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The 'Mummification of Culture' in Gramsci's "Prison Notebooks"

Robert Jackson

1. Introduction

In his writings, Antonio Gramsci has recourse to a constellation of biological terms and metaphors that reflect the organic sphere in the broad sense. This 'language of life' refers to bodies, cells, germs, arteries, the molecular, fermentation, growth, decay and decomposition, to name but a few recurrent concepts and images.¹ In his *Prison Notebooks*, despite a significant modification of his earlier use of these terms, Gramsci continues to inscribe his project, the elaboration of a 'philosophy of praxis',² in the complexities of this semantic field. Gramsci uses the terms life and death not simply to discuss the corporeality of an individual organism, but as a means to explain the capillary processes of 'molecular' transformation in the movement of history.³ Exploring the terminology associated with life and death illustrates the diagnostic function played by these concepts in Gramsci's assessment of the past. Thus, Gramsci's analysis of different historical traditions and cultural

1 For a detailed chronological reading of the development of Gramsci's use of the 'language of life' particularly in his pre-prison writings, see Ciliberto 1989.

2 Following Gramsci, Peter Thomas outlines its components as 'absolute "historicism"' 'absolute immanence' and 'absolute humanism' (Q11, §27, Gramsci 1975, p. 1437; Gramsci 1971, p. 465). For an extensive account, see Thomas 2009, pp. 243-439.

3 For a discussion of the methodological importance of the 'molecular' particularly in conditions of modernity, for Gramsci's conceptions of knowledge, transformation and history, see Forenza 2009, pp. 551-555.

phenomena separates healthy elements from those that are putrefied and cadaverous. In particular, Gramsci illuminates the dangerous situation where a rotten past masquerades as one that is actually alive, obscuring the lines of real development. This distinction between the dead and the ‘germ of new life to be developed’ is an important part of unravelling the inherited nightmare that can entrap the social forces that are capable of acting ‘as a fulcrum for creating new history’.⁴

Investigating this life-death nexus, I suggest that Gramsci develops an innovative conception of the ‘mummification of culture’, in order to account for the stubborn persistence of old traditions in the anachronistic form of the ‘living dead’. This concept of mummification explains the embalming process through which certain cultural formations that are valuable and appropriate when created become fossilised and anachronistic when repeated in new conditions.⁵ Gramsci’s use of the concept of mummification plays a significant role in explaining the predominantly passive constitution of the subaltern groups through wider cultural processes.⁶ Gramsci’s conception of the mummification of culture is a process that takes place both from above and

4 Q10.II, §59ii, Gramsci 1975, p. 1354; Gramsci 1995, p. 416.

5 There has been very little analysis of mummification and its derivatives in the literature. For a further study towards the treatment of this concept, see Jackson 2016a.

6 The partial availability of Gramsci’s writings on subalternity in anglophone anthologies of his *Prison Notebooks* has contributed to a restricted image of Gramsci’s category, e.g. in academic contexts where it often denotes an ‘undifferentiated mass combination’ incapable of speaking for itself (see Liguori 2015a, p. 120). For a criticism of this usage, arguing instead for a conception of subalternity as a ‘phased development’ of diverse capacities belonging to a hegemonic-subaltern pairing, see Green 2002. The analysis of subalternity in its expansive relationship with the dominant classes (see also Buttigieg 2009, pp. 826-830), has been one of many fruits of the season of philological Gramscian scholarship, particularly in Italy (see, for example, Cospito 2011a, 2011b, Francioni 2009, 2016, Frosini 2010a, Gramsci 2009).

below. The former, mummification from above, is associated with the orchestrated efforts of dominant groups to interrupt any development towards coherence of the traces of autonomous action by the subaltern groups. The latter, mummification from below, manifests itself in the ‘intellectual laziness’ that Gramsci connects with the phenomenon of ‘Lorianism’, the ‘lack of critical spirit’ that characterises certain intellectuals who rely on a quasi-scientific sociology.⁷ This original contribution is further evidence of the fertility of Gramsci’s thought for developing a critical appreciation of the past in order to engage with the problems of our present.

2. Origins of Mummification

The ‘language of life’ manifests itself from Gramsci’s early thought onwards in a multitude of concepts, metaphors and images. Focusing primarily on Gramsci’s pre-prison writings, in particular from the newspaper *L’Ordine Nuovo*,⁸ Michele Ciliberto organises his study of Gramsci’s use of this language through the conceptual coupling of ‘discipline’ and ‘spontaneity’.⁹ These concepts relate, on the one hand, to the ‘processes of disintegration, organic disorder, and decomposition of bourgeois-capitalist society’, and on

7 ‘Lorianism’ is the term that Gramsci uses to describe the ethically indulgent mind-set of certain Italian intellectuals (and by extension national culture), exemplified by Achille Loria. For a more detailed examination of the phenomenon, see Imbornone 2009, pp. 487-489.

8 The weekly newspaper published by Gramsci and his associates in Turin during 1919-1922 and 1924-1925.

9 Ciliberto 1989, p. 680, my translation (here and below where no English text given).

the other, to the ‘identification of the structural characteristics of a new “order”, of a new human community, by a strong, conscious will’.¹⁰ Despite Gramsci’s immersion in the language of some of his early influences (Sorel, Gentile, Croce, etc.), Ciliberto argues that, even at this stage, we should not elide his use of this network of concepts with the generic notion of life found in the matrices of Bergsonian or Gentilian thought in the years preceding the First World War.¹¹ Ciliberto stresses the originality of Gramsci’s position, arguing that his analyses of processes of decomposition and of creation represent a dual concept of life, ‘mutually reinforcing’ but without ever merging into a ‘definitive univocal synthesis’.¹²

While it is possible to identify notions associated with ‘*élan vital*’,¹³ both positively and negatively, in the pages of *L’Ordine Nuovo*,¹⁴ Gramsci is critical from the outset of any generic opposition between life and form. Gramsci’s conception of society as an organism with a fundamental internal antagonism leads him beyond the purview of a general crisis of the notion of form itself, understood as inadequate to the task of comprehending the boundless and chaotic complexities of life. Gramsci analyses the decomposition of a particular form, the old bourgeois-capitalist society that has become

10 Ibid.

11 Ciliberto 1989, p. 681.

12 Ciliberto 1989, p. 680.

13 Deriving from the philosophy of Henri Bergson, ‘*élan vital*’ is the creative principle in living beings, ‘an *original impetus* of life’ (Bergson 1911, p. 87).

14 For example, using ‘vital impulse’ (*slancio vitale*) as a synonym for the ‘rhythm of progress of communist society’ in Gramsci 1987, p. 238, ‘*Sindacati e Consigli*’ (11 October 1919); Gramsci 1977, p. 100, ‘Unions and Councils’ Note that the synonym is indicated by a comma that is missing in the English translation. Thanks to Francesca Antonini for this observation.

‘detached from life’.¹⁵ However, he is also concerned with the task of locating new forms and institutions that have the potential to develop into a new order.¹⁶ In this sense, the new element of life represents its own generative organising principle. At this time, Gramsci’s writings focus on the internal economic-productive life of the factory councils. He identifies the councils as potential cells of the new institutions of a communist society.¹⁷ In summary, we find a theory of revolution with a negative moment of decay and decomposition. However, the criticism of the old world is not able in and of itself to produce an alternative. Counter-posed to this, we have the identification of a new ‘principle of life’,¹⁸ capable of producing new institutions. Ciliberto argues that interpreters generally place insufficient emphasis on this second element of Gramsci’s conception: of life as a ‘disciplined organism, intimately organised, structured according to internal principles of cohesion, of solidarity, of the unity between the whole and the individual parts’.¹⁹

It is evident that this theoretical framework is closely bound to Gramsci’s experiences during the struggles of the factory councils in Turin. We need not rehearse the subsequent defeat of this movement and the rise and consolidation of fascism in Italy. However, Ciliberto notes that the

15 Ciliberto 1989, p. 681.

16 Ibid.

17 Gramsci 1987, p. 238, ‘*Sindacati e Consigli*’ Gramsci 1977, p. 100, ‘Unions and Councils’

18 Ciliberto 1989, p. 687.

19 Ciliberto 1989, p. 681.

'language of life' does not disappear from Gramsci's writings after this period, but persists into his *Prison Notebooks*.²⁰ In fact, this language undergoes a development that is set within a wider perspective, and 'continues to develop a significant political and theoretical function, above all on the delicate and crucial terrain of the criticism of "(party) bureaucracy", and of the uncritical and unconscious processes of "standardisation" of the masses'.²¹ In this chapter, I will restrict myself to studying a concept from the language of life that has an intimate relation with these contested processes of 'conformism', namely Gramsci's innovative conception of the 'mummification' of culture. For Gramsci, mummification plays a fundamental role in the wider cultural processes that accompany and facilitate the creation of bureaucratic personnel in political organisations. It is also a concept lies at the intersection of these processes of growth and decay, at the intersection between the principles of life and death.²²

I will begin by examining some origins of the term in Gramsci's pre-prison writings. The concept of mummification appears in one of Gramsci's journalistic pieces in *Avanti!* from 4 January 1917, entitled 'The Dead That Speaks' (*Morto che parla*).²³ Here Gramsci excoriates a Torinese politician,

20 Ciliberto 1989, p. 692.

21 Ibid.

22 Ciliberto 1989, p. 687.

23 Gramsci 1980, p. 681. The title refers to a symbol from '*La Smorfia Napoletana*' which is a popular method in Italy, traditionally associated with Naples, for 'translating' symbols in dreams into numbers for playing the lottery.

Donato Bachi,²⁴ who falls out of favour but fails to acquiesce to his new situation. According to Gramsci, despite being a useless ‘instrument’ lacking the authority of an earlier time, Bachi continues to hawk his ‘mummified carcass’ around town in order to gain a hearing from beneath 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*’.²⁵ Gramsci links this theme, of the politically ‘dead’ politician whose body continues to have a putrefied after-life and will not remain buried, to the post-war crisis. He argues that these periods can lend an air of contemporaneity to redundant politicians that continue to play a role in civic life.²⁶ At this point, we might consider this phenomenon to be a colourful metaphor through which Gramsci adds polemical flavour to his writings, e.g. by his allusions to the ‘corpse-like smell’ of certain publications or political groupings.

Nevertheless, in the same issue of *Avanti!*, in a text entitled ‘On the Exhibition at the *Circolo degli artisti*’ (*Sull’esposizione al circolo degli artisti*), Gramsci also refers to a similar phenomenon attaching itself to language. In the context of the exhibition, he warns against confusing its vocabulary with ‘language’: ‘The vocabulary is a museum of embalmed corpses, language is the vital insight that gives new form to these corpses, new life because it

24 Donato Bachi (1866-1952) was an attorney and well-known socialist figure in Turin prior to fascism, later founding an anti-fascist review with Camillo Olivetti called ‘*Tempi Nuovi*’

25 Gramsci 1980, p. 681, my translation.

26 The reader can undoubtedly conjure her own contemporary examples of this phenomenon.

creates new relations, new periods in which single words regain an exact and current meaning'.²⁷ Gramsci's early writings deploy these numerous allusions to tombs, putrefaction, embalming, etc. in a particular theoretical manner to denote the effects of anachronistic forces, detached from life and history. He writes of corpse-like forces attacking the living, and, as a consequence, of the 'corpses that need to be buried in the political cemetery'.²⁸ A few years later, in his famous letter to Leon Trotsky on the Futurist art movement (8 September 1922), Gramsci uses the term mummification, or a related term 'fossilisation', to describe the outmoded academic culture of Italy, as 'fossilised/mummified and distant from the masses of the people'.²⁹

In each situation, Gramsci uses this language of the 'living dead' to analyse the anachronistic character of an element of the political situation. Gramsci is exploring modes of illuminating the complex dialectic of restoration and innovation that will later come to occupy a prominent place in his *Prison Notebooks*.³⁰ Yet, in his pre-prison writings, Gramsci does not appear to address the full complexity of the problem of burying these troublesome

27 Gramsci 1980, p. 683, my translation. Cf. Gramsci's well-known passage in Q11, §28: 'language is at the same time a living thing and a museum of fossils of life and civilisations'(Gramsci 1975, p. 1438; Gramsci 1971, p. 450). On the other hand, contrast with Q12, §2, where Gramsci discusses the importance for children to learn the 'dead'language of Latin, 'which can be treated as a corpse which returns continually to life'(Gramsci 1975, p. 1545; Gramsci 1971, p. 38).

28 Gramsci 1980, p. 227, 'The Altar-boy'(*Il chierichino*) in *Avanti!* (31 March 1916).

29 Gramsci 2014, p. 123. As the original of this letter has not yet been found, we cannot be certain of the exact metaphor deployed here (See Derek Boothman's editorial note in Gramsci 2014, p. 54 n. 36). However, it is also worth noting Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's forceful comparison between Italian 'museums'and 'cemeteries'in the *Manifesto of Futurism* (1909).

30 Boothman's recent edition of Gramsci's pre-prison letters illustrates Gramsci's interest for Egyptology and the related imagery of mummies, e.g. his drawings of a sphinx and pyramids on a postcard from Ivanovo-Voznesensk (Gramsci 2014, p. 125).

corpses. By contrast, in his later thought, Gramsci regards the stubborn persistence of the 'living dead' as an issue that requires more than simply verbal exposure. We continue to find the language of life, death and mummification prominently in his prison writings, but they suggest that a more variegated solution is required to lay these 'undead' traditions to rest. This question relates to the development of Gramsci's conception of subalternity,³¹ and to the problem of the emergence of the subaltern groups from their predominantly passive condition. As Peter Thomas observes, the notion of passivity in the *Notebooks* is 'analysed as a social relation [that] we must actively construct, in relation to other equally active social relations'.³² I will now examine how the process of mummification plays a useful role in helping us to understand this construction, and the relatedness to history of a certain type of passive activity, or the apparently 'living' role played by 'dead' traditions.

3. Mummification in the *Prison Notebooks*

In the *Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci deploys the concept of the 'mummification' across a broad array of topics, ranging from Americanism and Fordism, intellectuals and political parties, Italian culture, the study of philosophy,

31 As Joseph Buttigieg points out, Gramsci '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' (Buttigieg 2009, p. 826, my translation).

32 Thomas 2009, p. 305.

Catholicism, Taylorism and the mechanisation of work, and the ‘Lorianism’ of the monarchist newspaper editor G.A. Fanelli, among others.³³ Before investigating Gramsci’s conception of the ‘mummification of culture’ in the *Notebooks*, I note the caution required to read the term ‘culture’ in an expansive sense. Culture, as Kate Crehan points out, is central to understanding the lived experience of a reality divided by class conflict.³⁴ This means moving beyond a narrow notion of the products of artistic creation, towards a sense of a grouping of ‘the social elements that share the same mode of thinking or acting’.³⁵ It also means criticising the predominant anthropological sense of a bounded, and sometimes romanticised, entity, in favour a more historically dynamic conception of cultural transformation.³⁶ For Gramsci, culture is a complex and articulated notion of a ‘world’, ‘sphere’, ‘field’ or ‘structure’ of activity associated with organisational functions of differing valences.³⁷ It is an ‘expression of society’,³⁸ understood through an interrelated network of concepts in Gramsci’s thought. These include, in particular, the struggle for hegemony, and, among others, the notions of language and of ‘common sense’. The latter is a sedimented document of a conception of life and of morality, relatively rigid but also somewhat diffuse

33 For a full list of the eleven appearances of mummification in the *Notebooks*, and in the *Dizionario gramsciano* (under the entries for ‘Arrogance of the party’ (*Boria del partito*), ‘Europe’ ‘Mechanicism’ ‘Internal politics’ ‘Psychology’ ‘Represented/representatives’ and ‘Weber, Max’, see Jackson 2016a, pp. 208-210.

34 Crehan 2002, p. 71.

35 Q11, §12, Gramsci 1975, p. 1376; Gramsci 1971, p. 324.

36 For an important confrontation of Gramsci’s notion of culture with anthropological thought more generally, see Crehan 2002.

37 For a concise introduction to the concept of ‘culture’ in the *Prison Notebooks*, see Baratta 2009, pp. 190-194.

38 Q9, §57, Gramsci 1975, p. 1130, my translation.

and malleable, which is shared across social layers or spatial locations.³⁹ ‘Moreover’, as Gramsci says, ‘common sense is a collective noun, like religion: there is not just one common sense, for that too is a product of history and a part of the historical process’.⁴⁰ With these precisions in mind, I will now trace the way Gramsci applies the concept of ‘mummification’ in different contexts: to workers, to political parties, to social groups, to the various manifestations of ‘common sense’, and to ‘culture’. While these contexts vary quite significantly, I will suggest that they represent ‘translatable’ aspects of a unitary phenomenon.

3.1 *Taylorism, Americanism and Fordism*

The first appearance of the term ‘mummification’ in the *Prison Notebooks*, in November 1930,⁴¹ appears during Gramsci’s discussion of the American industrialists’ collective attempts to ‘create, with unprecedented speed and a consciousness of purpose unique in history, a new type of worker and of man’.⁴² Gramsci investigates the efforts of these industrialists to preserve a ‘social passivity’ among the workers by regulating their private lives, and thus their ‘morality’. However, discussing the rationalisation of the work process under Taylorism, Gramsci says:

39 Q24, §4, Gramsci 1975, p. 2271; Gramsci 1985, p. 421.

40 Q11, §12, Gramsci 1975, p. 1378; Gramsci 1971, pp. 325-326.

41 I use the chronology of notes in the *Notebooks* from recent scholarship in Cospito 2011b, p. 898.

42 Q4, §52, Gramsci 1975, p. 489; Gramsci 2011, vol. 2, p. 215.

Once the process of adaptation has been completed, the brain of the worker, in reality, does not become mummified but rather reaches a state of complete freedom. Physical movement becomes totally mechanical; the memory of the skill, reduced to simple gestures repeated with rhythmic intensity, “makes its home” inside the bundles of muscles and nerves, leaving the brain free for other occupations.⁴³

Thus, the concept of ‘mummification’ first appears in the *Notebooks* during a discussion of its absence.⁴⁴ Gramsci notes that the brains of workers do not succumb to mummification under the conditions of the mechanisation of manual labour. Quite the opposite, he argues that, having overcome the ‘crisis of adaption’ to these conditions, workers’ brains tend towards a free state. Moreover, given the unsatisfying nature of their work, this situation raises the potential that they will reject the dominant modes of social conformism. Industrialists like Henry Ford were well aware of these social consequences. Gramsci’s reflections indicate the important role that industrial labour plays in his conception of a new way of life in which culture does not suffer the blight of ‘mummification’. The significance of the new industrial methods of Fordism and Taylorism was that they swept away ‘the old that is not yet buried’, albeit in the service of instituting ‘wider margins of social

43 Q4, §52, Gramsci 1975, pp. 492-493; Gramsci 2011, vol. 2, p. 219.

44 The passage quoted here is substantially unchanged in its second version (Q22, §12, Gramsci 1975, p. 2170; Gramsci 1971, p. 309), which is also one of the final appearances of the term in the *Notebooks* (Second half 1934 from July/August).

passivity'.⁴⁵ However, for Gramsci, the coercive conformism associated with the methods of Fordism is not the only type available to us, as he intimates through his considerations of the early phases of the Soviet project.⁴⁶

3.2 *Bureaucracy and political parties*

In the second appearance of the term, in December 1931, Gramsci turns his attention to the field of political parties, arguing: 'One of the most important questions regarding political parties is their "opportuneness" or "rightness for the times"; that is to say, the question of how they react against "habitude" and the tendency to become mummified and anachronistic'.⁴⁷ This is an example of the development of Gramsci's use of the 'language of life', identified earlier by Ciliberto, moving onto the 'delicate and crucial terrain of the criticism of "(party) bureaucracy"'.⁴⁸ The 'mummification' of a political party is the concrete expression of its separation from history. It is synonymous with the severing of the organic connection between the party and the social forces that provided it with its social base.⁴⁹ 'Mummification' is therefore a feature of parties that are incapable of adapting to 'new epochs or historical

45 Q4, §52, Gramsci 1975, p. 491; Gramsci 2011, vol. 2, p. 218.

46 Interestingly, this is another example of Gramsci's reflections on mummification appearing in close proximity to his critical engagement with Leon Trotsky (Q4, §52, Gramsci 1975, p. 489; Q22, §11, Gramsci 1975, p. 2164).

47 Q7, §77, Gramsci 1975, p. 910; Gramsci 2011, vol. 3, p. 209.

48 Ciliberto 1989, p. 692.

49 This process is related to Gramsci's notion of the 'arrogance of the party' (*boria del partito*), the substitution of conceit for 'concrete facts' developed from Giambattista Vico's 'conceit of nations' (*boria delle nazioni*), (Q14, §70, Gramsci 1975, p. 1732; Gramsci 1971, p. 151). See also La Porta 2009, p. 79.

phases'.⁵⁰ As such, they are 'unable to develop in accordance with the ensemble of the relations of force [and therefore with congruous forces] in their particular country or in the international sphere'.⁵¹ However, the phenomenon of mummification does not affect equally all elements of the 'collective organism' of the party:

In this analysis, one must make distinctions: the social group; the mass of the party; the bureaucracy or general staff of the party. The latter is the most dangerous in terms of habitude: if it organizes itself as a separate body, compact and independent, the party will end up being anachronistic. This is what brings about the crises of parties that sometimes suddenly lose their historical social base and find the ground taken from under their feet.⁵²

In the second version of the note above, from Notebook 13 (May 1932 – November 1933), Gramsci describes the bureaucracy as 'the most dangerous hidebound and conservative force', which, if allowed to solidify as a caste, voids the party of its social content.⁵³ In his own time, Gramsci found the political parties of France to be particularly ripe for this type of analysis. Having been 'spawned by the [17]89⁵⁴ revolution and subsequent movements',⁵⁵ Gramsci declares that the French parties 'are all mummified

50 Q7, §77, Gramsci 1975, p. 910; Gramsci 2011, vol. 3, p. 209.

51 Ibid.

52 Ibid.

53 Q13, §23, Gramsci 1975, p. 1604; Gramsci 1971, p. 211.

54 The English translation appears to contain a misprint, reading '889'(Gramsci 2011, vol. 3, p. 209).

55 Q7, §77, Gramsci 1975, p. 910; Gramsci 2011, vol. 3, p.209.

and anachronistic – historical-political documents of the various phases of French history’.⁵⁶ Thus, Gramsci does not simply address the issue of the creation of bureaucratic personnel, but uses the concept of mummification as a means of linking the processes of bureaucratisation to wider socio-cultural phenomena. Gramsci’s use of the term in subsequent appearances fleshes out these internal connections in his conception of mummification by addressing questions of language, Italian culture, the philosophy of praxis, and religion.

3.3 *Political terminology*

One particularly revealing appearance of the term mummification, in a note entitled ‘*Political terminology. Theorists, doctrinaires, abstractionists, etc.*’ (Q8, §28, January/February 1932), illuminates the conservative aspect of Gramsci’s concept of ‘common sense’. Here, sandwiched between a discussion of ‘*Conservation and innovation*’ (Q8, §27) and ‘*Good sense and common sense*’ (Q8, §29), Gramsci describes the process by which certain terms acquire a negative aspect:

In ordinary language, “theorist” is used in a pejorative sense, like “doctrinaire” or, better still, like “abstractionist.” It has suffered the same fate as the technical-philosophical term “idealist,” which has come to mean “head in the clouds,” etc. It is no accident that certain words have

⁵⁶ Q13, §23, Gramsci 1975, p. 1604; Gramsci 1971, p. 211.

acquired this pejorative connotation. It has to do with a reaction by common sense against certain cultural degenerations, etc. But “common sense” in turn has been the agent of philistinism; it has mummified a justified reaction into a permanent attitude, into an intellectual laziness that is as degenerative and repulsive as the phenomenon it sought to combat. “Good sense” has reacted, but “common sense” has embalmed the reaction and made out of it a “theoretical,” “doctrinaire,” and “idealistic” canon.⁵⁷

In this context, the process of mummification is the degeneration of an initially healthy reaction of ‘common sense’. It takes the form of a resistance to speculative intellectual abstraction, which sinks into a generic anti-intellectualism when repeated in changed circumstances. For Gramsci, the embalming process is stubborn, but does not appear to be inevitable. It relates to the introduction of a third term, ‘good sense’, into the process of reaction. Gramsci tends to associate ‘good sense’ with applying the ‘power of rational concentration’, even calling it ‘the healthy nucleus that exists in “common sense”’, the part of it which should be ‘made more unitary and coherent’.⁵⁸ The reaction of ‘common sense’ can be ‘justified’, but, if allowed to embalm ‘good sense’, ‘common sense’ can also become an ‘agent of

⁵⁷ Q8, §28, Gramsci 1975, p. 958; Gramsci 2011, vol. 3, p. 254. Here, Gramsci’s concern with the creation of a ‘canon’ strikes some resonances with more recent sociological thought, such as Pierre Bourdieu’s analysis of the confrontation between ‘canonized’ and ‘non-canonized’ texts in the literary field (Bourdieu 1993, p. 34).

⁵⁸ Q11, §12, Gramsci 1975, p. 1380; Gramsci 1971, p. 328.

philistinism', equally bad as the problem it sought to rectify.⁵⁹ It is therefore necessary to study the historical conditions that allow mummification to take hold and endure. This leads Gramsci to incorporate his conception of mummification as an element of his wider project of generating adequate criterion of historical analysis.

3.4 Italy and Germany

In December 1932 (Q14, §47), Gramsci reflects on the distinctive characteristics of Italian culture, discussing the polemical debates on the interpretation of the history of the peninsula between Benedetto Croce, the dominant figure in Italian neo-idealism, and the fascist historian Gioacchino Vólpe.⁶⁰ Gramsci remarks that it is an important and typical characteristic of the Italian politico-cultural situation that such a diversity of interpretations of the facts are possible.⁶¹ Gramsci identifies a number of aspects of this phenomenon:

- 1) the fact that the intellectuals are disaggregated, without hierarchy, without a centre of ideological and intellectual unification and

59 For an orientation in the complex issue of the relationship between 'good sense' and 'common sense' see Liguori 2009, pp. 89-90.

60 Gioacchino Vólpe (1876-1971) was a nationalist historian who joined the fascist movement, writing, among others, the book *L'Italia in cammino* (1927) that Gramsci refers to in this note.

61 The Italian case is close to unique, Gramsci suggests, with the possible exception of Spain, whose position in relation to Europe and Africa was a matter of interpretative controversy (Q14, §47, Gramsci 1975, p. 1704).

centralisation, which is the result of a lack of homogeneity, compactness and “national” character of the ruling class; 2) the fact that these discussions are, in reality, the perspective and the foundation of implicit political programmes, that remain implicit, rhetorical, because the analysis of the past is not made objectively, but according to literary prejudices or of literary nationalism⁶²

The ‘theorisation’ of national policy in abstract forms by these different writers, without a corresponding group that is able to put these political differences into terms of ‘effectivity’, argues Gramsci, leaves ‘real affairs’ in the hands of specialist functionaries.⁶³ These functionaries, despite their ‘undoubted technical-professional bureaucratic’ capabilities, are ‘without a continuing connection to “public opinion”, that is, the national life’.⁶⁴ This is therefore a concrete example of the important relationship for Gramsci, identified above, between the creation of bureaucratic personnel and wider cultural phenomena. Gramsci makes a comparison between the situation in Italy and Wilhelmine Germany, but identifies a significant difference between the ‘national life’ of the two:

That in Wilhelmine Germany, behind the bureaucracy, were the Junkers, a social class that was mummified and mutilated, while in Italy no such force exists: the Italian bureaucracy can be compared to the

62 Q14, §47, Gramsci 1975, p. 1704, my translation.

63 Q14, §47, Gramsci 1975, p. 1705.

64 Ibid.

Papal bureaucracy, or better still, to the Chinese bureaucracy of the Mandarins. It was certainly in the interests of very specific groups (primarily the agricultural interests, followed by protected industry, etc.), but without a plan and a system, without continuity, on the basis, briefly put, of the “spirit of combination” that was necessary to “harmonise” the many contradictions of national life, which it will never seek itself to resolve organically and with a consistent approach.⁶⁵

This note (Q14, §47), previously unpublished in the English anthologies, adds complexity to Gramsci’s use of the term ‘mummification’, deployed when describing national situations that involve a complex fusion of the old and the new. Gramsci uses the ‘mummified and mutilated’ state of the Junkers to describe their specific role in the national life of Germany.⁶⁶

On the one hand, the Junkers are an anachronistic element of the internal relations of Germany, a symptom arising from the ‘universalistic and supranational institution and ideology’ of the Holy Roman Empire.⁶⁷ Relating to the work of Max Weber,⁶⁸ Gramsci notes that German industry developed within a ‘semi-feudal integument’,⁶⁹ which impeded the development of the

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ The Junkers, according to Gramsci, ‘were the traditional intellectuals of the German industrialists, but retained special privileges and a strong consciousness of being an independent social group, based on the fact that they held considerable economic power over the land’(Q12, §1, Gramsci 1975, p. 1526; Gramsci 1971, p. 19).

⁶⁷ Q12, §1, Gramsci 1975, p. 1526; Gramsci 1971, p. 18.

⁶⁸ In particular, Weber’s text, *Parliament and Government in Germany under a New Political Order*, *Parlament und Regierung im neugeordneten Deutschland* (1918).

⁶⁹ Note that there is another biological association here, in the sense of ‘integument’ as the durable outer layer of a plant or animal.

organic bureaucratic personnel of the bourgeoisie through the Junker's 'virtual monopoly' on the 'directive-organisational functions in political society'.⁷⁰ In turn, this led to 'continual parliamentary crises' and a 'fragmentation of the liberal and democratic parties'.⁷¹ On the other hand, Gramsci later (July/August 1934 – February 1935) takes up Antonio Labriola's argument explaining the durability of the Junkers (Q19, §24), regardless of their anachronistic relation to the development of the power of industrial capitalism. For Labriola, the Junkers represent a kind of 'façade' that is useful for the bourgeoisie in order to disguise its own 'real domination'.⁷²

Despite their declining economic power, the Junkers in Wilhelmine Germany retain a residual strength as a 'priestly-military caste'.⁷³ While incapable of turning back the clock to create a new German aristocracy, their mummified state gives them a strong sense of 'being an independent social group'.⁷⁴ In turn, this status makes them ripe for the crystallisation of bureaucratic cadre. By contrast, the configuration of national life in Italy, while sharing some historical similarities with Germany in terms of the cosmopolitan function of its intellectuals, results in a kind of 'bureaucratic monarchy', in which the King forms the 'first official' of a bureaucracy, which is 'the only "unitary" force in the country, permanently "unitary"'.⁷⁵ The concept of

70 Q12, §1, Gramsci 1975, p. 1526; Gramsci 1971, p. 19.

71 Q12, §1, Gramsci 1975, p. 1527; Gramsci 1971, p. 19, fn. *.

72 Q19, §24, Gramsci 1975, p. 2033; Gramsci 1971, p. 83.

73 Q12, §1, Gramsci 1975, p. 1526; Gramsci 1971, p. 19.

74 Ibid.

75 Q14, §47, Gramsci 1975, p. 1705.

‘mummification’ thus performs its part in illuminating the reciprocal relations between bureaucracy and wider culture in Gramsci’s survey of different national configurations.

3.5 *Philosophy and popular culture*

It would be misleading to give the impression that, through his use of the term mummification, Gramsci’s aim was to develop simply a more precise analysis of different historical situations. Throughout his entire body of writings, Gramsci is not content to describe the past (or the present) synchronically, but is interested in its transformation. In June/July 1933, at the beginning of the third phase of his prison writing,⁷⁶ under the thematic title of ‘*Introduction to the study of philosophy*’ (Q15, §61), Gramsci discusses the ‘process of “hierarchical” unification of world civilisation’.⁷⁷ Within this process, there is also a process of unification of European culture that, he says, ‘has culminated in Hegel and the critique of Hegelianism’.⁷⁸ Gramsci addresses the personification of this cultural process in the intellectuals, contrasting it with popular culture, because, in this context, ‘one cannot speak of critical elaboration and process of development’.⁷⁹

76 See Frosini 2003, pp. 23-29, and Thomas 2009, pp. 113-116, for a discussion of the periodisation of the writing of Gramsci’s Notebooks.

77 Q15, §61, Gramsci 1975, p. 1825; Gramsci 1971, p. 416.

78 Q15, §61, Gramsci 1975, p. 1826; Gramsci 1971, p. 416.

79 Q15, §61, Gramsci 1975, p. 1826; Gramsci 1971, p. 417. Except in the sense, as Gramsci notes, of the ‘reciprocal translatability’ between this ‘theoretical and speculative’ cultural process (classical Germany philosophy) and its “practical” confirmation in the ‘real activity’ of French politics. On this central thematic

According to Gramsci, however, the ‘disintegration of Hegelianism’ marks the opening of a ‘new cultural process, 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)’.⁸⁰ The birth of this new cultural movement is not a discrete process, a smooth transition from one great work to another, but a passage and a transition, with all the complex disarray of the old and the experimental fumbling of new beginnings:

It is not important that this movement had its origins in mediocre philosophical works, or at best, in works that were not philosophical masterpieces. What matters is that a new way of conceiving the world and man is born and that this conception is no longer reserved to the great intellectuals, to professional philosophers, but tends rather to become a popular, mass phenomenon, with a concretely world-wide character, capable of modifying (even if the result includes hybrid combinations) popular thought and mummified popular culture.⁸¹

Here, the appearance of the term mummification takes on new dimensions in its association with the world-historical task of the philosophy of praxis, the elaboration of a new culture and, ultimately, a new form of civilisation. In this sense, Gramsci regards the philosophy of praxis as ‘the result and the

issue in Gramsci’s writings, see also Frosini 2010b.

80 Q15, §61, Gramsci 1975, p. 1826; Gramsci 1971, p. 417.

81 Ibid.

crowning point of all previous history'.⁸² In contrast to the old and disintegrating cultural process, this new cultural movement is a 'mass phenomenon', which must elaborate its conception of the world, not only intellectually, but also as 'popular thought'. This returns us, via philosophy, to a whole series of interconnected problems, including those of 'common sense' and 'good sense' explored above, that Gramsci summarises here in his reference to the modification of 'mummified popular culture'.

Gramsci is attentive to the fact that the philosophy of praxis is not the only product of the critique of Hegelianism. Most significantly, the 'modern idealism' of Croce represents an alternative trajectory, albeit one that has assimilated elements of the philosophy of praxis, and which is an important interlocutor for the renovation of the philosophy of praxis itself.⁸³ However, according to Gramsci, it is only the philosophy of praxis, as 'absolute historicism or absolute humanism',⁸⁴ which can realise the aforementioned unity of theory and practice.⁸⁵ For Gramsci, this new character of concretely modifying popular thought cannot but be related to the phenomenon of religion (understood in a broad sense). As we shall see shortly, Gramsci's

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Gramsci's reflections on Croce's historicism form one part of the elaboration of his own distinctive understanding of historicism. These critical reflections constitute tentative sketches of a mooted wider project to produce an *anti-Croce* (Q8, §235, Gramsci 1975, p. 1088; Gramsci 2011, vol. 3, p. 378). See also Liguori 2015b, p. 133.

⁸⁴ 'Absolute historicism' indicates Gramsci's inheritance and extension of prior historicist traditions, "translating" their speculative claims into a political form, self-aware of its own emergence, while also historicising the 'realm of conceptuality' locating it in an 'always active attempt ... to modify social activity in general' (Thomas 2015, p. 109).

⁸⁵ By this means, Gramsci seeks to chart a course that is capable of avoiding both the pitfalls of speculative philosophy and the mechanistic and positivistic degenerations of Marxism.

analysis of mummification also draws him towards the topic of religion more narrowly conceived, in his consideration of the Catholic Church. First, however, I will examine his use of the notion of mummification to assess the ‘real content’ of the ideology of the Jacobins, and their own concrete historical modification of culture.

3.6 The philosophy of praxis and Jacobinism

In his reflections in Q16, §9,⁸⁶ entitled *Some problems for the study of the development of the philosophy of praxis*, Gramsci considers the philosophy of praxis as ‘a moment of modern culture’,⁸⁷ or as he elaborates further, ‘a diffuse atmosphere, which has modified old ways of thinking through actions and reactions which are neither apparent nor immediate’.⁸⁸ He takes up again the aforementioned theme of the philosophy of praxis’s enrichment and rejuvenation of other cultural currents. On the one hand, various tendencies, represented by figures such as ‘Croce, Gentile, Sorel, Bergson even, pragmatism’, subsume, both explicitly and implicitly, elements of the philosophy of praxis.⁸⁹ This is one aspect of, what he calls, a ‘double revision’

⁸⁶ Written, approximately, June/July 1932 –Second half of 1934 from July/August.

⁸⁷ Q16, §9, Gramsci 1975, p. 1854; Gramsci 1971, p. 388. Gramsci’s use of the term ‘moment’ is polysemic, combining the meanings of time, aspect, and force, as the editors of the latter have noted (Gramsci 1971, p. 388, fn. 17).

⁸⁸ Q16, §9, Gramsci 1975, p. 1856; Gramsci 1971, p. 391.

⁸⁹ Q16, §9, Gramsci 1975, p. 1854; Gramsci 1971, p. 389. Interestingly, Gramsci appears foremost to valorise the implicit influence. Thus, he says, ‘the most important study, it seems to me, should be that of Bergsonian philosophy and of pragmatism, in order to find out to what extent certain of their positions would be inconceivable without the historical link of the philosophy of praxis’ (Q16, §9, Gramsci 1975, p. 1856; Gramsci 1971, p. 391).

of the philosophy of praxis.⁹⁰ On the other hand, Gramsci believes that the 'so-called orthodoxy' of Marxism, engaging with and reacting against the 'religious transcendentalism' that prevails among popular groups, has identified itself with 'traditional materialism'. This second revision leads towards a vulgarisation of Marxism, due to the suture of this 'orthodoxy' with certain positivist influences. From this discussion, Gramsci suggests a consistent development of the path pioneered by Antonio Labriola. This would enable the philosophy of praxis, which is an 'independent and original philosophy which contains in itself the element of a further development', to become 'from an interpretation of history, a general philosophy'.⁹¹

Towards the end of this note, Gramsci returns to the 'complex and delicate' question of the development of the philosophy of praxis, placing it within the context of the 'elaboration of all modern historicist doctrines', during the 'period of the Restoration' (circa 1815-1848).⁹² Gramsci traces in this period the formation of ideological currents that persist into his own time.⁹³ Moreover, he places the philosophy of praxis in its historical context:

The historicist theories of the Restoration opposed the eighteenth century ideologies, abstract and utopistic, which remain alive as

90 Q16, §9, Gramsci 1975, p. 1854; Gramsci 1971, p. 389.

91 Q16, §9, Gramsci 1975, p. 1855; Gramsci 1971, p. 390.

92 Q16, §9, Gramsci 1975, p. 1863; Gramsci 1971, p. 398. The latter is in fact a misnomer, since this period did not restore the old regime, but represented a temporary equilibrium of a new 'alignment of forces' that crumbled in the face of the 1848 revolutions.

93 For example, he analyses the waning of Papal power and the organisation of new forces, such as the Catholic Action. Elsewhere he describes this movement as a reaction to prevent 'mass apostasy' (Q20, §2, Gramsci 1975, p. 2086).

proletarian philosophy, ethics and politics, particularly widespread in France up to 1870. The philosophy of praxis was opposed to these eighteenth century popular conceptions as a mass philosophy in all their forms, from the most infantile to that of [Pierre-Joseph] Proudhon.⁹⁴

Gramsci identifies the philosophy of praxis as an element within this historical situation, in which it acts and reacts against competing 'living' tendencies of thought. Nevertheless, he also shows how it is capable of moving beyond the limited and partial positions of other tendencies:

If the conservative historicists, theorists of the old, are well placed to criticise the utopian character of the mummified Jacobin ideologies, philosophers of praxis are better placed to appreciate the real and not abstract value that Jacobinism had as an element in the creation of the new French nation (that is to say as a fact of circumscribed activity in specific circumstances and not as something ideologised) ...⁹⁵

The continuing importance of mummification in this context is notable, as a means of diagnosing the distance that has opened up between the 'real' and 'abstract' values of particular ideologies. The concept plays a role in determining the specificity of the absolute form of 'historicism', which is able to explain not only the past, but also 'to explain and justify historically itself as

94 Q16, §9, Gramsci 1975, p. 1863; Gramsci 1971, p. 398.

95 Q16, §9, Gramsci 1975, p. 1864; Gramsci 1971, p. 399.

well'.⁹⁶ Elaborated through the philosophy of praxis, this 'total liberation from any form of abstract "ideologism"', according to Gramsci, portends 'the real conquest of the historical world, the beginnings of a new civilisation'.⁹⁷

3.7 Adaptation and the Catholic Church

Gramsci returns to the concept of mummification in a note entitled *Integral Catholics, Jesuits, Modernists* (Q20, §4),⁹⁸ in which he discusses the internal conflict within the Catholic Church between these three factions.⁹⁹ For Gramsci, this conflict had 'unbalanced' the church politically, because of a push to the right in its struggle against modernising tendencies. This over-reaction necessitated a re-alignment that could 're-endow it with a flexible political form, not constrained by doctrinally rigid positions, but allowing a wide-ranging freedom of manoeuvre'.¹⁰⁰ However, in view of the heterogeneous nature of these forces and their modes of organisation, steering such a course was not a simple question and required the deployment of variegated methods.

While these conflicts are of interest in their own right, Gramsci also develops an analysis of the adaptability of organisations that is of wider

96 Ibid.

97 Ibid.

98 Written between July/August 1934 –first months (approx.) of 1935.

99 For an account of these groups, see the chapter by Takahiro Chino in the present volume.

100 Q20, §4ii, Gramsci 1975, pp. 2092-2093; Gramsci 1995, p. 81.

relevance. Thus, we find him interrogating the Catholic Church's oft-proclaimed possession of 'inexhaustible virtues of adaptation and development'.¹⁰¹ Gramsci enumerates three 'decisive points' in the 'life of the Church': the schism in the Church 'between East and West', the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, and the impact of the French Revolution.¹⁰² According to Gramsci, the first two represent, respectively, forms of territorial and cultural separation:

[T]he third was that of the French Revolution (liberal-democratic Reform) which forced the Church to take up a yet more rigid stance and to assume the mummified shape of a formalistic and absolutist organism whose nominal head is the pope, with theoretically 'autocratic' powers, which in reality are very few because the whole system hangs together only by virtue of the rigidity typical of a paralytic.¹⁰³

Through his analysis of the efforts of the Church to maintain its unity, waging internal and external struggles, Gramsci draws important lessons for the way in which collective organisms can enter a state of paralysis, taking the 'mummified shape of a formalistic and absolutist organism'.¹⁰⁴ At the same time, Gramsci adopts a forensic approach in assessing the persistent efforts

101 Q20, §4ii, Gramsci 1975, p. 2093; Gramsci 1995, p. 82. In translation, we lose perhaps the Machiavellian overtones of the Italian 'virtù'

102 Q20, §4ii, Gramsci 1975, pp. 2093-2094; Gramsci 1995, p. 82.

103 Q20, §4ii, Gramsci 1975, pp. 2094; Gramsci 1995, p. 83.

104 It would be worth exploring this phenomenon further with reference to Gramsci's concept of 'phantasmagorical being' in his notes on fetishism as a cultural problem, see Q15, §13, Gramsci 1975, pp. 1769-1771; Gramsci 1971, p. 187, fn. 83.

of the Church as an organism developing within the context of congruent forces. It is the third 'decisive point' of the French revolution that appears to pose the most serious challenge to Catholicism, driving it towards a mummified state. Overall, Gramsci gives a pessimistic prognosis of the opportunities for the Church to adapt itself, since, as he argues, the 'entire society in which the Church moves and is able to evolve has this tendency to become rigid'.¹⁰⁵ It is however, an important example from which the philosophy of praxis must learn if it is to be successful in its task of modifying 'popular thought and mummified popular culture'.

3.8 *Fascism and G.A. Fanelli*

The final appearance of the term 'mummification' in the Notebooks is found in Q28, §17, written during the first months of 1935. It occurs in the context of a discussion of G.A. Fanelli,¹⁰⁶ described by Joseph Buttigieg as 'a prominent voice of the traditionalist, anti-modern, and monarchist wing of the Fascist movement'.¹⁰⁷ Of significance here, as Buttigieg notes, is Fanelli's book *L'Artigianato: Sintesi di un'economia corporativa* (1929), which 'sets forth the notion that the system of small industries as operated by the Italian artisan class embodied the basic principles of corporative economics advocated by Fascist ideologues'.¹⁰⁸ Gramsci's reflections on Fanelli's book address the

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Giuseppe Attilio Fanelli (c.1895-1985) –sources differ on his date of birth, which is listed as 1893, 1895, 1899, by the Italian Chamber of Deputies, English critical edition of the *Notebooks*, and Italian Central State Archives respectively –was an ultra-conservative editor-in-chief of *Il secolo fascista* (1931-35).

¹⁰⁷ Gramsci 2011, vol. 3, p. 555.

¹⁰⁸ Gramsci 2011, vol. 2, p. 693.

categories of 'Past and present', 'Americanism', and 'Lorianism'.¹⁰⁹ He undermines Fanelli's extreme provincial reaction against 'American' industrial production by pointing out that artisanal work in Italy is also a form of standardised mass production:

Big industry seeks to standardise the taste of a continent or the whole world for a season or for a few years; handicrafts undergo an already existing and mummified standardisation in a valley or a corner of the world. A handicraft of arbitrary and constant "individual creation" is so restricted that it only includes the artists in the strict sense of the word (and further: only the 'great' artists that become 'prototypes' for their pupils).¹¹⁰

Thus, for Gramsci, the attempted distinction by Fanelli between modern industry and handicraft production is, to a certain extent, simply a matter of scale. Moreover, the two systems are inter-linked, since the latter relies on the tools and materials produced by big industry. The difference, pointed out by Gramsci, is that the standardisation of handicrafts, far from being a model of 'pure' creativity, is in fact of a mummified form.

Of interest, for our purposes, is that 'mummification' applies here to the process of standardisation itself, and is associated with the creation of taste, of inclinations and dispositions. We can detect resonances here with the field

¹⁰⁹ Q28, §17, Gramsci 1975, p. 2336.

¹¹⁰ Q28, §17, Gramsci 1975, p. 2336, my translation.

of concerns of sociological thinkers like Pierre Bourdieu, in terms of the study of taste and dispositions.¹¹¹ For Gramsci's wider project, this is a problem related to the struggle between different historical types of conformism, and the normative assessment of them in terms of a critical notion of progress.¹¹² In the context of a conflict within the fascist movement between Fanelli and Gentile,¹¹³ they also take on an added relevance by revealing fractures within the fascist project and its unstable hybrid of modernist and conservative tendencies.

4. Mummification from Above and Below

Building now on the above analysis, I would suggest that Gramsci's conception of mummification incorporates two elements. The first I will refer to as mummification from above, imposed by dominant groups in order to maintain their position. This includes the uses of the term involving conservative social milieux, such as the Junkers in Germany, from which a certain type of bureaucratic strata are crystallised. In the process of the bureaucratisation of an organisation, the mummification of culture appears to constitute a cultural phenomenon, a wider atmosphere, providing the conditions for the selection of a priesthood-like caste of intellectuals.¹¹⁴ It forms a field in which this caste is able to develop, what Gramsci refers to as,

¹¹¹ For a contribution to the comparative analysis of Gramsci and Bourdieu, see Jackson 2016b.

¹¹² See Q11, §12, Gramsci 1975, p. 1376; Gramsci 1971, p. 324.

¹¹³ For the scandal surrounding Fanelli's attack on Gentile's philosophy, see Q8, §16, Gramsci 1975, p. 947; Gramsci 2011, vol. 3, p. 243.

¹¹⁴ A further study might be possible considering the connection of this phenomenon to Gramsci's conception of 'organic centralism' see Q4, §33, Gramsci 1975, p. 452; Gramsci 2011, vol. 2, p. 173.

an 'esprit de corps'.¹¹⁵ As we have seen above, the orchestration by the dominant groups of the interruption of the coherence of the autonomy of subaltern groups is a complex and variegated process. Mummification from above also refers to the processes of standardisation that take place in unhealthy forms. I would suggest that there is a close connection between the notion of mummification and that of passivity in Gramsci's thought. Gramsci sees this in the coercive imposition of a 'social passivity', such as that which is engendered by Americanism.¹¹⁶ This cultural phenomenon forms a part of the complex puzzle by which the dominant social forces are able to obstruct the healthy development of new historical and political initiatives.

The second element of mummification, emerging from below, is associated with the 'mental' or 'intellectual laziness' of certain intellectuals that are associated with the subaltern groups. This is associated with the phenomenon of 'Lorianism', the 'lack of critical spirit' exemplified by Achille Loria. Loria displays, among other traits, a lack of coherence and a 'softness and ethical indulgence in the field of scientific-cultural activity'.¹¹⁷ This represents for Gramsci some of the worst aspects 'of the mentality of a group of Italian intellectuals *and then* of the national culture'.¹¹⁸ These intellectuals were, on the one hand, through their 'absence of restraint and criticism',¹¹⁹ a

115 Q12, §1, Gramsci 1975, p. 1515; Gramsci 1971, p. 7.

116 Q4, §52, Gramsci 1975, p. 491; Gramsci 2011, vol. 2, p. 218.

117 Q28, Gramsci 1975, p. 2321.

118 Ibid.

119 Q1, §25, Gramsci 1975, p. 22; Gramsci 2011, vol. 1, p. 116.

cause of the poor formation of national culture, and, on the other hand, a reflection of the mummified state of Italian 'national life' itself. Despite making this analytical distinction, in actuality there is a constitutive interpenetration of these two forms of mummification. One conditions the other: the 'mental laziness' of Lorianism has been fomented by the dispersion wrought by the dominant groups, while the mummification of culture is able to achieve purchase on the life of the nation for as long as the subaltern groups are unable to develop a more coherent leadership.

As mentioned above, I have restricted myself in this chapter to examining the concept of mummification, but we can perhaps use this as a lens through which to comment on the development of the 'language of life' in Gramsci's thought. Previously, Gramsci appeared to combat the problem of the 'living dead' in terms of verbal exposure. We now have, as Ciliberto points out, a more developed critical analysis of mummification that addresses the formation of party bureaucracy and processes of standardisation. These considerations place many of Gramsci's most familiar passages in a new light. We might mention Gramsci's famous dictum in the *Notebooks*, referring to the modern 'crisis of authority' and the detachment of the masses 'from their traditional ideologies': 'The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of *morbid* symptoms appear'.¹²⁰ The 'language of life' provides key tools to

120 Q3, §34, Gramsci 1975, p. 311; Gramsci 1971, p. 275, my italics.

understand this relationship between the past and the present, by explaining the past as a 'complex of the living and the dead'.¹²¹

5. De-mummification?

Gramsci's conception of the 'mummification of culture' may have a broader significance in relation to the important theme of 'translation' and 'translatability' within the *Prison Notebooks*.¹²² It is plausible to conceive the process of mummification being connected to the blockage or seizing up of 'organic and thoroughgoing' processes of translation between different cultural paradigms,¹²³ which allows the philosophy of praxis to conduct a 'reciprocal "reduction," a passage from one to the other and vice versa.'¹²⁴ Reversing this logic, we might speculate, beyond the letter of Gramsci's texts, that the de-mummification of culture is a condition for the healthy development of historical initiative, described by Gramsci in terms of a cathartic movement.¹²⁵ In this process, the subaltern groups pass from their

121 Q10.II, §41xiv, Gramsci 1975, pp. 1325-1326; Gramsci 1995, p. 374.

122 For Gramsci, 'translation' is a process that takes place between not only natural languages, or even different (national) cultural discourses, but through the 'interposition of the structural aspect of a society' that 'mediates, and maybe complicates, the task of translation' (Boothman 2010, pp. 122-123).

123 Q11, §47, Gramsci 1975, p. 1468; Gramsci 1995, p. 307.

124 Q3, §48, Gramsci 1975, p. 331; Gramsci 2011, vol. 2, p. 51.

125 See Coutinho 2009, pp. 105-107. Note also that Gramsci's development of the term 'catharsis' is 'translated' from his analysis of Canto X of Dante's *Inferno*, wherein it is the life/death status of Cavalcante's son Guido that is the source of his torment, cf. Rosengarten 1986.

position as an 'object' in history to become a protagonist, or the authors of a new historical epoch.¹²⁶

Gramsci does not explicitly refer to such a concept, but if the philosophy of praxis is to be able to modify mummified forms of culture, this suggests that the desired product is a de-mummified form of culture and civilisation. Furthermore, the diagnosis performed by Gramsci's concept of mummification helps to renovate the philosophy of praxis through processes of 'translation', a pre-condition for unpacking the metaphors that are necessary for his critical project.¹²⁷ Rethinking these 'mythical' pathways to produce new critical categories requires the creation of a system of 'living philology' that can move towards embodying an organic relationship between theory and practice.¹²⁸

Articulating such a collective complex requires, for Gramsci, the 'organic coalescence' of political parties 'with the intimate (economic-productive) life of the masses themselves' resulting in a standardisation of popular feeling which is no longer 'mechanical and causal', but one that has become 'conscious and critical'.¹²⁹ We can think of the quality of this system in terms of 'plasticity': being rigid enough to be historically effective and yet

126 Q11, §12, Gramsci 1975, p. 1388; Gramsci 1971, p. 337.

127 In Gramsci's framework, the significance of metaphors is their ability to express previous research on practical political problems in summarised form.

128 Q11, §25, Gramsci 1975, p. 1430; Gramsci 1971, p. 429.

129 Ibid.

sufficiently adaptable in order to resist ossification and anachronism. These constitute elements of a continuous criticism that Gramsci deems necessary for the successful elaboration of the philosophy of praxis. By these experimental means, Gramsci proposes to advance a new hegemony in the concrete organisational form of the collective 'organism' of the 'modern Prince'.¹³⁰

6. Conclusion

Gramsci's analysis of the mummification of culture helps to advance a wider explanation of the largely passive condition of the subaltern groups within society. The concept of mummification plays an important role in articulating the intimate relationship between the dialectical poles of hegemony and subalternity. It plays 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'. As Marcus Green has argued, 'Gramsci's investigation of subalternity is founded upon a transformative praxis that attempts to understand the subaltern past and present in order to envision the

130 Q13, §1, Gramsci 1975, p. 1558; Gramsci 1971, p. 129.

political prospects of subaltern political struggle and the possibilities of a post-subaltern future'.¹³¹

Furthermore, the obstacles towards the emergence of the masses from their condition of subalternity, and the renovation of common sense, correspond to obstacles confronting the development of a new type of philosophy and its articulation through the philosophy of praxis. Gramsci's innovative ways of thinking through these problems continue to provide a fertile laboratory that help us to confront our contemporary situation. While the term mummification appears in relatively few notes in Gramsci's prison writings, the resonance of this theme is highly significant for understanding the relevance that Gramsci's thought has today, and can open productive dialogues with wider debates in critical theory.¹³² In a period that bears numerous 'undead' characteristics, from zombie-banks to vampire-capital,¹³³ it is also timely to consider the Sardinian thinker's contribution to these themes of political monstrosity.

131 Green 2011, p. 400.

132 We might think here of recent debates in contemporary philosophy regarding 'conceptual corpses' and reinventions of the Hegelian notion of *plasticity* in dialogue with neuro-science, e.g. Catharine Malabou's discussion of this simultaneous capacity to take on and to give form (Malabou 2005).

133 For a broader discussion of these figures, from rebel-monsters to the corpse-economy and zombie-labourers, see McNally 2011. It is difficult to resist a parting note, in the context of Gramsci's reading of Machiavelli, of the proximity between the idea of a mummy and an 'undead' Prince.

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