

The Modern Prince: Gramsci's Reading of Machiavelli

Peter D. Thomas¹

Abstract: Gramsci's 'modern Prince' has often been interpreted in relation to his theory of political parties. According to this reading, Gramsci was constrained by carceral censorship to use this Machiavellian metaphor as a 'codeword'. This interpretation has tended to direct attention away from the novelty of Gramsci's reading of *The Prince* in the *Prison Notebooks*. This article argues that a contextualist and diachronic reading of the development of the figure of the modern Prince allows it to be understood as also a novel contribution to the Machiavelli scholarship of Gramsci's time and the tradition of 'democratic' readings of *The Prince*.

¹ Department of Politics, History and the Brunel Law School, Brunel University London, UB8 3PH, UK. Email: PeterD.Thomas@Brunel.ac.uk. I would like to thank Sara Farris, Fabio Frosini, Filippo del Lucchese, the editors of this journal and two anonymous referees for helpful criticisms and suggestions.

In early 1932, over 2 years after beginning his carceral writing project, Antonio Gramsci wrote what were to become some of the most famous lines of his *Prison Notebooks*. ‘The modern Prince’, he argued,

the myth-Prince, cannot be a real person, a concrete individual.

It can be only an organism, a social element in which the becoming concrete of a collective will, partially recognised and affirmed in action, has already begun. This organism is already given by historical development; it is the political party, the modern form in which the partial, collective wills that tend to become universal and total are gathered together.²

It is on the basis of this citation that the figure of the modern Prince has often been understood as a euphemism or ‘codeword’ for the Communist Party. The preconditions for these readings were established by the first post-war thematic edition in six volumes of Gramsci’s prison writings, edited by Felice Platone under the guidance of Gramsci’s successor as leader of the Italian Communist Party, Palmiro Togliatti. The editorial preface to the fourth volume of this edition, entitled *Notes on Machiavelli, Politics and the Modern State* [*Note sul Machiavelli, sulla politica e*

² *Q* 8, §21, pp. 951–3 (January–February 1932). References to Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks* (hereafter, *Q*), are given to the Italian critical edition of the *Quaderni di carcere*, edited by Valentino Gerratana (Turin, 1975), following the internationally established standard of notebook number (*Q*), number of note (§), and page reference. Notes from Notebooks 1–8 are available in the English edition of the *Prison Notebooks*, edited by Joseph Buttigieg (Columbia, 1992-); where available, translations are taken from these volumes, occasionally silently modified; in other cases, translations are my own. Dates of individual notes are given according to the chronology established in Gianni Francioni, *L’officina gramsciana. Ipotesi sulla struttura dei ‘Quaderni dal carcere’* (Naples, 1984), and the revisions contained in the appendix to Giuseppe Cospito ‘Verso l’edizione critica e integrale dei «*Quaderni del carcere*»’, *Studi storici*, LII, n. 4 (2011), pp. 896-904.

sullo stato moderno] (1949), established an explicit equation between ‘the problems of the political party of the working class and of the foundation of a socialist state’ and ‘the problems of the “modern Prince”’.³ Subsequent scholarship has tended to assume a similar ‘allegorical’ perspective. Thus, for instance, the editors and translators of *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, argue that ‘the “Modern Prince” – i.e. the communist party – must organise and express a national-popular collective will’.⁴ More cautiously, other scholars suggest a more nuanced relationship, in terms of inspiration or analogy. Joseph Femia argues that ‘Gramsci ... constructed his theory of the party around an analogy with Machiavelli’s *Prince*’, while Richard Bellamy and Darrow Schechter suggest that ‘Gramsci likened the function of the Party to that of Machiavelli’s *Prince*’.⁵ On this basis, discussion in these and other works of the figure of the modern Prince has most often focused on determining the nature of the political party to which it refers, whether conceived in continuation with a ‘Leninist’, democratic-centralist conception of the party, or as a ‘Western Marxist’ alternative to it. Studies specifically dedicated to Gramsci’s relation to Machiavelli (though based on a thematic rather than diachronic reading of the *Prison Notebooks*) have offered a more

3 Antonio Gramsci, *Note sul Machiavelli, sulla politica e sullo stato moderno* (Turin, 1949), xix (editorial preface).

4 Editorial introduction to ‘The Modern Prince’, in Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, edited and translated by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (London and New York, 1971), p. 123. This interpretation has been widely echoed in both the specialist and broader literature. See, e.g., Anne Showstack Sassoon, *Gramsci’s Politics*, 2nd Edition (London, 1987 [1980]), p. 151; Louis Althusser, *Machiavelli and Us*, translated by Gregory Elliott (London, 1999), p. 13; Andreas Kalyvas, ‘Hegemonic sovereignty: Carl Schmitt, Antonio Gramsci and the constituent prince’, *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 5:3 (2000), pp. 343-76, p. 354; Maurizio Viroli, *Machiavelli’s God* (Princeton, 2010), p. 289.

5 Joseph V. Femia, *Gramsci’s Political Thought: Hegemony, Consciousness and the Revolutionary Process* (Oxford, 1981), p. 133; Richard Bellamy and Darrow Schechter, *Gramsci and the Italian State* (Manchester, 1993), p. 132. In a similar vein, see James Martin, *Gramsci’s Political Analysis: a critical introduction* (Basingstoke, 1998), p. 89; Dante Germino, *Antonio Gramsci: Architect of a New Politics* (Baton Rouge, 1990), p. 261.

expansive perspective, identifying elements of Gramsci's broader discussion of the Florentine Secretary that can be textually or plausibly traced back to passages and themes in his major works, particularly in relation to the concept of hegemony.⁶ Regarding the figure of the modern Prince itself, however, these studies have still nevertheless tended to gloss the modern Prince as the (communist) political party, even if one renovated or reformulated in Machiavellian terms, and to posit a relationship of continuity between Machiavelli's *principe nuovo* and Gramsci's *moderno principe*.⁷ Less attention has thus been given to studying the process by means of which this distinctive and complex figure itself was developed throughout the *Prison Notebooks*.

The publication of Valentino Gerratana's critical edition of the *Prison Notebooks* in 1975, however, has enabled a new approach to the study of Gramsci's thought slowly to emerge. Rather than attempting to interpret Gramsci's individual notes in a more or less decontextualized way, this approach focuses on reconstructing the forms and times of his particular arguments within the overall architecture of the *Prison Notebooks*. In particular, Gianni Francioni's pioneering work in *L'officina gramsciana* drew attention to the diachronic development of Gramsci's central concepts throughout the composition of the *Prison Notebooks* between 1929-1935.⁸ There has since emerged, particularly over the last decade, a rich season of new philological and historical studies based upon this approach, in which the study of the

6 See, in particular, Federico Sanguinetti, *Gramsci e Machiavelli* (Bari, 1981); Rita Medici, *La Metafora Machiavelli: Mosca, Pareto, Michels, Gramsci* (Modena, 1990); and Benedetto Fontana, *Hegemony and Power: On the Relation between Gramsci and Machiavelli* (Minneapolis, 1993).

7 See, e.g., Leonardo Paggi, 'Machiavelli e Gramsci', *Studi Storici*, X, n.4 (1969), pp. 833-76, p. 862; Fontana, *Hegemony and Power*, p. 3, p. 148, p. 151.

8 Gianni Francioni, *L'officina gramsciana*. See also the editorial introductions to Antonio Gramsci, *Quaderni del carcere. Edizione anastatica dei manoscritti*, 18 volumes, edited by Gianni Francioni (Cagliari, 2009), and the on-going new *Edizione nazionale* (Rome, 2007-).

development and transformation of Gramsci's concepts has constituted a central focus.⁹

Building on this season of studies, this article proposes a diachronic analysis of the development of the figure of the modern Prince in the *Prison Notebooks*, considered in its specificity. By focusing not on what the modern Prince may be argued to represent (in a relationship of 'encoding' or of metaphor) – as the large majority of studies devoted to this topic have done – but on the development of this figure itself, hitherto underexplored dimensions of Gramsci's thought can be brought to light.¹⁰ On the basis of this analysis, I argue that the significance of the figure of the modern Prince is not limited to Gramsci's theory of the political party, or to his proposal of a new strategy for the Italian Communist Party in the struggle against Fascism in the early 1930s, or even to the terms of his relation to Machiavelli in general. The development of the figure of the modern Prince also represents a specific contribution to a tradition of 'democratic' readings of *The Prince*. In the early stages of the *Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci focuses on the content of *The Prince*, arguing that the political realism that informs Machiavelli's depiction of the necessary qualities of the 'new Prince' represents a demystifying critique of the dominant ideologies of its time. With the emergence of the distinct figure of the 'modern Prince' in 1932, however, Gramsci's attention shifts to the form of Machiavelli's work. In particular, he argues that the much-contested concluding chapter twenty-six makes *The Prince*

⁹ Among the most significant recent studies, see Guido Liguori and Pasquale Voza (eds), *Dizionario gramsciano 1926–1937* (Rome, 2009); Fabio Frosini, *La religione dell'uomo moderno. Politica e verità nei 'Quaderni del carcere' di Antonio Gramsci* (Rome, 2010); Giuseppe Cospito, *Il ritmo del pensiero. Per una lettura diacronica dei 'Quaderni del carcere' di Gramsci* (Naples, 2011).

¹⁰ The development of Gramsci's theory of the political party in the *Prison Notebooks*, and its relationship with the figure of the modern Prince, thus lies beyond bounds of the present article. For recent philologically-informed studies, see Alberto Burgio, *Gramsci. Il sistema in movimento* (Rome, 2014), particularly pp. 283-97, and Guido Liguori, *Gramsci's Pathways* (Leiden, 2015), pp. 202-22.

something more than a negative critique of existing power relations. Rather, it represents the positive programme, or a ‘political manifesto’, for the emergence of a distinctive type of ‘popular’ realism founded upon the ‘merging’ of political power and political knowledge. In addition to the themes already explored in the scholarship, the modern Prince therefore should also be seen a decisive stage in the development of a distinctive interpretation of the theoretical consequences of the structure of Machiavelli’s most well known work, with important implications for our understanding of Gramsci’s political thought.

Preludes

Although it is commonly regarded as central to Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks*, the modern Prince is not present from their beginning in 1929, and in fact only appears in 6 notes, all written in 1932.¹¹ It represents the deepening and partial transformation of Gramsci’s previous studies of Machiavelli in general, and *The Prince* in particular. Gramsci had a long-standing interest in Machiavelli, dating back at least to his university years. While a functionary of the Comintern traveling through Berlin in May 1922, he encountered his old Professor Umberto Cosmo, who urged him to write the book on Machiavelli that he had long awaited from him.¹² Before imprisonment Gramsci took a keen interest in the debate then underway in Italy and Europe between liberal and Fascist returns to the Florentine Secretary. Mussolini had written his own ‘Prelude’ to *The Prince*, published in the Fascist journal *Gerarchia* in April 1924, in which he argued that Machiavelli’s text demonstrated the necessity of

11 *Q* 8, §21, pp. 951-3; *Q* 8, §37, pp. 964-5; *Q* 8, §48, p. 970; *Q* 8, §52, pp. 972-3; *Q* 8, §56, pp. 974-5; *Q* 13, §1, pp. 1555-61.

12 Antonio Gramsci, *Lettere dal carcere 1926–1937*, edited by Antonio Santucci (Palermo, 1996), p. 399 (letter to Tania of 23 February 1931).

strong leadership and a ‘fatal’ antithesis between Prince and people. Piero Gobetti’s *La Rivoluzione liberale* immediately countered with a response vindicating a ‘democratic’ Machiavelli of the *Discourses*.¹³ The debate raged throughout the 1920s: Chabod published an edition of *The Prince* in the same year with a strongly historical focus, Croce intervened in the debate with his *Elementi di politica* in 1925, while Ercole and Mosca reflected on the contemporary significance of Machiavelli in the following years.¹⁴ In the early years of his imprisonment, before gaining permission to write, Gramsci undertook a detailed survey of the press coverage that emerged in the wake of the commemorations of the fourth century of Machiavelli’s death in June 1927, as he later recalled in a letter to his sister-in-law Tania.¹⁵

Given this background, and particularly considering the importance that Machiavelli assumes at a later stage in the *Prison Notebooks*, it is notable that Machiavelli is absent from Gramsci’s first work plans, in the 4 themes outlined in a letter to Tania on 19 March 1927, and the 16 ‘principal arguments’ listed at the

13 Benito Mussolini, ‘Preludio al Machiavelli’, in *Scritti Politici*, edited by Enzo Santarelli (Milan, 1979 [1924]), p. 231; ‘Commento a un Preludio’, in *La Rivoluzione liberale*, 13 May 1924, p. 1. As this article, followed by a collage of quotations from the *Discourses*, carries no author’s name, it is plausible to suppose the involvement, if not direct authorship, of the paper’s editor, Piero Gobetti. For a reconstruction of the ensuing debate – including a brief intervention, possibly by Gramsci himself, in the pages of the newly founded *l’Unità* – see Michele Fiorillo, ‘Dalla machiavellistica “elitista” al moderno Principe “democratico”’ in *Gramsci nel suo tempo*, edited by Francesco Giasi (Rome, 2008). See also Paggi, ‘Machiavelli e Gramsci’; Leonardo Paggi, *Antonio Gramsci e il moderno principe* (Rome, 1970); Leonardo Paggi, *Le strategie del potere in Gramsci. Tra fascismo e socialismo in un solo paese, 1923-1926*, (Rome, 1984), particularly p. 404 et sqq; and Antonio Gramsci, *Il moderno principe*, edited by Carmine Donzelli (Rome, 2012). Gramsci refers to Mussolini’s ‘Prelude’ in *Q 3*, §34, p. 312.

14 Niccolò Machiavelli, *Il Principe*, introduction and notes by Federico Chabod (Turin, 1924); Benedetto Croce, *Elementi di politica*, in *Etica e Politica* (Milan, 1999 [1925]); Francesco Ercole, *La politica di Machiavelli* (Rome, 1926); Gaetano Mosca, *Saggi di storia della scienza politica* (Rome, 1927). Croce had earlier famously called Marx the ‘Machiavelli of the Proletariat’; see Benedetto Croce, *Materialismo storico ed economia marxistica* (Milan-Palermo, 1907), p. 134.

15 Antonio Gramsci, *Lettere dal carcere 1926–1937*, pp. 132-3 (letter to Tania of 14 November 1927). See also *Q 2*, §31, p. 189 (May-June 1930); *Q 2*, §36, p. 192 (early June 1930).

beginning of the first prison notebook, dated 8 February 1929.¹⁶ Nevertheless, Machiavelli appears very early in Gramsci's first notebook. The first reference is in *Q* 1, §10, written in June-July 1929 (and thus in the first weeks of Gramsci's work on his own notes). He argues that

All too often Machiavelli is considered as the 'politician in general', good for all seasons: this is certainly an error in politics. Machiavelli linked to his times: 1) internal struggles within the republic of Florence; 2) struggles among the Italian states for a reciprocal balance of power; 3) struggles of the Italian states for a European balance of power. [...] Machiavelli is wholly a man of his times and his art of politics represents the philosophy of the time that tends towards absolute national monarchy, the structure that permits bourgeois development and organization.¹⁷

This note establishes a pattern that will be repeated throughout the early notebooks, in notes written in 1929-1930. Machiavelli is considered primarily as a historically important figure in early European modernity and Italian state formation.¹⁸ This focus has led some readers – Sasso, Lefort and Althusser among them – to view Gramsci's interpretation of Machiavelli as a continuation of Risorgimento myths of national unification, particularly when related to Gramsci's related but distinct

16 See Antonio Gramsci, *Lettere dal carcere 1926–1937*, p. 54-7 (letter to Tania of 19 March 1927) and the themes noted at the beginning of the first Notebook on 8 February 1929: *Q*1, p. 5.

17 *Q* 1, §10, p. 8 (June–July 1929); compare to the 'C text' *Q* 13, §13, p. 1572 (spring–summer 1932).

18 See *Q* 1, §44, p. 43-4 (February-March 1930); *Q* 1, §150, p. 133 (late May 1930); *Q* 2, §41, p. 196-7 (early June 1930); *Q* 2, §60, p. 216 (August-September 1930); *Q* 2, §116, p. 257-8 (October-November 1930).

reflections on the ‘national-popular’.¹⁹ Gramsci’s reason for this emphasis, however, was that the debate on Machiavelli in the 1920s had made him well aware of the risks of a decontextualized reading of a Machiavelli as a ‘man for all seasons’: it was precisely to domesticate him to contemporary ideological currents, rather than to comprehend the ‘untimely’ historical force of his thought by considering it in the specific conjuncture of the crisis of the Renaissance.²⁰ Against such decontextualized readings, Gramsci emphasises the need to comprehend the specificity of the political conditions under which Machiavelli operated, in the exceptional case of a still fragmented Italy surrounded by the emerging absolutist national monarchies of early modern Europe.²¹

It is on the basis of this historical contextualisation that Gramsci then slowly but surely turns to consider Machiavelli’s theoretical importance, in *Q* 4, begun in May 1930. This is the first notebook with a section dedicated specifically to philosophical questions (entitled ‘Notes on Philosophy. Materialism and Idealism’). The first note attempts to delineate the methodology required in order to study the conception of the world, never systematically presented but operative ‘in a practical

19 Gennaro Sasso, *Niccolò Machiavelli. Storia del suo pensiero politico* (Bologna, 1980), p. 353. Elements of such a reading are also present in Claude Lefort, *Le travail de l’œuvre Machiavel*, Paris (1986 [1972]), p. 242 in particular. Lefort may have led Althusser also to overestimate Gramsci’s indebtedness to this tradition at times (Althusser’s *Machiavelli and Us* in fact opens with a homage to Lefort’s study; p. 3). For critical surveys of interpretations of Machiavelli that emerged from the Risorgimento, see Luca Sartorello, *Machiavelli nella storiografia post-risorgimentale. Tra metodo storico e usi politici* (Padua, 2009); and Alvaro Bianchi and Daniela Mussi, ‘II Principe e seus contratempos: De Sanctis, Croce e Gramsci’, *Revista Brasileira de Ciência Política* 12 (2013), pp. 11-42.

20 See *Q* 4, §8, pp. 430-1 (May 1930).

21 See Antonio Gramsci, *Lettere dal carcere 1926–1937*, p. 133 (letter to Tania of 14 November 1927). Gramsci’s reading in this sense shares something with Hegel’s emphasis upon Machiavelli’s ‘untimeliness’ in *Die Verfassung Deutschlands*, as Althusser discerned. See Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Werke*, Volume 1 (Frankfurt/M, 1971) pp. 553-8; and Althusser, *Machiavelli and Us*, p. 10.

state', in Marx's work.²² In this context, Gramsci at first critically considers but ultimately finds to be limited Croce's particular formulation of the notion of Machiavelli's political realism.²³ According to Gramsci, it was not the discovery of principles that could function as the transhistorical foundations of 'political science', as Croce had argued, that constituted the radical nature of Machiavelli's realism, and its enduring relevance.²⁴ Rather, it was the nature of Machiavelli's thought as an intervention into the ideological conjuncture of his time. Gramsci thus argues that the specific nature of Machiavelli's realism is to be sought in the political commitments that this mode of writing entails.

Machiavelli wrote for 'those who do not know', 'those who are not born in the tradition of statesmen; in the case of someone born within that tradition, the entire complex of de facto education combines with family interest (dynastic or patrimonial) to produce the character of a realistic politician'.²⁵ The autonomy of the political in Machiavelli therefore should be understood historically, as a consciously attained autonomy from the ruling ideologies of the time (morality and religion), rather than speculatively, as an irreducible metaphysical principle. For this reason, Gramsci argues that there is a significant continuity between Machiavelli and Marx, despite their apparent and real differences, because Marx also intervened with a realism that favoured 'those who do not know', the 'revolutionary class' of his historical period.²⁶

22 Alastair Davidson, 'Gramsci and Reading Machiavelli', *Science & Society* 37:1 (1973), pp. 56-80, pp. 60-1, suggests that Gramsci may have thought that these methodological criteria could also be applied to Machiavelli.

23 For the critical consideration, see *Q* 4, §4, p. 425 (May 1930), and for the subsequent critical problematization, *Q* 4, §56, pp. 503-4 (November 1930); *Q* 5, §127, pp. 656-62 (November-December 1930); and *Q* 13, §13, pp. 1572-6 (spring 1932), which discusses "'exaggerations'" derived from Croce's reading.

24 *Q* 4, §8, pp. 430-1 (May 1930). See also *Q* 8, §84, pp. 990-1 (March 1932), where Gramsci defines 'effective reality' in a dynamic sense, contrasting Savonarola's 'abstract' and Machiavelli's 'realistic' 'ought to be'.

25 *Q* 4, §8, pp. 430-1 (May 1930).

26 *Q* 4, §8, pp. 430-1 (May 1930).

The comparison of Marx and Machiavelli, considered not simply as theorists but above all as political activists in historically specific circumstances, will be one of the central organising perspectives of Gramsci's reading of Machiavelli throughout 1930 and beyond.

Gramsci's reading of Machiavelli's realism in May 1930 could thus be characterised as an inheritance of what he will later (in 1933) call a 'liberal-romantic' or even (in problematizing quotation marks) "democratic" interpretation of Machiavelli.²⁷ It is a tradition in which Gramsci includes the readings of Reginald Pole, Alberico Gentili, Rousseau, Ugo Foscolo and Mazzini. Its unifying features are perhaps best captured in Rousseau's famous claim in the *Social Contract* that 'while pretending to give lessons to kings, he gave great ones to peoples. *The Prince* of Machiavelli is the book for republicans'.²⁸ As we have seen, Gobetti's *La rivoluzione liberale* had counterposed the seemingly more 'democratic' *Discourses* to *The Prince*, effectively ceding the later work to Mussolini's decisionistic reading. The 'liberal-romantic' reading, on the other hand emphasises the 'democratic' dimensions of the *Prince* itself, or those elements of it that, read in a certain way, might contribute to empowering popular political participation and agency. Rather than a mirror for Princes, Machiavelli's work is in this sense understood as a portrait of the 'Prince', that is, of the mechanisms and strategies of political action and power. By means of

27 Q 13, §25, p. 1617-18 (May 1932-November 1933). This note draws extensively on an article by Adolfo Oxilia, who had referred to a 'romantic' interpretation. See Adolfo Oxilia, 'Machiavelli nel teatro', *Cultura*, October-December 1933. Given Gramsci's reference to this article, it is probable that this note was written in late 1933.

28 Jean Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, in *The Social Contract and The First and Second Discourses*, edited by Susan Dunn (New Haven, 2002), p. 205. On Rousseau's reading of Machiavelli, see Filippo Del Lucchese, 'Freedom, Equality and Conflict: Rousseau on Machiavelli', *History of Political Thought*, 35 (1) (2014), pp. 29-49. For an argument regarding continuities between republicanism and democracy, rather than the opposition between them invoked in some recent debates, see Stephen Holmes, *Passions and Constraint: On the Theory of Liberal Democracy* (Chicago, 1995).

their representation and analysis in Machiavelli's text, this knowledge was finally made available beyond the restricted circle of those 'born into the tradition of men of government'. *The Prince* is thus characterised in this reading as a work of demystification of the real workings of political domination and organisation, and in this precise, negative sense, as 'democratic', or in the interests of the people.²⁹

Very soon, however, Gramsci supplements this perspective with an increasing emphasis upon the distinctive literary form of *The Prince*. In *Q* 4, §9, Gramsci proposes the compilation of 'a repertory of Marxism', 'a critical "inventory" of all the questions that have been raised by Marxism'. In the immediately subsequent note, this project takes on a more concrete form through reference to Machiavelli. Gramsci projects 'a twofold work': first, building upon his comparison of only a few weeks before between Marx and Machiavelli, 'a study of the real connections between the two as theoreticians of militant politics, of action'; and second, a 'book which would derive from Marxist doctrines an ordered system of contemporary politics like *The Prince*. The argument would be the political party, in its relations with classes and the State: not the party as a sociological category, but the party that seeks to found the State'.³⁰ Immediately, however, he specifies that the decisive feature of such a book (which Gramsci, echoing Machiavelli's own formulation, here calls a 'new' rather than 'modern' prince) should be not simply its content, but also its dramatic form. 'It would thus be a case, not of compiling an organic repertory of political maxims, but of writing a "dramatic" book in a certain sense, an historical drama in action, in which

29 Gramsci focuses in particular upon Foscolo's allusion to this reading and Croce's commentary on it. See *Q* 13, §20, p. 1600; *Q* 13, §25, p. 1617; *Q* 14, §33, p. 1689. For surveys of such traditions of interpretation, see Giuliano Procacci, *Machiavelli nella cultura europea dell'età moderna* (Rome-Bari, 1995); Maurizio Viroli, *Redeeming the Prince* (Princeton, 2014); and Filippo Del Lucchese, *The Political Philosophy of Niccolò Machiavelli* (Edinburgh, 2015).

30 *Q* 4, §10, p. 432 (written in the summer of 1930). It is significant that in this note Gramsci still uses the term 'new Prince', rather than 'modern Prince'.

the political maxims would be presented as individualised necessity and not as scientific principles'.³¹ Just as Gramsci's reading of Machiavelli is strongly conditioned by the reference to Marx, so here Gramsci's conception of how to develop Marxist theory itself (as a dramatic book, rather than mere organic repertory) is transformed by the reference to Machiavelli.

The modern Prince

By the end of 1930, Machiavelli has become an important and abiding presence in Gramsci's research, as indicated by his name figuring twice (in the seventh and twentieth places) among the topics for 'principle essays' listed at the beginning of *Q* 8.³² He continues to explore both the historical and theoretical significance of Machiavelli throughout notes written in 1931.³³ It is only in January-February 1932, in *Q* 8, §21, however, that Gramsci begins to use his own distinctive figure of the 'modern Prince', rather than the 'new Prince' of Machiavellian coinage, which Gramsci, as we have seen, had previously employed. This terminological development is no longer a proposal simply to 'translate' Machiavelli's figure 'into modern political language', as Gramsci had suggested in late 1930.³⁴ Rather, it

31 *Q* 4, §10, p. 432.

32 The first reference is simply 'Machiavelli', while the second is 'Machiavelli as technician of politics and as integral politician, or politician in act' (*Q* 8, p. 935) In the 'grouping of materials' that Gramsci composes in April 1932 on the following page of *Q* 8, however, 'Machiavelli' has been promoted to the second topic. See Antonio Gramsci, *Quaderni del carcere. Edizione anastatica dei manoscritti*, Vol. 13, p. 29 and p. 31.

33 See *Q* 6, §50, p. 723; *Q* 6, §52, p. 724; *Q* 6, §66, p. 735; *Q* 6, §79, pp. 749-51; *Q* 6, §85, pp. 758-60; *Q* 6, §86, pp. 760-2; *Q* 6, §110, pp. 781-2.

34 *Q* 5, §127, pp. 661-2 (November-December 1930), in which Gramsci repeats the identification of the 'Prince' (*sans* 'new' or 'modern') with the political party. Gramsci continues to refer to the 'new Prince' at least once more after the emergence of the figure of the modern Prince in January-February 1932, in *Q* 13, §21, p. 1601 (presumably written in summer-autumn 1932). This note, however, entitled 'Continuation of the "New Prince"', is a transcription, with significant revisions, of the

functions as a form of ongoing critical appropriation and transformation, during which Gramsci will critically compare and contrast new and modern Princes, initially valorising the latter before returning to Machiavelli's text to discover hitherto undetected resources for the development of his own 'concrete fantasy'.

From the outset, the modern Prince is formulated equivocally, echoing the twofold work that Gramsci had earlier proposed in the summer of 1930 in *Q* 4, §10. It refers, in the first instance, to a work of political science that would have the same 'mythical' qualities as *The Prince*. 'Under this title [the modern Prince] can be gathered all those ideas of political science that can be assembled into a work of political science that would be conceived and organized along the lines of Machiavelli's *The Prince*'.³⁵ The dramatic dimension previously highlighted in the summer of 1930 here returns in much more specific terms. Gramsci argues that 'the fundamental character of *The Prince* is that it is not a systematic treatment, but a "living" book, in which ideology becomes "myth", that is, fantastic and artistic "image" between utopia and scholarly treatise, in which the doctrinal and rational element is personified in the "condottiere", which presents in an "anthropomorphic" and plastic way the symbol of the "collective will"'.³⁶ Machiavelli, Gramsci argues, did not have recourse to 'pedantic disquisitions of principles and criteria for a method of action'. Instead, he represented the process of the formation of a collective will in terms of the "'qualities and duties" of a concrete personage and thus stimulates the artistic imagination [*fantasia*] and arouses passion'.³⁷

The precise nature of Machiavelli's myth, however, still remains to be specified. Gramsci compares the mythical dimensions of Machiavelli's text to a

arguments developed in *Q* 4, §10, p. 432 (summer 1930).

³⁵ *Q* 8, §21, p. 951 (January–February 1932). The notion of a book of maxims or 'observations' is also highlighted in *Q* 8, §37, pp. 964-5 (February 1932).

³⁶ *Q* 8, §21, p. 951 (January–February 1932).

³⁷ *Q* 8, §21, p. 951.

conception that had exerted an important influence upon his own political and intellectual formation, like that of many of his generation, including Mussolini: namely, Sorel's notion of political 'myth'. *The Prince* is argued to constitute an 'historical exemplification' of Sorel's later notion, as both represent a 'political ideology that is not presented as a cold utopia or as a rationalised doctrine but as a concrete "fantasy" that works on a dispersed and pulverised people to arouse and organize its collective will'. Nevertheless, *The Prince* is still argued to have a 'utopian character', because, historically, Machiavelli's new Prince did not really exist; it was itself 'a doctrinal abstraction, the symbol of the generic leader, the "ideal condottiere"'. The same limitations of doctrinal abstraction are found in Sorel's notion of myth. It also appears only at a 'primitive' level of development, embodying only the moment of negative critique and not that of the positive programmatic formulation of the collective will. Sorel's 'doctrinal abstraction' remains at the level of a 'passive activity', without progressing from the destructive phase of the general strike to the properly "active or constructive" phase of the formation of the political party.

This is the context in which the modern Prince, the 'myth-Prince', is first used in relation to the political party. Unlike Machiavelli's non-existing Prince, and unlike Sorel's non-constructive, doctrinal abstraction, the political party is 'already given by historical development'; it represents a 'social element in which the becoming concrete of a collective will, partially recognised and affirmed in action, has already begun'. In the modern world, Gramsci argues with a clear implicit reference to Mussolini's decisionistic reading of the *Prince*, the political action of an individual, a charismatic condottiere, could only give rise to a restoration or reorganisation of existing political structures. Only a collective 'organism' could go beyond a merely defensive action to a creative phase of the constitution *ex-novo* of a collective will that

aims to institute genuinely new political forms, of a concretion ‘not verified by previous experience’.

The remainder of this note returns to Gramsci’s focus on the modern Prince conceived as a text, composed of two parts or ‘fundamental points’: ‘the formation of a national popular collective will, of which the modern Prince is the active and operative expression, and intellectual and moral reform’. In both cases, Gramsci emphasizes in particular the importance of the historical experience of Jacobinism, of which Machiavelli is held to be a ‘precocious’ example. He also returns to the emphasis on Machiavelli’s mode of presentation as the way in which such a modern Prince should be written: ‘The concrete points of programmatic action should be incorporated in the first part; in other words, they should arise “dramatically” from the discourse and not be an exposition of cold ratiocination’. For this reason, Gramsci concludes the substantial proposals in this note insisting that intellectual and moral reform needs to be presented in his projected work in concrete terms, for ‘intellectual and moral reform is always tied to a programme of economic reform; indeed, the programme of economic reform is the concrete way in which every intellectual and moral reform expresses itself’. The much contested concluding formulations of this note, in which Gramsci defines the modern Prince in terms that have appeared to many readers as menacingly totalizing if not totalitarian, needs to be understood in relation to this programme of moral and intellectual reform.³⁸ It is this element that he argues should ‘take the place, in people’s awareness [*nelle coscienze*], of the divinity

38 Richard Bellamy, *Modern Italian Social Theory* (Oxford, 1987), pp. 136-40 and Femia, *Gramsci’s Political Thought*, pp. 169-89 discuss difficulties in Gramsci’s formulations and subsequent criticism. Maurice A. Finocchiaro, *Beyond Left and Right. Democratic Elitism in Mosca and Gramsci* (New Haven, 1999), p. 177, suggests a reading of these formulations in light of Gramsci’s announced twofold work.

and the categorical imperative’, and which thus constitutes ‘the basis of a modern secularism and of a complete secularization of life and of all customary relations’.

At the beginning of 1932, therefore, the modern Prince functions as a critical notion in two directions. On the one hand, it is a critique of both the ‘abstract’, non-constructive’ character of Sorel’s notion of myth (which ultimately results in Sorel’s ‘ethical repugnance’ for the Jacobins, argued by Gramsci to be a “categorical” “incarnation” of Machiavelli’s *The Prince*), and the individualistic emphasis of the Fascist appropriation of *The Prince*. In this sense, the modern Prince appears as the type of political party that would be capable of inheriting a Jacobin emphasis on both moral and intellectual reform, and, as an integral element of this, of the necessity of a concrete programme of economic reform. On the other hand, the figure of the modern Prince is also a critique of the historical limitations of Machiavelli’s text *The Prince* itself. Despite Machiavelli’s partisan realism (a claim repeated in *Q* 8, §37), and despite his dramatic mode of presentation, *The Prince* remained ‘utopian’ in its own time. The concept of the modern revolutionary political party, conceived as a collective ‘organism’, is the supplement by means of which *The Prince* could be ‘actualised’, in both temporal and effective terms. The modern Prince, that is, ‘completes’ *The Prince*, providing it with the historical concretion that such a figure could not but lack in Machiavelli’s historical period.

Poetry and Structure

1932 constitutes one of Gramsci’s most intense periods of work in his entire imprisonment. He writes circa 600 notes, in comparison to circa 275 notes written during 1931. Some of the most significant conceptual developments of the *Prison*

Notebooks occur in this year, including the delineation of the notion of Marxism as a philosophy of praxis, the reconfiguration of the relationship between *senso comune* and philosophy, and the further specification of the notion of the ‘integral state’. At least four elements of Gramsci’s work from this year have a decisive impact upon the further development of the figure of the modern Prince. First, Gramsci continues his analysis both of Machiavelli in his historical period and traditions of interpretations of Machiavelli, particularly in *Q* 8 and *Q* 9.³⁹ In this period Gramsci not only deepens his argument that Machiavelli represents Italy’s first ‘precocious’ Jacobin, insofar as Machiavelli’s concern with a popular or ‘patriotic’ reform of the army was linked to the question of forging a stable basis for relations between the country and the city.⁴⁰ He also emphasises in increasingly detailed terms that Machiavelli is an almost singular forerunner of the philosophy of praxis.⁴¹ The concept of hegemony itself is rethought through the lenses of interpretations of *The Prince* and the *Discourses*.⁴² Not even Gramsci’s economic reflections are spared from this obsession with the Florentine secretary. Thus, he poses questions, via Tania, to Piero Sraffa, with whom he discussed economic theory regularly throughout his imprisonment, about Machiavelli’s possible relationship to mercantilism.⁴³

Second, Gramsci begins the composition of his so-called ‘special notebooks’. In these notebooks he both writes new notes, and also transcribes, sometimes with significant amendments, notes previously written in earlier notebooks. A special

³⁹ In *Q* 8, see §48, §52 (February 1932), §56, §58, §61, §62, §69, §86, §114 (March 1932). In *Q* 9, see §19, §21 (May 1932), §40 (June 1932), §68, §69, §70 (August 1932), §133, §136 (November 1932).

⁴⁰ *Q* 13, §1, p. 1560 (May 1932). See also *Q* 8, §21, p. 951 (January–February 1932).

⁴¹ *Q* 8, §237, p. 1090 (May 1932); *Q* 11, §52, pp. 1480-1 (autumn 1932).

⁴² See *Q* 13, §5, p. 1564 (presumably May 1932), which contains important revisions to *Q* 8, §48, p. 970 (February 1932). See also *Q* 10II, §41x, p. 1315 (August–December 1932).

⁴³ Antonio Gramsci, *Lettere dal carcere 1926–1937*, pp. 548–9 (14 March 1932). See *Q* 8, §78, p. 985 (March 1932).

notebook dedicated to Machiavelli is among these, *Q* 13, in which Gramsci rewrites and revises notes originally penned only a few months earlier.⁴⁴ This notebook effectively follows the previously announced plan of a twofold work, including notes on Machiavelli himself, and notes on the political party and political organisation more broadly. Though *Q* 13 is the notebook in which Gramsci comes closest to the plan for a systematic book on political theory, this attempted re-organisation of his research soon spills over into a significant number of entirely new notes on Machiavellian themes in other notebooks, particularly in *Q* 14, *Q* 15, and *Q* 17 (including 9 new notes), and the brief *Q* 18, seemingly conceived as a continuation of the exhausted *Q* 13.⁴⁵ From being an implicit sub-theme in Gramsci's earliest work plans, Machiavelli has now definitively assumed a central position, as the explicit subject of one of Gramsci's most elaborated notebooks.

Third, in the same period in early 1932 in which Gramsci makes the equation between the modern Prince and the political party in *Q* 8, §21, he also reads Luigi Russo's *Prolegomeni a Machiavelli*.⁴⁶ Published in 1931, Russo's book is a remarkable instance of (post-) Crocean aesthetics that is both a not-so-coded critique of the Fascist appropriation of Machiavelli, and a profound renewal and renovation of

44 Notes from *Q* 4, *Q* 8 and *Q* 9 are transcribed in *Q* 13, begun in May 1932, but limitations of space see them spill over into *Q* 18, begun in early 1934. On Gramsci's method of working with several notebooks contemporaneously and the different phases of work on the *Prison Notebooks*, see Gianni Francioni, 'Come lavorava Gramsci', in Antonio Gramsci, *Quaderni del carcere. Edizione anastatica dei manoscritti*, volume 1.

45 Giuseppe Cospito and Gianni Francioni, 'Nota introduttiva' a *Quaderno 13 (1932–1933)*, in Antonio Gramsci, *Quaderni del carcere. Edizione anastatica dei manoscritti*, volume 14, p. 154 provides an overview of the dissemination of Machiavelli throughout the 'special' and later 'miscellaneous' notebooks.

46 Luigi Russo, *Prolegomeni a Machiavelli* (Firenze, 1931), now in *Machiavelli* (Rome, 1945), from which subsequent citations are taken. Paggi, 'Machiavelli e Gramsci', suggests that Chabod was important for Gramsci's reflections. Both Donzelli (in Antonio Gramsci, *Il moderno principe*, p. 41, p. 86) and Fabio Frosini, 'Luigi Russo e Georges Sorel: sulla genesi del "moderno Principe" nei *Quaderni del carcere* di Antonio Gramsci', *Studi storici* LIV, n. 3 (2013), pp. 545-89, p. 548, however, doubt that Gramsci knew Chabod's reading directly.

the tradition of cultural critique deriving from the Risorgimento, particularly De Sanctis. While many critics have focused on Gramsci's critique of Russo's interpretation of Machiavelli, Fabio Frosini has convincingly argued that Gramsci's reading of this work nevertheless had a profound impact upon his understanding of *The Prince* in particular.⁴⁷ Its central terms are absorbed by Gramsci to such an extent that his subsequent notes on Machiavelli, particularly at the beginning of *Q* 13 but also in *Q* 8, can be read as an on-going critical dialogue with Russo's interpretation.⁴⁸

Particularly important for Gramsci is Russo's focus on the importance of *The Prince*'s concluding 'exhortation'.⁴⁹ Sometimes dismissed as merely rhetorical excess or even as a much latter addition, many readers have not known what to do with the rousing final pages of *The Prince*, seemingly discordant with the calm analytic temper of the preceding chapters.⁵⁰ In Italy in the early twentieth century, however, it was a common theme in discussions of Machiavelli, particularly following Chabod's studies in the mid 1920s.⁵¹ For Chabod, in his introduction to *The Prince* of 1924, 'of the twenty-six chapters of *The Prince*, twenty-five are rigidly logical, with clear and

47 For a focus on Gramsci's criticisms, see, e.g., Fontana, *Hegemony and Power*, p. 149, p. 182, p. 204. Frosini, 'Luigi Russo e Georges Sorel', particularly pp. 552-61, reconstructs in detail the decisive impact of Gramsci's reading of Russo upon the development of the figure of the modern Prince, particularly Russo's suggestive argument regarding the poetic architecture of the *Prince*, and the integral role played by the epilogue in it.

48 The reference to Russo occurs on the first page of *Q* 13, §1, p. 1555. See also *Q* 13, §13, p. 1573; *Q* 13, §16, p. 1578; and, earlier, *Q* 8, §48, p. 970

49 In Gramsci's six notes on the modern Prince (unlike his other notes on Machiavelli), the only direct references to Machiavelli's texts are in fact to the concluding chapter of the *Prince*, with the partial exception of a reference to the *Discourses* in *Q* 8, §48, p. 970 (also stimulated by a study of Russo's text).

50 For views on the 'extraneous' nature of the concluding chapter, see Felix Gilbert, 'The Historian's Machiavelli', in *History: Choice, and Commitment*, edited by Felix Gilbert (Cambridge, MA, 1979) p.114 and Mario Martelli, 'La logica provvidenzialistica e il capitolo XXVI del *Principe*', *Interpres* 4 (1982), pp. 262-384. For a review of the history of interpretations of this chapter, see Viroli, *Redeeming the Prince*, pp. 113-48.

51 See Federico Chabod, *Scritti su Machiavelli* (Turin 1964), particularly p. 22, p. 108, p. 130.

direct reasoning, without deviation or pause; the analysis unfolds, most delicately and incisively, the thought limits itself to a secure and cautious sobriety that distinguishes and specifies'.⁵² In the final chapter, however, Machiavelli 'lets himself be taken over by hope';⁵³ reason is replaced by faith. As Chabod later argued, 'The final chapter of *The Prince* is the releasing of the barely contained passion, which transfuses the logical outlines that have been traced out into a new creative moment, into the overflowing of its desire: it makes them hope and faith, after having contemplated them as reason and possibility'.⁵⁴ For Chabod, therefore, chapter twenty-six indicated a break with the rest of the book, in an opposition of logic and passion.

For Russo, on the other hand, the exhortation represents a 'Savonarolian' moment in *The Prince*, in which political science is transfigured into moral and even religious prophecy.⁵⁵ This moment is regarded, however, not as the invocation of a hitherto absent redeemer, or in discontinuity with or in addition to the preceding argument, but rather, as the 'logical and sentimental premise' of the entire work.⁵⁶

The political-passionate aspiration of the writer, however, is preceded by a cold and objective scientific demonstration. This transition from a scientific treatise to an argument of political passion is thus not abrupt, improvised and artificial, as some interpreters suppose; because in reality that final sentiment has been present in the entire work, reticent like that reticence usual in seriously and profoundly meditative minds.⁵⁷

52 Chabod, *Scritti su Machiavelli*, p. 18

53 Chabod, *Scritti su Machiavelli*, p. 25

54 Chabod, *Scritti su Machiavelli*, p. 69. Cf. Gennaro Sasso, *Niccolò Machiavelli. Storia del suo pensiero politico*, p. 393-400 and *Machiavelli e gli antichi* (Milan, 1987), Vol. 2, p. 52.

55 Russo, *Prolegomeni*, p. 43.

56 Russo, *Prolegomeni*, p. 83.

57 Russo, *Prolegomeni*, pp. 83-4.

The notion of an artistic unity of the Prince, or what Russo calls its ‘architectonic clarity’, becomes fundamental also for Gramsci’s reading.⁵⁸

Fourth, in early 1932 Gramsci also writes the concluding notes to what he called his ‘little discovery’ in the study of Dante. Gramsci first refers to his new reading of Canto X of the *Inferno* in a letter to Tania of 26 August 1929.⁵⁹ His reading of the famous drama of Farinata and Cavalcante is written intermittently between May 1930-August 1932, and in letters from the same period.⁶⁰ In a temporal sense, Gramsci’s readings of Dante and Machiavelli thus develop in parallel (May 1930, when Gramsci writes *Q* 4, §78, the first and most substantial note of the series on Dante, is also the month when he begins to explore the dramatic nature of *The Prince* in *Q* 4, §10). There are also, however, significant substantial parallels between these analyses, in terms of Gramsci’s sources and literary-critical assessments.⁶¹

In his reading of Canto X of the *Inferno* Gramsci polemicizes against Croce’s distinction between ‘poetry’ and ‘structure’ in his aesthetics in general and his criticism of Dante in particular (‘structure’ for Croce being understood not simply in an ‘architectural’ or formal sense, but above all as the ‘non-poetical’, or those formal and doctrinal features in the *Divine Comedy* that were not products of pure, unified intuition).⁶² While many critics of Canto X had focused on the proud Farinata, Gramsci argues that instead it is Cavalcante who constitutes the true emotional focus of the Canto, despite his all too brief appearance. When Cavalcante, interpreting Dante’s use of the past tense to mean that his son Guido is dead, falls back into his

58 Russo, *Prolegomeni*, p. 79.

59 Antonio Gramsci, *Lettere dal carcere 1926–1937*, p. 280.

60 *Q* 4, §78–§87, pp. 516–30.

61 The Dante criticism used by Gramsci, including that of Luigi Russo, is listed by Gerratana on *Q*, p. 2661.

62 See Benedetto Croce, *La poesia di Dante* (Bari, 1921), pp. 53-72, particularly p. 66. Croce revised his position in *La Poesia* (Bari, 1936).

tomb, the reader sees ‘*in action* [*in atto*] the torment of the damned’.⁶³ Dante does not ‘represent this drama’, but ‘suggests it to the reader; he gives to the reader the elements for reconstructing the drama, and these elements are given by the structure’. ‘The structural passage’, Gramsci therefore concludes, ‘is not only structure, [...] it is also poetry, it is a necessary element of the drama that has occurred’.⁶⁴

It is not simply the dramatic ‘suggestion’ of action, however, that constitutes the dialectic between poetry and structure in this Canto. As Gramsci argues nine months later, the true meaning of Cavalcante’s torment for the ‘poetry’ of the Canto is not immediately apparent with the description of his action, but only becomes fully clear to the reader retrospectively. When the ‘magnanimous’ Farinata explains to Dante the nature of the torments of the heretics in this circle, condemned to see the past and future but deprived of knowledge of the present, the full extent of Cavalcante’s anguish can be understood. ‘Farinata is reduced to the structural function of “explicator” in order to make the reader penetrate into the drama of Cavalcante’.⁶⁵ Farinata’s discourse thus reorganizes the proceeding sequence; it is only after he has spoken that the reader can ‘relive’ the drama ‘in action’ of Cavalcante’s slump into silence and grasp its significance, as the unrepresentable anguish of the moment in which Cavalcante confronts concretely the death of his son, in a present that he cannot know. The ‘structure’ of the Canto therefore gives rise to a process of retrospective reconfiguration of the earlier elements, which can now be re-read in terms of the economy only revealed by the latter developments.

A Political Manifesto

63 *Q* 4, §78, p. 517 (May 1930).

64 *Q* 4, §78, p. 518 (May 1930).

65 *Q* 4, §83, p. 524 (March 1931).

These themes strongly mark the previously mentioned special notebook, *Q* 13, entitled ‘Notes on the Politics of Machiavelli’, which Gramsci begins in the spring of 1932. It begins with a revision of *Q* 8, §21, written only a few months before. The continuous text of the earlier note is broken up into ten ordered paragraphs.⁶⁶ While the argument of the earlier note is substantially reproduced, there are also significant additions that both clarify and extend Gramsci’s earlier argument, and also fundamentally transform the interpretation of *The Prince*.

Perhaps symptomatically, *Q* 13, §1 begins directly by discussing the fundamental character of *The Prince* as a ‘living’ book ‘in which political ideology and political science are fused in the dramatic form of “myth”’, thus dispensing with the opening line of *Q* 8, §21 that had continued to project a ‘work of political science’ conceived and organised like Machiavelli’s work, but with the title of the ‘Modern Prince’. Gramsci repeats that one of the elements that distinguish *The Prince* is its dramatic method of presentation, giving a concrete form to political passions. Now, however, rather than moving immediately to the comparison to Sorel, he locates the mythical dimension of the book in its conclusion, with an explicit reference to Russo:

One will have to look through the political writers who preceded Machiavelli to see if there exist writings structured like *The Prince*. Even the conclusion of *The Prince* is linked to the ‘mythical’ character of the book. After having represented the ideal condottiere, Machiavelli, with a passage of great artistic efficacy, invokes the real condottiere who incarnates him historically. This passionate invocation reflects [*si riflette*] on the entire book, giving it its dramatic character. L. Russo’s *Prolegomeni*

66 *Q* 13, §1, pp. 1555-61. See Antonio Gramsci, *Quaderni del carcere. Edizione anastatica dei manoscritti*, Vol. 13, pp. 45-9 and Vol. 14, pp. 165-8

calls Machiavelli the artist of politics, and once even uses the word ‘myth’, but not precisely in the sense indicated above.⁶⁷

The immediately following discussion of a potential homology between Sorel’s notion of myth and Machiavelli’s *The Prince* is thus redimensioned. In January-February 1932, Gramsci had argued that both were utopian and abstract. It was the supplement of the political party, conceived as a really existing collective organism already given by the historical process, that enabled Gramsci’s figure of the modern Prince to ‘complete’ its untimely Machiavellian forerunner. Now, in May 1932, it is the structure of *The Prince* itself, and particularly the exhortation, that is valorised as a non-utopian and non-abstract mode of political writing.

with a dramatic movement of great effect, the mythical, passionate elements contained in the entire little volume are drawn together and become alive in the conclusion, in the invocation of a prince who ‘really exists’. Throughout the book, Machiavelli discusses what the Prince must be like if he is to lead a people to found a new State; the argument is developed with rigorous logic, with scientific detachment. In the conclusion, Machiavelli merges with the people, becomes the people, but not with some ‘generic’ people, but the people whom he, Machiavelli, has convinced by the preceding argument, the people of whom he becomes and feels himself to be the conscience and expression, with whom he feels himself to be one [*si sente medesimezza*]. It now seems that the entire ‘logical’ argument is nothing other than a self-reflection of the people, an inner reasoning worked out in the popular conscience, which has its

⁶⁷ *Q* 13, §1, p. 1555.

conclusion in an impassioned, urgent cry. Passion, reasoning on itself, becomes once again ‘affect’, fever, fanaticism of action. This is why the epilogue of *The Prince* is not something extrinsic, ‘tacked on’ from the outside, rhetorical, but has to be understood as a necessary element of the work – indeed, the element that projects its true light [*riverbera la sua vera luce*] on the entire work and makes it a kind of ‘political manifesto’.⁶⁸

This addition contains at least three significant developments in Gramsci’s reading of Machiavelli. First, he extends his consideration of the specificity of the literary form of *The Prince*. According to this new emphasis on the exhortation, *The Prince* constitutes a ‘living book’ not simply because of its dramatic mode of presentation, which would find its ‘natural conclusion’ in the epilogue.⁶⁹ It is also because Machiavelli’s impassioned advocacy in the conclusion that the time has come for Italy’s redemption from enslavement, oppression and scattering reacts back upon the entire preceding argument, retrospectively reconfiguring it.⁷⁰ Just as Gramsci focuses on the dramatic dimensions of Dante’s ‘indirect representation’ of Cavalcante, so too does his new reading of *The Prince* in May 1932 emphasise the significance of its ‘structure’ for comprehending its ‘poetry’. The closing pages of *The Prince* ‘incomplete’ rather than conclude it, because the entire book needs to be read again in the light of what those stirring final pages reveal. In this sense, Gramsci’s reading

68 *Q* 13, §1, p. 1556. For the manuscript version, see Antonio Gramsci, *Quaderni del carcere. Edizione anastatica dei manoscritti*, Vol. 14, pp. 165.

69 This is the reading of chapter twenty-six presented in Leo Strauss, ‘Machiavelli’s Intention: The Prince’, *American Political Science Review* 51:13-14 (1957), p. 20, while Viroli, *Redeeming the Prince*, p. 109-11 focuses on the exhortation’s indebtedness to the rhetorical tradition.

70 Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, translated by George Bull (London, 1961), pp. 80-1. Gramsci returns to emphasise the importance of the conclusion of *The Prince* in a number of subsequent notes in 1932: *Q* 13, §20, p. 1600; *Q* 13, §25, p. 1618; *Q* 14, §33, p. 1689.

builds upon yet differs from Russo's. For Russo, the exhortation represents a return of the repressed of the passionate premises of the work, which Machiavelli 'allows to come out at the last moment, enriched by a whole rich experience of particular reasons'.⁷¹ Gramsci, on the other hand, focuses instead on the structural consequences of the conclusion. Rather than the hidden but true message of the book finally being revealed in its final pages, it is the true light of the epilogue that 'reverberates' or is 'projected' back onto the entire work, thereby reconfiguring not only its form and genre, but also its content.

Second, this interpretation transforms the reading of *The Prince* that Gramsci had previously pursued. In the notes from 1930 and even those from early 1932, *The Prince* was primarily regarded in terms of its content. As a 'portrait' of the Prince, the text enabled the people to understand the nature of political power, but simultaneously maintained their separation from it, insofar as the people *qua* people continued to be posited as the object of the Prince's calculations (from which Machiavelli's text might help them to escape). Now, however, *The Prince* is understood as an enactment of the merging of Machiavelli (as representative of the knowledge of Princes) and the people, or the emergence of a qualitatively new 'people' no longer characterised by its externality to political knowledge. Political knowledge is instead regarded as internal to the people, as its own 'conscience and expression'. In the exhortation, the 'people' crafted by Machiavelli's discourse suddenly realize that all along throughout the book it has only been observing itself. The figures of the Prince that Machiavelli has explored through the text – Moses, Cyrus, Romulus, Theseus, Savonarola and Valentino – are revealed as the self-reflection of the 'people', that is, the dramatic staging of its own 'qualities, characteristics, duties and needs'. For this reading, the strategy of *The Prince* is not one of merely revealing knowledge of the arts of

71 Russo, *Prolegomeni*, p. 84.

government, but the cathartic preparation of the people for the assumption of self-governance.

Third, in a radicalisation of the ‘democratic’ reading, *The Prince* is no longer understood as a predominantly negative moment of demystification of the existing relations of political power. Instead, it represents a positive programme for the construction of new power relations. Having recognised their own features in the passionate exhortation, the people discover that *The Prince* has been no mere ‘utopian’ or ‘doctrinaire’ description, but a ‘concrete fantasy’ or even, in a clear reference to Marx and Engels’ most famous text, a ‘political manifesto’ – that is, a text that aims not at an abstract or ‘sociological’ analytic presentation of the features of a preeminent political actor, but to inspire partisan action on the part of the people itself.⁷² It is this element of a political programme in which the people can recognise its own needs that, for Gramsci, indicates a form in which utopia can become ‘concrete fantasy’. It is precisely in this sense that the programme of economic, moral and intellectual reform aiming at the formation of a ‘collective will’ that concludes the notes on the modern Prince should also be understood as an ‘exhortation’, reorganising the arguments that have led up to it and disrupting ‘the entire system’ of previous ‘intellectual and moral relations’.

The ‘Democratic’ *Prince*

Q 13, §1 from the spring of 1932 is the final note in which the figure of the modern Prince appears in the *Prison Notebooks*, on which Gramsci continues to work until 1935. The themes that he explored under this heading undoubtedly have a

⁷² Gramsci refers again to *The Prince* as a ‘manifesto’ in other notes from the same period: *Q* 13, §20, p. 1599; *Q* 17, §27, p. 1928 (late 1933).

decisive impact on his research on the political party in those years, though it is significant that the term itself is not explicitly used in this (or any other) context after May 1932.⁷³ Equally decisive is the impact that the development of the figure of the modern Prince has on Gramsci's subsequent reflections on Machiavelli's text *The Prince*. In later notes from 1933, Gramsci argues that Machiavelli's intentions can be regarded as 'more complex and even "more democratic"' than supposed by what he will come to characterize as the 'liberal-romantic' or "'democratic'" interpretation.⁷⁴ Gramsci's interpretation in 1930 had substantially coincided with that tradition's emphasis upon *The Prince's* 'revelation' of political knowledge to a hitherto ignorant people. After the development of the figure of the modern Prince, however, Gramsci instead argues that *The Prince* is a 'democratic' work because it was intended not simply to subvert the power relations of its time, but above all to promote a process of the expansion of popular political participation. Machiavelli, Gramsci writes in January 1933,

proposed to educate the people, but not in the sense that one usually gives to this expression, or which at least certain democratic currents have given it. For Machiavelli, 'to educate the people' can only have meant making the people convinced and conscious that there can exist only one politics, a realist politics, in order to attain the desired end.⁷⁵

73 Fontana, *Hegemony and Power*, argues for the Machiavellian resonance of Gramsci's notion of the 'democratic philosopher', a formulation that appears only once in the *Prison Notebooks*, in *Q* 10II, §44, p. 1332 (autumn 1932), which is dedicated to the relations of philosophy, language and *senso comune*. While it is plausible that Gramsci's previous reflections on Machiavelli influenced the themes developed here, neither Machiavelli himself nor the modern Prince are mentioned in this note.

74 *Q* 14, §33, p. 1690 (January 1933); *Q* 13, §25, p. 1617 (presumably, October-November 1933).

75 *Q* 14, §33, p. 1690-1 (January 1933). See also, from the same year, *Q* 17, §27, pp. 128-9.

This argument is distinct both from ‘traditional’ democratic readings of *The Prince* as demystifying revelation, or more recent interpretations focused on Machiavelli’s supposedly ‘democratic’ procedural proposals in the *Discourses*, either in opposition to or in continuity with contemporary ‘republican’ readings.⁷⁶ Gramsci instead locates Machiavelli’s democratic innovation precisely in *The Prince*; but ‘democracy’ in this context refers not to precocious intimations of *Ideologiekritik* or an exemplary institutional paradigm derived from the tradition of forms of government. Instead, it refers above all to the meaning that such a valorization of popular power could have had in Machiavelli’s time, as the problematic conditions in which the power of a still unformed people could emerge and be exercised. Thus, Gramsci stresses that

the ‘democracy’ of Machiavelli is of a type adapted to his times, that is, it is the active consent of the popular masses to the absolutist monarchy, insofar as it was limiting and destructive of the feudal and seigniorial anarchy and the power of the priests, insofar as it was founding of great territorial national states, a function that the absolutist monarchy could not accomplish without the support of the bourgeoisie and of a standing, national, centralized army’.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ For an example of the former, see John P. McCormick, *Machiavellian Democracy* (Cambridge, 2011); of the latter, Catherine Zuckert, ‘Machiavelli’s Democratic Republic’, *History of Political Thought*, 35 (2) (2014), pp. 262-94.

⁷⁷ *Q* 14, §33, p. 1690-1 (January 1933). Gramsci’s argument for the democratic nature of *The Prince* in this sense focuses on what McCormick characterizes as ‘outcomes’ that contribute to the well being of the demos (McCormick, *Machiavellian Democracy*, p. 22), rather than formally or substantively democratic institutions, as McCormick rightly discerns (p. 190). A surprisingly similar focus on democratic ‘ends’ can be found in Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Chicago, 1958), pp. 293-4, according to Zuckert’s reading (‘Machiavelli’s Democratic Republic’, p. 262).

In this sense, Gramsci argues, Machiavelli's *The Prince* aimed to found and to diffuse 'a popular "realism"', which would be able to teach the popular classes not only how to decipher the forms of their current oppression, but above all, eventually to attain "coherence" in the art of government' in a new political field defined by popular political protagonism.⁷⁸ While in January 1932 the modern Prince, conceived as a collective organism, was invoked in order to sublimate the historical limitations of the content of Machiavelli's text and thereby to 'complete' it, Gramsci's subsequent reflections on the form of *The Prince* lead him increasingly to suggest that it is rather the specificity of *The Prince*, as a manifesto in which the merging of political power and knowledge is enacted, that might help an eventual modern Prince to discern more clearly its own tasks in the struggle against Fascism.

Conclusion

A diachronic reading of the development of the figure of the modern Prince in the *Prison Notebooks* demonstrates that it is not simply a codeword or analogy for the political party. Rather, it is a complex point of confluence of a variety of Gramsci's research interests. In addition to themes already noted in the scholarship, it also constitutes a novel contribution to the tradition of 'democratic' readings of *The Prince*, emphasising the merging of political knowledge and power at the dawn of modernity that Gramsci argues is enacted, in however utopian a form, in Machiavelli's text.

It is precisely this emphasis that makes the figure of the modern Prince such a crucial stage in the evolution of Gramsci's views on modern politics, democracy and the tasks of the Italian Communist Party in the 1930s, and which enables a study of its diachronic development to open new perspectives also onto these broader questions.

⁷⁸ *Q* 17, §27, p. 1928 (September 18-November 1933).

Gramsci has sometimes been conflictingly depicted as either, on the one hand, the ‘architect’ of a ‘genuinely’ democratic politics (a ‘libertarian’ when not ‘pluralist’ Gramsci), or, on the other hand, as electively affine to theorists of modern democratic governance such as Schmitt, or even Mosca’s ‘democratic elitism’ (an ‘authoritarian’ if not ‘totalitarian’ Gramsci).⁷⁹ The evolution of Gramsci’s reading of *The Prince*, however, suggests that his understanding of democracy may have evolved in ‘more democratic’ directions than either of these readings suppose; ‘democracy’ here, however, refers not to normative or procedural proposals, but to the popular ‘terrain’ of modern politics itself, defined by a tension between the popular basis of political power and the political knowledge that seeks to regulate it.⁸⁰

This dimension is, finally, strongly present in Gramsci’s proposals for the development of the Italian Communist Party in the mid-1930s, particularly in terms of its relations with other oppositional political forces. Against the sectarian ‘Third Period’ of the Communist International, Gramsci’s consistent advocacy of the slogan of *Il Costituente* sought to build the widest possible movement, involving both communist and non-communist parties, in order to oppose a regime that had consolidated its power in all areas of national life.⁸¹ Machiavelli’s invocation of a ‘new Prince’ had aimed to create a terrain of popular political power; anti-Fascist political forces in Italy in the 1930s, however, found themselves confronted with the very different task of learning how to operate on this already-constituted and effectively corrupted ‘democratic’ terrain, in order to counter Fascism’s ‘fatal’ separation of Prince and people.⁸² The development of the ‘concrete fantasy’ of the modern Prince

79 On the former perspectives, see Germino, *Antonio Gramsci*, and Angelo Rossi, *Gramsci in carcere. L’itinerario dei Quaderni (1929-33)* (Naples, 2014); on the latter, Kalyvas, ‘Hegemonic sovereignty’, and Finocchiaro, *Beyond Left and Right*.

80 See Frosini, ‘Luigi Russo e Georges Sorel’, particularly pp. 569-89.

81 The most recent research on this topic is synthesized in Giuseppe Vacca, *Vita e pensieri di Antonio Gramsci 1926-1937* (Turin, 2012).

82 See Mussolini, ‘Preludio al Machiavelli’.

was one of the ways in which Gramsci attempted to think the conditions for their real, historical unification, and thus to think the necessary renovation of the existing Italian political parties in an expansive process of ‘moral and intellectual reform’.