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**Reverberations of *The* *Prince*: from ‘heroic fury’ to ‘living philology’**

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**Abstract:**

This article explores the ways in which Gramsci’s engagement with Machiavelli and *The Prince* in particular results in three significant developments in the *Prison Notebooks*. First, I analyze how the ‘heroic fury’ of Gramsci’s lifelong interest in Machiavelli’s thought develops, during the composition of his carceral writings, into a novel approach to the reading of *The Prince*, giving rise to the famous notion of the ‘modern Prince’. Second, I argue that the modern Prince should not be regarded merely as a distinctive (individual or collective) figure, but rather, should be understood as a dramatic development that unfolds throughout ‘the discourse itself’ of the *Prison Notebooks*, particularly in the crucial phase of reorganisation in the ‘special notebooks’ composed from 1932 onwards. Third and finally, I suggest that the combination of the two preceding themes is decisive for understanding the modern Prince as a distinctive form of political organization. Rather than equated with a generic conception of the ‘(communist) political party’, this notion was developed as a part of Gramsci’s larger argument regarding the necessity for anti-Fascist political forces in Italy in the early 1930s to grow into an antagonistic collective body guided by principles of ‘living philology’.

**Keywords:** Modern Prince, Machiavelli, Living Philology, Political Organization

**Reverberations of *The* *Prince*: from ‘heroic fury’ to ‘living philology’**

‘The fundamental character of *The Prince*’, Gramsci wrote in early 1932, ‘is that it is not a systematic treatment, but a “living” book, in which political ideology and political science are fused in the dramatic form of “myth”’(*Q*13, §1: 1555: May 1932; cf. *Q*8, §21: 951: January-February 1932).[[1]](#footnote-1) Machiavelli did not indulge in ‘pedantic classifications of principles and criteria for a method of action’, Gramsci argued; rather, he represented the ‘qualities, characteristics, duties and needs of a concrete person’ (*Q*13 §1: 1555). Throughout the *Prison Notebooks*, the incarcerated professional revolutionary continually emphasizes the dramatic qualities of the fallen Florentine Secretary’s most well-known work. Such sensitivity to dramatic form is not surprising when we recall the importance of drama and the theatre in the cultural and political formation of both Gramsci and Machiavelli. On the one hand, during the intense years of WWI and its aftermath Gramsci had been a regular attendee of the theatres in Turin, in his role as the theatre critic for *Avanti!* from 1915-1920. His collected writings from these assignments amount to a substantial volume of almost 500 pages (Gramsci, 2010). Looking back upon these formative experiences at the beginning of his incarceration, in a letter to his sister in law Tania of 19 March 1927, he claimed to have discovered and helped to popularize the then avant-garde works of Pirandello, whose theatre in fact constituted the third topic in Gramsci’s first plan of work in prison (Gramsci, 1996: 56). On the other hand, Machiavelli was not merely a politician, historian and political theorist. He also wrote innovative comedies, and it is not insignificant that he intensified his interest in drama precisely at the moment of his exile from public office in Florence. Furthermore, he did not write the types of political treatises and histories that were conventional for his time. Rather, he was a stylist who infused all his works with a dramatic flavor, particularly evident in the mythical forms of *The* *Prince*, where arguments are less presented than they are ‘enacted’ in the concrete actions of menacing shapes and embodied figures.

The dramatic dimension of Machiavelli’s works, particularly *The* *Prince*, in fact seems to Gramsci to have been the Florentine Secretary’s greatest innovation and enduring legacy. Indeed, he regards this dimension of Machiavelli’s work to be of much greater importance than his supposed theorisation of an ‘autonomy’ of the political, or his role in the foundation of a supposedly ‘realist’ tradition of political science and international relations.[[2]](#footnote-2) Machiavelli, according to Gramsci, literally created the modern ‘political manifesto’ in the dramatic epilogue of *The Prince*, where the Prince, that ‘concrete phantasy’, merges with the people whose dispersed and pulverised lives it has organised into a collective will (*Q*13, §1: 1556: May 1932). Machiavelli’s ‘new Prince’ for Gramsci is not the prophet who has created his own people, according to a decisionistic reading of Machiavelli’s thought already current in Fascist readings in the 1920s, and which has only grown stronger as the ‘long twentieth century’ continues to entrap the early decades of the twenty-first in its shadows. Rather, according to Gramsci’s reading, the ‘new Prince’, a delicately embodied balance between *virtù* and *fortuna*, suddenly emerges as an ‘impassioned, urgent cry’ in the wilderness of an enslaved Italy at the end of Machiavelli’s dramatic enactment of the ‘qualities, characteristics, duties and needs’ of the people throughout the ‘text’ of *The Prince*. It is a moment of ‘fever’ or even ‘fanaticism of action’ that retrospectively reorganises the entire preceding narrative sequences (*Q*13, §1: 1555: May 1932).

In this article, I aim to explore the ways in which this distinctive approach to *The* *Prince* results in three significant developments in the *Prison Notebooks* and in Gramsci’s overall political theory. First, I analyze how the ‘heroic fury’ of Gramsci’s lifelong engagement with Machiavelli’s thought matures, during the composition of his carceral writings, into a novel interpretation of *The* *Prince* and its ‘reverberations’. This interpretation becomes foundational for the formulation of Gramsci’s famous notion of the ‘modern Prince’. Second, I argue that studying the context and mode of development of the figure of the modern Prince suggests that it should not be regarded merely as a distinctive (individual or collective) figure, allegory or euphemism. Rather, it should be comprehended as also the name of a dramatic development that unfolds throughout ‘the discourse itself’ of the *Prison Notebooks*, particularly in the crucial phase of their reorganisation into the ‘special notebooks’ that Gramsci composes from 1932 onwards. Third, I argue that the combination of the two preceding themes enables us to understand the specificity of the modern Prince as a distinctive form of political organisation. Rather than equated with a generic conception of the ‘political party’, this notion was developed as a part of Gramsci’s larger argument regarding the necessity for anti-Fascist political forces in Italy in the early 1930s to grow into a new type of political organisation, an antagonistic collective body guided by principles of ‘living philology’. I suggest in conclusion, finally, that these three dimensions of Gramsci’s ‘Machiavellian experiment’ might provide us with resources and perspectives for thinking the organisational challenges of contemporary radical politics.

**Heroic Fury**

Machiavelli was clearly one of Gramsci’s most fundamental and abiding ‘heroic furies’, in the precise sense that he proposes, echoing Bruno, in the *Prison Notebook*s: those formative intellectual experiences ‘when one doesn’t study for mere external curiosity but for reasons of deep interest’, to such an extent that the object of study takes possession of one’s whole personality, before being in a certain sense ‘metabolised’ and incorporated into a new organisation and equilibrium (*Q*16, §2: 1841). From Gramsci’s early university studies, to his keen interest in the publications marking the anniversary of Machiavelli’s death in 1927 (Gramsci, 1996: 132-3), Machiavelli remained, as Leonardo Paggi notes, not a ‘metaphor or exterior analogy, but a concrete point of reference for [Gramsci’s] entire political evolution’ (Paggi, 1969: 834; see also Fontana, 1993). This heroic fury continues during the early stages of the *Prison Notebooks*, from 1929 to 1931. During this period, Gramsci explores different dimensions of Machiavelli’s thought – for instance, his decisive position in the crisis of the Renaissance, in the political history of Italy and Europe, and his philosophical innovations (regarded as an almost solitary forerunner of Marx’s philosophy of praxis) – not simply in terms of their role in Machiavelli’s own intellectual biography, but also in terms of their capacity to reflect contemporary themes – that is, the debates of the international Communist and anti-Fascist movements.[[3]](#footnote-3) In this sense, Machiavelli here functions almost as a mirror into which Gramsci peers in order to try to discern the outlines of his own concerns, which then necessarily appear immediately in a ‘Machiavellian’ guise.

By early 1932, this fascination solidifies into a new orientation. Rather than overdetermining the perception of the present, Machiavelli is instead mobilized in the form of a specific mode of intervention; rather than reflecting the present, Machiavelli’s thought is instead valorized in terms of its capacity to illuminate it, to refract it, or even to distort and deform it in its alien light and shadows. This development is encapsulated in Gramsci’s formulation in this period of the seductive but also enigmatic notion of a ‘modern Prince’. Decisive here appears to have been Gramsci’s reading of Luigi Russo’s *Prolegomeni a Machiavelli* (Russo, 1931), as Fabio Frosini has convincingly argued (2013). In particular, Gramsci was influenced by Russo’s argument regarding the integral relationship of Chapter 26 (the concluding exhortation, or as Gramsci calls it, the ‘epilogue’) to the rest of *The Prince.* Yet Gramsci also adds his own emphasis, irreducible to the terms of Russo’s reading, regarding the way in which it is the dramatic form of *The Prince* that gives it a distinctive power of retrospective reconfiguration. In Chapter 26, Gramsci argues,

with a dramatic movement of great effect, the mythical, passional 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. 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 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*] onto the entire work and makes it a kind of ‘political manifesto’ (*Q*13, §1:1556).

The translation of this passage in the most widely consulted English edition of Gramsci’s writings – the *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, translated and edited by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith – concludes with a significantly different formulation: ‘the element which gives the entire work its true colour’ (Gramsci, 1971: 127). This translation seems to me to fail to capture the specificity of the work being done in this sentence by the rare verb *riverberare*. It thereby ascribes the *vera luce* to the entire work itself (a ‘true colour’ previously hidden but finally revealed by the epilogue), rather than specifically to the epilogue (which projects its own ‘true light’ back onto the work, and thereby illuminating it). Earlier in the same note, Gramsci had written that ‘this passionate invocation reflects [*si riflette*] on the whole book’ (*Q*13, §1: 1555). The manuscript seems to indicate that Gramsci hesitated in his choice of verbs for the concluding phrase to this paragraph (see Gramsci, 2009, Volume 14: 165). My argument is that the slight change of verbs is symptomatic of a significant conceptual precision that is crucial for grasping the implications of Gramsci’s reading of the conclusion of *The* *Prince*. While reflection implies a direct linear relation in which a subject observes itself as object, reverberation suggests a more complicated and retroactive process. Gramsci’s argument is that the epilogue does not passively ‘reflect’ what is already ‘there’ in the rest of the book of *The Prince*. Rather, it actively ‘reverberates’ or projects its true light back across the entire work, actively transforming it in a highly dramatic fashion.

It is precisely this dimension of dramatic enactment, self-reflexivity and retrospective reconfiguration that is central to Gramsci’s proposed inheritance of this Machiavellian dynamic by means of the distinctive figure of the ‘modern Prince’. The significance of this reading of the epilogue can be measured not simply in terms of what it shares with other Italian readings from the 1920s and 1930s, many of which similarly valorized Chapter 26 as structurally essential to the entire argument of *The Prince* (see Russo, 1931; Chabod, 1964; Frosini, 2013; Thomas, 2017). It can also be assessed in terms of what separates it from more recent influential approaches – both those that continue a late twentieth century tendency to minimise the structural importance of Chapter 26, as well as those that insist upon its centrality.

In terms of the former approaches, Pocock might be taken as representative of a more general tendency to regard *The Prince*’s conclusion as, at best, unsatisfactory. He expresses scepticism regarding whether the earlier chapters can be seen ‘as leading up to’ the exhortation in any logical sense (Pocock, 1975: 180). He thereby seems to reduce the final chapter to a rhetorical embellishment without argumentative priority. On this view, the liberator from barbarian domination invoked in the final chapter should be seen as merely one portrait among many in the gallery of ‘innovators’ that is *The Prince*. This gallery is thus effectivelyconceived as a ‘typology’ of innovation (158). According to this reading, Chapter 26 represents a contingent rather than logically necessary conclusion to the work; or rather, it represents no real conclusion at all, but instead, a sign of the work’s effective ‘incompletion’. For this perspective, the true significance of *The Prince*, and its true conclusion, is arguably only later realised by the effective sublation of its themes in the institutions outlined in the *Discourses* (particularly when read through a ‘Guicciardinian’ lens; see McCormick, 2003), the finally found republican forms capable of taming and making endure the content of the earlier work(cf. Pocock, 1975: 182).

In terms of the latter approaches – that is, those that instead regard Chapter 26 as central not only to *The Prince* but to Machiavelli’s entire political thought – Viroli (2014) provides a strong defence of its significance in terms of the notion of the political myth of a ‘redeemer’. While articulated in a moral vocabulary linked to notions of a ‘civil religion’, ‘moral renewal’ and even a (surprisingly and arguably Crocean) conception of a ‘religion of liberty’ (Viroli, 2010: 286; Viroli, 2014: 141), Viroli’s emphasis upon Machiavelli’s new Prince as a ‘redeemer’ cannot but effectively situate itself, today, in a complicated relation to the decisionistic tradition that dominated interpretations of *The Prince* throughout the twentieth century, from Mussolini’s theorization of a ‘fatal’ separation of Prince and people onwards (Mussolini, 1979). For this tradition, Machiavelli’s figure of the new Prince is a prophet whose resolution and self-legitimation literally creates himself. Only after such self-affirmation can this new Prince go in search of the people he will both create and motivate by means of his redemptive myth. Viroli goes so far as to inscribe Gramsci in this tradition (2014: 141-5). His reading, however, surprisingly relies upon the order of argumentation presented in the now outdated thematically organized postwar publication of Gramsci’s carceral writings (Gramsci, 1949), rather than the more recent and authoritative critical edition (Gramsci, 1975). Viroli (2014: 144) thus mistakenly assumes that Gramsci classified *The Prince* as a ‘political manifesto’ before he argued that the work’s intended audience was the popular classes (who are thus depicted as the recipients of this appeal). In reality, however, Gramsci clearly highlighted already in May 1930 (*Q*4, §8: 430-1) the popular foundations of Machiavelli’s project, and only later, in early 1932, suggested that *The Prince* could be seen a ‘political manifesto’, precisely because it took the people as its point of departure rather than arrival.

Gramsci’s conception of the ‘reverberation’ of the epilogue of *The Prince* back across the entire preceding work instead represents a significantly different understanding of its significance, with important consequences for the way in which he proposes to inherit its dynamic in his own thought. Like Pocock’s reading, Gramsci suggests that the epilogue does not ‘conclude’ *The Prince*, in the sense of providing its argument with a logical fulfilment. Rather, it instead ‘incompletes’ it, in the sense of preventing the text from achieving closure in a final and definitive ‘meaning’. However, whereas Pocock’s reading appears to understand this incompletion in a negative or debilitating sense (a state of weakness only to be overcome by the transition to the more assured *Discourses*), Gramsci’s instead posits it as an enabling and self-reflexive dimension of the new practice of political writing embodied in Machiavelli’s text. The reverberation of the epilogue incompletes *The Prince* in the sense that it requires us to read the entire work again in the light of what those stirring final pages reveal, both in themselves and in all the pages that preceded them. Viewed in this light, *The Prince* constitutes a ‘concrete fantasy’ because Machiavelli’s impassioned advocacy in the epilogue that the time has come for Italy’s redemption from enslavement, oppression and scattering reacts back upon the entire preceding argument (Machiavelli, 1961: 80-1). The figures of the Prince that Machiavelli has explored through the text – Moses, Cyrus, Romulus, Theseus, Savonarola and Valentino – are revealed as having been nothing more than the self-reflection of the ‘people’ upon its own limitations, and crucially, potential capacities.

In terms of dramatic theory, this understanding of a text’s incompletion constitutes an inversion of the Aristotelian sequence according to which *anagnórisis* [recognition, or discovery] should give rise to *peripéteia* [reversal]. For Aristotle, it is knowledge that constitutes the condition of possibility for the reversal of the tragic narrative. This reversal or reconfiguration of the tragic narrative’s temporal flow and internal organization relies upon the recognition of that which was not known before.[[4]](#footnote-4) According to Gramsci’s understanding of the structural role of the epilogue of *The Prince*, however, it is instead a type of ‘reversal’ (of perspective), a looking backwards and active recollection, that enables a startling ‘re-cognition’, in the etymological sense of the word: that is, a rethinking of all that was previously taken for granted in its apparent obviousness. In the epilogue, the always conflicted and plural ‘people’ (because traversed by antagonistic political ‘humors’) crafted by Machiavelli’s discourse suddenly realizes that all along throughout the book it has only been observing itself, that is, the dramatic staging of its ‘qualities, characteristics, duties and needs’.[[5]](#footnote-5) Only now, at the moment of the narrative’s *auto-détournement*, can the people recognise, or re-think, those capacities as its own.

The epilogue of *The Prince* thus makes the book a kind of ‘political manifesto’ because it performs – in a strong, ‘structural’, sense – the very process of liberation that the protagonist of the book has been called upon to enact. The people thereby discover that *The Prince* has been no mere ‘utopian’ or ‘doctrinaire’ description, but the ‘concrete fantasy’ of its own really existing capacities, above all, for self-liberation and self-governance. The ‘collective singular’ people interpellated in this way thus become its own ‘redeemer’, though not in the sense of a subjectivist or voluntarist excess (*pace* Negri, 1999: 320; Althusser, 1999), or Viroli’s sense of a myth aiming to motivate the action of a leader separate from and preceding the people (2014: 3). Rather, the people becomes the author of its own collective self-determination and self-reflection, ‘leading itself’ towards the sublation of the ‘primordial fact of politics’, or the overcoming of the distinction between rulers and the ruled, which Gramsci defines as the central distinguishing feature of hegemonic politics (*Q*15, §4: 1752). It is this complex Machiavellian dynamic that Gramsci proposes to inherit and to actualize in the figure of the modern Prince, a concrete myth and expansive process of ‘moral and intellectual reform’ (*Q*13, §1: 1560).

**An ‘historical drama in action’**

The emergence of the notion of the modern Prince thus constitutes not simply a novel reading of Machiavelli, but also a fundamental development in Gramsci’s conception of the potential forms of self-emancipation of the subaltern classes. Yet if the appearance of the modern Prince in the Spring of 1932 marks a Rubicon that defines the ulterior development of the *Prison Notebooks* project, it is surely not coincidental that this occurs in the same period (early 1932) when Gramsci begins what have been called his ‘special notebooks’ (*Q*10-13, 16, 18-29). In these notebooks Gramsci transcribes previously written notes, sometimes with significant amendments and always in new organizational relations between notes, alongside composing entirely new reflections.[[6]](#footnote-6) My thesis is that the modern Prince should be understood not simply as a distinctive figure, exhausted in its presentation in the surprisingly small number of notes in which it is explicitly nominated in early 1932.[[7]](#footnote-7) Rather, I argue that the modern Prince should be regarded as the name of Gramsci’s subsequent intellectual and political project, from the Spring of 1932 until its (in)completion in 1935 (that is, when failing health leads Gramsci to cease drafting the texts of the *Prison Notebook)*, and even beyond until Gramsci’s death in 1937 – particularly in his renewed recommendation to his party comrades, shortly before his death, of the slogan of the constituent assembly as a method of anti-Fascist struggle that he had previously essayed in 1930 (see Lisa 1973). The modern Prince, that is, becomes in 1932 the name for the refoundation of Gramsci’s entire project, an implicit presence that redefines all dimensions of his thought, even and perhaps especially when it is not mentioned.

What is the nature and mode of this refoundation? Much earlier, in the summer of 1930, Gramsci had proposed to write 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’(*Q*4, §10: 432). Immediately, however, Gramsci specified that the distinctive feature of Machiavelli’s *The Prince*, which any modern rewriting of it must also embody, is 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 the political maxims would be presented as individualised necessity and not as scientific principles’ (*Q*4, §10: 432).

I would like to suggest that the ‘modern Prince’ needs to be understood in a similar sense; namely, not as a systematic presentation, codified in a singular figure or a series of directly political maxims or organisational proposals, conceived as a euphemism for the political party. Gramsci’s was no ‘Menardian’ project of quixotically attempting to ‘repeat’ his predecessor’s Renaissance text in the changed conditions of the full-blown crisis of political modernity represented by Fascism. Such a project would make the modern Prince the type of ‘deliberate anachronism’ seemingly pursued by Borges’s Pierre Menard, ‘Author’ (in an overpowering sense) of *Don Quixote* (Borges, 1998: 95). However, Gramsci was not trying to rewrite *The Prince* according to the interpretation of a still influential tradition that has read it as a cumulative linear narrative exhibiting various component parts of an already known figure or given political form. Such a reading would in effect reduce Machiavelli’s ‘little book’ to the *Specula principum* genre that preceded it (and which Machiavelli’s intervention revolutionized and arguably made redundant).[[8]](#footnote-8) Rather, Gramsci’s project consisted in the more difficult project of ‘re-inhabiting’ the dynamic that he comes to see as the distinctive feature that makes of Machiavelli’s text a qualitatively new genre of political writing. Gramsci’s modern Prince in this way does not merely ‘repeat’ Machiavelli’s ‘new Prince’, but inherits its critical force under radically changed conditions. In this sense, Gramsci’s project can be understood as ‘Menardian’ in a more profound sense, if we remember that Borges’s author in truth aimed not simply to re-inscribe Cervantes’s seventeenth century words in the twentieth century, but to reproduce his ‘meaning’, not despite but because of all the centuries that separated them.

For this reason, I argue that Gramsci’s ‘modern Prince’ should be understood not as one distinctive ‘figure’ alongside the many others that emerge within the overall architecture of the *Prison Notebooks* (for instance, the ‘organic intellectual’, the factory worker subject to Fordist discipline, the ‘subaltern’, and so forth). Rather, the translation of Machiavelli’s ‘new Prince’ into Gramsci’s distinct notion of a ‘modern Prince’ gives rise to a dramatic development that unfolds throughout ‘the discourse itself’ of Gramsci’s later carceral writings, alchemically transforming the dispersed and pulverized lives of the subaltern social groups into a new principle and practice of social organisation (*Q*13, §1: 1561: May 1932). From May 1932 onwards, the ‘modern Prince’ becomes something more than a rubric under which are gathered Gramsci’s reflections on politics, and the reference to Machiavelli something more than one topic among others. Above all, the notion of an impassioned urgent cry retrospectively reorganising a preceding ‘logical’ sequence, of reason become ‘affect’, becomes fundamental to both the content and the form of Gramsci’s later notes. The modern Prince is elaborated not only in the notes that explicitly cite Machiavelli, and not only in the notes in which Gramsci discusses the political party or political organisation. Rather, conceived in this more expansive sense as a ‘living book’, the modern Prince is developed above all, in a practical form, in the 21 notebooks (that is, the majority of the 29 *Prison Notebooks*, in number if not in pages) that Gramsci compiles from spring 1932 onwards, including notebooks of both revised texts and new departures.[[9]](#footnote-9) These ‘special notebooks’ are the true ‘creation of a concrete phantasy’, or the modern Prince ‘in action’.

The form of these later notebooks have often struck even the most attentive readers as signs of Gramsci’s exhaustion, as if he were attempting to shore up fragments against his impending ruin in something similar to the time-honored tradition of a ‘commonplace book’.[[10]](#footnote-10) It may indeed seem that these later notebooks often do not speak of political organisation at all, but rather cultural, socio-economic or historical themes. At first sight, they do indeed appear to discuss the relatively ‘non-political’ themes of, for example, culture, Risorgimento, catholic action, popular literature, literary criticism, journalism, folklore, Fordism, the development of subaltern social groups, and historical linguistics. However, far from an effective retreat from politics, I argue that these special notebooks need to be understood as a process of working out the possible forms of a proletarian hegemonic apparatus, that is, of undertaking the rigorous reconnaissance of the intertwining of the national and international terrains that Lenin had recommended to Western Communists in the debates over the United Front in the early 1920s. It was precisely this perspective that Gramsci continually recalled throughout his imprisonment as ‘lodestar’ guiding his solitary researches (*Q*7, §16: 865-7).

Taken together, I would argue that these special notebooks constitute an articulated ‘cognitive map’ (in a Jamesonian sense) of the many different ‘terrains’ of the modern Prince. Out of the diversity and richness of the themes in these notebooks Gramsci slowly composes a sketch, or many sketches, of the forms of popular practice and organisation that could constitute a politics ‘of another type’, an antidote to the politics of ‘passive revolution’ that Gramsci had extensively analysed in historical terms in his earlier notebooks in 1930 and 1931 (see, for instance, *Q*4, §57:504: November 1930).[[11]](#footnote-11) Just as the conclusion of Machiavelli’s text retrospectively redefines the logical sequence that has led to it, so too does the architecture of the *Prison Notebooks* fold back upon itself, as lines of research in earlier notebooks are ‘re-formed’ in the context of this refoundation of Gramsci’s politico-theoretical project. No mere ‘transcriptions’, Gramsci’s re-organisation of his previous notes in the special notebooks fundamentally transforms their meaning, even and especially when – again in a ‘Menardian’ fashion – their outward form may seem simply ‘to repeat’ with greater or smaller revisions the content of earlier notes. In the terms developed in Gramsci’s reading of the epilogue of *The Prince*, the light of the modern Prince ‘reverberates’ back through both earlier and later notes. In the process, the forms of abject subalternity induced by the bourgeois hegemonic project that were analysed in the earlier notebooks under the rubric of ‘passive revolution’ are redimensioned into the passionate forms of potential self-liberation of the subaltern social groups. The modern Prince in this sense becomes a structural principle of the later phases of the *Prison Notebooks*, the dramatic discourse that concludes – or rather, ‘incompletes’ – them as a ‘living book’, in a perennial openness to innovations-to-come.

**‘Living philology’**

If the modern Prince is conceived as not merely a figure or entity, but as a dramatic development within the structure of Gramsci’s texts, a ‘collective singular’ that synthesises his disparate fields of research into a coherent and strategic political project, this also has consequences for the way in which we can understand Gramsci’s theorization of the nature of the modern Prince in relation to the organization of the anti-Fascist struggle. Fascism had reduced the Italian subaltern classes to a status similar to that which Machiavelli had diagnosed in his own time: ‘More enslaved than the Hebrews, more oppressed than the Persians, more widely scattered than the Athenians; leaderless, lawless, crushed, despoiled, torn, overrun’ (Machiavelli, 1961: 81). Only a thorough-going constituent process, and not the arrival of any singular redeemer, could liberate the Italians from the barbaric Fascist yoke. What could be the forms and modalities of such a constituent process of political struggle?

For Gramsci, they needed to be thought in terms of processes of totalising moral and intellectual reform, or a ‘politics of another type’, in Lenin’s sense.[[12]](#footnote-12) In the early 1930s in Italy, this involved a renewal of the neglected politics of the United Front from the early 1920s, with Communists engaging in active political relations and alliances with other anti-Fascist forces in a durable and substantive, rather than merely tactical or ephemeral, way. Gramsci’s proposal was that the translation of the ‘living book’ of the modern Prince into organisational form thus needed to be thought in terms of what he had earlier characterized as a type of ‘living philology’ (*Q*7, §6: 857: November 1930). The formation of the ‘collective organism’ of the political party, Gramsci argues, should involve a process of ‘active and conscious co-participation’, ‘compassionality’ [*con-passionalità*], and the ‘experience of immediate particulars’ (*Q*11, §25: 1430: July-August 1932). When these conditions are realised, he argues, the political party becomes not merely an institution or apparatus, but an ongoing practice of the ‘living philology’ of popular political ‘relations of force’ capable of intervening on the terrain of mass politics. It is this dimension that makes the modern Prince, as an organisational form, something much more than a euphemism for an already existing and known type of political party. On the contrary, as the historically concrete realisation of the practice of living philology, the modern Prince is represented as a process of experimentation in the construction of an unprecedented future, and the formation of a new type of political party.

I would thus argue that modern Prince should properly be understood as conceiving the political party not in a formalist or abstract sense, but rather as a process of the extension and maturation of one of the decisive roles of political parties in the modern world: that is, as a decisive step towards the achievement of the institutional and political autonomy of the subaltern classes. From being a singular instance of ‘political condensation’ amidst a multiplicity of social interests, the political party is instead thought as a totalising political, social and ultimately ethical process, capable of embodying the learning processes of the subaltern classes. The party-form that Gramsci attempts to delineate thus cannot be limited to any of the usual figures by means of which modern political thought has traditionally conceived such a ‘composite political body’, whether as institution, apparatus or subject. The modern Prince elaborated into a new party-form does not represent a type of nascent state-organization confined within the paradigm of constitutionalism, according to which the party functions as a discrete ‘political’ instance of organisation besieged on all sides by the anarchy of the associative ‘social’; sovereignty always and everywhere ‘from above’. Rather, ‘the modern Prince’,

as it develops, revolutionises the whole system of intellectual and moral relations […] the Prince takes the place of the divinity or the categorical imperative, and becomes the basis for a modern laicism and for a complete laicisation of all aspects of life and of all customary relationships (*Q*13, §1:1561).

No mere institutional apparatus, the modern Prince is conceived much more as a totalising process of civilisation reformation and refoundation. Rather than a unity closed within itself, the modern Prince is here conceived in startlingly terms as a ‘categorical imperative’, the ‘organiser [of a popular-national collective will] and simultaneously active and effective expression’ of the same (*Q*13, §1: 1561: May 1932).

**Conclusion**

The development of the figure of the modern Price, its reverberation throughout the *Prison Notebooks*, and the delineation of its organizational consequences, was Gramsci’s final recommendations for the forging of a new United Front in his own time. I would suggest that this Machiavellian metaphor, and particularly the method of its dramatic development, provides us with resources and perspectives for thinking the challenges of contemporary radical politics. For after reason’s slumber in the long epoch of the neo-liberal counter-revolution, the uprisings, revolutions and oppositional movements of the early twenty-first century have posed a fundamentally Gramscian question: how is it possible to coordinate the diversity of experiences, interests and values of our pluralised, pulverised and dispersed *popolo* into a hegemonic force capable not simply of resisting the current order, but of initiating a constituent process, the construction of a socialist order in the forms of struggle already underway? One of the ways of searching for an answer to this theoretical and practical challenge may be to experiment with Gramsci’s Machiavellian technique of the dramatic enactment of the ‘qualities, characteristics, duties and needs’ of the people itslef, in which Prince and people, form and content, knowing and feeling, merge into the reverberating forms of their collective and totalising expansion.

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1. References to Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks* follow the internationally established standard of Notebook number (*Q*), number of note (§), followed by page reference to the Italian critical edition. Dates of individual notes are given according to the chronology established in Francioni 1984, and the revisions contained in the appendix to Cospito, 2011. I have consulted and profited from all existing English translations of Gramsci’s writings, but have often modified them or offered substantially different translations of passages especially significant for my argument. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For Gramsci’s critical consideration of the Crocean thesis of an autonomy of the political in Machiavelli, see *Q*4, §4: 425: May 1930; *Q*4, §8: 430-1: May 1930. On the refashioning of Machiavelli as a particular type of ‘realist’ in the context of the emerging cold war, see Guilhot, 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See, e.g., *Q*1, §44: 43-4: February-March 1930; *Q*2, §60: 216: August-September 1930; *Q*4, §8: 430-1: May 1930; *Q*5, §127: 657: November–December 1930. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. ‘The finest form of recognition [*anagnórisis*] is one attended by reversal, like that which goes with the recognition in *Oedipus*’ (Aristotle, 1984: *Poetics* 1452a, 31-3). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. On the constitutive multiplicity of Machiavelli’s *popolo*, see Del Lucchese 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. On the different phases of Gramsci’s work, and their reorganization in the special notebooks, see Francioni 2009 and 2016. On the significance of the later ‘miscellaneous’ notebooks, see Antonini, forthcoming. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The ‘modern Prince’ in fact appears only in 6 notes throughout the *Prison Notebooks* (*Q*8, §21: 951-3; *Q*8, §37: 964-5; *Q*8, §48: 970; *Q*8, §52: 972-3; *Q*8, §56: 974-5; *Q*13, §1: 1555-61). All were written in 1932, and *Q*13, §1 is the term’s last appearance, despite the fact that Gramsci continues to write until 1935. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. As previously suggested, elements of this reading to me to be present in Pocock’s (1975) interpretation of the internal coherence of *The Prince*, whereas Skinner (1978: 118) emphasizes the extent to which Machiavelli revolutionized the pre-existing genre, though in a different sense from that highlighted by Gramsci. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. On the dates of composition of the special Notebooks, see Cospito 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. On the constitutive and productive ‘incompletion’ of the *Prison Notebooks*, see Gerratana 1997. On the novelty of the practice of compiling notebooks in Gramsci’s intellectual evolution (previously defined by the daily rhythms of journalistic production and publication), see Francioni 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. For a reconstruction of the temporalities of Gramsci’s varying usages of the formula of passive revolution, see Thomas, 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. The reference is to Lenin’s characterisation of the Soviets as representing a form of political ‘power of a completely different type’, in comparison to constitutional parliamentary democracy. See Lenin, 1964, Volume 24: 38. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)