it claims to represent. The enigmatic figure that Gramsci proposes in this regard is the «democratic philosopher», a self-critical intellectual for whom an active relationship exists between her and the «cultural environment» that she is attempting to modify (Q 10 II, § 44; Gramsci 1975a, p. 1332; Gramsci 1971, p. 350).

Gramsci concept of mummification seems to diagnose very presciently the dangers posed to the requisite "open"-ness of this figure<sup>17</sup>. The "democratic philosopher" actively engages through the modern

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<sup>16</sup> Thanks to Peter Thomas for suggesting this avenue of investigation in personal correspondence.

<sup>17</sup> This runs somewhat counter to the impressions drawn by commentators such as Martin Jay, who have detected «a license for repression» in the educative role of a proletarian state (Jay 1984, p. 166).



Prince in a process of rendering coherent the elements of “good sense” that can be found in popular culture. Thus, Peter Thomas suggests that the philosophy of praxis gives «the practically-focused *senso comune* a level of critical self-awareness regarding its historical determination that allows it to break with the incoherence and passivity imposed upon it by an incoherent present» (Thomas 2009, p. 374). Yet, there are risks to this practical transformation of philosophy, which is «forced to recognise its own foundation» (ibid.), for as long as “common sense” has the capacity to mummify a «justified reaction into a permanent attitude» (Q 8, § 28; Gramsci 1975a, p. 958; Gramsci 2011, vol. 3, p. 254)<sup>18</sup>.

### 3.3. *Americanism*

For Gramsci, the forced imposition of Taylorist and Fordist production techniques represents a form of rationalisation of the work process from above. Gramsci investigates the initiatives of the American industrialists to maintain a «social passivity», and an externally imposed «psychophysical equilibrium» among the workers through the regulation of their lives even beyond the workplace. Thus, these industrialists sought to control the consumption of alcohol and to regulate the sexual relations of the population (Q 4, § 52; Gramsci 1975a, pp. 490-491; Gramsci 2011, vol. 2, pp. 216-217). Yet, this phenomenon has unintended consequences for the industrialists that orchestrate it precisely because the process of adaptation undergone by the industrial worker creates opportunities for non-conformism. The industrial worker is capable of achieving in her thoughts a state of «complete freedom» through the habitualisation of instinctive physical movement «making its home» in her body (Q 4, § 52; Gramsci 1975a, pp. 492-493; Gramsci 2011, vol. 2, p. 219).

At the same time, the rationalisation of the demographics of the American population is contrasted by Gramsci with the resistance to this process in European countries by all the «passive residues of all

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<sup>18</sup> In some respects this capacity for mummification to re-emerge could be compared to the concept of *Tailism* advanced by Georg Lukács (Lukács 2000).

the social forms that have faded away in history» (Q 4, § 52; Gramsci 1975a, p. 491; Gramsci 2011, vol. 2, p. 218). The introduction of these new industrial methods can also be seen as removing these mummified elements in society, «the old that is not yet buried will be definitively destroyed», but only in the service of instituting «wider margins of social passivity» (ibid.). Gramsci is concerned with the distinction between different types of conformism, and the possibility of a normative assessment of them in terms of a critical conception of historical progress. Thus he says that we «are all conformists of some conformism or another», the question is «of what historical type is the conformism, the mass humanity to which one belongs?» (Q 11, § 12; Gramsci 1975a, p. 1376; Gramsci 1971, p. 324)

For Gramsci, the type of conformism that is associated with the top-down imposition of the production methods of Americanism is not the only type of conformism available to us. The «organic coalescence» of political parties «with the intimate (economic-productive) life of the masses themselves» offers the possibility of a process of the standardisation of popular feeling that is no longer «mechanical and causal (that is produced by the conditioning of environment factors and the like)», but one that has become «conscious and critical» (Q 11, § 25; Gramsci 1975a, p. 1430; Gramsci 1971, p. 429). Thus, a complex is articulated which may be described as «collective man» through a system that he refers to as «living philology» (ibid.).

#### *3.4. Mummification from above and below*

Interestingly, Gramsci's conception of mummification could be said to incorporate two elements. The first might be called mummification from above, imposed in order to maintain groups in their subaltern position. This might include usages involving the conservative social groups, the bureaucratic strata such as the Junkers in Germany, or those national elements around the Italian monarchy. In the process of the bureaucratisation of an organisation, the mummification of culture appears to form an integral part of the molecular creation of a priesthood-like caste of intellectuals, the field in which it develops its bodily

spirit or «esprit de corps» (Q 12, § 1; Gramsci 1975a, p. 1515; Gramsci 1971, p. 7).

The second element of mummification, emerging from below, is associated with the “mental laziness” of subaltern groups. The previously untranslated appearance (11) links Gramsci’s concept of mummification to the theme of *Lorianism* within the *Notebooks*. For Gramsci, this represented some of the worst aspects of «the mentality of a group of Italian intellectuals and then of the national culture» (Q 28, Gramsci 1975a, p. 2321, my translation). These “Lorian” intellectuals were on the one hand a cause of the poor formation of national culture, and on the other a reflection of a distinctive feature and mummified state of the Italian people themselves<sup>19</sup>. The irresponsibility of these intellectuals is therefore strongly connected to a wider cultural phenomenon among the people (see also Francioni, Frosini 2009, p. 333).

Despite a certain analytical distinction, it seems evident there is a constitutive interpenetration between the notion of mummification from above and mummification from below. In other words, one mutually conditions a disposition towards the other. The conditions within which the “mental laziness” characteristic of “Lorianism” arises has been fomented by the disruption of the elements of conscious leadership within the subaltern groups. And, vice versa, the intellectual laziness within the subaltern groups allows the mummification of culture, imposed by the dominant groups, to manifest itself and achieve some purchase on the life of the masses.

### *3.5. The Language of Life and the Living Dead*

In his article *Gramsci e il linguaggio della “vita”*, Michele Ciliberto (1989) has traced the semantic field of “life” in Gramsci’s early years,

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<sup>19</sup> In the very first notebook Gramsci had already referred to this phenomenon among a «certain stratum of intellectuals» who «deal with the question of workers and who believe, more or less, that they are deepening, correcting, or surpassing Marxism» (Q 1, § 25; Gramsci 1975a, p. 22; Gramsci 2011, p. 116). It is characteristic, Gramsci continues, «of a certain type of literary and scientific production in our country [...] and is connected to the poor organisation of culture and, hence, to the absence of restraint and criticism» (ibid.).

and the connections of his ethico-political thought to the works of Bergson and Croce. For Ciliberto, even at this stage, Gramsci's position should not be reduced to the general diffusion of the Bergsonian opposition of form and life in the European intellectual milieu at this time (ibid., pp. 680-681). Despite these influences, Gramsci's appropriation and transformation of the generic opposition life/form takes on a different perspective from the outset, due to his conception of society as an organism with a fundamental internal antagonism (ibid., p. 686). For Gramsci, the language of life is deployed to diagnose the sickness, decay and putrefaction of bourgeois society, but also to identify the constitution of new institutions of communist society.

Despite the significant theoretical transformation of Gramsci's thought between his early writings and the *Prison Notebooks*, I would suggest that the roots of Gramsci's concept of mummification can be traced back to this lexicon of "life". In this article, I have tried to indicate the continuing influence of one aspect of this semantic field in the *Prison Notebooks*. "Life" is associated with the creativity of "élan vital", but also with the simultaneously flexible and resistant notion of «plasticity» (ibid., p. 683)<sup>20</sup>. There is scope for a much wider investigation of the oppositions drawn out here between spontaneity and discipline and their relation to the dual nature of mummification.

Gramsci was interested in associations made between the theme of life and death and Italy as a nation. In his note entitled *The tradition of Rome*, he quotes a line from Giuseppe Giusti's poem *The land of the dead* (Q 5, § 42; Gramsci 1975a, p. 573; Gramsci 2011, p. 300), which was a response to Lamartine's description of Italy as such (Buttigieg in Gramsci 2011, vol. 2, p. 642). Likewise, Gramsci discusses Ugo Foscolo's poem *On tombs* (Q 5, § 32; Gramsci 1975a, p. 569; Gramsci 2011, vol. 2, p. 296), which celebrated the tombs of "great men" to promote, according to Foscolo, «the resurrection not of bodies but of virtues» (Buttigieg in Gramsci 2011, vol. 2, pp. 638-639).

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<sup>20</sup> It might be fruitful to bring a Gramscian notion of *plasticity* into dialogue with its usage in contemporary philosophy, e.g. by Catherine Malabou as the capacity at once to take on and to give form (Malabou 2005).

Limitations of space do not permit the analysis of further examples, but I would speculatively suggest that the theme of life and death in Gramsci's writings may not always have been fully transmitted in its English translations. Thus, in Gramsci's note on the anti-feminist writer A. De Pietri Tonelli, where he discusses the «deviations» of the paradoxical social position of upper class feminists, these become «unhealthy» rather than «morbid» in translation (Q 22, § 9; Gramsci 1975a, p. 2160; Gramsci 1971, p. 298). Similarly, the language of being «buried» [*seppellito*], which arises at numerous points in the *Notebooks*, is perhaps stripped of the more mummifying sense of being «entombed» (Q 4, § 52; Gramsci 1975a, p. 491; Gramsci 2011, vol. 2, p. 216).

#### *4. Passivity and Subalternity*

Building on this survey of the meanings of the concept of mummification we can now appreciate its importance for a Gramscian analysis of the categories of passivity and subalternity. The notion of passivity is, for Gramsci, associated with pejorative terms such as putrefaction and stagnation (Q 3, § 42; Gramsci 1975a, p. 320; Gramsci 2011, vol. 2, p. 42). As Giuseppe Cospito points out in the *Dizionario gramsciano*, Gramsci applies the concept to the subaltern classes, but also to the traditionally conservative social groups like the peasantry and petit-bourgeoisie (Liguori, Voza 2009, p. 628). I argue that there is a close connection between the concepts of passivity and mummification. Much like the concept of mummification, the concept of passivity can be applied from above, in terms of the imposition of a «social passivity» that is engendered by Americanism (Q 4, § 52; Gramsci 1975a, p. 491; Gramsci 2011, vol. 2, p. 218). On the other hand, it can also manifest itself in an attitude of «resignation» that is identified as being characteristic of religious thought (Q 6, § 157; Gramsci 1975a, p. 812; Gramsci 1985, p. 237).

Again, like mummification, passivity is a concept that is associated with a lack of political initiative. It is precisely this “fatality” that must be fought by progressive groups, if the popular masses are to seize the possibility of emerging from this condition and rendering coherent the

episodic and fragmented elements of «spontaneity» within their ranks into a systematic «conscious leadership» (Q 3, § 48; Gramsci 1975a, p. 328; Gramsci 2011, vol. 2, p. 49). Gramsci is dismissive of those that might counter this passivity with abstract proposals, «the mechanical repetition of scientific or theoretical formulas» (ibid.). He rather indicates the necessity of a study of the popular forms that are constituted by a heterogeneous mixture of elements. The theoretician's task is to “translate” the healthy elements of historical life into theoretical language, rather than seeking to impose an «abstract scheme» on reality (Q 3, § 48; Gramsci 1975a, p. 332; Gramsci 2011, vol. 2, p. 52).

Gramsci was deeply concerned with the effects of the experience of subjugation on the working-class movement, which gave rise to «an orientation [*atteggiamento*] of passivity, unwittingly reproducing the experience of subjection to external forces (in the first instance, another class's social and political hegemony) at the very heart of attempts to overcome such a condition» (Thomas 2009, p. 254). For Gramsci, the Marxism associated with Nikolai Bukharin's *Popular Manual* was itself in danger of creating a «crude, vulgar materialism», as Fabio Frosini notes, that «perpetuates the perception that the subaltern classes have of themselves, as objects deprived of will, at the mercy of circumstance» (Frosini 2003, p. 87; trans. Thomas 2009, p. 301). By contrast, Gramsci's conception of the philosophy of praxis sought to transform the experience of passivity into «an active and directive relation to the world» (Thomas 2009, p. 300).

Thomas observes that the notion of passivity in Gramsci's *Notebooks* is «analysed as a social relation we must actively construct, in relation to other equally active social relations» (ibid., p. 305). Here, I would argue that the process of mummification could play a useful role in helping us to understand the relatedness to history of a certain type of passive activity, or the apparently “living” role played by “dead” traditions. This raises the question of how these anachronistic traditions can be buried and laid to rest, without abandoning the concrete strategies and organisation necessary for political effectivity. For Gramsci, one part of the solution would seem to be the political mobilisation of the popular masses, but without further determination this proposal appears as an empty abstraction.

I will argue that Gramsci became increasingly concerned in the *Prison Notebooks* with the stubborn persistence of mummified traditions that were immune to simple verbal exposure. This mummification of culture poses a riddle in need of philological decoding. The sedimented layers of anachronistic tradition continue to be reproduced not simply from above, but by the very groups that stand to benefit from the negation of their influence. The cathartic laying to rest of these “undead” traditions seems to require a complex and variegated solution, which Gramsci would formulate through the political strategy for transformation that he associated with the experimental forms of praxis of the modern Prince.

The theoretical basis for this conception is Gramsci’s theory of contradictory consciousness. It is manifested when a person attempts to «consider the present, and quite specific present, with a mode of thought elaborated for a past which is often remote and superseded» (Q 11, § 12; Gramsci 1975a, p. 1377; Gramsci 1971, p. 324). Attempting this feat makes one a «walking anachronism, a fossil, and not living in the modern world», or at least «strangely composite» (ibid.). For Gramsci, it is the social groups that «in some ways express the most developed modernity, [which] lag behind in other respects, given their social position, and are therefore incapable of complete historical autonomy» (ibid.). Gramsci describes a movement from the time in which the subaltern is considered as a «thing», to that in which it has a feeling of itself as «a historical person, a protagonist» (Q 11, § 12; Gramsci 1975a, p. 1388; Gramsci 1971, p. 337). This emergence from conditions of passivity requires the elaboration of a new conception of the world, the moral and intellectual reform of “common sense” [*senso comune*].

I have sought to demonstrate that, for Gramsci, mummification is deeply entwined with subalternity in characterising the obstacles confronting the development of the autonomy of the subaltern groups. In order to emerge from their condition of passivity the subaltern groups must make the «cathartic» passage from the economic-corporate to the ethico-political moment, where «structure ceases to be an external force which crushes man, assimilates him to itself and makes him pas-

sive; and is transformed into a means of freedom» (Q 10 II, § 6; Gramsci 1975a, p. 1244; Gramsci 1971, p. 367).

### *5. Conclusion*

Our crisis-ridden times are frequently ascribed the characteristics of monstrosity, e.g. zombie banks, vampire-like capital. A study of the mummification of culture is a timely consideration of the Sardinian thinker's contribution to these themes, one which we should perhaps add to the pantheon of «monsters of the market» (McNally 2011)<sup>21</sup>. Although Gramsci never makes the connection himself, it is hard to resist considering the resonances of the concept of mummification with his reflections on Machiavelli and the modern Prince. It is suggestive that the monstrous mummy is a figure of embalmed royalty, or we might say an undead Prince. Indeed Gramsci is centrally concerned with the capacity of the modern Prince to resist this tendency to become mummified, and arms us presciently against the danger of the monstrous degeneration of political parties.

The concept of mummification is able to perform a critical function by making an incision between forms of culture that are historically opportune and those that are anachronistic, the reactionary form of the “living dead”. On one level, the mummification of culture is a metaphor that addresses the “dead”, the elements of the past that continue to walk among us. It is also a concept that helps us to face the «historicity of the present», one of «the fundamental themes of the *Prison Notebook*» (Thomas 2009, p. 282). This present, as Thomas notes, «is not identical with itself but is fractured by residual formations from past and emergent formations orientated to new social practices» (ibid.). The concept of mummification is important for our understanding of this “non-contemporaneity of the present” through which various temporalities assert compete to assert primacy.

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<sup>21</sup> The synergies of Gramsci's concept of mummification, in the sense of the living dead, with recent literature on politics, fascism and the monstrous would also merit further study, e.g. Neocleous 2005.



The practical organisation of this cleavage is manifest through Gramsci's reflections on different types of conformism. We always already belong to some historical type of «mass humanity», but the incoherence of our conception of the world means that each personality is «strangely composite» and constituted from a «multiplicity» of groups (Q 11, § 12; Gramsci 1975a, p. 1376; Gramsci 1971, p. 324). It is this riddle of the composite that helps to confine the subaltern groups in their passivity. It is self-reinforcing through the fact that mummification is at its most effective when the masses are separated from active political participation.

This vicious cycle might lead us into a council of despair, yet Gramsci saw a possibility of the masses moving into activity “like lightning”, perhaps recalling his own experience of the *Biennio Rosso*. Thus, he noted that political mobilisation was able «to rouse the masses from passivity, in other words, to destroy the law of large numbers» (Q 11, § 25; Gramsci 1975a, p. 1430; Gramsci 1971, p. 429). In these conditions, the power of the “living dead” can crumble, and the bureaucratic carapace of political organisations can be shattered. This challenges us to find the forms of praxis that can supplant old formations that have become rapidly redundant in conditions of crisis. With this task in mind, the concept of mummification might be an important tool for explaining the apparently paradoxical combination of stability and fragility characteristic of the present neo-liberal conjuncture, not only its grinding longevity and surprising viscosity, but also its capacity for sudden fractures and the unexpected rupturing of “dead”-time.

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