



Cultural Studies in Italy

Cultural Studies in Italy and the Influence of Gramsci, Catholic Culture and the
“Birmingham School” (CCCS)

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0. Introduction

Until some years ago, if one mentioned Cultural Studies in the Italian academic world one got two types of reactions: the first was lack of confidence towards an area of research and study that was not well known; the second was the negative reaction of scholars who looked down on an approach which they considered unsystematic and without methodological dignity. Of course, the two reactions had no strong theoretical basis, but they reflected cultural trends that we shall try to define and illustrate in this paper. Perhaps it's no accident that at the end of the 1970s, British Cultural Studies – incorrectly but widely known in Italy as the “Birmingham School” – first came to be known in literary studies and in more marginalized areas of the sociology of culture. In order to understand the Italian peculiarity, we need to describe briefly the landscape of Italian academic

culture in the human sciences of the last thirty years.

After this short description we will try to characterize the development of Cultural Studies in a specific and important area of research (media studies) trying at the same time to understand how the encounter between the heritage of Gramsci and a part of Catholic culture (that which is closest to the personalism of Emmanuel Mounier and Paul Ricoeur) has been so fecund. This encounter lies behind the successful adoption of Cultural Studies in Italian media and communication studies.

1. From the influence of US Functionalism to the rise of Qualitative Research in Social Sciences

In the mid 1960s sociology was finding it hard to take off in Italy, at least in the

academic world. It was finally legitimated thanks to two tendencies: on the one hand the social movements that led up to and followed on from 1968 and on the other the impact of disciplines like psychology and anthropology.

The anthropological sciences represented one of the privileged territories for the development of the research approaches that today we could define – with some approximation – as “culturalist”. Sociology – and in particular media sociology – *was placed initially in the furrows of the American tradition of communication research.*

In the years when, in Birmingham, Richard Hoggart and then Stuart Hall were giving life to the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS), Italian academic culture was still generally under the influence of Benedetto Croce’s Idealism. A substantial part of the Marxist intellectual left was also burdened with the baggage of idealism, both Crocean and Neo-Hegelian.

The social sciences took their first steps in this period and Italian scholar, in their attempts to legitimate sociology, borrowed methods and disciplinary approaches from the USA. In this frame, it is not surprising that these scholars, including some Marxist scholars, adopted a theoretical system that derived from structural functionalism, above all from the work of Talcott Parsons. For this reason, many methods and concepts coming from communication research were adopted by Italian communication scholars. It is no accident that in Italian handbooks of media sociology, at least until the beginning of the 1980s, the prevailing direction was the functionalist approach and the main reference authors were Harold Lasswell, Paul Lazarsfeld and Elihu Katz. So, it’s not surprising that also the best handbook of the new Italian media studies held in great consideration the problem of media effects¹

¹ About the conceptual and research problems posed by the

and often went deliberately towards the field of effects theories.

A particular case is represented by audience studies, where a curious convergence was produced by two factors: on the one hand the influence of the Frankfurt School on the Marxist scholars had generated a concept of the audience as a one-dimensional and manipulated mass; on the other hand the tradition coming from functionalist research had given cultural and methodological legitimisation to the idea that the media were only and exclusively tools of manipulation over a passive mass audience. It was an easy comprehensible merger: the idea of the “public as mass”, in its simplified perspective, was a really useful weapon with which the Marxist theorists could attack the power and ideological structure of the media

institutions. One of the consequences of this linkage was the adoption of determinist approaches to audience research, strongly based on over-quantitative methods. Using the four-part division of audience research proposed by Kim Schröder and others (cfr. Schröder, Drotner, Kline, Murray 2003; Sorice 2005a) we could say that the Italian research was essentially concentrated on the first two dimensions (quantitative and experimental research), marginalizing the qualitative approaches and, particularly, reception studies and ethnographic research.

In reality, considerable attention to reception theories and text-based approaches had been developing in the fields of semiotics, the “aesthetics” of reception and literary criticism: these research areas had met (and sometimes merged) with French philosophy and the sociology of culture coming from the British tradition, which was also closer to the heterodox and “non-

“media effects model”, see Gauntlett 1998. For our position see Sorice 2000 and 2005a.

systematic” Marxism of Gramsci than to the more “functional” approach to Marxism of his successor, the postwar Italian Communist leader Palmiro Togliatti.²

We have here the first important key concept in Italian culture linked to Marxism, such as the adoption of a political program based upon the idea of the “Italian road to Socialism”; a program that, sinking its roots in Togliatti’s pragmatism, found a strong connection to Gramsci’s philosophical conceptions. On this subject it is useful to remember that in Gramsci’s prison notebooks (*Quaderni del carcere*) the first deep linkage is made between the Italian cultural tradition and Marxist reflection. However,

² In 1956, after the suppression of the Hungarian revolution, Italo Calvino wrote *La grande bonaccia del Mar delle Antille*, a polemical pamphlet against the conservative approach (culturally conservative above all) of the ruling strata of the Italian Communist Party (Pci, Partito Comunista Italiano) which was also critical of an approach to the social truth that Calvino judged inadequate. Cfr. Sorice 1998b.

in relation to the more orthodox Marxist tradition, Gramsci’s original research shows two specific and peculiar elements: the conception of civil society and the theory of ideologies. Gramsci, as is well known, rejects the notion of a necessary and mechanical relationship between the economic structure and the political, social and cultural phenomena that constitute society. This particular “Gramscian Leninism” – as it was defined by Togliatti – is really radical: it enables us to think of ideology not as an epiphenomenon or as false consciousness but as the real shape of social existence itself. Gramsci considers the ideological sphere as the space in which the social subjects, forces and the classes gain consciousness and knowledge of conflicts and manage them. It means, in other words, that the space of ideology is at the same time objective and historically subjective: the subjectivity of ideologies is on the one hand mediated by historical conceptions while

on the other side it represents the node of historical change.

Gramsci, in other words, takes up Benedetto Croce's ideas but inverts the outcomes: from the separation between masses and élites to the concept of "historical bloc". And it is in the peculiarity of Gramsci's Marxism that we can situate the deeply anti-Hegelian turning point represented by Galvano Della Volpe (1895-1968) who, although also distant from Gramsci, took up some key Gramscian concepts.

Another key concept elaborated by Gramsci – with which we conclude this short but necessary parenthesis on the thought of the Italian philosopher – is that of the "ethical State". This concept, in reality, belonged primarily to the Hegelian Neapolitan tradition and it was used by Giovanni Gentile, one of the fathers of "attualismo", the "philosophy of action", one of the philosophical reference points of Italian fascism.

For Gramsci, to say that the State is ethical means that the State, beyond the repressive function that everyone recognizes in it, also has an educative function, it means "to elevate the great mass of the population to a determinate cultural and moral level, a level that corresponds to the needs of development of the productive forces and therefore to the interests of the dominant classes" (Gramsci 1975:1049). But if this is the main value of the "ethical State", it follows that the true ethical state is the State that, having fulfilled its educative function, no longer needs to exercise the coercive power, and it coincides with the end of the State, in the traditional sense of the word, that is with "regulated society" (Id: 1050). (Bobbio 1990: 103, *our translation*).

Gramsci's concepts, which we have quickly passed here in review – unfortunately rather superficially – constitute the foundations of the reflections by Marxist intellectuals in Italy, those first of all of who were engaged from 1954 – the year television arrived in Italy – despite some political misgivings, in the launch of project of a pedagogical television elaborated by Filiberto Guala, an Italian follower of John Reith.³ And it was in the contents of the new-born television that the first convergences between Catholic and Marxist

intellectuals in Italy took place.

We have to clarify an essential point, although it is well known when we speak about “Catholic” culture in Italy we are not referring simply to a religious dimension but to the historical articulation that this “culture” has assumed in the Italian political-cultural tradition. And this has absolutely distinctive characteristic for a series of historical reasons that we do not have space to discuss here.

Coming back to the points of contact between “Catholics” and “Marxists” in Italy, the idea that the ideological dimension represents a subjective and objective space at the same time contains an interesting meeting point with the Christian perspective of “already and not still”. Moreover the “educative” function of the Gramscian ethical State (destined for this reason to its own dissolution) finds points of convergence with the “utilitarian” and “transitory”

³ Filiberto Guala (1907-2000) was General Director of the Rai in the first years of Italian television. Very religious catholic, he came to conflict with the Democrazia Cristiana establishment (the party which had the majority in Parliament and controlled radio and tv). He left the Rai and some years later he became monk. He can be considered the first Italian “reithian”. John Reith (1889-1971) was Director-General of the BBC from 1927 to 1938 and he is considered the “father” of modern European idea of “radio-TV public service”.

perspective “of the State” theorized by Catholic culture in Italy (and not only). In other and simpler words, we can say that the educative dimension of culture (and therefore the educative function of the media) finds contiguity between Italian Marxism and the Catholic cultural tradition. They even share perhaps a common teleological perspective (even if one is materialist and the other is not).

Given this convergence, it is not surprising that Italian television – although under the hegemonic control of the Christian Democratic Party (Italy’s ruling party from 1945 to 1991) – represented a privileged site of encounter and comparison between Marxists and Catholics. Moreover, it was in the Public Opinion Service of RAI that the first research on audiences was designed and carried out (in the 1960s, several years before such research started in the Universities): and a reflection on media audiences was produced which tried – even if in a somewhat primitive

way – to get out of the logic of “effects theories”, choosing a new perspective, based upon the idea that it was preferable to study what people do with the media. In this trend the researchers coming from a Catholic background were the first to open up this new direction of study, thanks also to the adoption of the concept of “person” which came to them from Emmanuel Mounier’s communitarian personalism.⁴

2. The Research on Cultural Industries in Italy

The newly emerged Italian media sociology developed, therefore, between two poles: on the one hand scholars of Catholic origin (mainly those close to communitarian personalism, from the Bologna school of sociology and its first leader, Achille Ardigò, to the School

⁴ And also, of course, of “creative referentiality” coming from the Paul Ricoeur’s works.

of Communication at the Catholic University of Milan, deeply marked by the original approach to media studies of Gianfranco Bettetini, which crossed between sociology and semiotics); on the other hand the more orthodox Marxist sociologists, partly influenced by the theoretical elaboration of the Frankfurt School (often more from an apocalyptic “*vulgata*” than the original ideas of Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse, etc.). In that early period, between these two poles we can situate some small groups of scholars coming from “liberal” positions (inspired mainly by US functionalism) and some cross-sectional groups of humanities scholars who were also engaged in *communication studies*.

In this complex situation – in which we cannot omit to mention the substantial backwardness of the Italian university system and the lack of resources for research – British Cultural Studies reached Italy through many mediations and the methods

(or, if you prefer, the critical approach to the methodology of the social research) were at the beginning adopted in areas of social research that were really marginal at that time, such as *Television Studies*

In the 1980s, there was an increase in the number of Italian scholars and sociological schools who explicitly declared their link to *Cultural Studies*, thanks also to the development of gender studies, women’s studies, research on ethnicity and, more generally, thanks to post-structuralist tendencies in the human sciences. In the field of sociological and media studies (which is the subject of this paper: we stress that we are not speaking here about the fortunes of Cultural Studies in the whole of the human sciences) we can find in the 1980s the rise of television studies that make reference to the US tradition (Lawrence Grossberg, Horace Newcombe, James Lull), which is still partially based upon theoretical elements

coming from functionalism and linked to the *Uses and Gratifications* approach. For example, the *Social Uses of Television* model, elaborated by James Lull, although strongly based upon a post-functional structure and heavily linked to the *Uses and Gratifications* approach, enjoyed great success in Italy and has frequently been considered a paradigmatic model of Media Studies developed in the Cultural Studies perspective. In relation to this, it is worth remembering that the most interesting aspect of Lull's research of the 1980s is the adoption of an ethnographic perspective⁵, not the theoretical approach which remains within the *Uses and Gratifications* tradition⁶. At

the same time, it is useful to highlight that the *culturalist approach of the Cultural Studies* (deriving from the US Cultural Studies but not only) has strongly limited the original marxian-based

with Corner, criticizes some of the recent work which has focused on the domestic consumption of mass-media products, arguing that this focus on the domestic has often been rather limited in scope and has a largely failed to locate the family within any broader social context. As he rightly notes, 'notwithstanding Lull's characterisation of the family as a *private social unity* (Lull 1980: 199), families are embedded in social and political environments that inform their interaction and link their members to a broader collectivities' (Carrage 1990: 89). It is precisely for this reason that I have attempted to frame the analyses below of *Family Television* and of the *Household Uses of Information and Communication Technology* within a broader framework of the role of various media in articulating the private and public spheres, which (hopefully) allows us to articulate these micro-analysis to broader perspective on macro-social issues of politics, power and culture" (Morley 1992: 40). Same position, in Italian media studies, in De Blasio, Gili, Hibberd, Sorice (2007).

⁵ On this topic, it's important to remark that "no single method has a monopoly on virtue, but the choice of method, in itself, can neither guarantee nor damn a given study" (Morley 1992: 13).

⁶ On Lull's research, we have also to remark other aspects of its functionalistic design. On this topic, it's useful to remember what David Morley wrote more than 15 years ago: "Carragee (1990), in parallel

approach used by Stuart Hall and others, substantially forgetting the importance of power relationships in the media system.

Sociology (and particularly *Media Sociology*) fully assumes the “British” Cultural Studies point of view only with the generation of scholars who come to social research from the social and human sciences⁷. In the same period (the 1990s), philosophers and political researchers in the Marxist area had been elaborating Gramsci’s ideas and this had led to a reworking (in some ways) of the Italian philosopher’s thought: it’s not surprising that in this context Gramsci came to be used, with ever greater frequency, also by non-Marxist scholars. A first field

of study and comparison is represented by the research on the Italian cultural industry.⁸ The turning point, also in this case, came from United Kingdom and it is represented by the publication of the extraordinary historical-critical reconstruction of the development of Italian cultural industry, written by David Forgacs (1992).⁹ Forgacs’s perspective strongly refuses the “productionist” approaches to culture (and to the media) and it became a fundamental reference for those scholars who, at that moment, had been moving away from the dominance of quantitative analyses (and production based researches, often using

⁷ This generation of “young” sociologists (to which we partially belong) has also refused the inadequate descriptions of the society coming from a simplified functionalistic approach, adopting different perspectives, such as Giddens structuration theory, new-Marxist and humanitarian Marxist approach, etc.

⁸ More, the same concept of “culture” is explored in Cultural Studies perspective by some Italian scholars like for example, Simonetta Piccone Stella.

⁹ Maybe it’s not curious that David Forgacs is the author of the important article *Gramsci and the Marxism in Britain*, published in the n. 7, 1989, of *New Left Review*.

only official data) of cultural production.¹⁰

3. Audience Studies: the Italian Way

But, in our opinion, the most significant case is that of Italian Audience Studies. In this area of studies too the inheritance of functionalism and of the presumed reliability of quantitative research appeared very strong. Many audience research projects were based upon the idea that audiences were mere passive masses,

¹⁰ In the 1990s, very often affirming their methodological and cultural linkage to the British tradition of the Cultural Studies – many researches and books (i.e. those by Fausto Colombo, Guido Gili, Michele Sorice) about cultural industry in Italy find great audience and success. Also, the relationship “media-socialization” (sometimes interpreted using a functionalistic approach or also in deterministic and simplified ways) is reviewed under the Cultural Studies perspectives and using Foucault theories from one side, hybrid approaches and new-Marxist approaches from the other side.

with no critical spirit and composed of undifferentiated people. In the many years of media studies, the different paradigms of communication studies have produced various ways of interpreting (and therefore of studying) the audience. From the mass audience of the magic bullet theory to the stratified and diversified but still substantially passive audience of the first phase of functionalist media sociology; from the articulated public of the *Uses and Gratifications* approaches to the active audience concept, elaborated within Cultural and Media Studies (even if, in this case, the concept of “activity” was not intended in the highly simplified sense coming from an over-simple “vulgate” that circulated in the universities too¹¹). The different concepts of audience have led to extremely diversified research methodologies, often using strongly

¹¹ This belongs to what we have called the “culturalist turn” in Cultural Studies

ideologized research methods, above all those deriving from nomothetic perspectives. The new styles of consumption (including television consumption) testify to a society that is very different from that one of twenty or thirty years ago: we have now, for example, a diffused, fragmented and diversified audience. To try to analyze this audience with tools derived from a simplified conception of the public, would mean to fall in a typical positivist prejudice. Nevertheless, much of the Italian audience research being conducted today remains locked within the frame of this prejudice¹².

Between the end of 1980s and the beginning of 1990s, many other researchers have chosen to adopt theoretical formulations coming from approaches and “methods”

born in the tradition of the Cultural Studies (with reference initially to the work of David Morley, Dorothy Hobson, Charlotte Brunson, Roger Silverstone, Dick Hebdige, David Buckingham etc., and then diverging into the partially different approaches of those such as Sonia Livingstone, David Gauntlett, Annette Hill, the Northern European “school”, etc.). Once again, the merger happens in the refusal of the concept of audience as a shapeless mass of individuals, a refusal made both jointly and independently by scholars coming from different cultural backgrounds.

An important “turning point” in Italian audience studies was represented by the concept of “audiovisual conversation”, elaborated in 1982 by Gianfranco Bettetini, after the elaboration of Stuart Hall’s Encoding/Decoding Model and, only few months later, David Morley’s research on the reception of the programme *Nationwide*. Bettetini says that all texts, including those which are

¹² This is also evident in the first researches on Internet, very often marked by an anaesthetised position or an hyper-optimistic prejudice, both not useful to understand a rising phenomenon with a huge range of political consequences. See: Fuchs 2007.

less open and more mono-directional (like the broadcasting communication) develop around a relationship of symbolic interactivity between two subjects (the enunciator and the receiver) which are, in their turn, symbolic productions. The model, in the Bettetini's elaboration, "*is constructed on the outline question-answer, where question is an interest of acquaintance sped up from the enunciator subject (and, therefore, from the text) in the receiver subject and answer is the satisfaction or otherwise of this interest by the same enunciator subject and/or the text.* The text would predispose therefore a *conversation* between the two subjects, to whose shape the empirical receiver can of course correspond with a series of behaviours going from the most passive acceptance to the most complete refusal" (Bettetini 1991:123, *our translation into English*). In spite of some conceptual differences – which we do not have time to

discuss in this paper – the substantial (if not theoretical) linkage between Bettetini's model and Hall's encoding/decoding model and narratological models is evident (Sorice 2005a).

Bettetini's model strongly refuses determinism and adopts the frame of the active audience, even if not in the hyper-optimistic and banalized scheme used in some Italian scholars' theories and in early US ethnographic research (or "culturalist approaches"). Also, the idea of a "continuum", from the passive acceptance of the text's dominant position to its antagonistic refusal, places Bettetini's work on the path opened up by David Morley in his study of the *Nationwide* audience (1980; dominant text position/dominant audience position) and in some ways it anticipates the problematic but most important concept of the diffused audience (with its "continuum" from the consumer to the petty producer) elaborated recently by Nick

Abercrombie and Brian Longhurst (1998)¹³.

The key characteristic of Italian “non-quantitative” audience research resides in the refusal of the mass-audience idea. This refusal is motivated by scholars coming from Catholic academic institutions using the concept of human person as an undivided whole. In this context, the substantial opening-out to the media and innovation which is typical of the Catholic world (and

Christian culture generally) should not strike us as surprising; even when the ecclesiastical hierarchies show an attitude of closure, important agencies of the Catholic world carry out an active role in the media both as operators and as scholars (from Rev. Giacomo Alberione, founder of the St. Paul’s Society, to the research centres of the Catholic and Pontifical Universities). A similar attitude is already present in Italian culture also with Gramsci. In the first thirty years of the twentieth century, when many scholars and researchers took a defensive attitude towards the risks of the “new medium” – the cinema, for example in Bontempelli’s works of 1926 (Bontempelli 1978) – Gramsci ten years before (1913–1917) had underlined the positive characteristics of the new medium and he had also elaborated the concept of “nazionale-popolare” (national-popular), in some respects anticipating the later theorizations of “popular culture” and,

¹³ Aiming to go over some of the conceptual difficulties of the “diffused audience” idea, one of us (Sorice 2005b) has recently proposed the adoption of the concept of “widen audience” (extended audience) in which the function of ideology is highly considered (it was partially let in shadow in the first theorization of the diffused audience concept). In the same time, independently (and meaningly) Nick Couldry (2005) proposed in UK a similar argumentation (probably also more useful). Our idea is that a “fragmented” audience is not more “powerful” than a “mass audience” because, anyway, all the power’s dealignment between media (and their ownership) and audience/citizens is still present.

perhaps, even of “media culture”. Some of the roots of modern Italian audience studies lie in precisely those dialectical contrasts that Gramsci had understood so well: “the popular” dimension of Tolstoy against the “benevolent” view of Manzoni, the evangelical spirit of early Christianity against paternalistic [it means post-Tridentine] Catholicism; and the conflict between “content” and “forms” that Gramsci resolves by rejecting the dichotomy and considering that gap misleading and inadequate to explain cultural phenomena (Gramsci 1977).

We find, working within these guidelines, some of the most important audience research in Italy, such as – for example – *L’ospite fisso*, one of the first fully ethnographic Italian research projects on media consumption, directed by Francesco Casetti (1995), which combined Bettetini’s perspective with Hall’s *Encoding/Decoding Model*.

Others important moments of “meeting” between Gramsci and the

Catholic intellectuals can be found in the elaboration of the so-called “Southern question” in which Gramsci and Luigi Sturzo, the founder of the Popular Party (the anti-fascist Catholic party) took a similar view; and also in the studies on ethnicity, race and the media (see Hall 1986), which in Italy have been carried forward by Catholic researchers and Marxist scholars, mainly but not exclusively of Gramscian formation.

In the last years of the 1990s, many scholars and researchers, merging the theoretical approaches of Gramsci with Ricoeur’s ideas, have also adopted Stuart Hall’s perspective about identity and realized researches about the interrelationship between media, audiences and identity. Hall’s approach has represented a turning point for the starting of many researches considering media as symbolic places (such as “frameworks” in which identity processes are activated). Many scholars have used Hall’s approach to

“representation” merging it to Ricoeur’s use of metaphor as communicative way.¹⁴

The view we are presenting here is only a partial one and it deserves a deeper and more systematic study, of which this paper is only a tentative expression. Nevertheless, it is certain that the influence of Cultural Studies (in particular of the concepts and perspectives coming from the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies) has been gradually growing in Italian culture, also in the sociological field, the field in which Audience and Media Studies have primarily developed. We, the authors of this paper, have an hybrid scientific formation of diasporic intellectuals and this formation has represented for us – as for a great part of Italian media scholars – the possibility of reading the reality in between, using an holistic

¹⁴ In the same direction (in UK) the works of David Gauntlett (2005; 2007).

perspective and in a “militant” way, but without the limits of predefined interpretative grids¹⁵.

The crossing over between Gramsci, Stuart Hall and a media sociology influenced by the *personalist* tradition have contributed to the creation of an area of Italian Cultural Studies that has sprung up also in the field of Italian media studies, as many research projects carried out in the last few years demonstrate. This is a research area which, while not rejecting outright the possibility of using Cultural Studies as a systematic approach, has preferred to adopt – as Stuart Hall himself suggested – Cultural Studies as a perspective¹⁶

¹⁵ A great work should be drawn anyway, on the new/digital media and the Internet. An excellent starting point is represented by Fuchs 2007.

¹⁶ In this way, i.e., the research approach of the *Osscom* (the important Research group based in Università Cattolica, Milan, directed by Fausto Colombo).

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