

## A Revolution against *Capital*? Gramsci and the ‘visual angle’ of October 1917

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‘The Revolution against *Capital*’ is one of those pregnant formulations that has assumed an almost mythical status in the interpretation of Gramsci’s thought. For some readers, this formulation and the text it entitles have seemed to offer a ‘key’ to decipher the fundamental coordinates of Gramsci’s political and theoretical evolution, both in its continuities and its breaks. On the one hand, against the determinism of the ‘orthodox’ Marxism of the Second International, the 26 year old Gramsci appears to valorize the role of the will, ideas and subjectivity, which has been understood to prefigure the strongly ‘culturalist’ emphasis of the *Quaderni del carcere*. Similarly, against ‘economistic’ understandings of Marxism, this text seems to assert a more strongly ‘political’ perspective, which in its turn has been related to Gramsci’s ‘superstructural’ explorations in prison, to the neglect of engagement with the critique of political economy. On the other hand, the youthful militancy of this text – perhaps most notable in Gramsci’s definition of the Bolsheviks as ‘maximalists’, ‘the active agents needed to ensure that events should not stagnate, that the drive to the future should not come to a halt and allow a final settlement – a bourgeois settlement – to be reached’<sup>1</sup> – has also sometimes been invoked to highlight a distance that supposedly lies between Gramsci’s youthful ‘politicism’ (perhaps under the suspicious influence of Bergson or Sorel), and the more ‘mature’ understanding of institutional complexity and density present in the *Quaderni*, with concepts such ‘war of position’, ‘passive revolution’ and ‘(civil) hegemony’.

These are of course superficial readings of this deliberately and playfully paradoxical formulation of a ‘revolution against *Capital*’. They are also readings that effectively propose to read a ‘formula by means of formulae’, in the sense that they are readings that arrive to this text with a series of preconceptions regarding Gramsci’s status as a representative of a ‘Western’, ‘cultural’ Marxism, seemingly at odds with a more austere ‘Eastern’ political tradition. These images of Gramsci are the product of varying seasons of Gramsci’s reception, perhaps above all the reception of the ‘New Left’ in the 1960s and 1970s and its aftermath, particularly but not only in the Anglophone world. In those contexts, the newly discovered thought of Gramsci seemed to offer a way to maintain a nominal connection to the Marxist tradition, while distancing oneself from the ‘corruptions’ to which it had been subjected in the experience of ‘actually existing Stalinism’ (all too often equated with the Soviet experience *tout court*). It was a reception that was based upon, and which in its turn reinforced, a series of distortions and inaccurate claims regarding Gramsci’s thought in its historical context. It is one of the great merits of more recent historical and philological research that we are now in a position definitively to correct such mistaken views (even if the nature of academic fashions and reputations means that they will continue to circulate for some time).

We have known for some time, for instance, that nothing could be further from the truth than Perry Anderson’s influential claim in the 1970s that Gramsci’s ‘silence on economic

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<sup>1</sup> Antonio Gramsci, ‘La rivoluzione contro <<il Capitale>>’, *Scritti (1910-1926)*, 2, 1917, edited by Leonardo Rapone, Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana: Rome, 2015, p. 617. [‘Il fermento necessario perché gli avvenimenti non stagnassero, perché la corsa verso il futuro non si fermasse, dando luogo a una forma definitiva di assestamento – che sarebbe stato un assestamento borghese’.]

problems was complete'.<sup>2</sup> While such a claim may have seemed almost plausible to a superficial reader of the Platone-Togliatti edition of the *Quaderni* from the 1940s-50s, it clearly cannot be sustained on the basis of documents that were already available in the 1970s prior to Anderson's intervention. As Gerratana's critical edition made clear, and as subsequently scholarship has confirmed, the *Quaderni* are filled with notes dedicated to reflections on economic history, bourgeois economic theory and the Marxist critique of political economy.<sup>3</sup> These are not merely marginal comments by a neophyte, but sophisticated discussions of highly technical themes, including the tendency of the fall in the profit rate, the organic composition of capital and dialectical methodology. Crucially, as Giuliano Guzzone has emphasized, they are not a distraction from the main themes of Gramsci's writing in prison, but are absolutely central to the overall philosophical and political project pursued in the *Quaderni*. Similarly, the ongoing editorial work of the *Edizione nazionale* on this period, and particularly scholarship by Leonardo Rapone, has allowed us to redimension our understanding of Gramsci's early inheritance of the Marxist tradition.<sup>4</sup> It was an 'inheritance' in the fullest sense of the word, that is, not merely affiliation to or acceptance of an existing doctrine, but rather, an active and complex process of critical appropriation and transformation in the context of the colossal civilizational crisis of the First World War.

In truth, the notion of the Russian Revolution as a 'Revolution against *Capital*' is a dense formulation which, like the best of the young Gramsci's journalistic aphorisms, deliberately begins from an apparent contradiction in order to highlight a paradoxical truth. If the Bolsheviks could be seen to have made their revolution 'against' *Capital*, then this was only the case because of a misconception of the nature of *Capital* itself. Read as book about the 'normal' course of capitalist development, Gramsci argued, the animating spirit of *Capital* had been neutralised, 'contaminated by positivist and naturalist incrustations' (argued to be present even in Marx himself).<sup>5</sup> It was only the forceful and exceptional intervention of the Bolsheviks that enabled the recovery of *Capital* not as neutral 'science', but as a revolutionary political perspective, the 'invigorating, immanent thought' that allowed *Capital* to be read not as the 'book of the bourgeoisie', but as a guide to revolutionary action.<sup>6</sup> The Bolsheviks, Gramsci declared, 'live Marxist thought' [*vivono il pensiero marxista*].<sup>7</sup> Far from a merely

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<sup>2</sup> Perry Anderson, 'The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci', *New Left Review*, I, 100, 1976, p. 75.

<sup>3</sup> Among the most significant contributions are Derek Boothman, 'General Introduction', *Further Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, translated and edited by Derek Boothman, Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1995, and Michael Krätke, 'Antonio Gramsci's Beiträge zu einer kritischen Ökonomie', in Uwe Hirschfeld (ed.) *Gramsci-Perspektiven*, Argument, Berlin-Hamburg, 1998 [also available in a revised and updated English version: 'Antonio Gramsci's Contribution to a Critical Economics', translated by Peter D. Thomas, *Historical Materialism* 19.3, 2011, pp. 63-105]. I have also attempted to analyse the significance of these notes in Peter D. Thomas, *The Gramscian Moment*, Brill, Leiden, 2009, particularly pp. 347-362. The most comprehensive study of Gramsci's economic reflections is by Giuliano Guzzone, *Tra filosofia della praxis e Critica dell'economia politica: il problema scientifico dell'economia nei Quaderni del carcere di Antonio Gramsci*, doctoral dissertation at the Scuola normale superiore di Pisa, 2015.

<sup>4</sup> Leonardo Rapone, *Cinque anni che paiono secoli: Antonio Gramsci dal socialismo al comunismo*, Carocci, Rome, 2011.

<sup>5</sup> 'La rivoluzione contro <<il Capitale>>', pp. 617-618. ['si era contaminato di incrostazioni positivistiche e naturalistiche'].

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* ['il pensiero immanente, vivificatore'; 'il libro dei borghesi'].

<sup>7</sup> 'La rivoluzione contro <<il Capitale>>', p. 618.

rhetorical metaphor, this formulation operates theoretically and politically, enacting a dialectical unification of two elements frequently seen as opposites: of life and thought, of practice and theory, or – as we might say today – of politics and philology. This conception of a ‘living’ of Marxist thought, however, should be conceived not simply as an excess of contemporaneity, as if the Bolsheviks had somehow made fully present a hitherto repressed ‘truth’ of Marxism. Rather, what was involved in the intervention of the Bolsheviks, in Gramsci’s view, was a complex practical reflection on the modes of inheritance of a tradition, of the interweaving of the relations of force of past and present, of the ways in which ‘actualisation’ involves not simply ‘updating’ of a given resource, but a retrospective redefinition of that very resource itself. Marxist thought ‘lived’ in the action of these ‘maximalist’ Bolsheviks in the fullest sense; it was in fact only the intervention of the Bolsheviks that enabled ‘Marxist thought’ to become truly itself.

There were undoubtedly significant transformations in Gramsci’s understanding of the significance of the Russian Revolution in the long period between 1917 and the drafting of the *Quaderni del carcere* in the late 1920s and 1930s.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps the most significant of these was Gramsci’s radical and ongoing revision of his assessment of the historical meaning and actuality of Jacobinism.<sup>9</sup> While in 1917 Gramsci clearly affiliates himself, not without contradictions, to what has been called an ‘anti-Jacobin’ tradition in Marxism, he very soon, by the early 1920s at the latest, begins a reconsideration of this theme, in reflections that are simultaneously historiographical (regarding the French Revolution) and contemporary (regarding current political strategy).<sup>10</sup> By the time of the *Quaderni*, the Bolsheviks have become the direct inheritors and creative extenders of the vital core of Jacobinism, which is arguably the foundational problematic of Gramsci’s entire prison writings.<sup>11</sup> The valorization of Jacobinism becomes one of the central organizing perspectives of Gramsci’s thought, both in its absence (passive revolution as a lack of Jacobinism) and in its realization (hegemony as the actual form of an ‘essence’ of Jacobinism, or what the sadly recently deceased André Tosel efficaciously defined as a type of ‘metajacobinism’).<sup>12</sup>

Nevertheless, there are also significant continuities between the argument of the ‘Revolution against *Capital*’ and Gramsci’s ‘mature’ writings regarding the assessment of the

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<sup>8</sup> For considerations on Gramsci’s initial and later assessments of the Russian revolution, see *Gramsci e a revolução russa*, edited by Ana Lole, Victor Leandro Shaves Gomes and Marcos del Roio, Mórula, Rio de Janeiro, 2017.

<sup>9</sup> For studies of Gramsci’s evolving relation to Jacobinism, see Leonardo Paggi, ‘Giacobinismo e società di massa in Gramsci’, *Il modello politico giacobino e le rivoluzioni*, edited by Massimo L. Salvadori and Nicola Tranfaglia, La Nuova Italia, Florence, 1984; Rita Medici, *Giobbe e Prometeo: filosofia e politica nel pensiero di Gramsci*, Alinea, Florence: 2000; Rita Medici, ‘Giacobinismo’, *Dizionario gramsciano 1926-1937*, edited by Guido Liguori and Pasquale Voza, Carocci, Rome, 2009.

<sup>10</sup> On Gramsci’s engagement with the historiography of the French Revolution, particularly the work of Mathiez, see Sabrina Areco, ‘Antonio Gramsci e Albert Mathiez: jacobinos e jacobinosmo nos anos de Guerra’, *Revista Outubro*, n. 24, 2015. On the importance of the theme of Jacobinism for Gramsci’s strategic elaborations, particularly in terms of the concept of passive revolution, see Leandro de Oliveira Galastri, ‘Revolução passive e jacobinismo: uma bifurcação da história’, *Filosofia e Educação*, 2:1. 2010.

<sup>11</sup> As Paggi (‘Giacobinismo e società di massa in Gramsci’) notes, Jacobinism is a dominant theme already in Notebook I, preceding and overdetermining the elaboration of concepts such as hegemony and passive revolution. See, for instance, Q 1, §43, p. 40; Q 1, §47, p. 57; Q 1, § 48, p. 58; Q 1, § 120, p. 112 (all from February-March 1930); Q 1, § 150, p. 133 (late May 1930).

<sup>12</sup> André Tosel, ‘Gramsci et la Révolution française’, in *Modernité de Gramsci?*, edited by André Tosel, Les Belles Lettres, Paris, 1992.

Russian Revolution. These continuities are not, however, a case of a simple repetition of judgement, but of a deepening of perspective. To adopt a recurrent phrase from Labriola, the notion of the ‘living’ of Marxist thought becomes something like a ‘visual angle’ from which Gramsci will continually attempt to view and study the Revolution of 1917 and its aftermath, or a criterion by means of which he attempts to assess its historical and contemporary significance.<sup>13</sup> Gramsci does not think the Russian Revolution of October 1917 merely as an event or even ensemble of events, but as an open ended process that subsists in its endless critical interrogation, in its revisiting, or, as Gramsci will come to phrase it in the *Quaderni*, in its capacity to be ‘translated’ and thereby transformed in changing political circumstances.<sup>14</sup> The ‘Russian Revolution’ for Gramsci is thus ultimately less the storming of the Winter Palace in October than it is the entire process that unfolds throughout the attempted construction of socialism on an international scale, including the critical reflection upon that process.

This visual angle is most firmly developed and consolidated during Gramsci’s sojourn in Moscow in 1922-23. It is an experience that he will never fully metabolise, with which he is never entirely finished, upon the significance of which he will never cease to reflect, as his continuous references throughout the *Quaderni* to themes first encountered in this period attest. The memory of the debates and discussions in which he engaged in Moscow will accompany Gramsci throughout the rest of his life, functioning something like a ‘touchstone’ to which he will return to compare and contrast subsequent developments. They were eighteen intense months in which a fundamental development and also transformation and reorientation of Gramsci’s thought occurred. Such is the extent of this development, and in deference to a certain Italian tradition of the naming of the political event, that I propose to call these months ‘la svolta di Mosca’.<sup>15</sup> For it is in this period that the relations of force between Gramsci’s past, present and future will crystalize into a fundamentally new strategic orientation, which nevertheless shows strong signs of continuity with some of his earliest and most instinctual political perspectives.

Until recently, we had relatively limited knowledge of Gramsci’s period in Moscow, compared to other phases in his life. In a deliberately exaggerated and brutal way, we could say that the general perception of the importance of this sojourn in Gramsci’s biography could be summarized thus: Gramsci arrived in Moscow, became sick, sent a letter to Trotsky, had some arguments with some other Russians, fell in love, returned to Italy.<sup>16</sup> While we have long know that it was a significant period in Gramsci’s human evolution – and as we now know in more details, seemingly also a complicated one, as his affections oscillated between at least two sisters in problematical ways– its importance for his political development has tended to be less noted, particularly for those readers already blinkered by the perception of Gramsci as

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<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Antonio Labriola, *Del materialismo storico. Dilucidazione preliminare*, in *La concezione materialistica della storia*, edited by Eugenio Garin, Laterza, Rome-Bari, 1965, p. 123.

<sup>14</sup> See Q 7, §2, p. 854, where Gramsci recalls Lenin’s reflections at the Fourth Congress of the Third Communist International regarding the failure of the Bolsheviki adequately to ‘translate’ the policy of the United Front into the ‘languages’ of the non-Russian International Communist movement, particularly in western Europe (Germany and Italy *in primis*).

<sup>15</sup> The reference is obviously to Togliatti’s famous ‘Svolta di Salerno’ of 1944, decisive for the PCI’s future as party of a national ‘progressive democracy’.

<sup>16</sup> The increase in our knowledge of Gramsci’s Russian period over the last 50 years can be measured by comparing the detail in which it is discussed in Giuseppe Fiori’s classic *Vita di Antonio Gramsci* (Laterza, Rome-Bari, 1966) with Angelo D’Orsi’s recent *Gramsci: una nuova biografia* (Feltrinelli, Milan, 2017).

fundamentally a ‘Western’ theorist. In effect, Gramsci’s *russische Reise* (a *Reise* in a ‘Goethean’, formative sense) was regarded as an interregnum separating the earlier theorist of workers councils from the later advocate of a ‘modern Prince’. Indeed, it is significant that the vast majority of studies of Gramsci’s thought can be divided into those focusing on early and later periods, while the intervening period has traditionally been both less studied and less documented.<sup>17</sup>

However, recent archival and philological research – particularly but not only by Gramsci’s grandson, Antonio Gramsci Jr – has provided us with a much richer picture of Gramsci’s stay in Russia and its fundamental significance for his political evolution.<sup>18</sup> We are now beginning to appreciate the extent to which Gramsci, despite his health difficulties, engaged intensely in the work of the Comintern at the highest levels of responsibility. It is an engagement all the more remarkable precisely due to the precariousness of his health in this period. Gramsci was elected to the Presidium of IKKI on the 13<sup>th</sup> June 1922 – that is, just 10 days after his arrival in Russia by way of the Latvian border. In the following months Gramsci attends numerous meetings of and on behalf of IKKI, all the while resident in a sanatorium on what was then the outskirts of Moscow. In some weeks, these responsibilities involve almost daily travels into and out of the capital, with a schedule that would be exhausting in the best of conditions, let alone for a sick man in the midst of a Muscovite winter. While clearly an important dimension, particularly given the catastrophe unfolding in Italy precisely in this period, Gramsci’s work on the Presidium was not limited to discussing the contentious ‘Italian Question’. Rather, he is engaged with responsibilities on a wide variety of commissions in an international perspective, including work on the commission on Latin America. At the same time, he undertakes work on the Profintern, and actively seeks out contacts with the initiatives associated with a then embattled Proletkult. Nor is his engagement with Soviet society limited to the elite circles gathered around the Kremlin. He undertakes travels to major concentrations of the Russian working class at a significant distance from Moscow, coming into contact with the concrete reality of recovery from civil war and the construction of socialism to a much greater extent than almost all other representatives of the other international communist parties in this period. Gramsci also has a private meeting with Lenin, which was undoubtedly of the highest significance in terms of Gramsci being willing to assume the responsibilities and grave risks of leadership of the Italian Party soon after. In short, far from being the very paradigm of the ‘Western’ Marxist, Gramsci’s immersion in Soviet society and politics was of such a nature

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<sup>17</sup> An important exception is constituted by Giovanni Somai, *Gramsci a Vienna. Ricerche e documenti 1922/1924*, Argalìa, Urbino, 1979, which, although focusing mostly on Gramsci’s later Austrian sojourn, as indicated by the title, still contains some materials relevant for reconstructing the Russian period, as do a number of other articles authored by Somai during the 1980s. The relevant volumes of the *Edizione nazionale* aim to fill this lacuna; in the meantime, important contributions to this task are Derek Boothman’s translation of Gramsci pre-prison letters: *A Great and Terrible World: The Pre-Prison Letters of Antonio Gramsci (1908-1926)*, edited by Derek Boothman, Lawrence and Wishart, London, 2014, and Alessandro Carlucci and Caterina Balistreri’s archival study, ‘I primi mesi di Gramsci in Russia, giugno-agosto 1922’, Belfagor, Nov 2011. I am currently preparing a volume of archival materials with Craig Brandist that will make available previously unpublished documents. The brief outline of Gramsci’s activities in this article is drawn from this research.

<sup>18</sup> Antonio Gramsci Jr has published a number of editions of his archival and social-historical research, including *I miei nonni nella rivoluzione: gli Schucht e Gramsci* (Edizione riformiste, Rome, 2010) and culminating in *La storia di una famiglia rivoluzionaria* (Editori Riuniti University Press, Rome, 2014).

and extent that he might almost be regarded, with only a slight exaggeration, as an ‘honorary Russian’, particularly when his new consolidated family connections are kept in mind.

Decisively, and most importantly in terms of Gramsci’s later theoretical evolution and his development of a novel conception of hegemony in the *Quaderni*, Gramsci’s period in Moscow in 1922-23 also gave him the opportunity to engage closely with the discussions regarding hegemony then underway not only amongst the Bolshevik leadership, but throughout Soviet society. As recent research in Russian historical scholarship has emphasized, hegemony was not merely an agitational slogan that more or less disappeared from the Bolshevik vocabulary after the seizure of power in 1917.<sup>19</sup> It was not, *contra* Anderson, superseded domestically by the reality of a realized dictatorship of the proletariat and consigned merely to external affairs, in accordance with a Prussian perspective on international politics descending from Droysen.<sup>20</sup> On the contrary, the Bolshevik discourse on hegemony was, if anything, radically extended and deepened following the revolution of 1917, as Buci-Glucksmann already noted over 40 years ago and has been further confirmed by the recent work of Brandist and others.<sup>21</sup> From being a relatively limited political strategy that aimed to mobilise the peasantry under the leadership of the proletariat in a process of political modernization during the pre-Revolutionary period, hegemony after 1917 was disseminated and multiplied throughout a variety of discourses – directly political discourses, but also social, ethical and cultural discussions. In this sense, the dissemination of hegemony in the early Russian revolutionary experience and its vocabulary curiously mirrors the term’s diffusion in the Greek classical period, in which a political usage in historical texts is complemented by related but distinct meanings in philosophical, pedagogical and moral discourses.<sup>22</sup>

Perhaps the most startling case of this dissemination consists in the frequent use of the word and concept of hegemony in the debates, discussions and publications associated with Proletkult, where it literally constitutes a veritable *Leitmotiv*. During the early days of Gramsci’s stay in Russia, Kamenev republished an old text from the Bolshevik-Menshevik debates that enjoyed a certain notoriety in both official and wider circles. Most significant, however, were a series of lectures held in 1923 by the President of the Comintern, Zinoviev, on the history of the Bolshevik party, which assigned pride of place to the concept and practice of hegemony, as the living heart and soul of both ‘old’ and new Bolshevisms alike. They were published in *Pravda* soon after their delivery. It is possible that these publications may have been read by a linguistically adept young Italian then taking his first steps towards proficiency in Russian (as recent research has suggested, Gramsci had a greater knowledge of, if not fluency in, Russian at this stage than was previously thought). At the least, whether or not he was able to read the texts of these lectures directly, it seems improbable that Gramsci would

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<sup>19</sup> The fundamental work is Craig Brandist, *The Dimensions of Hegemony: Language, Culture and Politics in Revolutionary Russia*, Brill, Leiden, 2015.

<sup>20</sup> Anderson, ‘The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci’, p. 17. Curiously, Anderson repeats the claim verbatim in *The H-Word. The Peripeteia of Hegemony*, Verso, London, 2017, despite the publication of numerous studies in the intervening period that demonstrate it to be without textual foundation.

<sup>21</sup> Christine Buci-Glucksmann, *Gramsci and the State*, Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1980 [1975], p. 7.

<sup>22</sup> For the most comprehensive overviews of the concept’s development before and in Gramsci, see Giuseppe Cospito, ‘Egemonia/egemonico nei “Quaderni del carcere” (e prima)’, *International Gramsci Journal*, 2:1, 2016, pp. 49-88; and B. Bongiovanni & L. Bonanate, ‘Egemonia’, *Enciclopedia delle Scienze Sociali*, vol. III, Roma, Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 1993, pp. 470-477.

have been unaware of them, given the public attention they received in Moscow in these days. Even more significantly, given Gramsci's almost daily contact with Zinoviev in Comintern meetings and offices in precisely the period of the delivery of these lectures, it is unlikely that he would not have been conscious of their main themes and theses.

Hegemony in these discussions among the Bolshevik leadership (in the broadest sense) was conceived not simply as an alliance of the proletariat and peasantry, the *smychka* that was so often invoked in pre-revolutionary debates, admittedly sometimes in mechanical forms, in the sense of a 'yoking' together of classes, or (in a more recent vocabulary) the 'articulation' of discrete elements in an artificial and contingent unity. Rather, it was fundamentally presented as a 'method of political work', to use a felicitous phrase of Badaloni.<sup>23</sup> In the concrete political and social conjuncture of 1922-23 – the period of the institution of the NEP, following the privations of War Communism – this concretely meant that hegemony was conceived as a programme of political and even what we could call 'civilizational' development. Indeed, it was the dissemination of the discourse on hegemony that permitted the tentative rethinking of the NEP not simply in terms of a 'concession' to the peasantry (the terms in which it was sometimes presented at the time, and almost always in subsequent historiography). Rather, the reformulation of hegemony in the context of the NEP meant thinking of it in terms of a 'political offensive' by the proletariat to relaunch the project of the construction of socialism in the aftermath of the civil war.<sup>24</sup> Fundamentally, this was a development of a notion of hegemony not simply in terms of political power, or at least, not simply in terms of a notion of repressive power ultimately reducible to a paradigm of sovereignty. Rather, and more significantly, it was also an attempt to think hegemony in relational and even pedagogical terms, as a form of leadership that seeks to construct the conditions for real historical progress.

The encounter with this conception of hegemony constitutes, in my view, a genuine *svolta* in the development of Gramsci's own distinctive understanding of hegemony, or at least, the beginning of a transition to a new conception of hegemony that he elaborates progressively in both practical and theoretical terms in later years. It is a transition that occurs in 1922-23, and not in 1926, or at some point between 1929 and 1935, and certainly not in some mythical 34<sup>th</sup> or 35<sup>th</sup> notebook. Hegemony, as a distinct concept, did not play a significant role in Gramsci's writings prior to his stay in Moscow; when it is used, it is usually in the most generic sense, as (pre)dominance.<sup>25</sup> It was the exposure to these debates and discussions among the Bolsheviks, in which hegemony was not merely a curious Greek word but a real intervention into mass politics, that prepared Gramsci to attempt the practice of hegemony in the leadership of the PCd'I, and then later to extend these perspectives in historiographical, philosophical and political terms during his prison writings. If five years can seem like centuries, in Rapone's suggestive phrase (in some ways an echo of Lenin's remarks on the density of historical time in revolutionary periods), then 18 months also can seem like a lifetime. The reflection on this experience gave rise to a tension that is slowly 'released' throughout Gramsci's later years, in a concentration, critical elaboration and 'translation' of his earlier perspectives.

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<sup>23</sup> Nicola Badaloni, *Il marxismo di Gramsci*, Einaudi, Turin, 1975.

<sup>24</sup> On this dimension of the NEP, see Fabio Frosini, *Gramsci e la filosofia*, Carocci, Rome, 2003, particularly pp. 95-8.

<sup>25</sup> See the discussion in Cospito, Cospito, 'Egemonia/egemonico nei "Quaderni del carcere" (e prima)'.

It is with this ‘visual angle’ of the complexity of the Bolshevik discussion of hegemony in the early 1920s, I would suggest in conclusion, that we can understand the evolution of Gramsci’s distinctive notion of hegemony both before and within the *Quaderni*. In my view, the decisive coordinates of this evolution are not given in terms of a transition from a binary problematic of ‘hegemony-dictatorship of the proletariat’ to one of ‘hegemony-political power’ (conceived in a generic if not genetic sense), as once influentially suggested by Leonardo Paggi.<sup>26</sup> Nor can this conceptual and political evolution be adequately comprehended in terms of a transition to the relationship between ‘hegemony’ and ‘democracy’, in the abstract sense often operative in Giuseppe Vacca’s characterization of this development.<sup>27</sup> Finally, it does not seem to me that the complexity of this process is fully grasped even in terms of Gramsci’s development of reflections upon the relation between ‘hegemony’ and ‘“actually existing” Italian bourgeois democracy’, in the historically concrete and specific sense that has been proposed, with different emphases, by Giuseppe Cospito and Fabio Frosini.<sup>28</sup> Rather, my thesis is that the distinctive feature of Gramsci’s ‘mature’ conception of hegemony was shaped by a deeper and earlier problematic, within which his reflections on contemporary forms of bourgeois governance (and its crisis) were elaborated. This problematic is constituted by the transition, in 1922-23, to a dialectical notion of ‘hegemony-historical progress’, that is, to a perspective that assesses hegemony in terms of its capacity (or incapacity) to produce real instances of historical progress. As a method of political work, this strategic perspective is decisive for Gramsci prior to his imprisonment, from the *Lyon Theses*’ emphasis upon proposing solutions to the real developmental and social problems afflicting Italy, to Gramsci’s engagement with the politics of intellectuals in *On Some Aspects of the Southern Question*. It remains central to his conception of the distinctive form of proletarian hegemony or leadership throughout the *Quaderni*, as Gerratana rightly emphasised in his reflections on the varying ‘forms’ of hegemony.<sup>29</sup>

Equally, however, it is central to the ‘thought experiment’ Gramsci undertakes in prison of applying hegemony, conceived as a criterion of historical research, to the analysis of the history of consolidation of bourgeois state power. It is a thought experiment that gives rise to the notion of passive revolution, conceived as the corrupted simulacrum of hegemony. Viewed from the visual angle of Bolshevik hegemony, passive revolution, even and especially in the paradoxical form of a ‘progressive restoration’, represents the increasingly historically regressive tendency of bourgeois society. It not only becomes incapable of constructing progress as an historical act, but, in its reduction of the possibility of autonomous political activity of the subaltern classes, regresses back behind the early emancipatory promises of political modernity itself. Passive revolution thus should be understood as a ‘failure of hegemony’, in two senses, as both ‘thing’ and as ‘concept’. On the one hand, passive revolution

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<sup>26</sup> See Leonardo Paggi, *Le strategie del potere in Gramsci. Tra fascismo e socialismo in un solo paese 1923–26*, Editori Riuniti, Rome, 1984.

<sup>27</sup> For the most recent variant of this argument, see Giuseppe Vacca, *Modernità alternative: il novecento di Antonio Gramsci*, Einaudi, Turin, 2017, particularly pp. 190-228.

<sup>28</sup> See, for instance, Fabio Frosini, ‘L’egemonia e i “subalterni”: utopia, religione, democrazia’, *International Gramsci Journal*, 2:1, 2016, pp. 126-166; Giuseppe Cospito, ‘La lettura diacronica dei Quaderni del carcere’, keynote presentation at Colóquio Internacional Antonio Gramsci, 22 a 25 de agosto de 2017, Instituto de Filosofia e Ciências Humanas da Universidade Estadual de Campinas.

<sup>29</sup> See the classic study in Valentino Gerratana, *Problemi di metodo*, Editori Riuniti, Rome, 1997.



represents an instance of ‘failed hegemony’, the form taken by the bourgeois project as it encounters its class limits and begins to deny the emancipatory ideals that had accompanied its emergence. On the other hand, however, passive revolution, as a concept, is also a response to a conceptual failure, namely, the failure of the concept of hegemony to comprehend the nature and functioning of bourgeois political power. In the distinctive formulation provided by the Bolshevik debates, the concept of hegemony requires a dynamic sense of historical process, as its necessary complement; but as Gramsci comes to see, what he had attempted to characterize in the early phases of the *Quaderni* (particularly in early 1930)<sup>30</sup> as a bourgeois form of hegemony denies precisely that possibility, particularly from the second half of the nineteenth century onwards (from 1848 to the Paris Commune). It is from the progressive realization of this conceptual blockage and its significance that the formulation of passive revolution emerges, and becomes increasingly central to Gramsci’s thinking in 1932 and 1933.<sup>31</sup>

The Bolsheviks, Gramsci argued in ‘The Revolution against *Capital*’ in 1917, appeared almost as the ‘spontaneous expression of a *biological* necessity ... they *had* to take power if the Russian people were not to fall prey to a horrible calamity’.<sup>32</sup> By the time of the *Quaderni*, in its earliest phases in February-March 1930, this elemental force has become the actualisation of the ‘Jacobin’ slogan of *Die Revolution in Permanenz*, ‘something that sprang from all the pores of the society which had to be transformed’: in other words, ‘hegemony’.<sup>33</sup> In both the distance between these formulations, and in their proximity, we can measure the intensity of Gramsci’s concrete discovery, during 1922-23, of the significance of what he had earlier called, in late 1917, the ‘vivifying thought’ that was ‘immanent’ to both *Das Kapital* and the Russian Revolution.

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<sup>30</sup> The paradigmatic note is of course Q1 §44, from February-March 1930.

<sup>31</sup> First formulated in November 1930 (Q4, §57, p. 504), passive revolution is largely developed in a series of notes written between early 1932 and mid 1933.

<sup>32</sup> ‘La rivoluzione contro <<il Capitale>>, p. 620 [‘la espressione spontanea, *biologicamente* necessaria perché l’umanità russa non cada nello sfacelo più orribile’].

<sup>33</sup> Q 1, § 44, p. 54 [‘come scaturiente da tutti i pori della società che occorre trasformare’]. On continuities in Gramsci’s strategic perspective between 1917 and the *Quaderni*, see Alvaro Bianchi and Daniela Musi, ‘Gramsci and the Russian Revolution’, *Jacobin*, April 2017. For different readings of the relationship between hegemony and permanent revolution, see Fabio Frosini, *Da Gramsci a Marx*, Deriveapprodi, Rome, 2009; Peter D. Thomas, ‘A Primeira Guerra Mundial e as teorias marxistas da revolução’, *Revista Outubro*, n. 24, 2015; and Juan Dal Maso, *El marxismo de Gramsci. Notas de lectura sobre los Cuadernos de la Cárcel*, Ediciones IPS, Buenos Aires, 2016.