Gramsci on Oedipus

Jonna C Mackin, Dartmouth College
A given socio-historical moment is never homogeneous; nor does it ever come again in precisely the same way. And although we can never know precisely what happened many centuries ago, we can try to “read back” through what we do know to understand the political dynamics in play during certain epochs. It is these dynamics which form the context, and often the subtext, of Greek classical drama such as Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex*.

What we do know about this theater tells that it appeared in a unique way at a unique time in Greek history. It arose from a social matrix whose existence coincided with that of the *polis*. The *polis* was an institution unlike anything we know today. It was a communally governed community. As H.D.F. Kitto describes it, “Polis...may mean as much as ‘the whole communal life of the people, political, cultural, moral’—even ‘economic,’...religion too was bound up with the polis. (203). Though often translated as “city-state,” Kitto makes clear that it was unlike any city or state of the present.

A politically active statesman in his time, Sophocles’s plays were but a single element in institutionalized rites and festivals that collectively produced a constant affirmation and re-definition of the *polis*. Citizens came to the theater not only to enjoy, but to form an ongoing consensus about the nature of the *polis*. What they saw on stage was an enactment and resolution of the contradictions in their present socio-historical moment. Thus, the ancient myths re-enacted on stage afforded the audience a window on their own *polis*, as well as a shared experience of communal regeneration. The catharsis that took place through identification with individual characters was set within an experience of social integration via the festival experience.

Drama, then, was – and is – part a part of the ideological struggle to form a new culture. Culture, and by extension, literary criticism, brings out, especially in relation to the philosophy of praxis, the fatuous naivete of those parrots who think that with a few brief and stereotyped formulas they posses the key to open all doors. Following the idea that the play itself expresses all the contradictions in the culture of Athens at a given socio-historical moment, I would like to discuss *Oedipus Rex* in the light of what we can learn of the contrast, the struggle, the hierarchy that is both represented and being overthrown in the play.

As Creon’s son Haemon says in Sophocle’s play *Antigone*, “It is no polis that is ruled by one man only.” *Oedipus Rex* embodies in the fateful tragedy that befalls Oedipus just how true is Haeman’s observation. At the beginning of the play, the city is “sick.” and Oedipus, who is identified as the savior of the city in the past, is waiting to learn what he must do to save it again. “I sent Menoeceus’ son Creon, Jocasta’s brother, to Apollo...that he might learn there by what act or word I could save this city.” It is not in Oedipus’s range of vision that it is not his act alone that saves the city. Ironically, he does prove to be the ultimate “savior,” but not before his communal sin is revealed to be the cause of the malaise. It will be his violation of social taboos that causes the sickness in the *polis*. His blind assumption that he alone can save the city ironically reflects his central role in the city’s sickness, which proves to be a cultural system that has been violated and that must be set right before social relations can resume normal activities of procreation and regeneration.
The word that Creon brings back from Apollo is a clue to the cultural nature of the malaise. “The clue is in this land.” While Oedipus individually carries the marker of cultural contradiction, signaled by the tragic irony of his fate, he also is the sign of communal malaise, that can only be healed by a removal of the disruption that he represents. His fate is the sterile dead end of a life beyond community, beyond consensus, beyond cultural renewal.

Oedipus is the embodiment of Thebes, which in itself is a kind of Anti-Athens. By that I mean that Thebes reflects back to the citizens of Athens watching the play a negative mirror of itself and its contradictions. The present confronts the past through this negative myth, and the citizens of Athens are faced with questions crucial to the polis, to family to self and to society. The dangerous self-assertion that Oedipus represents is a threat to the Harmonia of self and city. Where Ares (war) and Aphrodite (love) are operating illegally instead of united in idealized marriage, the health of the polis and thereby the health of all its citizens is threatened.

The chorus retains its ties to the citizen-masses, reflecting the power inequalities which were also a part of Athenian social life. Members of the citizen-elite enjoyed functional advantages which were a threat to the democracy of the polis. The drama of Oedipus is in one sense the dilemma of private rights vs. public harmony. The chorus sees itself as powerless, victim of its misunderstood fate and of the warring gods. It besieges powers beyond itself to manipulate its ultimate destiny. Passive and benighted, the chorus is the ultimate response to an ultimate dictator. By making Oedipus all powerful, they render themselves weak. “Our fight is with the War God, a War God ringed with the cries of men, a savage God who burns us” “Lycean King, I beg to be at our side for help.” “I do not know what to say. I am in a flutter of foreboding.” The people stare helplessly at the maws of their fate, and yet it is by their suffering that Oedipus is condemned. “If a man walks with haughtiness of hand or word and gives no heed to Justice and the shrines of Gods despises—may an evil doom smite him for his ill-starred pride of heart!” The irony of Oedipus as King is that in his very existence, despite his intentions, his context determines him: he ultimately “gives no heed to Justice” – not from an evil heart but from a misalignment with the social movement of the city and its polity. Oedipus Rex is a play not about things as they are, but things as they were. This “anti-Athens” reflects back to the assembled citizens the instability of systems grown too ideologically elite. This tragedy of the individual is at the same time the tragedy of the overgrown state, where too much power resides in the hands of too few. The play, via identification with the tragic hero Oedipus, calls upon the citizen spectator to be actively involved in the maintenance of the community and in doing so to create the harmonia necessary to the ideal democracy. Creon’s benediction, “Do not seek to be master in everything, for the things you mastered did not follow you throughout your life” is said to Oedipus but actually provides a guide to the life of the polis. Justice, then, is not one’s individual fate – even in a fate as undeserved as is that of Oedipus. Justice, in the life of the city, is when each one contributes his own mastery, according to his abilities. As Plato says in The Republic, Book IV, “Justice is that very thing, I think, or some form of it, which we laid down at first when we were founding the city, as necessary conduct in everything from
beginning to end...each one must practise that one thing, of all in the city, for which his nature was best fitted.”