

Gramsci and the political

From the state as 'metaphysical event' to hegemony as 'philosophical fact'

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One of the forms in which the waves of protests against the 'new world order' in the 1990s and, particularly, the varied political and social movements of the new millennium have been registered in political philosophy has been in a renewed interest in the nature of 'the political' and its relationship with 'politics'. Even and especially in their hesitations, weaknesses and defeats, these movements have prompted debate over the coordinates necessary to define a realistic leftist political project today. In turn, these discussions have reopened, at least for a significant 'minoritarian' current, the question of the contribution that philosophical practice can make to projects of political emancipation.

The return of 'the political'

Schematically, we can distinguish between at least two broad 'camps' or approaches to the question of the nature of 'the political' operative in contemporary leftist political philosophy. One current – strengthened by its intersection with the revival of normativity in mainstream philosophy – has sought to formalize the relationship between 'politics' and a particular concept of 'the political' in a foundational sense, with the latter providing the ground or origin for the former. Determining the nature of the political is then seen as the *sine qua non* for the elaboration of political practice, precisely because politics is represented as but the conjunctural instantiation of a structure of 'the political' that necessarily and always exceeds it. While by no means limited to it, the rediscovery of the figure of Carl Schmitt by leftist political philosophers (particularly in the anglophone world) has perhaps been emblematic of this initiative.¹ For not so well disguised 'Platonizing' theories such as Schmitt's and its latter-day derivatives, 'the political' is not produced, constituted or even repressed by politics; rather, it is productive and constituting of it, preceding it in both a temporal and logical sense. In this perspective,

'the political' denotes an autonomous and irreducible realm of human experience whose basic structures and logic are distinct from other equally autonomous and irreducible realms: 'the social', 'the economic', 'the aesthetic' and so forth. Thus, just as any particular social practice participates in the 'logic' of the social, so any particular political act must participate in and finds its meaning within the logic of 'the political'.²

Whatever the claims sometimes made regarding its radical gritty realism, the Schmittian concept of the political in reality participates in one of the most venerable illusions of the Western metaphysical tradition: namely, the dogmatic assertion of a moment that provides the essence for the contingent events that are determined by it. Political philosophy, as the specific form of philosophy that thinks the political (and as distinct from modern political science, which can only analyse 'mere' politics), claims to have a privileged access to this moment, as the art of symptomatically reading the traces of the political whose nature is precisely to remain forever concealed as an essence within the mundanity of politics or concrete political activity. The claim, however, is of course tautological: in so far as this concept of the political is itself already a metaphysical construction, a certain type of metaphysical philosophy cannot but have privileged access to it, in a relationship of mutual confirmation. What remains unthought in this entirely traditional approach is both the production of the conceptual space of the political within philosophy and the constitution of philosophy itself, the material forms in which the political achieves its hegemony over politics and philosophy asserts its mastery of both.

Another current – which could perhaps be characterized as contemporary political thought's reconstructive 'transcendental' mode – has attempted to undermine such a traditional notion of the political by instead setting out to determine the conditions of possibility for genuinely radical political engagement.³ In effect,

this approach offers a notion of a 'real political' or 'true politics' as a substitute for the pale imitations of traditional political philosophy and 'official' politics. Žižek, for instance, in polemic with Schmitt in particular and the 'entire history of political thought' more generally – 'ultimately nothing but a series of disavowals ... of the proper logic of political antagonism' – has argued that 'a leftist position should insist on the unconditional primacy of the inherent antagonism as constitutive of the political': 'the internal struggle which traverses the social body'.⁴

For Žižek, the political thus ultimately finds its foundation in the social, or rather, it is precisely the suppression of the constitutive internal division of the social that requires the emergence of the political as the terrain of its resolution, in its turn suppressed or deformed by existing politics. Beginning in a similar way from contemporary forms of political and social conflict, Alain Badiou and other figures associated with him such as Sylvain Lazarus argue that a truly radical politics today can only exist at a certain 'distance' from the state, in a space uncontaminated by the logic of what Badiou calls, with a post-Maoist formula curiously reminiscent of Bordiga, 'capitalist-parliamentarianism'.⁵ Contemporary 'official' politics figures as but a deformation of the 'Real', the site of genuine political conflict, from which 'a politics of a different nature', in Badiou's revealing phrase, may emerge.⁶

The role of philosophy for this approach consists in comprehending the emergence of these moments of 'true politics', as symptomatic of the 'genuinely' political and distinct from its forms of disavowal (in Žižek) or mimetic imposture (in Badiou and Lazarus). It is arguable, however, if this current is any better placed than the former to provide a useable account to contemporary political movements of either the constitution of the space of 'the political' as it currently exists, the role of philosophy in this process of constitution or their mutually reinforcing domination of politics itself, beyond an appeal to trust in a decisionist declaration: *hic rhodus, hic saltus!*

Gramsci's theory of hegemony has not figured prominently in recent debates in anglophone political philosophy. Reference to Gramsci in contemporary intellectual culture is strongly influenced by the paradigm of 'Neo-Gramscianism', which has been more concerned to present Gramsci as a viable (neo-) Marxist theory within International Relations and its subdiscipline of International Political Economy than with matters directly philosophical. It is therefore all the more interesting to observe how the history of

interpretations of Gramsci's theory of hegemony has been marked by variants of the two aforementioned contemporary approaches. Togliatti's interpretation of *The Prison Notebooks* as the outlines of a 'general theory of politics' that could underwrite the manoeuvres of the post-World War II Italian Communist Party, for instance, tended to present Gramsci's notion of hegemony in terms arguably consonant with a strongly foundationalist notion of the political. Gramsci's genius was to have produced the most viable Marxist candidate for inclusion in the pantheon of the 'classics' of Western political philosophy. On the other hand, the Eurocommunists' later championing of Gramsci as a theorist of modernization and development (supposedly justifying various 'historical compromises' from the 1970s onwards) was accompanied by a reading of his concept of civil society as the true locus of political power, only subsequently sequestered formally by the existing state form. The seizure of political power therefore required a laborious prior work of construction 'outside the state' in order to deprive it of its supports. More recently, there have even been attempts to articulate or synthesize Gramsci and Schmitt, either suggesting that Gramsci's and Schmitt's thought is compatible in certain key respects or arguing that Schmitt provides a salutary corrective to deficiencies in Gramsci's thought.⁷

Despite these and other interpretative traditions, it is nevertheless my contention that a less overdetermined reading of *The Prison Notebooks* today can discern an alternative to both Platonizing and transcendental modes, or at least the outlines of a possible exit from them. *The Prison Notebooks* attempt to rethink the concept of the political in both non-metaphysical and concrete terms by means of a theory of hegemony. According to this reading, Gramsci does not provide a theory of 'the political' as such, even less than he provides a 'general theory of politics'. Rather, he attempts to provide an analysis of the 'production' or, more exactly, 'the constitution of the political' – constitution in both the active and formalized sense – as a distinct social relation within what *The Prison Notebooks* describe as the bourgeois 'integral state'. 'Hegemony' describes the process of this constitution, or the way in which historically identifiable political practices – the social relations of communication, coordination and organization of the project of a particular class or social group – have come to define the nature of 'politics' as such, as its politico-philosophical 'distillate'. In its turn, this analysis forms the foundation for an attempt to think the possibility of a notion of a political 'of a completely different type' (to paraphrase Lenin's

description of the status of Soviet power in the ‘dual power interregnum’ of 1917), a notion and practice of ‘the political’ that would be adequate to the formation of what Gramsci calls a ‘self-regulated society’.

Central to this analysis are three general lines of research of Gramsci’s overall project in *The Prison Notebooks*, with the latter two being read through the optic of the former: first, a non-essentialist theory of translatability between social practices; second, an anti-metaphysical definition of philosophy; and third, a critique of the integral relationship between all philosophy hitherto and the (bourgeois) state form (in Gramsci’s terms, the ‘integral state’), conceived as a dialectical unity of civil society and political society or the institutionalized form of the political. The purpose of this article is to elucidate some of the novel elements of this threefold theoretical movement and to suggest one of its possible meanings for radical politics today.

Translatability, speculation and the state as ‘metaphysical event’

Gramsci was inspired to elaborate a theory of translatability in the first instance by Lenin’s remark to the Fourth Congress of the Third International in 1922 that the Russian Revolution had not yet been able to ‘translate’ its language into the Western European languages.⁸ Trained as a linguist, Gramsci explored the significance of this enigmatic statement in a variety of contexts, not least in his comparative historical linguistics and its analysis of the relations between dialects and national languages.⁹ It is also central to his theory of the relationship between philosophy and politics (and history), as the major representative forms in which a wider range of social relations are ‘condensed’. In 1931, having criticized at length Croce’s attempt to posit a ‘non-political’ or purely ‘philosophical-conceptual’ foundation for philosophy, Gramsci argues that

we arrive thus at the equality of, or equation between, ‘philosophy and politics’, thought and action, that is, at a philosophy of praxis. Everything is political, even philosophy or philosophies ... and the only ‘philosophy’ is history in action.¹⁰

Rather than the reductive or derivative forms of an hierarchical causation, or of an external articulation or even overdetermination of distinct and autonomous realms governed by their own logic, Gramsci posits the relationship between philosophy and politics, thought and action, as a dialectical relationship of simultaneous identity and distinction. This identity is not

posited as a function of a foundational essence, the originary unity of which is ‘expressed’ and thereby ‘realized’ in different terrestrial forms. Rather, the identity of philosophy and politics is conceived as an active relation of ongoing translation between different organizational levels and forms a class’s or social group’s activities; it is precisely this translation into different registers that retrospectively and temporarily ‘unifies’ a class’s project and allows its philosophical and political dimensions to be grasped as ‘attributes’, to use a Spinozian conceptual structure, of an achieved, rather than originary, ‘substantiality’. In other words, there is no *Ursprache* for Gramsci, just as little as there is a *telos* of immediate comprehensibility, in a homogenizing Esperanto; ‘translatability’ for Gramsci implies the always unfinished and therefore transformable nature of relations of communication between different social practices.¹¹

Furthermore, the distinction between these forms is grasped as ‘quantitative’ rather than ‘qualitative’, related to differing intensities of organization, confirmation and contestation of social relations rather than unbridgeable distinctions between incompatible logics that precede them. Philosophy in this perspective figures as a particularly intense form of organization of the social relations of knowledge within which political practice occurs, and thus as itself already a form of highly mediated institutional and discursive political practice. Equally, politics, in so far as it attempts to modify the organization of the social relations of which knowledge forms an integral part, is itself already a form of highly mediated philosophical practice. Politics, that is, is comprehended as philosophy ‘in the practical state’.

This non-essentialist notion of translatability lays the foundation for Gramsci’s claim that metaphysics represents not the ‘hard core’ of philosophy but only one of its possible conjunctural ‘forms’. Like other Marxists of his generation, though not perhaps those of our own, Gramsci remained committed to the particular version of the more general late-nineteenth-century critique of metaphysics elaborated by Marx and ‘popularized’ by the late Engels. This critique insisted that metaphysical concepts must be rationally translated into their real forms of historical existence, as socially particularistic and temporally limited discursive forms that falsely claim a universal and ahistorical validity. In Gramsci’s particular case, the post-Marxist Croce’s distortion of this critique and attempt to apply it to Marx’s thought itself prompted a significant extension and precision. Following Marx’s *Theses on Feuerbach*, Gramsci identified ‘speculation’ as the hard core or

‘mode of production’ of the metaphysical form of philosophy.¹²

Croce had claimed, as Gramsci noted, ‘to have sought to “expel” from the field of philosophy any residue of theology and metaphysics, up to the point of negating any philosophical “system”’.¹³ At the same time, he asserted that Marxism and its pseudo-concepts represented nothing more than a variation on traditional dual-world explanations of the metaphysical tradition. Marx’s ‘economic structure’, argued by the late Engels to be determining of other social practices ‘in the last instance’, was for Croce nothing but a modern variation of the Platonic *eidos*. Elaborating the philosophical coordinates that would later be exploited, often unknowingly, by various seasons of ‘post-Marxism’, Croce proposed a critique of Marx’s thought as ‘essentialist’: it accorded full reality only to the structure, leaving the superstructure to be grasped as mere appearance, mimetic failure or phenomenon. Marxism, Croce claimed, remained indifferent to real history, because it had already declared it to be essentially unreal.

Gramsci returned the charge with interest: if Croce could see in the founding propositions of the materialist conception of history only a speculative metaphysics, then this was because his own thought was essentially speculative.¹⁴ Croce was unable to grasp the historical dynamism of Marx’s notion of structure as an ensemble of active social relations due to the unbridgeable distinction that the Crocean system posits between historical events and the conceptuality used to comprehend them: in other words, it was due to Croce’s unwitting restoration of metaphysics at the very moment of its supposed negation. For Croce, the structure of genuine thought in the form of philosophical concepts necessarily remains unsullied by historical development (as opposed to the merely ‘pseudo-concepts’ operative in practical action, dismissed as instrumental ‘ideology’).¹⁵ Philosophical concepts are given in thought qua thought, as a ‘higher’, speculative form of knowledge of the Real, purified of practical distractions.¹⁶ Thought can at best reflect history in the sense of a *speculum* (more or less accurately, depending upon the ‘purity’ of the concept), but it cannot participate in it and its fundamental ‘logical’ structure is not altered by it. Croce’s own attempted identification of history and philosophy, Gramsci argued, therefore remained trapped in an ‘idea’ of history that was unable to comprehend its own historicity. It could only presume to reflect upon reality as if from outside it, rather than acknowledging its own practical constitution as an element within it – in other words, the status of this ‘philosophy’ itself

and its purified concepts as instances of ‘ideology’, or practical interventions into the conceptual and political organization of the present.

For Gramsci, it was thus a question of deciphering this speculative disposition as an index of the political development of a class project, or of resolving ‘speculation into its real terms [as] ideology’. Rather than as being definitive of philosophy as such, the speculative metaphysical form of philosophy is thereby recognized as a particular phase in the historical development of an ideological formation. It is symptomatic of a phase of achieved social and political hegemony that seeks to insure itself against dissolution and disaggregation by means of ideal refinement and conceptual perfection.¹⁷ In this sense, in so far as philosophy is defined as a practical social relation alongside others, the way is open to think the transformation of philosophy by the social relations it seeks to comprehend, or, in other words, the status of thought itself as a social relation of communication, coordination and organization.

The notion of translatability also has a determinant impact upon Gramsci’s critical reworking of the Hegelian notion of the state, in accordance with the young Marx’s critique. Marx had viewed the failed transition between civil society and the state in Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right* as revealing not merely of a flaw in Hegel’s political philosophy or even in the Hegelian dialectic and philosophy in general, but of a fundamental reality of the modern state as such. ‘Hegel is not to be blamed’, Marx argues, ‘for depicting the nature of the modern State as it is, but rather for presenting what *is* as the *essence* of the State’.¹⁸ For Marx, Hegel’s speculative hypostatization provided an all-too-true likeness of reality, a mimetic failure in the fullest sense: Hegel’s categories merely imitated – or in Gramsci’s terms, ‘translated’ – and thereby ratified an appearance that was no mere expression of an essence, but had been produced by the suppression of a complex series of political mediations. Thus for Marx, the modern bourgeois state itself figures as a pre-eminently ‘metaphysical event’. In Gramsci’s terms, it is the concrete realization of speculation as an extensive form of social organization.

Gramsci critically extends the terms of Marx’s critique of Hegel by means of the notion of the dialectical unity of ‘civil society’ and ‘political society’, two instances analytically separable but ‘organically’ united within the bourgeois ‘integral State’.¹⁹ For Gramsci, the ‘political society’ (which in Gramsci’s sense means not only ‘official’ politics, but organizing and coordinating functions throughout the social formation) of the bourgeois integral state is a particular

‘condensation’ (to use a term of Poulantzas) of social relations, forces and forms of organization in the civil society that political society itself has either made possible or, at the least, overdetermined.²⁰ It is their institutional organization or comprehension, in speculative terms. Like Marx, Gramsci argues against Hegel that civil society is the true ground of the state, and not vice versa. At the same time, however, also following Marx, Gramsci acknowledges that in bourgeois society the ‘state’ (comprehended here as the concrete institutional functions embodied in the relations of ‘political society’) really is primary, in the sense that it is a real abstraction or hypostatization that subordinates and organises civil society. ‘Enwrapped’ and interpenetrated by this existing political society, civil society can then only figure as its subaltern ‘raw material’.²¹ Political society, that is, posits itself as a speculative comprehension of a civil society that is constituted in its particularity precisely by political society’s claim to be an instance of organizing universality. Stated in Schmittian terms, it is the institutional realization of the claims of ‘the political’ to dominate and to organize ‘politics’; in Gramsci’s terms, it is the speculative translation of the bourgeois class’s project.

This condensation or speculative translation was historically effected by the bourgeoisie by means of a novel political practice, encapsulated in *one* of the concepts of ‘hegemony’ present in *The Prison Notebooks*.²² Gramsci undertakes numerous studies of this process of the constitution of the political in various national contexts throughout his prison studies. As a distinctively modern political practice aiming to compose atomized, juridically free individuals into larger collective social bodies, bourgeois hegemony has traversed the boundaries between civil society and political society, simultaneously a form of both ‘civil’ and ‘political’ organization and leadership. It is the social relation of coordination and direction through which the bourgeois class project made the transition from a merely (economic) corporative to a properly hegemonic or political phase, successfully positing its own particular interests – above all, the form of private property – as valid for the society as a whole. The history of political society hitherto has consisted in its conscious separation from civil society, as the speculative juridical resolution of the contradictions of the social forces in corporative civil society. The practice of bourgeois hegemony itself, that is, has

been the means by which ‘the political’ has been ‘constituted’ as a distinct realm of social experience, concretely produced and institutionally formalized as the foundation of any possible ‘politics’. Indeed, in so far as a distinct political society is a social form that came into being only with the modern world, it is thus properly defined as bourgeois political society, like Hegel’s bourgeois civil society (*bürgerliche Gesellschaft*), just as the political is properly defined from this perspective as ‘the bourgeois political’.

This perspective in itself would be enough for a critique of those Platonizing or normative notions of ‘the political’ that posit it as a space prior to and determining of the moment of politics. Against this



traditional current of Western political philosophy, with its assertion of a relationship between the political and politics as one of generality/particularity, conceptuality/instantiation or determination/determinateness, Gramsci’s theory of hegemony seeks to demonstrate that the political of the bourgeois integral state is not constitutive but, rather, has been historically constituted in precise institutional terms – including and perhaps above all in the ratifying institutional forms of ‘political philosophy’. According to Gramsci’s analysis, ‘the political’ represents neither an origin of nor derivation from ‘politics’, but, rather, a highly mediated form of politico-philosophical organization, a philosophical ‘distillate’ of the bourgeois class’s hegemonic project. It is the level of speculative conceptuality corresponding to and organizing the already speculative structures of political society. A political philosophy that proposes this concept of ‘the political’ is merely repeating the unilateral and eternalizing translation of particular political practices into a speculative metaphysical concept that has already been achieved by bourgeois hegemony.

Gramsci's notion of the integral state, however, also provides a critical perspective on what I have referred to as a 'transcendental' mode of contemporary political thought, alongside other approaches with similar practical consequences. Existing political society and its organizing logic in the bourgeois political are not mere illusions to be wished away, or a location to be avoided. Rather, they are hypostatizations or real abstractions whose mode of existence consists precisely in the speculative relation they actively establish to politics at whatever 'distance' from the state: bourgeois political society and its accompanying 'political' posit 'real politics' as their object in order to 'contemplate' them, each in their own fashion, with the political seeking to regulate and dominate the possibility of any particular political act, just as political society juridically polices its concrete realization. It is therefore not a question of subtracting the deformations of the existing political society in order to reveal a hard core of 'politics' in the Real, be it in social antagonism, civil society or an indeterminate place beyond it. On the contrary, in so far as the



hypostatized forms of the bourgeois political really *do* determine the conceptual space in which politics in this social formation can occur – not only 'official' politics, but politics in the broader Gramscian sense, or social relations of organization – it is much more a case of determining the particular forms of practice, even and especially in their conditions of subalternity to or interpellation by the existing political society, that are capable of rupturing its material constitution from within. That is, those forms of activity and organization that might be adequate for the formation of a political 'of a completely different type'.

Towards hegemony as 'philosophical fact'

It is in his theory of non-bourgeois or proletarian hegemony that Gramsci attempts to outline the political practices that would be adequate to the constitution of this new concept and reality of 'the political'. Rather than as a regulative instance foundationally distinct from and prior to 'politics', Gramsci configures this notion of 'the political' as a theoretical moment *within and contemporaneous with* 'politics'. The reference to Lenin is once again decisive for Gramsci's theoretical elaboration. In 1931, he argued that the late Lenin's 'theorization and realization of hegemony' in the post-revolutionary conjuncture – Gramsci's emphasis lies upon both terms, theorization *and* realization – constituted a 'great "metaphysical" event'.²³ Gramsci is referring here to Lenin's attempt – albeit limited and ultimately tragically defeated – to elaborate a form of social organization in the first extensive workers' 'non-state state' that would permit the Russian proletariat (particularly the industrial working class) to forge a 'composite body' with other oppressed classes (above all, the peasantry), providing them with democratic leadership and participation in an expansive political form.²⁴ It was a "metaphysical" event' in so far as it ruptured the stability of the constituted state form, its political society and logic of the political, comprehended as forms of 'institutionally realized' metaphysics. It aimed to subtract social relations and forces from the conceptuality of the bourgeois political by actively demonstrating at least the potential for an alternative form of social and political organization based upon radically different, non-speculative and non-hierarchical principles.

In 1932, however, Gramsci attempted to go further and to generalize this insight into a theory of a specifically proletarian practice of hegemony that could be translated into the 'languages' of the other European countries, with their different traditions and class compositions. Gramsci's fully developed theory of

hegemony thus consists in three integrally related 'moments': first, the attempt to 'translate' Lenin's practical elaboration of the pre-Russian revolutionary notion of hegemony in the post-revolutionary conjuncture into theoretical terms; second, the deployment of this theory for the study of the historical constitution of the bourgeois political in the West (viewed as the retrospective negative image of proletarian hegemonic practices in the East); and, third, the attempted further translation of this theory into concrete proposals for the forms of organization in which the popular classes in the West, under the leadership of those sections located in the 'decisive nucleus of economic activity' (that is, the waged working class capable of denying the bourgeoisie its material supports in the realm of production), could be unified into a political force capable of confronting and defeating bourgeois state power.²⁵

The year 1932 represents Gramsci's *Annus mirabilis*, the year in which, articulating various aspects of his critical carceral researches, he formulates them into a positive programme of a 'philosophy of praxis' as a necessary component part of such forms of political organization and leadership among the popular classes. Only the most general outlines of this movement, in terms of its delineation of an alternative notion of the political, can be elucidated here. Central to the project of a philosophy of praxis is the elaboration of a different 'form' of philosophy that would not be speculative or metaphysical, and thus – following the young Marx's critique of Hegel – complicit with the 'metaphysical event' of the bourgeois state, but would rather be an active social relation of knowledge seeking to increase the 'coherence' of popular classes' political interventions. This philosophy – '*immanent to the things on which it philosophizes*', in Labriola's felicitous phrase – would not consist in the ideal unification and domination of that which lies outside it, but would instead be the 'translation' of or theoretical moment internal to the self-organization of the ensemble of social relations.²⁶

Rather than the mere 'unity of theory and practice', or the external articulation of discrete elements, Gramsci argues that such a philosophy of praxis must aim to produce instead the active and ongoing 'identification of theory and practice'.²⁷ He argues that

If the problem of producing the identity of theory and praxis is posed, it is posed in this sense: to construct, on the basis of a determinate practice, a theory that, coinciding and identifying itself with the decisive elements of the same practice, may accelerate the historical process taking place, render-

ing practice more homogeneous, coherent, efficient in all of its elements, strengthening it to the maximum; or, given a certain theoretical position, to organize the indispensable practical element for setting it to work. The identity of theory and praxis is a critical act, by means of which practice is demonstrated to be rational and necessary or theory to be realistic and rational.²⁸

The production of the identity of theory and practice then becomes the critical art of finding, in a Spinozist fashion, the adequate theoretical form of a practice, capable of increasing its capacity to act, on the one hand, or, on the other hand, the adequate practical form of a theory, capable of increasing its capacity to know.²⁹ Rather than as a function of the domination of the state form, this non-metaphysical form of philosophy is redefined as a relationship of enabling pedagogy. It attempts to act as the theoretical comprehension of actually existing practices, describing their tendencies and lines of potential development as concrete acts of organization and coordination rather than normatively prescribing their necessary forms from above.

Translated into political terms, it is the active dimension of the working class movement's hegemonic project itself, conceived as a potentially extensive, non-bureaucratic organizational form, which indicates the possibility of the constitution of a political of a completely different type. The traditional relationship is inverted; the materiality of the organization of social relations (that is, politics) asserts its hegemony over its comprehension in a speculative conceptuality (that is, 'the political'). The outlines of a different type of political now emerge, integrated with rather than separate from politics and configured as the theoretical form of self-comprehension of the practices to which it remains integrally related in relations of ongoing translation.

Thus, towards the end of May 1932, Gramsci returns to a consideration of the late Lenin's attempt to develop a proletarian form of hegemony – theoretically and above all practically – and formulates its significance in a non-metaphysical register. 'Ilich', he argues,

advanced philosophy as philosophy in so far as he advanced political doctrine and practice. The realization of a hegemonic apparatus, in so far as it creates a new ideological terrain, determines a reform of consciousness and of methods of knowledge: it is a fact of knowledge, a philosophical fact.³⁰

Gramsci thus progressed from a theory of the bourgeois state as a 'metaphysical event', produced by bourgeois

hegemony's constitution of the political, institutionalized in a distinct political society and reinforced by its official political philosophies, to a theory of proletarian hegemonic practice as a (potential) 'philosophical fact', in so far as it aims to unite philosophy and politics, thought and action, in a self-regulated social form.

'A political of a completely different type'

What actuality is there today for Gramsci's theory of hegemony as an analysis of the constitution of the (bourgeois) political and the outlines of an alternative form of proletarian hegemony based upon a philosophy of praxis? The political terrain in most national formations has radically changed from the period in which Gramsci, following Lenin, focused upon strengthening the political relations between minoritarian working classes and majoritarian peasantries, even if such relations of 'dialectical pedagogy' now constitute, on an international terrain, one of the most important fronts of the contemporary struggle against the latest phase of capitalist globalization. The continuing penetration of the commodity form into all spheres of life, the reorganization of the labour process in 'post-Fordist', 'high-tech', or precarious neoliberal forms and the concomitant decomposition of traditional working-class identities and communities would seem to deny such a theory of its material supports, even if wage labour is now more generalized than ever before. Above all, the profound political defeat of the socialist movement in the twentieth century and the ongoing disaggregation of leftist organizational forms are a long way from Gramsci's description of the formation of a 'Modern Prince' as an 'organization of struggle'.³¹

The contemporaneity of the theory of hegemony of *The Prison Notebooks* consists, in the first instance, in the theoretical distance it allows us to take from this present and the forms in which it is often comprehended. On the one hand, Gramsci's critique of 'the political', as a historically produced 'bourgeois political', provides a warning against leftist temptations to participate in contemporary political philosophy's turn to normativity – itself an integral element of the contemporary revival of metaphysics as a response to the institutional crisis of an increasingly technicist bourgeois philosophy. In particular, it provides an argument for why the resort to a metaphysical concept of the political such as Schmitt's cannot be regarded as a solution to the continuing organizational difficulties and marginalization of the Left, or the foundation for an authentically 'political' politics. On the contrary, in so far as it reproduces in theoretical form precisely the passifying speculative structure that

governs current official politics, it is an 'essential' part of the problem.

At the same time, Gramsci's approach also warns against the debilitating dimensions of approaches that seek a point of leverage in a space that would supposedly escape the political in its currently constituted form and the official politics it ratifies, whether it be sought in a 'true politics' beyond/at a distance from the state or even in a return, as Mario Tronti has recently suggested, to the 'world of labour(s)'.³² Dialectically integrated within the integral state, these practices are already subject to overdetermination by the speculative logic of the bourgeois political, posited as objects of its contemplation and ideal coordination. Recourse to them will not find an uncontaminated space from which an external assault upon existing political society could be launched; nor will it discover a terrain of *potentia* to be mined for arms in the struggle against a now parasitic *potestas*, as Negri proposes, constituent power versus the existing state of affairs. Rather, it will encounter the bourgeois political in perhaps its most intense and pure form, in the claim of the non-political status of merely 'technical' organization – always and everywhere, of course, 'from above'.

The concrete negation of this hypostatization will only occur on the basis of renewing an organic relationship between leftist theory and forms of organization that already exist in the wide variety of practices and social relations that today compose what Gramsci referred to as the 'subaltern social groups': from 'instinctive' resistance to the extraction of surplus value, to rejection of the commodity form as satisfaction of social need, to nascent political demands for 'another world'. Necessarily, in their current disaggregation and subalternity, these forms are often incoherent and ineffective. They nevertheless remain the forms 'given by historical development'; if they are not yet the social element 'in which the becoming concrete of a collective will, partially recognized and affirmed in action, has already begun', as Gramsci described the political party of his day, they nevertheless constitute the only basis upon which such a Machiavellian 'concrete "phantasy"' could arise.³³

The decisive role of theory in this conjuncture lies not only in the elaboration of the 'raw materials' in 'civil society' (the non-political in an 'official' sense) that could form the foundation for a future self-regulated society. Just as crucially, precisely in order to liberate those 'raw materials' from their subaltern interpellation by the existing political qua principle of speculative organization, it also requires the attempt to elaborate on the terrain of existing 'political society'

new practices of proletarian hegemony, conceived as political leadership within the popular classes, capable of challenging its speculative logic; forms in which theory's role will be more that of an enabling 'descriptive immanent grammar' of initiatives already under way rather than that of a regulative instance or even externally posed utopian prescription.

The main challenge for contemporary socialist political theorists and philosophers, that is, does not consist in the attempt to elaborate an 'alternative', leftist concept of the political, in order to gain, finally, its own mastery of politics. Nor does it consist primarily in the critique of the normative and metaphysical pretensions of this conceptuality of the actually existing bourgeois political and its ratifying political philosophy, nor even in the – absolutely necessary – critique of their continual intrusions into the socialist project itself. Rather, the task today is to attempt to put politics 'in command' within philosophy itself: that is, to practice philosophy as an organizational form of social relations that seeks to formulate adequate theoretical 'translations' of the concrete social and political relations and practices of resistance that alone will be able to give rise to a 'political of a completely different type'.

Notes

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1. Many themes of the current Schmitt revival were prefigured in the turn to Schmitt within Italian Marxism in the 1970s, particularly by Mario Tronti in the 'autonomy of the political' debate – a rich season of political theory that unfortunately has not yet received the attention it deserves in international discussions.
2. For Schmitt, of course, the specificity of the political consists in the irreducibility of the friend–enemy distinction. See Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, trans. George Schwab, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1996.
3. Rather than in the present indicative, this transcendental 'style' proceeds retrospectively, reconstructing the conditions of possibility of a memory in order to propose it in the conditional future: 'Radical political engagement existed; how was it/could it become possible (again)?' In so far as he posits the dual immanence–imminence of radical politics today, requiring more to be revealed than reconstituted, Negri is excluded from this approach, although the concrete political positions that emerge

from his presuppositions arguably have more in common with it than either the 'democratic materialist' Negri or his antagonists Badiou and Žižek would be comfortable to admit.

4. Slavoj Žižek, 'Carl Schmitt in the Age of Post-Politics', in *The Challenge of Carl Schmitt*, ed. Chantal Mouffe, Verso, London, 1999, pp. 28–9.
5. Bordiga's most memorable condemnation of parliamentary corruption was his intervention at the sixth plenum of the Executive of the Comintern in 1926. See *Protokoll. Erweiterte Exekutive Der Kommunistischen Internationale, Moskau, 17. Febr. Bis Marz 1926*, Verlag Carl Hoym Nachf, Hamburg, 1926, pp. 124 ff.
6. Alain Badiou, 'De quel réel cette crise est-elle le spectacle', *Le Monde*, 17 October 2008. English translation by Nina Power and Alberto Toscano available at www.cinestatic.com/infiniteThought/2008/10/badiou-on-financial-crisis.asp.
7. For an example that tends towards the former approach, see Andreas Kalyvas, 'Hegemonic Sovereignty: Carl Schmitt, Antonio Gramsci and the Constituent Prince', *Journal of Political Ideologies*, vol. 5, no. 3, 2000, pp. 343–76. For an example of the latter, see Susan Buck-Morss, 'Sovereign Right and the Global Left', *Rethinking Marxism*, vol. 19, no. 4, 2007, pp. 432–51. What these syntheses or corrections must neglect are not only the findings of the most recent Gramscian philological research (see, e.g., *Le parole di Gramsci: per un lessico dei 'Quaderni del carcere'*, ed. Fabio Frosini and Guido Liguori, Carocci, Rome, 2004; Fabio Frosini, *Gramsci e la filosofia. Saggio sui 'Quaderni del carcere'*, Carocci, Rome, 2003), which in decisive respects corrects the distortions of Gramsci's thought performed by previously politically overdetermined readings upon which such elective affinities are based. They must also seize upon certain seemingly rhetorically similar formulations in order to disregard the more fundamental contradiction between the philosophical foundations of Schmitt's thought (particularly after *Roman Catholicism and Political Form* of 1923), as the most consummate form of 'juridical nihilism', and Gramsci's philosophy of a radical *Diesseitigkeit*, or plenitude of being and negation of any notion of the void. In their philosophical presuppositions, Gramsci and Schmitt are located at entirely opposite extremes of the modern philosophical tradition.
8. See Q 11, §46; Antonio Gramsci, *Further Selections from the Prison Notebooks (FSPN)*, ed. and trans. Derek Boothman, Lawrence & Wishart, London, 1995, p. 306. For Lenin's original remarks, see Lenin, *Collected Works* 33, p. 430. References are given to the Italian critical edition of Gramsci's prison writings: Antonio Gramsci, *Quaderni del carcere*, ed. Valentino Gerratana, Einaudi, Rome, 1975. I have adopted the internationally accepted standard of citation in Gramscian studies, giving the number of the notebook (Q), followed by the number of the individual notes. The English critical edition of *The Prison Notebooks*, edited by Joseph A. Buttigieg, now comprises three volumes, containing notebooks 1–8; notes included in those volumes can also be located according to the notebook and number of note. If possible, I have also provided page references to one of the English anthologies of Gramsci's writings; in this instance, *FSPN*.
9. It is one of the great merits of Peter Ives's work (*Gramsci's Politics of Language: Engaging the Bakhtin*

- Circle and the Frankfurt School*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 2004) to have emphasized that Gramsci's theory of language cannot be reduced to a supposedly merely 'cultural' concern – according to a dubious notion of 'Western Marxism' – but is rather central to his entire project, the concept of hegemony in particular.
10. Q 7, §35; Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (hereafter *SPN*), ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, International Publishers, New York, pp. 356–7.
 11. Gramsci polemicalises against Esperanto on a number of occasions in the *Prison Notebooks*, just as in his earlier journalistic articles, as a false solution to the real difficulty of constituting non-hierarchical relations of translation.
 12. Wolfgang Fritz Haug, 'Einleitung' to Antonio Gramsci, *Die Gefängnishefte*, vol. 6, trans. and ed. Wolfgang Fritz Haug and Klaus Bochman, Argument Verlag, Hamburg–Berlin, 1999, p. 1206. Gramsci translated the *Theses On Feuerbach* at an early stage of his incarceration. They become a touchstone to which he continually returned throughout his researches, to such an extent that it would not be an exaggeration to regard *The Prison Notebooks* in their entirety as an extended commentary and elaboration of this, one of the shortest texts in the Western philosophical tradition.
 13. Q 8, §22.
 14. Q 10I, §8; *FSPN*, p. 347.
 15. Q 10II, §2; *FSPN*, pp. 382–3.
 16. See Benedetto Croce, *Logica come scienza del concetto puro*, Laterza, Rome–Bari, 1967 [1908].
 17. 'One could ... say that every culture has its speculative or religious moment, which coincides with the period of complete hegemony of the social group which it expresses, and maybe coincides precisely with the moment in which the real hegemony disaggregates but the system of thought is perfected and refined as happens in epochs of decline. Critique resolves speculation into its real terms of ideology' (Q 8, §238; see also Q 11, §53; *SPN*, p. 370).
 18. *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, Volume 5, p. 89.
 19. According to Gramsci's famous definition, 'the State is the entire complex of practical and theoretical activities with which the ruling class not only justifies and maintains its dominance, but manages to win the active consent of those over whom it rules' (Q 15, §10; *SPN*, p. 244). Against a persistent misreading, it is necessary to insist that civil society for Gramsci does not lay outside the state (in its integral sense), but is rather an essential component part of it, the overdetermined form in which political society diffuses its rationality throughout the entire social formation (compare to Hegel's formulation of civil society as 'the external State'; G.W.F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, trans. T.M. Knox, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1942, §183). I have argued elsewhere that seeming 'antinomies' in Gramsci's concept of the integral state are best resolved by regarding it as a critical elaboration of the anti-atomistic presuppositions of Hegel's theory of the state. See Peter Thomas, *The Gramscian Moment*, Brill, Leiden, forthcoming.
 20. Althusser noted this dimension of the state's overdetermination of civil society in his rejection of the distinction between the private and the public while formulating his notion of ISAs. See Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy*, trans. Ben Brewster, New Left Books, London, 1971, p. 144.
 21. See Q 25 §5; *SPN*, p. 52. See also Q 3, §90.
 22. *The Prison Notebooks* contain not one but at least two concepts of hegemony (bourgeois and proletarian), which represent elaborations of the concept of proletarian hegemony already operative in Gramsci's precarceral political activity, particularly following the Fourth Congress of the Comintern in 1922. By the time of the first of the *Prison Notebooks* in 1929, Gramsci had developed this into an analytical concept to be applied as a 'historical-political criterion' (Q 1, §44) or 'canon of historical research' (Q 3, §90) for the study of the distinctive forms of bourgeois hegemony; finally, having conducted these historical researches, Gramsci returned to his point of departure (particularly from 1932 onwards) and attempted to elaborate the concept of proletarian hegemony theoretically, in particular, by articulating it with his notion of a philosophy of praxis.
 23. Q 7, §35; *SPN*, pp. 356–7.
 24. It is worthwhile stressing that the point of departure of Gramsci's theory of hegemony was the post-revolutionary conjuncture, particularly because it has often been claimed that the concept of hegemony in *The Prison Notebooks* is derived from Lenin's pre-revolutionary deployment of the term in, for instance, a text such as *Two Tactics of Social Democracy*. Gramsci, however, with his reference to the reevaluation by 'the greatest modern theoretician of the philosophy of praxis' and the notion of the 'doctrine of hegemony as a complement to the theory of the State-as-force', makes it quite clear that his fundamental reference is to Lenin's attempt in the post-revolutionary conjuncture to re-elaborate the concept and practice of hegemony as a form of proletarian organization, particularly in the battle against bureaucratization and in the proletariat's relation with the peasantry.
 25. Q 13, §18; *SPN*, p. 161. See also Q 4, §38 for Gramsci's insistence upon the necessarily 'economic' as well as 'ethico-political' dimensions of (proletarian) hegemony.
 26. Antonio Labriola, *La concezione materialistica della storia*, ed. Eugenio Garin, Laterza, Rome–Bari, 1965, p. 216. For Gramsci's comments on Labriola's solitude in the Marxism of his time, see Q 16, §9; *SPN*, p. 390.
 27. For Gramsci's critical remarks on the limitation of prior formulations of the thesis of the unity of theory and practice, in both 'materialist' and 'idealist' philosophies, see Q 11, §12; *SPN*, p. 334 and Q 11, §54; *SPN*, p. 364.
 28. Q 15, §22.
 29. See EIIP13S.
 30. Q 10II, §12; *SPN*, pp. 365–6.
 31. Q 8, §21; Q 13, §1; *SPN*, pp. 125–33. Q 11, §12; *SPN*, p. 335.
 32. Mario Tronti, 'La politica al lavoro', *Il Manifesto*, 30 September 2008. English translation by Alberto Toscano available at: <http://conjunctural.blogspot.com/2008/10/old-guard-on-new-crisis-pt-2-mario.html>. Tronti immediately qualifies that such a renewed 'workerist' gesture should be understood as functional to the formation of 'a great political force, a popular Left ... social before it is electoral', though without specifying how this 'mass party of working men and women' would relate either to currently constituted forms of political representation or to the political overdetermination of this pre-electoral social 'base'.
 33. Q 8, §21.