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Gramsci and the South as a Space of Emancipation

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Abstract: The paper will actively engage with the contradictions found in Gramsci in an attempt to tease out the elements of emancipation found in his thought, as well as a sub-culture of opposition against Western notions of rationality. Antonio Gramsci's analysis of the Italian South and of the Southern Italian peasantry in relation to the formation of a radical politics of emancipation constitutes one of the most salient features of his critique of orthodox Marxism. I argue that for the Italian Marxist theorist, the liberation of the Italian peasantry is not only a project of social, economic and political emancipation. Rather, the peasantry's emancipation is also seen as a project of cultural liberation, a liberation from the dominant strands of rationalist and positivist Enlightenment thought, which Gramsci saw as encapsulated in Crocean philosophy. For Gramsci, the task of the organic intellectuals is to create an ideational sphere in which the colonized South can potentially articulate and celebrate a culture that has historically been deemed backward and primitive. However, Gramsci's analyses of the South also contain historicist encrustations, which create a dialectical tension in his theory of politico-cultural emancipation that has never really been solved. I argue that the positivist and progressionist encrustations of Gramsci's program for the emancipation of the South is an instantiation of a wider, Western, 19th and 20th century intellectual tradition which conflates "progress" as such with emancipation, a tradition that goes beyond the Italian and European context, and that is even paralleled by the model for black emancipation in the American South put forth by a figure as seemingly divergent as, say, W.E. B. Du Bois in the *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903).

1. Introduction

This paper attempts to review and deconstruct the key theoretical approaches and formulations on literacy and its relation to cultural and political domination and hegemony, as well as coloniality, found in the literary, poetic, and even theoretical, writings, of the Italian leftist filmmaker, essayist, novelist, and poet, Pier Paolo Pasolini. Specifically, I look at Pasolini's writings on Southern Italian (peasant) dialect and literacy and Southern Italian peasant culture as he views it through the lens and prism of Northern Italian capitalist, consumerist, neo-colonial, yet above all, linguistic domination. I will argue that historically, at least since the unification of Italy in the 1860s, the struggle over literacy, what constitutes, "proper" or legitimate, literacy, as well as other modes of written and oral communication deemed culturally legitimate and proper, has taken place within an internal neo-

colonial and colonial context, as well as within a struggle over cultural and linguistic hegemony, counter-hegemony, and emancipation. Throughout this paper, I rely heavily throughout on the work of Pierre Bourdieu, Walter D. Mignolo, and Angel Rama, respectively. Specifically, I look at their invaluable works, *Language and Symbolic Power*, *The Lettered City*, and *The Darker Side of the Renaissance*. Despite some very major key differences in their methodological approaches and in their key theoretical constructs, all three authors approach literacy as being not some abstract and ahistorical signifier in one's proficiency in written and linguistic communication, but rather a major tool, instrument, and marker invested in struggles for and against religious, cultural, and political-ideological hegemony, a struggle that (at least for Mignolo and Rama) is often centered around the struggle for the political supremacy of a particular lettered class. I conclude by comparing and contrasting the central ideas of all three authors in an attempt to tease out the most theoretically fruitful of their main theoretical concepts. Throughout the paper, I have decided to rely methodologically upon the theoretical and conceptual tools used to analyze key and fundamental historical processes that are explicated and deployed by Rama, Mignolo, and Bourdieu, to delineate and highlight to the reader how literacy and the struggle over what constitutes literacy is (within, but not limited to, the Southern Italian peasant milieu) often a struggle against and for linguistic and cultural colonization; in the Italian case, such a struggle has taken place within the parameters of internal colonization and conquest, but the theoretical and methodological parameters are still essentially the same. Of particular relevance and import for devising the methodological and analytical approach I have decided to take are Rama's extremely useful and fascinating concept of the *letrados* (or lettered class), and Mignolo's decision to look at literacy through the lens of, not just colonization as such, but through the prism of concrete socio-political and cultural, history. Indeed, Mignolo's decision to locate struggles over literacy and its meaning within the crucible of history, of historical struggles of domination and self-determination, has been, methodologically, at least, of invaluable use for me, for it has enabled me to approach literacy, the concept of literacy as such, throughout this paper, as not an ahistorical and "value-free" notion, but rather, as a social and cultural practice that is often shaped and determined by concrete (and often highly-invested) historical forces and struggles.

2. Bourdieu and Pasolini: The Meaning of Southern Italian Dialect

Perhaps what struck me the most in reading Bourdieu was his discussion in Chapter One of his work *Language and Symbolic Power* (1994), of the formation of a "standard" linguistic "market" during the revolutionary era in eighteenth century France. Quite aside from Bourdieu's fascinating analogizing of the "linguistic

market” with the Marxist notion of the formation of a national economic market during eras of national unification and consolidation, his conception of a “normalized language” is significant, for it highlights the fact that language is-and has-often been deployed amid contexts of struggles for social, political, and cultural emancipation, recognition, and hegemony.¹ According to him,

The *normalized* language (of the functionaries, as opposed to the “*patois*” of, say, the peasants) is capable of functioning outside the constraints and without the assistance of the situation, and is suitable for transmitting and decoding by any sender and receiver, who may know nothing of one another. Hence it concurs with the demands of bureaucratic predictability and calculability, which presuppose universal functionaries and clients, having no other qualities than those assigned to them by the administrative definition of their condition.²

The significance of the normalization of the new “national”, “official” language, is thus predicated upon its internalization by every single member of the national community, thus making it “insignificant”, or normal, by its abstract and universalizing “bureaucratic predictability and calculability”. The new, “normalized language” thus requires “the holders of dominated linguistic competences to collaborate in the destruction of their instruments of expression”, that is, it requires the members of what Gramsci calls “subaltern classes” to participate in the eradication of their own authentic modes of expression and self-articulation.³ The (linguistically and socially) subaltern are thus restrained by “the modalities of practices, the ways of looking, sitting, standing, keeping silent, or even of speaking”, that is, of their *habitus*, of ways that are “full of injunctions that are powerful and hard to resist precisely because they are silent and insidious, insistent and insinuating”.⁴ What I find of immediate import in this discussion of the significance of language by Bourdieu, then, is how he ties the symbolic nature of language to not only social relations as such, or even social relations as they express relations of power, but also to the struggle for self-expression and sub-cultural opposition to the predominant, hegemonic culture of the “official language” and all this entails and represents on the part of marginalized groups (for example, in his discussion of the “*Lumpenproletariat*” and the Parisian immigrant “tough guys”,

¹ Cfr. P. Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, Cambridge, Harvard University, 1994, pp. 46-51.

² Ivi, p. 48.

³ Ivi, p. 49.

⁴ Ivi, p. 51.

in the appendix to chapter 2). There, we see how the symbolic nature of language is used, not as an instrument of domination and standardization, but as a weapon of resistance by those who are marginalized and exploited, by those use “slang” as an “ideal” expression to “grasp their virile identity...”.⁵ Thus, for Bourdieu, the deployment of language always occurs within a nexus of cultural, political, social, economic, aesthetic-and linguistic-domination *and* within a nexus of cultural resistance, where struggles for social and cultural emancipation are constantly occurring. Perhaps we find a literary and polemical call to arms against just such domination of a “linguistic market” and a justification for an “ideal” model of opposition against cultural and linguistic domination, expressed with stylistic power, in Pasolini’s “Note on Poetry Down South” (1958):

Why have you let our kids be educated by the middle class? ...Why have you tolerated our souls being tempted by the middle class? Why have you only verbally protested while, little by little, our culture was being transformed into a middle-class culture? Why have you accepted that our bodies would live as middle-class culture? Why haven’t you risen up against our anxiety that daily justified itself by ripping off something from the poor to have a middle –class life? Why have you conducted yourselves in such a way as to find yourselves facing this *fai accompli* and seeing that, by now, there’s nothing more to do, why are you inclined to save the savable, participating in middle-class power?⁶

Pasolini’s protest against the cultural (and by inference, linguistic and literary) domination of “the poor” by “middle-class culture” is, at least in part, an example of Bourdieu’s notion of the economic (in the narrow and expanded sense) logic of domination in relation to linguistic usages. In another, even more striking piece, Pasolini asks: “What is the *culture* of a nation?”⁷ His response:

Commonly, it’s believed, even by *cultured* people, that it’s the *culture* of the scientist, of the politicians, of the literary men, of the filmmakers, etc.: namely, that it’s the *culture* of the *intelligentsia*. But this is rather untrue. It’s not even the *culture* of the ruling class that tries to impose it, at least formally, precisely through the class struggle. And finally it’s not even the

⁵ Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, cit., p. 96.

⁶ P. P. Pasolini, *Stories from The City of God: Sketches and Chronicles of Rome 1950-1968*, ed. W. Siti, and Trans. Maria Harss, New York, Handell Press, 2011, cit. p. 43.

⁷ P. P. Pasolini, *In Danger: A Pasolini Anthology*, ed. Jack Hirschman, San Francisco, City Lights Books, 2010, cit., p. 45.

culture of the ruled class, meaning the popular *culture* of the workers and the peasants. The culture of a nation is the drawing together of all these class cultures: it's the average of all of them....Today (in Italy)...historical distinction and historical (national) unification have ceded their place to a homologation that almost miraculously fulfills the inter-classistic dream of the old Power (of the bourgeoisie and of Fascism). What causes such a homologation? Clearly it's a new Power.⁸

The culture of a nation is thus the culture of not one particular class or classes, not even of the “ruling class”, but the “average of all of them”. Yet Pasolini has hit upon something significant. “Today,” in the Italy of the 1970's, there is taking place the same process of cultural, literary, and linguistic “homologation” and domination that Bourdieu effectively describes taking place in Revolutionary and post-Revolutionary France in *Language and Symbolic Power*, that is, the massification and simultaneous standardization of all forms of non-bourgeois, non-aristocratic forms of literacy and written and verbal communication, including forms of communication and literacy that are specific to “the workers and the peasants”. The culture and the language of the peasantry and the workers is slowly, but inevitably, due to the power of the ideology of capitalist consumerism, being transmuted into a “middle-class culture”. It is thus the slow but inevitable fulfillment of the “old inter-classistic dream” of the bourgeoisie: that is, the erasure and elision of all the diverse forms of literacy, language, and communication deployed by the subaltern in the name of a supposed ideal of national homogeneity and classless egalitarianism, but that in actuality inscribes and re-inscribes the power of the ruling class. The “homologation” of peasant and worker culture and linguistic communication, is thus an instantiation of Bourdieu's notion of “symbolic violence”, a symbolic violence that is equivalent to what Pasolini elsewhere describes as “cultural genocide” and that is reminiscent to Mignolo's depiction of the violent destruction of Amerindian linguistic usages by the Spanish colonizers, and that is designed to, as Bourdieu also states, preclude the formation of any subcultural language of opposition, such as “slang”, on the part of the Italian (recently urbanized and proletarianized) “tough guys” that teem the Roman *borgate* (working class slums and shanty-towns).⁹ It is in this sense and within this historical, political, and cultural context and conjuncture (aside from the context of the national “unification” of Italy, which he also mentions, and which I will further discuss below) of the spread of neoliberal capitalist consumerist ideology in Italy in the 1970s, that Pasolini calls

⁸ Pasolini, *In Danger*, p. 45.

⁹ Ivi, cit., p. 8.

for the (admittedly romantic and essentialist) preservation of Southern Italy's "culture of poverty", so that the Southern Italian masses can continue to "live out the mystery and innocence of poverty".¹⁰ Pasolini's romanticization of the language and linguistic usages of the Italian peasantry, then, not only illustrates Bourdieu's profound and intellectually fruitful model of a "linguistic market", a linguistic market that is predicated upon an ethos and a rationale of both cultural domination and capitalist economic "rationality", but also, as we have also seen and will now explore further, Mignolo's conceptualization of literacy as a form of societal written and oral communication that is not only culturally determined, but that is also determined by, and vulnerable to, the concrete social, political, economic, and socio-cultural environment within which it functions and is surrounded by, as well as by processes of foreign and internal colonization.

3. Dialect and Colonization: Pasolini, Gramsci, and Mignolo

In *The Darker Side Of The Renaissance: Literacy, Territoriality, and Colonization* (2002), Walter D. Mignolo, in a far more explicit fashion than Bourdieu, ties literacy directly to the struggles for cultural, political, military, and theological hegemony on the part of two social classes, two social classes that are actively engaged in the colonization and occupation of the "New World" and "the Castilianization' of the Amerindian population": the Spanish aristocracy, immediately tied to the Court, and the Spanish clergy.¹¹ Mignolo discusses at great length the inextricable links between literacy on one hand, and the interests, prejudices, and (distorted) self-perceptions, of a class or classes that are deeply engaged in the struggle for hegemony, and are in the process of inscribing onto the indigenous, colonized inhabitants the status of coloniality. Indeed, what perhaps interested me the most in Mignolo's discussion was his notion that the monotheistic and Judeo-Christian tradition, adopted by European civilization, has set up a conceptually rigid demarcation between the Word (interpreted as the Word of God), embodied by the physicality of the Bible, of Scripture, and speech. We are thus in the presence of a conception of (written) literacy that is and has become legitimized through and by the process of a particular hegemonic class (in this case, the clergy's) attempts to create, recreate, and inscribe, their worldview and their "conception of themselves as a class", to use Marxian terminology, onto the subjugated Amerindian population. Thus, since the Word of God is just that-the Word, the written text-acts of speech which involve

¹⁰ Ivi, p. 43.

¹¹ W. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of the Renaissance: Literacy, Territoriality, and Colonization*, Michigan, University of Michigan Press, 2003, pp. 52-53.

the actual physicality of speaking on the part of fallible human individuals, are relegated to a subordinate and inferior position. Mignolo writes,

It is quite comprehensible that when the word was detached from its oral source (the body), it became attached to the invisible body and the silent voice of God, which cannot be heard but can be read in the Holy Book. However, the theological view of writing developed by Christianity and the epistemological view of knowledge provided by Socrates and Plato (where God is not only the archetype of the writer but also the archetype of wisdom), joined forces during the Middle Ages and extended to the Renaissance. Nature is the book God *wrote*, and to know nature is the best way to know God.¹² (Emphasis added).

Thus, the denigration of speech and speech acts precisely because of its corporeality, is denigrated in favor of alphabetic writing, of alphabetic literacy, as constituting the sole legitimate form of literacy, of communication and receptacle of historical memory, as such. On the face of it, this seems at first glance a mere exercise in historical genealogy. However, given that the imposition of Spanish and European forms and conceptions of proper literacy and the denigration of Amerindian (non-written) literacy went hand in glove with the Castilian missionaries' attempt to Christianize and convert the Amerindians (which itself was part and parcel of the political-military attempt to colonize the New World and transform it into an appendage of the monarchy), the (ethnocentric) attempt to stamp proper literacy with the marks and appendages of textuality, of "the Word", illustrates how conceptions of "legitimate" and legitimized forms of literacy are inextricably linked to the struggle for social, political, and cultural hegemony, struggles that are often spearheaded by literate and educated "elite" classes. We have already seen Pasolini's brilliant and stylistically beautiful call for the cessation of the late twentieth century Italian bourgeoisie's erasure of the linguistic usages of the Italian masses, of the Southern Italian "peasants and workers". Yet what are the historical contexts and antecedents of this erasure? Put in another way, can one provide a historical model, narrative, and explanation of such an erasure, in the Southern Italian context, that is the equivalent of Mignolo's brilliant and historically grounded conceptual formulation of literacy, and the colonial dimension of attempts to suppress different forms of literacy? What are-and have been-some of the chosen and preferred and historically effective forms of counter-hegemonic forms of cultural and linguistic struggle deployed by the Southern Italian peasantry? In his piece,

¹² Ivi, cit., p. 82.

“Conceptions of Hegemony in Antonio Gramsci’s Southern Question and the *Prison Notebooks* (2008), Ercan Gundogan explicates Antonio Gramsci’s brilliant cultural and sociological analysis of the historical and socio-cultural landscape of the Southern Italian countryside, and of the centuries-long cultural and economic domination of the South by the industrialized North. According to him,

[...] Gramsci pointed to the backward, agrarian conditions of (Southern) Italy. In countries such as Italy where agriculture was significant, ‘the old model of intellectual was the organizing element’ and under this model intellectuals ‘provide the bulk of the State personnel and locally too, in the villages and little country towns, (the old model) plays the part of intermediary between the peasant and the administration in general’....This phenomenon was typical in Southern Italy. Intellectuals were ‘democratic’ in front of the peasants and reactionary in front of the great landowners and the government....The Southern intellectuals, Gramsci observed, originated from the rural bourgeoisie, which was still powerful there. They were often rentiers, and given their class background, hated the working peasants. As well, Gramsci characterized the Southern clergy as part of the intellectual group. The priest, in the eyes of the peasants, was a usurer and a bailiff, an ordinary man with all the ‘usual passions’ of women and money. The peasant has ‘little time for the clergy’ in the South [...]¹³

Thus, the “backward, agrarian conditions” of the South are due to decades of Northern economic exploitation and internal colonization, very similar to the horrific modes of economic exploitation and domination undergone by the Amerindians under Spanish domination, so effectively described by Mignolo. Yet of even more significance, in relation to literacy and linguistic usage, is the powerlessness, ineffectiveness, and moral dissolution of the Southern priest and intellectual, who, according to Gramsci, has historically been the spokesman, leader, and cultural conveyor belt, of the Southern Italian peasantry.¹⁴ After touching upon the historical reduction of the Southern peasant regions to “exploitable colonies” by the “Northern bourgeoisie” in his classic piece “Some Aspects of the Southern Question” (1926), Gramsci writes, in somewhat paternalistic tones, of the moral and cultural decadence of one of the historical and centuries-long cultural leaders of the Southern peasant: the Catholic priest:

¹³ E. Gundogan, *Conceptions of Hegemony in Antonio Gramsci’s Southern Question and Prison Notebooks*, «New Perspectives: Journal of Marxism and Interdisciplinary Inquiry», 2 (1) 2008, cit, p. 48.

¹⁴ Ivi, p. 55.

(He is) a man subject to all the ordinary passions (women and money), and who therefore, from a spiritual point of view, inspires no confidence in his discretion and impartiality. Hence confession exercises only the most minimal role of guidance, and the Southern peasant, if often superstitious in a pagan sense, is not clerical. All this . taken together, explains why in the South the Popular Party (except in some part of Sicily) does not have any great position or possess any network of institutions and mass organizations. The attitude of the peasant towards the clergy is summed up in the popular saying: ‘The priest is a priest at the altar; outside, he is a man like anyone else’.¹⁵

Compared to the clergy of the South, the priest of the Italian North is

Generally the son of an artisan or a peasant, has democratic sympathies, is more tied to the mass of the peasants. Morally, he is more correct than the southern priest, who often lives more or less openly with a woman. He therefore exercise a spiritual function that is more complete, from a social point of view, in that he guides a family’s entire activities. In the north, the separation of Church from state and the expropriation of ecclesiastical goods was more radical than in the South, where the parishes and convents either have preserved or have reconstituted considerable assets, both fixed and moveable.¹⁶

Gramsci’s portrait of the Southern Italian clergy is historically accurate. However, he fails to take into consideration the possibility of radicalizing the Catholic clergy of the South, or, at the very least, creating an ideological schism between the parish priest, who deals with the peasant on an everyday basis, and the clerical aristocracy. Moreover, he fails to take into consideration the very real possibility that it is precisely the irreligious nature of the clergy, together with the “superstitious” and “pagan” nature of the peasantry, which would create a revolutionary break in the Italian South. It is precisely that Southern “impiety”, on the part of both clergy and peasantry, which in reality constitutes a healthy skepticism towards any kind of organized dogmatism that should be celebrated. Indeed, such a healthy skepticism that is almost wryly cynical and pessimistic in nature is in fact nothing more than the logical and inevitable concomitant and result of, the centuries-long cul-

¹⁵ A. Gramsci, *On the Southern Question*, in *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. Q. Hoare, New York, International Publishers, 1974, pp. 180-181.

¹⁶ Gramsci, *On the Southern Question*, p. 180.

tural denigration of Southern peasant dialect, literacies, and modes of written and oral communication and that have been deemed “improper” and “illegitimate”. The “morally corrupt” priest can potentially serve as an organizer and leader of the peasantry. Indeed, it is precisely the supposed “morally corrupt” nature of Southern Italian culture that has led to its being deemed almost subhuman and inferior. Yet the categories of inferiority and sub-humanity can be used to create a space of violent cultural and linguistic Otherness. The violence that occupies this space of cultural Otherness is not the result of oppression or subjugation, but rather a violence born from the wish to *remain* Other, to remain outside the sphere of the culture, the language, the dialect, the literacy, and the linguistic usage (as well as the ethos) of the North, of the culture and the language that is deemed “normal” or “superior”. According to Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth* (2004), the *Lumpenproletariat*’s habitation in the main towns of colonial Algeria “constitutes a serious threat to the ‘security’ of the town and signifies the irreversible rot...eating into the heart of colonial domination”.¹⁷ The shantytown which the *Lumpenproletarian* inhabits “is the consciousness of the colonized’s biological decision to invade the enemy at all costs, and if need be, by the mot underground channels”.¹⁸ Gramsci, therefore, unwittingly presents us with a schema and a program of counter-hegemonic cultural and linguistic reclaiming, of struggle against the de-legitimization of Southern peasant culture linguistic usage, (as well as the racialization of Southern Italian poverty and all its oppressive concomitants), whilst simultaneously subscribing to a conception of political and cultural and linguistic emancipation that is inextricably linked with paternalist and positivist underpinnings, a conception that inevitably deems the culture of the Italian South as “backward”.

Thus, the problematics of describing the “pagan” superstitiousness of the Southern Italian peasant, and of highlighting the moral “turpitude” of one of its historical cultural symbols and leaders, the Southern Italian Catholic priest, are glaring. Gramsci is simultaneously decrying and rein-scribing the traditional prejudicial Northern stereotype of the licentiousness and “Oriental” Otherness” of the South, of its backwardness. This echoes Pasolini’s romanticization of the “innocence” of Southern poverty. Yet in terms of its significance in relation to the historic de-legitimization of Southern forms of written and oral communication, of Southern literacy and dialect, we are in the presence of a conceptual schema that simultaneously degrades and highlights, the historic colonization of, (as well as the historic forms in which cultural counter-hegemonic forms of leadership arise) of Southern Italian peasant dialect, language, and communication, within the pa-

¹⁷ F. Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, New York, Grove Press, 2004, cit., p. 81.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

rameters of economic and (internal) cultural colonization and exploitation, *a la* Mignolo. Gramsci's schema of the priest as cultural, literary, and even political, leader and representative of the Southern Italian peasantry, as cultural and linguistic transmission belt in the peasantry's servile, colonized, and dependent relations with, the Northern Italian bourgeoisie, are in fact a concrete (European) example of Angel Rama's conception and analysis of the indispensability of a lettered class, or *letrados*, in relation to the colonization and near-erasure of indigenous and non-hegemonic forms of literacy and written and verbal communication in the Latin American context. Let us look at the matter more closely.

4. Rama's *Letrados* and Cultural Domination and Opposition

Perhaps nowhere else do we see the inextricable relations between a hegemonic lettered class, seeking for social and colonial domination, and conceptions of "legitimate" forms of literacy, than in Angel Rama's *The Lettered City* (1996). In this study, Rama presents us with an exposition of the genesis of the establishment of cultural and political hegemony in the New World by Spanish colonists. Specifically, he discusses the central role that the *letrados*, or men of letters—that is, both secular and religious intellectuals—played in the erasure of non-European and non-Spanish forms of literacy and communication and their de-legitimization, in favor of the written word. What immediately struck me in reading Rama is how much his work is theoretically linked to the theses put forth by both Mignolo and Bourdieu, respectively. Whilst Bourdieu focuses mostly on language as such and its relation with social power, yet does not at first glance seem to focus on the interconnections between cultural hegemony and one particular social class, his discussion of language clearly makes us see the fallaciousness of the notion that language is an abstract, "value free" instrument of communication, completely free from the logic of social domination. This, together with Mignolo's discussion of the role the Christian clergy, coupled with European Enlightenment and Renaissance notions of rationality and inevitable historical progress, clearly ties into Rama's analysis of the centrality one particular social class, the *letrados*, played in the establishment of literary and cultural hegemony in the "New World".¹⁹

We perhaps see the connection between Bourdieu's brief discussion of the *patois* of the Parisian *Lumpenproletariat* as a form of linguistic opposition, for example (and his skepticism that this form of opposition can withstand the hegemony of the bourgeois linguistic "market") in Rama's discussion of graffiti and Lizardi's work. According to him,

¹⁹ A. Rama, *The Lettered City*, Durham, Duke University Press, 1996, p. 24.

Unlike (the writers of graffiti), (Lizardi) could seek the attention of a newly literate, bourgeois public. While graffiti represented an individual, illicit, and almost predatory appropriation of writing (still tightly monopolized by the *letrados* in the eighteenth century) the nineteenth-century literary production of the *Pensador Mexicano* was built on a marginal but expanding social base. The new periodical publications of the day were purchased by readers who did not form part of the power elite but whose literacy and ability to pay offered writers like Lizardi an alternative to the sort of support from wealthy patrons that had been typical earlier.²⁰

Thus, we see how the small elite of *letrados* were able to achieve their ascendancy through “their ability to manipulate writing in largely illiterate societies”. Writing and “legitimate” forms of literacy are thus the restricted forms of communication that only those who are privileged can use, disseminate, and manipulate. Indeed, writing takes on the aura “of a second religion” with the decline of Christianity. Finally, the hegemonic form of literacy is imbued with the magic power and potential to make the hidden open, to open up channels of communication that the colonized cannot access, a form of literacy that “makes itself increasingly autonomous” and that “imbues” the chaotic nature of the external world “with coherent meaning”.²¹ It is this form of hegemonic (written) literacy, a form of literacy that is tied to the vicissitudes of the linguistic “market” (Bourdieu), as well as to “a newly literate, bourgeois public”, that makes any attempt at linguistic subcultural opposition, such as graffiti (or Bourdieu’s *patois*), difficult to deploy in an effective manner. It is this seeming impossibility of avoiding the hegemonic strictures of Western European, colonialist, and “Enlightenment” cultural erasure that Rama (as well as Bourdieu) is intimating. This is even more significant when we remember that Lizardi attempts to deploy the popular “language of the streets” in his writings. However, as Rama points out, the restrictions paradoxically put in place by an expanding market for literary productions only highlights “a situation that was itself new: the existence of a group of *letrados* who had failed to gain entrance into the powerful inner circles of the city of letters despite their ardent desires to do so”.²² That is, attempts to delegitimize hegemonic forms of literacy are often only a mask to become a member of the dominant lettered class, rather than a genuine and legitimate form of linguistic and subcultural opposition. The almost mystical concern with, and investment in, a language of sub-cultural opposition, the anxiety

²⁰ Ivi, p. 43.

²¹ Ivi, p. 24 and 43.

²² Ivi, pp. 42-43.

that Rama's analysis implicitly lets us, as readers, feel, in his analysis of the difficulties any counter-hegemonic group of *lettrados* would have in successfully navigating the homologation of the capitalist and neo-colonial capitalist "linguistic market", is perhaps echoed in Pasolini's depiction, analysis, and definition of, Roman slang. Indeed, Lizzardi's attempt, and failure, to provide graffiti with a subversive and emancipatory function, a goal that necessarily would preclude any attempt to provide cultural titillation to "a newly literate, bourgeois public" is mirrored in Pasolini's analysis of Roman slang. In his essay, *Roman Slang* (1957), in a passage that deserves to be quoted at length, since it perhaps sums up my definition and explication of the historic function and counter-cultural significance of Southern Italian peasant dialect and language, Pasolini writes:

Roman slang depends on this fundamental 'narcissistic fixation' in the average speaker, and his consequent exhibitionism. Do we need a proof of this? Recent southern additions simply underscore a traditional fact. And I don't think that a racial explanation can be invoked. The infantilism that causes the craving for a manner of speech that is attractive, amusing, ironic, treacherous, insolent, blissful, and almost incomprehensible—due to its underworld, clandestine references—is a historic reality.²³

The depiction, indeed the very definition, of "Roman slang", as given here by Pasolini, not only obviously is reminiscent of Bourdieu's migrant Parisian "slang"; it is a mode of communication that, contrary to what those who have historically relegated the South to an "inferior" racial category, is glaringly colorful, counter-cultural, and hegemonically self-constituted, without any need or feel for outside reference or justification, because it is self-contained, "ironic, treacherous, insolent", and "blissful"—that is, it is its own justification. Yet just like Rama's analysis of Lizzardi and his relation to slang, the dialect of the Italian South is constituted the way it is precisely because of its "historical past", precisely because of "its underworld, clandestine references", references that are stamped with oppression and exploitation. Further on, he writes:

It (Roman slang) is the linguistic manifestation of a sub-culture, typical of an underclass that is frequently in contact with the dominating class: servile and disrespectful, hypocritical and unbelieving, spoiled and merciless. It is the psychological condition of a lower class that for centuries has remained 'irresponsible.' Their only 'vengeance' is the belief that they, not the power-

²³ Pasolini, *Stories From The City Of God*, cit., pp. 157-158.

ful, are the depositories of a notion of life which is more... 'virile,' because it is unscrupulous, vulgar, sly, and perhaps more obscene and devoid of moral niceties. This ruthless notion of life coincides with a morality which in its own way is epic. 'Vita', or life, means 'malavita,' underworld, and something more besides. It is a philosophy of life, a praxis.²⁴

The slang used by the inhabitants of the Roman *borgate* (slums), is thus, like the graffiti deployed by Lizzardi, a "linguistic manifestation of a sub-culture, typical of an underclass". Certainly, it is significant that Pasolini is here discussing slang, not dialect, and above all, a slang deployed by inhabitants of the Roman, that is, urban, slums. Yet the historic "homologation", to use Pasolini's term, the historic blurring, of city and country in the South by the North, as well as the very real and concrete social porousness of the markers that distinguish town and country, worker and peasant in Southern Italian regions after national unification in the 1860s and 70s, makes Pasolini's analysis significant and relevant. Moreover, quite aside from the explicit romanticization and mystification of Roman slang as being more "vile" (see, for example, Bourdieu's description of Parisian slang again), we are in the presence of a description and analysis of Southern Italian slang that delineates the historic cultural and social significance of that slang, of that mode of linguistic communication, and confirms the pitfalls and the wealth of opportunities, the deployment of such a "linguistic usage" has, as described by Rama. The slang deployed by the Roman *ragazzo di vita* (Roman term literally meaning "young man of life", denoting a street urchin, thug, or vagabond), "unscrupulous, vulgar, sly", and "virile", is a marker or symbol of his "praxis", his "philosophy of life", his way of life. The use of slang is one of the means of "vengeance" deployed by a group or "class" that has "remained irresponsible", that is, that has historically been deprived of power and self-governance and autonomy. Thus, just as in Rama's brief discussion of slang, we see that even in the Southern Italian context, slang is (one) means of counter-hegemonic and counter-cultural opposition against historical subjugation and cultural erasure on the part of the colonizer; just as it is in the Latin American context, we see, according to Pasolini (and Gramsci), that slang (and dialect) is a means of identity formation and a means of cultural and anti-colonial and anti-imperialist defiance. Of even more theoretical significance and fruitfulness, perhaps, is Gramsci's similar, yet largely critical and anti-romantic (though, as we have seen, also paternalistic), depiction of the "popular culture" of the peasantry. In his piece, "Gramsci, the Peasantry and Popular Culture", (19990), Alastair Davidson writes of Gramsci that he "was not endorsing a utopian view of the people-a new national populism". According to him, Gramsci rather

²⁴ *Ibid.*

was suggesting that the centralizing and rationalizing process of the state had been resisted in Italy, and still was because of the state's relative weakness, and that even if it was true that no subaltern culture existed except within the constraints of the dominant hegemonic culture, the second could never obliterate the first. It merely kept reproducing it in new forms. Gramsci's position was that both the romanticizing of the peasant and reducing him/her to the bestial in a new social realism were wrong, because they neglected the nine-tenths of life that is toil. By way of example of peasant resistance to the 'official' culture, he pointed out that: '...the peasants, having mulled for a long time the assertions that they have heard proclaimed and whose glitter has temporarily dazzled them, end up, when a good sense wins over the emotions aroused by stirring words, by discovering their inadequacy and superficiality and become generally distrustful.' The point made here is that the official view of life cannot be squared with their lived experience at all times, and that that lived experience will continue as long as the uneven development imposed by the imperialist system exists.²⁵

Moreover, Davidson writes, according to Gramsci,

[...] it was no longer possible to assume that the course of history was toward the world of one big city. The terms were and would be 'town and country.' Where, as in Italy, the population was overwhelmingly peasant and through absentee landowners and cyclical labour its ethic reached into the 'hundred cities' of the peninsula, it was clear that popular culture would be much stronger than it would be where the mode of production was much more purely capitalist. Indeed, it is this realization which is one reason for his renewed interest in the medieval and Renaissance commune, where city and country were even less distinct than they had become when he first established its dominance (in his conceptual schema).²⁶

Thus, in the process of the romanticisation of "a new national populism", of a "utopian view of the people" we have seen Pasolini imbue the dialects and linguistic usages of the Southern peasant and vagabond. In Gramsci's schema of things, this is jettisoned in favor of a strict Marxian sociological analysis of Italian peasant culture. The "popular culture" of the Italian peasantry is, in Gramsci, a mere

²⁵ A. Davidson, *Gramsci, the Peasantry, and Popular Culture*, «The Journal of Peasant Studies», 4 1983, cit., p. 147.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

historical and sociological fact, a fact that this peasant “subaltern culture” exists “within the framework of the dominant hegemonic culture”, and that “the second could never obliterate the first”. The “lived experience” of the peasantry is thus the consequence, at least in part, of capitalist and internal colonial domination. Yet it is significant that Gramsci, in his Marxian analyses, provides us with an emancipatory and counter-hegemonic schema that meshes with Pasolini’s later anti-consumerist and romantic ideology, an ideology that, as we have seen, recognizes, like Rama, the counter-hegemonic nature of “subaltern” cultures, and that calls for the constitution of a genuine class of lettered men, or *letrados*, that struggles against cultural erasure. For Gramsci, what romanticizing the peasantry has in common with “reducing him/her to the bestial in a new (artistic and literary) social realism”, is that both processes result in ignoring or erasing the fact that they have “nine-tenths of life that is toil”, and that ignores their “lived experiences”. We are thus in the presence of two conceptual and theoretical approaches (Gramsci’s and Pasolini’s) that, while seemingly and markedly different, imbue the culture, the language, the “linguistic usages”, and indeed, the very lives, of those who have been relegated to a subordinate position, and whose culture has been deemed “inferior”, with the aura of agency, autonomy, and dignity, with an agency that has the capacity to engage in counter-hegemonic struggles for autonomy and recognition in the midst of a historic process of cultural erasure. In terms of Rama’s thesis and analyses, we see that not only are we presented with “humanization” of slang and dialect; we are also in the presence of, in Gramsci’s case, at least, with a political schema (if not program) that is emancipatory in nature, and that recognizes a space for a (potential) lettered class, or *letrados*, that is grounded in the peasantry’s “life experiences” and social and cultural landscape, and that has, at least potentially, the ability to vocalize the cultural yearnings and discontent of the Southern Italian peasantry (the Southern priests and the “organic intellectuals” immortalized in Gramsci’s prison writings).

5. Conclusion

We have seen Mignolo, Bourdieu, and Rama deploy the concepts of language and literacy in attempting to explore the interrelations between coloniality and colonialism, on one hand, and cultural erasure on the part of the colonizers, on the other. While Bourdieu never explicitly discusses a particular social class or caste in his analyses of language, his notions of a “linguistic market”, modeled on the logic of the bourgeois market society, and of a *habitus* are deeply embedded within a theoretical investigation and project, of delineating how language often expresses and even create, material relations of social domination and power. Mignolo clearly

takes up the relation between literacy and domination, specifically, colonialism and imperialism, in a more explicit fashion; for him, “legitimate” forms of literacy are often merely the hegemonic and administratively sanctioned forms of communication of the colonizer; finally, we see Rama take up this notion further, but with the added focus on the constitution and reconstitution of a particular social (and lettered) class. Yet what we find implicitly and explicitly in each of these authors is the tying of literacy and language to the hegemony and domination of a social class or classes or groups, groups that are restrictive, self-constituting, and who, to paraphrase Rama, use literacy and language as a secular theology, a theology that is meant to exclude the oppressed, the subjugated, and the colonized. We have also seen that both Gramsci and Pasolini, the Marxist theorist and the leftist and populist poet and filmmaker, were both engaged, in real time, with what Rama, Mignolo, and Bourdieu engage with in their respective works: the deconstruction, humanization, and the granting of autonomy to, a culture and a bundle of linguistic usages, dialects, and slangs, of a socio-cultural group that has historically been relegated to the margins of European culture: the culture of the Southern Italian peasantry. Though glaringly dissimilar in some of their methodological and theoretical approaches, both Gramsci and Pasolini effectively illustrate (and confirm) the veracity and pressing, indeed urgent, legitimacy, of the problems the three theorists I have engaged with throughout this paper have dealt with: that is, the invaluable fruitfulness of the historical method, the recognition of the inherent value, humanity, and often strategic necessity of, modes of linguistic usage that have been deemed “inferior” historically, and the inextricable connection between cultural and linguistic domination (and prejudice) with processes of (external and internal) (neo-) colonization, domination, and imperialist expansion.

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