

## Antonio Gramsci and Grazia Deledda: Two Sardinians in the World as Planetary Subalterns

Sonita Sarker

The phrase “Planetary Subalterns” raises two immediate issues—one is the relationship between the local and the global implied in the word “planetary”; the second is about the subaltern as a metaphor for the ‘other.’

Regarding the first issue—the relationship between the local and the global manifests, in current vocabulary, a particular form of the link between the specific and the universal. The specific, in Gramsci’s and Deledda’s terms, is “folklore,” a concept and a study that counterbalances the universal. The concept is also based on the notion of a particular ethnicity, that of the Sardinian, explicitly in both Gramsci’s and Deledda’s works. The reference to subalternized cultures is of course explicit in Gramsci’s political analyses and a constant undertone in Deledda’s depictions of Sardinian life. The claim made by either for the universal status of the Sardinian subaltern creates, in my view, a fruitful disjuncture between the subaltern and the planetary since one is seen as rooted in the local (the subaltern) and the other is seen as belonging universally. From this disjuncture emerges also the non-synonymous relationship between the planetary and the global that must be scrutinized.

The second issue focuses on the nature of the subaltern in the phrase “planetary subaltern” as a metaphor for the ‘other’ (the unreturned, the irreducible) and of its inhabiting the planet as “unheimlich.” I’m using both terms, the ‘other’ and ‘unheimlich’ in the sense that Gayatri Spivak urges us to think about them (see “Planetary” in *The Death of a Discipline*). The subaltern as ‘other’ and the ‘planetary’ must remain uncontained, as figures of difference rather than convey the universalizing, all-encompassing, totalizing formation of the global inherent in politics and culture today.

I juxtapose Gramsci and Deledda not only because they are Sardinians. In juxtaposing Gramsci, primarily a cultural and political theorist, with Deledda, primarily a writer of novels and essays as well as cultural figure in her own right, I would like to emphasize two aspects that impinge upon the discussion of both planetary and subaltern. One is that though “Sardinian” may be the most obvious identifying ethnic marker of their commonality, it is not the one most emphasized by Gramsci while it is the only one forefronted by Deledda. As Spivak says in “Planetary,” “the literature of ethnicity writes itself between *ethnos*—a writer writing for her own people (whatever that means) without deliberated self identification as such and *ethnikos*, the pejoratively defined other reversing the charge, (de)anthropologizing herself by separating herself into a staged identity” (82 in *Death of a Discipline*, quoting from her own “Teaching for the Times”). The former can be said of Gramsci and the latter of Deledda; Gramsci writes about his “own people,” identified as Italians, without any “deliberated self-identification” and Deledda presents herself and her people as Sardinians as a “staged identity.”

In both cases, this paper links the issues of the planetary and the subaltern to the respective self-representations of the two authors to their exposure of the nationalism-colonialism nexus. Or, at the very least, to the relationship between the

hegemonic nation (Italy) and the ethnicized indigenous as subaltern (Sardinia). How each author lays out their particular interpretation of this local-global relationship constitutes the distinct image each of them has on the Italian intellectual scene. To draw out the contributions each one makes to the issues sketched out above, this discussion focuses primarily on Gramsci *Prison Notebooks* 1, 2, 3, and 5, and Deledda's *Tradizioni Popolari di Nuoro in Sardegna*.

The methodological framework rests upon two assumptions—that the juxtaposition of Gramsci and Deledda reinforces the idea of the diversity of Sardinians; and that subaltern historiography must be read in terms of gender. The latter responds to Spivak's insistence that gender should be used as "a general critical instrument rather than something to be factored in in special cases" ("Planetarity," *Death of a Discipline*, 74).

How has the subaltern ethnic been read? Primarily in terms of quaint curiosity (caratteristico). Gramsci and Deledda, themselves produces of a modernist philosophy, both play into this to some degree. For instance, Gramsci in Notebook 1 (1929-1930), compares Sicilians and Piedmontese in terms of their "ferocity." Deledda uses eternalized features to make Sardinians appear unique and unchanging. It is also interesting to note that she employs references to the world, the earth, and the planet. For example, she observes that "nel popolo, n fondo alla gran masse che e` la pietra e il fondamento dell'edifizio...una leggera sfumatura di progresso, che e` semple il segno del tempo e che dice pochissimo, ha modificato qualche rito, e le vesti. Ma il lutto e la gioia, le credenze e la religione, i pregiudizi e le passioni, sono sempre le stesse...il Nuorese che, se non e` molestato, e` la persona piu` pacifica *del mondo*" (my italics).

In speaking particularly of women, in a chapter title "La Donna in Sardegna," Deledda remarks—"In generale, la donna sarda...e` ignorante e relativamente poco intelligente; ma nella sua naturale inconsapevolezza essa conserva istinti nobili e delicate, ha pensieri di una suprema gentilezza e nella continua oscurita` della sua misera esistenza ama e odia come nessun altra donna *della terra*" (my italics). This ethnic image is defined as against the continent. As she observes of the Sardinian woman, "[e]lla ignora le teorie, le dottrine del giorno che invadono i popoli *d'oltre mare*, spingendoli alla rivola..." (my italics).

Gramsci, despite his ascription of "ferocity" to Sardinians and Sicilians, a word that implies their unchanging attitude in/outside modernity, states in "Folklore" (Entry 89) in Notebook 1, discussing Giovanni Crocioni, Pitre', and Raffaele Ciampini (1928), that "[i]t seems to [him] that until now folklore has been studied (in fact, until now there has been only the collection of raw material) as a 'picturesque' element. It ought to be studied as a '*conception of the world*' of particular social strata which are *untouched* by modern currents of thought." This conception of the world is not elaborated and systematized because the people, by definition, in the sense that it is not a mechanical juxtaposition of various conceptions of the world..." (186; my italics). This crucial phrase indicates, in Gramsci and in Deledda, that there is a self-conscious awareness of the ethnicized subaltern dwelling in the link between the ancient/universal and the modern, the local and the global, as is also indicated by their reference to the notion of being "untouched" by modernity. In Entry 24 of Notebook 1, Gramsci critiques Francesco Perri's *Gli Emigranti* as having "no chronological reference...it is obvious that Perri knows the popular Calabrian peasant environment not directly, through first hand psychological and emotional experience, but through old regionalist clichés" (113).

For, after all, the imagination and definition of the subaltern of modernity is

inevitably tied to the question of nation-state and nationalism. So, as Gramsci ponders in Entry 116 of Notebook 2 (1929-1933) on the cosmopolitan role of Italian intellectuals, in talking about Michelangelo, Cellini, Leonardo, and Machiavelli—"Examine the lives of these artists to see how their *a-nationality* stands out. And was the nationalism of Machiavelli so strong, after all, as to overcome 'the love of art for art's sake?...did the problem of the Italian state concern him more as a 'national principle' or as a political problem interesting in itself?" (my italics).

Even as Deledda naturalizes and universalizes the Sardinian as untouched by history, she acknowledges that "[I]a Sardegna d'oggi non è già più la Sardegna della mia fanciullezza. Le comunicazioni sempre più facili, l'aumento della popolazione Borghese, una maggiore intellettualità e la conseguente maggior coscienza del proprio valore, l'emigrazione, il più frequente *contatto col continente*, hanno già in gran parte trasformato il colore e lo spirito del sardi" (271; my italics).

Both Gramsci and Deledda recognize the dialectics embedded in modernity. They may themselves argue for the indestructible essence of the subaltern, in this case, the Sardinian or the Sicilian; they are doing so because, I'm arguing, of their own rootedness in modernist ideas. But I'm also proposing that the subaltern that generates folklore is not only subject to modernity but defines it as well.

The attitudes about folklore, ethnicity and the subaltern that Gramsci critiques had left a very strong legacy. Works by Girolamo Sotgiu on Sardegna during fascism and Giuseppe Marzi on the moral and cultural roots of the Sardinian contemporary novel, and especially works like Vittorio Spinazzola's 1981 study of Deledda's Sardinian novels romanticize and praise Deledda's movement away from rational positivism to a "senso del mistero."

But what does the subaltern hold besides what Gramsci notes is "a conception of the world"? He notes the movement in and outside history that is an artificial element of studying them. In Entry 156 on Folklore in Notebook 5 (1930-32), he says, and this could be said of him and Deledda, as Sardinians, that "the people themselves are not a homogenous cultural collectivity but present numerous and variously combined cultural layers that, in their pure form, cannot always be identified within given historical popular collectivities. It is true, however, that some identification of these collectivities becomes possible when one isolates them more or less historically" (400). Both Deledda and Gramsci note what is an important connection; in *Tradizioni Popolari*, Deledda notes, "[m]a non andiamo oltre, che saremmo obbligate a predicare un po' di *socialismo*, e il socialismo deve emergere da se' come un riflesso, dal *folklore*" (68, her italics). Gramsci, in Entry 45 of Notebook 1, says of the Sicilians (whom he frequently compares with Sardinians) that they have "socialist populism mixed with the superstitious cult of Saint Agatha" (152).

So the planetary subaltern is a historical and historicized subaltern. In Notebook 3, Entry 48 titled "Past and Present. Spontaneity and conscious leadership," Gramsci asks, "Can modern theory be in opposition to the 'spontaneous' sentiments of the masses? ('spontaneous' i.e. formed through the everyday experience in the light of 'common sense'; that is, the traditional popular conception of the world: what is tritely called 'instinct,' which is itself a rudimentary and basic historical acquisition" (51). In Entry 89 on folklore, then, Gramsci says that folklore must not be conceived of as a picturesque thing but as a serious thing to be taken seriously so that the separation between modern culture and popular culture or folklore is less or even disappears.

I'll end with a figure that may serve as a metaphor of this conjuncture—Deledda in her study of Sardinian popular culture speaks of the disappearance of "il ballo tondo

pubblico," a dance in the round performed by members of the community. I extend this picture to indicate the dance of modernity and the revival of located communities in which this subaltern culture becomes the very figure of the bringing together of modern and folk. When we talk of the planetary subaltern, I hope we're not indicating an act of consuming the subaltern into the contexts of our own discourses but that we are maintaining the figure of difference and otherness that keeps us always alien to ourselves. As Spivak says, "if anthropology classically studies the other as a community, Ethnic/Cultural Studies cathects the community as 'others.' But given this ruling ideology of the 'authority of experience,' we may be in danger of seeking the community as no more than a collection of ourselves."

So some questions arise—

In connecting subalternity with postcoloniality, could we be denying the effects upon ourselves of neo-colonial, late capitalist modernity, and attempting to fetishize the subaltern?

Are we resurrecting Gramsci as the organic intellectual but rendering him into an universal intellectual?

What is the connection between otherness (maintaining the uncontainability of identity), poverty (as experienced materially by the subalternized) and planetarity (the pretension to universals, in ordinary terms)? Are we turning planetarity into another form of globalism, attempting to imprison fully these various identities into fixed poses?