

Why Is There Socialism in American Universities?

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During the last year of my Ph.D. program in film studies at the University of Bologna, I spent three months at the Department of Modern Culture and Media at Brown University on a research fellowship. I was working on my dissertation on the use of animated cartoons in war propaganda and Brown's library was the ideal place to finish my bibliography. Coming from a country where libraries have erratic opening hours, to say the least, the almost always open libraries at American universities are paradise. At the Brown library, to my surprise and delight, I was entitled to a personal desk, and a shelf where I could keep all the books I needed. The table was in a niche near the stacks. I felt like the cat who ate the cream. There were two desks in the niche and my 'nichemate' was an African-American woman. At the beginning of my sojourn, I took a look at her books. They were all on black feminism. I guess she did the same with the books on my shelf, which were all on military history. Quite likely, in her eyes I was the quintessential European white man, still alive, but symbolically dead. In three months, we never exchanged a word. The only form of interaction between us was stealing a chair. One of the desks had a chair with one short leg. So, the first to arrive in the library took the good chair, and left the other one to the latecomer.

I have opened my paper with this personal recollection not only because starting with a joke is a good rhetorical tactic, but also because I think it says a lot about a certain tendency of American universities, at least in the humanities (I imagine they do not care much about feminism, either black or white, at business school). For a long period in Italy, academia and political militancy went hand in hand. I am not talking about university professors who take part in public debates, as commentators on newspapers and television, or even enter the political arena as consultants,

sometimes evolving into professional politicians. It is something that has always been relatively common in our country, during the so-called First Republic (from the end of World War Two to the mid-Nineties) and still continuing now. We have even had a couple of Prime Ministers who were university professors (of economics) such as Romano Prodi, who also became President of the European Commission, and Mario Monti. What I am thinking of is something different. It is the presence of political issues in academic research, not just in areas intrinsically linked to topical questions, like sociology or economics, but in a broader spectrum, from ancient history to comparative literature. It is something we used to have in the past, but that has faded away with the marginalization of the left as a main political actor, at least in the traditional, 20th century, meaning of the word “left”, i.e. a force rooted in the working class, and linked to the legacy of Marxist thinking.

Since Marxism in the United States never represented a mainstream political current, as Werner Sombart observed more than one hundred years ago in an essay whose title I have reworked for this paper¹, paradoxically, it survived in the universities. American academia is the only one in the Western hemisphere where Karl Marx and Marxist thinkers are still widely discussed, and not just in the philosophy departments, but also in the literature or film studies departments. In the abovementioned Department of Modern Culture and Media at Brown University, Phil Rosen, a cinema professor of Contemporary Film Theory, also teaches a course called Reading Marx. Another course he teaches is The Aesthetics of Political Cinema: From Montage to Political Modernism. Sometimes, Italian cinema professors do quote Gramsci or Lukács. But most of the time, it is some sort of an in-joke. For the older ones, those who were students or young intellectuals in the politically-inflamed 1960s and 1970s, it is a bitter-sweet flashback whereas the younger professors, when Marx and Marxism appear in their books and essays, completely deprive them of any real subversive force. Just think of the widespread presence of Walter Benjamin in

contemporary Italian film studies. In such a context, Benjamin becomes just a modernist icon, more or less interchangeable with Aby Warburg, or any other non-Marxist, non-revolutionary thinker.

On the contrary, American academics still take Marx and Marxists as true subversives. Let's take a look at, for example, Jonathan Crary's latest book, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (New York: Verso, 2013). Crary teaches Art at Columbia University. Among other things, he has published *Techniques of the Observer*, a book on vision in 19th century culture, one that has been quite relevant for film historians and theoreticians². Like *Techniques of the Observer*, *24/7* has been translated into Italian by Einaudi. A slight change in the subtitle of the Italian translation reveals the deep difference in the cultural and political context of the two countries. In Italy, the subtitle reads: *Il capitalismo all'assalto del sonno*. It says *capitalism*, not *late capitalism*. In the original version, "late" was there to implicitly announce that the collapse of capitalism was near. The book is included in a series called "The Mavericks", supposedly consisting of against the grain texts, but the omission of "late" clearly testify that for Einaudi, as well as for the majority of the Italian intellectual community, capitalism is here to stay. And reading Crary's book, the Italian reader experiences some sort of déjà-vu. *24/7* is a Marcuse-style pamphlet against the capitalist totalitarian project of occupying every corner of our life, making us endlessly work or consume. Personally, I do not find this book very convincing, and I think that even Jonathan Crary, the day he needs a doctor or a plumber after 6 PM or during the week end, will realize that living in a society where people work – in shifts – 24 hours a day, is not that bad. But I do not have the time to discuss the book here. What interests me is not its content, but its sheer existence. Crary, a well known scholar who teaches at a prestigious university, published a book "against capitalism", a book that is part of his research activity. This is the point.

Even in Italy on occasion, professors write political books, even radical and strongly opinionated books. Just think of classicist Luciano Canfora, who recently wrote two books, one co-authored with constitutionalist Gustavo Zagrebelsky, on the decay of democracy in contemporary

Italy and Europe³. Canfora's books may seem similar to Crary's, but there is a relevant difference. Canfora is a classicist who addresses issues outside his research field. He acts as a "citizen", or as a public intellectual. On the contrary, for Crary, studying the developments in capitalism at the beginning of the 21st century is an integral part of his work on modernity and its culture. One could object that Canfora also writes as a "specialist". He extensively researched the origins of democracy in ancient Greece, and now faces the troubles of democracy in our time. But it is self-evident that there is a huge gap between Pericles and Berlusconi. Canfora is a renowned "professore ordinario" (full professor). In Italy, it is usually only full professors, sometimes even the young ones (think of Claudio Giunta and his book on Matteo Renzi)⁴ who write "political" books. This sort of book does not help you to get a promotion, it does not count for board certification where a national board, one for every field, decides who is ready to become an associate or full professor. As a result, you write these books at the end of your career, when you are already a full professor – more or less. Giunta wrote his previous book, *Una sterminata domenica*⁵, before becoming a full professor, but he was not that far from the final goal. Moreover, *Una sterminata domenica* is not exactly a "political" book, it is a study of Italian mass culture; furthermore, a very interesting one because it was researched and written by somebody whose specialization is Dante and not Marshall McLuhan.

Claudio Giunta is in many ways quite an exception in the Italian university system. Usually, in Italy, "young" (i.e. anybody who has not turned sixty) literature, cinema, or art scholars do not write against, or in favor of, capitalism, globalization, the party in office. On the contrary, in the United States, both young and old scholars mix militancy and research. It is the humanities field in general that quite often deals with political issues and the public debate. Even those who are at the bottom of the academic ecosystem's food chain, e.g. – Ph.D. candidates, senior lecturers, teaching assistants, criticize capitalism, racism, sexism, the 1% privileged clique. I quote, more or less randomly, from one of the recent issues of *Cinema Journal*, not a radical or underground publication, but the official organ of the Society for Cinema and Media Studies. In the Summer

2015 issue, there is an essay by Greg Burris, a doctoral candidate at the University of California Santa Barbara, on the film representation of the 1969 trial of Bobby Seale, co-founder of the Black Panther Party⁶. The paper is written in the typical scholarly style, but its author's support for the Black Panther cause is evident. If we read Burris' bio on his university website, we discover that: «For his dissertation, Greg is examining the role of film and media in contesting the occupation of Palestine, and he is putting Palestinian voices in conversation with contemporary critical theory and the Black radical tradition»⁷. Such an openly militant approach would be considered quite peculiar in an Italian department of film studies. Even projects devoted to “hot” topics, such as media and terrorism, tend to be “colder” than their American counterparts.

Why can humanities, at least in some fields, be so strongly political in the United States, while politics has almost faded away from the Italian departments? Of course the answer is complex, but I think we can at least mention two main reasons. One has already been referred to. The fact that Marxism never took root in any American mainstream party or union somehow made it survive on university campuses. In Italy, at least till the 1970s, and partially even after, Marxism was part of the political mainstream. Its disappearance from the main political arena inevitably had an impact on the intellectual left and the university. On the contrary, in the United States Marxism was always on the fringe. The members of the radical intelligentsia, especially from the Cold War on, were secluded from the subaltern classes they were supposed to give voice to. In this social vacuum, they cultivated the solitary pride typical of elites and avant-gardes. And thanks to this attitude, in the last thirty years, while the Italian departments were losing any political angle, the American ones enthusiastically joined the front line of the culture wars.

The other main reason why I feel Marxism has survived in American universities is interdisciplinary. American humanities tend to “blend” more than Italian humanities. Putting together “different things”, for example Martin Heidegger + Richard Nixon + Mickey Mouse, is quite common in the United States, at least in the areas linked to what David Bordwell polemically

labels Grand Theory⁸. Grand Theory is that vast and heterogeneous corpus that combines semiotics, post-structuralism, Lacanian psychoanalysis, and Marxism, basically in its Frankfurt School and post-structuralist versions (let's say between Adorno and Althusser), but also with a more recent contribution from Žižek, and the relevant presence of Gramsci. This kind of eclecticism, seen from an Italian viewpoint, is sometimes confusing, especially from a Marxist, historicist, perspective. The “American Gramsci”, framed between Jacques Rancière and Edward Said, is a little bit puzzling for an Italian. If you do not know that Gramsci was a communist leader in the era of the Third International, you could mistake him for a post-structuralist philosopher, a colleague of Derrida and Foucault. Interdisciplinarity is a difficult task, a task that must be undertaken with deep methodological awareness. But at the same time, crossing disciplinary boundaries is a fascinating challenge that in many ways is quintessential to the humanities. Just as the aspiration to connect the object of your research to the world you live in is – or should be – quintessential to the profession of university professor. It is something that we have almost stopped doing in Italy. Meeting our American colleagues can help us to start again.

¹ See Werner Sombart, *Why Is There No Socialism in the United States?* (White Plains, N.Y.: International Arts and Sciences Press, 1976).

² See Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1990).

³ See Luciano Canfora, “E’ l’Europa che ce lo chiede!” *Falso!* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2012); Luciano Canfora and Gustavo Zagrebelsky, *La maschera democratica dell’oligarchia. Un dialogo*, (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2014).

⁴ See Claudio Giunta, *Essere #matteoreni* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2015).

⁵ See Claudio Giunta, *Una sterminata domenica. Saggi sul paese che amo* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2013).

⁶ See Greg Burris, ‘Prometheus in Chicago: Film Portrayals of the Chaining and Gaggling of Bobby Seale and the “Real-ization” of Resistance’, *Cinema Journal*, no. 54, Summer 2015, 26-49.

⁷ <http://www.filmandmedia.ucsb.edu/people/grad-alumni/burris/burris.html>.

⁸ See David Bordwell, ‘Contemporary Film Studies and the Vicissitudes of Grand Theory’, in David Bordwell and Noël Carroll (eds.), *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), 3-36.