

International Gramsci Journal

Volume 3
Issue 2 *The Modern Prince / Gramscian
Philology: The Prison Notebooks / Reviews*

Article 4

2019

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Recommended Citation

Sotiris, Panagiotis, The Modern Prince as Laboratory of Political Intellectuality, *International Gramsci Journal*, 3(2), 2019, 2-38.

Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/gramsci/vol3/iss2/4>

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The Modern Prince as Laboratory of Political Intellectuality

Abstract

The aim of this article is to return to Antonio Gramsci's highly original contributions in the *Prison Notebooks* concerning questions of organization and especially his conceptualization of the Modern Prince. In particular, I want to stress the importance of a certain conception of the intellectuality of politics that emerges in the *Prison Notebooks*, and which I consider to be one of Gramsci's more original contributions. Since Gramsci's texts were written against the background of the various debates around the "organization question" in the history of the working class movement, the article begins by revisiting some the answers offered to this question, in order to stress that the question of a certain intellectuality of politics from the beginning has been central to these debates. Then, I move forward to Gramsci's own intervention, in an attempt to show how a conception of organization as a laboratory of political intellectuality and experimentation emerges and how it is linked to the entire conceptual framework of Gramsci's work-in-progress. Finally, I attempt to show how all these are relevant to contemporary debates regarding radical left political parties and fronts.

Keywords

Gramsci, Marx, Lenin, Lukács, Badiou, Political parties, Hegemony, Modern Prince, Communism

The Modern Prince as a Laboratory of Political Intellectuality

Panagiotis Sotiris

*Introduction*¹

In the history of the working-class movements, the question of organization, its form and functioning returns constantly.² The very notions of organization and the party have been debated extensively and intensively and constitute one of the most contested terrains within Marxism, both politically and theoretically. One of the most important contributions has been Antonio Gramsci's conceptualization of the Modern Prince in the *Prison Notebooks*, and in particular what can be described as his conception of organization as a laboratory of political intellectuality. In particular, I think that the very notion of political intellectuality (combined with a certain experimental conception towards which the analogy of the laboratory points) is at the centre of any attempt to actually think the question of organization and its strategic articulation with any hegemonic practice aiming at transformation and emancipation. The questions referring to organization and its role in the transformation of modes of thinking, in the confrontation with antagonistic ideologies, in the articulation of learning practices (including treating politics as an experimental configuration) in the production of knowledges, in the elaboration of strategies, in the enabling of the gnoseological, theoretical and cultural aspects of any potential subaltern hegemony, have been at the centre of debates around the question of organization and this is what makes Gramsci's intervention so important. To bring this forward, it is necessary to revisit some of the debates around the question of organization and political intellectuality in the Marxist tradition, before moving to Gramsci's elaborations in the *Prison Notebooks* and then attempting an assessment of Gramsci's contribution in the light of contemporary debates around questions of organization.

¹ The writer wishes to thank the anonymous referees and Derek Boothman for their invaluable comments on earlier versions of this text.

² On recent debates see Thomas 2013.

1. *The question of organization and political intellectuality in the history of Marxism*

1.1. *Marx: organization as aporia*

Marx's work does not offer a systematic reflection on the question of organization. Although Marx and Engels borrow the notion of the *party* from the political vocabulary of their era, texts such as the *Communist Manifesto* do not actually offer a theory for a working-class party. Rather, they presented communists as the most radical wing of the working-class organizations of that time.

The Communists do not form a separate party opposed to other working-class parties. [...]

The Communists, therefore, are on the one hand, practically, the most advanced and resolute section of the working-class parties of every country, that section which pushes forward all others. (*MECW*, vol. 6, p. 497).

Even the "Address of the Central Authority of the League" to its members, written in March 1850, which insisted that the class interests of the proletariat demanded "an independent party as soon as possible" which will not be "misled for a single moment by the hypocritical phrases of the democratic petty bourgeois" and whose "battle cry must be: The Revolution in Permanence" (*MECW*, vol. 10, 287) does not make more concrete proposals upon how this "independent political party of the proletariat" should be organised.

We should take into consideration the fact that the working-class movements and the revolutionary tendencies of that time represented a galaxy of different and fragmented collective forms that included journals, small groups of intellectuals and workers, utopian experiments, small organizations, and personal circles. Even the *International Working Men's Association*, was less an "International" and more a network that brought together organizations, representatives of trade unions and important personalities, from a very broad spectrum of ideological currents, most of them at that time more influential than the positions of Marx and Engels. As Monty Johnstone has suggested these included:

(a) the small international Communist cadres' organization (the League of Communists – 1847-52); (b) the 'party' without an organization (during the ebb

of the labour movement – 1850s and early '60s); (c) the broad international federation of workers' organizations (the First International – 1864-72); (d) the Marxist national mass party (German Social Democracy – 1870s, '80s and early '90s); (e) the broad national labour party (Britain and America—1880s and early '90s) based on the Chartist model. (Johnstone 1967, p. 122).

Moreover, both Marx and Engels found themselves in the middle of a tension between two important currents of their time. On the one hand, there was the current of State Socialism represented by Lassalle, the current which at the same time was one of the first to insist upon the need to form a national labour party, and which was one of the constituent tendencies of German social-democracy. On the other hand, there was the anarchist current, in the particular version represented by Bakunin, where anti-statism was combined with a certain conception of the small conspiratorial group,³ a position that was influential in many countries. Both currents had a massive following and this was evident in the continuous influence of Lassalle's line in the German working-class movement, long after his death, and of course in the clash between Marx and Bakunin the Hague Congress. These currents represented positions which Marx and Engels felt obliged to struggle against (since it was obvious that they opposed both the logic of a state-centred socialist policy and with the practice of the small conspiratorial group) and at the same time to recognize as actually existing currents within the working class movement.⁴ It is as if such positions represented real currents and aspects of the reality of the working class movement. Regarding this point Étienne Balibar made an important observation:

Let us mention only one example: the triangle formed by Marx, Lassalle, and Bakunin. In my opinion, one does not wonder enough about the fact that such indefatigable polemicists such as Marx and his faithful assistant Engels turned out to be incapable of writing an "Anti-Lassalle" or an "Anti-Bakunin," which would have been practically much more important than an *Anti-Dübring* or even than the reissue of an *Anti-Proudhon*. No personal and no tactical reason in the world will ever be able to explain such a lapse, a lapse which moreover was, as we know, heavy with political consequences. *They did not write it because they could not write it* (Balibar 1994, p. 134).

³ A view also held by Blanquists. See Green 2017.

⁴ For a detailed account of the evolution of the other currents of the working class movement and Marx and Engel's confrontation with them see Draper 1990. See also Johnstone 1967.

In this sense, we can say that the question of organization remained an aporia for Marx and Engels in particular around the question of the form of a proletarian party, its internal functioning and above all the way that theory, knowledge and strategy could be produced in an antagonistic and class autonomous way.

It was the formation of German social-democracy with the SPD becoming the model party, in particular after the 1891 Erfurt Congress, that gave the first example of a really mass working class party. At the beginning of the 20th century, it was the most impressive example of a mass party in Europe. It was a party that was not simply involved in massive campaigns of political propaganda and organization building but also gradually created a “parallel universe” of working class newspapers, organizations, trade unions, clubs, mutual assistance organizations, schools, while at the same time insisting on its role as guarantor of Marxist “orthodoxy”, even after the appearance of the Bernstein’s “revisionist” positions.⁵ However, the overall experience and evolution of German social-democracy also made evident its limitations and its inability to initiate a revolutionary sequence.

Moreover, although an educational role and an insistence on mass ideological transformation was one of the main concerns, German Social-Democracy failed to offer an answer to the question: in what sense does the political organization produce antagonistic and autonomous forms of political intellectuality and strategy, by means and practices that are linked in an “organic” way to the subaltern classes themselves and their aspirations? Thus the question of a particular form and practice of antagonistic political intellectuality remained open.

1.2 What is to be done? as a text of political gnoseology

Few texts in the history of Marxism have come under as much accusation as Lenin’s *What is to be done?*. It is common to reject it as

⁵ On the ‘Erfurtian’ model of the mass Social-democratic party and its appeal in the international working class movement see Lih 2008. As Broué mentions (2006, pp. 14-15) in 1914 the SPD had 1,085,905 members, in the elections held two years before it had won 4,250,000 votes, the trade unions associated with the SPD had 2 million members, it had 90 daily newspaper, employed 267 full time journalists, 3,000 workers and employees to print and distribute them, it had 110 Reichstag deputies and 220 deputies in local parliaments, 2,886 municipal councilors and many professional cadres.

a text that simply insists upon a certain – and by now parochial – conception of a small conspiratorial group based upon the idea that socialist consciousness has to be brought to workers from the outside. However, this approach simply misses the importance of this text. Lars T. Lih (2008) has stressed, in his magisterial comparative reading of *What is to be done?*, the influence of German Social-Democracy and the “Erfurtian” model upon Lenin, but I think that this approach underestimates the originality of Lenin’s positions. In contrast, Lucio Magri stressed that Lenin actually tried to answer some of the open questions in Marx’s writings on questions of organization.

However, one aspect of the theory of the proletarian party, and by no means a secondary one, was never fully clarified by Marx. Confined to the immediacy of prevailing conditions, the proletariat cannot achieve a complete vision of the social system as a whole, nor promote its overthrow. Its practice as a class can only develop by transcending this immediacy via the mediation of revolutionary consciousness. What then is the process, the mechanism by which this consciousness is produced? Or, to pose the question more precisely: can this class consciousness develop within the proletariat spontaneously, by virtue of an intrinsic necessity, based on elements that are already present in its social objectivity and which gradually come to dominate over the other elements that originally condemned it to a subordinate and fragmented condition? Or must revolutionary consciousness represent a global transcendence of the immediacy of the proletariat, produced by a qualitative dialectical leap – a complex interaction between external forces and the spontaneous action of the class itself? (Magri, 1970: 101).

The central issue of *What is to be done?* is a question of political gnoseology in regard to the possibility of a revolutionary consciousness as a form of consciousness that transcends the immediacy of the everyday condition of labour and opens up towards an understanding of the overall working of the social system in order to rethink the possibility of a political movement for revolutionary change. Lenin’s position is organized not only around the acknowledgement of the influence of dominant ideology upon the spontaneous ideology of the masses, but also around the insistence that any attempt to enable the formation of a revolutionary consciousness should be intensified along with the spontaneous militancy of the masses.

[T]he fundamental error committed by the “new trend” in Russian Social-Democracy is its bowing to spontaneity and its failure to understand that the spontaneity of the masses demands a high degree of consciousness from us Social-Democrats. The greater the spontaneous upsurge of the masses and the more widespread the movement, the more rapid, incomparably so, the demand for greater consciousness in the theoretical, political and organizational work of Social-Democracy (*LCW*, vol. 5, p. 397)

So the crucial question is how to produce this particular form of consciousness within the terrain of class struggles, but in a way that goes beyond simply reproducing the spontaneous proletarian ideological representations. Although Lenin insists that revolutionary consciousness is not inherent to the working class in its everyday practice, the formation of such consciousness is not external to the terrain of social and political antagonism, but internal to class struggle and it refers more to qualitative transformation rather than “injection” from the outside. Moreover, it is here that the party is treated not as the “guarantor” of revolutionary truth, but rather as the production site for an antagonistic form of intellectuality. And as Sylvain Lazarus has stressed it is here that we find the actual tension between Marx and Lenin.

The tension lies rather in the fact that, for Marx, the appearance of Communists is something internal to the existence of the workers as a class. Lenin distances himself from this thesis by his critique of what he calls spontaneous consciousness. Revolutionary consciousness, the appearance of revolutionary militants, is not a spontaneous phenomenon. It is a very particular phenomenon, and it requires a break with spontaneous forms of consciousness. The political core of nonspontaneous consciousness is antagonism to the entire existing social and political order. As for the mechanism of realization of the conditions that will permit the emergence of a political consciousness, it is the party (Lazarus, 2007: 259).

Moreover, Lazarus insists that in Marx we cannot find a theory of political consciousness. We can find a theory of history as history of class struggles and a theory of historical consciousness but not a theory of political consciousness. For Lazarus it is Lenin that inaugurates the confrontation with this question.

With Marx, in fact, there is no theory of organization, nor can we speak of a real theory of political consciousness. There is a theory, major and fundamental, of historical consciousness and of consciousness as historical consciousness

– the history of humanity is the history of class struggles. I hold that Lenin brings the foundation of modern politics in the fact that revolutionary politics is required to announce and practice the conditions of its existence (Lazarus, 2007: 259).

On his part Antonio Negri in the reading he offers of Lenin, a reading influenced by the idiosyncratic Leninism of Italian *operaismo*, stresses the link between the particular condition of the Russian proletariat and the way the Lenin thinks the very question of organization, suggesting that Lenin thinks the political party as a factory of strategy.

The party, too, must be able to organize and form the multiplicative character of revolutionary labour, exalting and subverting against capital the very thing that it determines as a growth of the productive power of socialized labour. The party is a factory; it is an enterprise of subversion, an ability to impose a multiplier of productive rationality onto the revolutionary will of militants and the spontaneity of the masses. The party turns this primary matter, which is workers' insubordination, into the accumulation of revolution, into a generic power to attack the adversary (Negri, 2014: 36).

It is true that any attempt to present a unified "Leninist theory of the party" would only lead to simplifications, anachronisms and the reproductions of later canonizations. Most of Lenin's texts were interventions in the conjuncture, they answered to exigencies in relation to very specific times and places, are over-determined by the particular conditions and the history of the Russian working-class movement and often deal with tactics rather than strategy. However, we can note at least three important elements.

The first one has to do with the connection between party and strategy. The party represents the strong connection to revolutionary strategy, not as something referring to the distant future but as constant elaboration of the ways to connect immediate political exigencies and the ability to develop a form of revolutionary consciousness and practice that would enable the working class to be the leading force of all the subaltern classes.

The second element is what we could define as class autonomy. The demand for an independent political organization of the working class, as expression of its class antagonistic character, runs through the entire history of the working-class movement, ever since the *Communist Manifesto*. However, it is in Lenin's texts that we find this demand not only as an organizational aspect (this was

already evident in German Social-Democracy), but as a strategic line that runs through all practices and interventions. For Lenin the proletarian character of the party is not a question of class composition of the membership or of the electorate but rather a question of political strategy and strategic independence in regard to dominant ideology.

And this brings to the third crucial element, that of the need for a radical rupture. If class autonomy is above all a question of political strategic orientation, then the organizational break with the political forms of the working-class movement that represent the influence of bourgeois politics and ideology becomes the necessary condition of its revolutionary character. Lenin made this evident by his insistence that this should also take a symbolic form on the eve of the revolution by means of the choice of a new name (“communist”) and the formation of a new International

9) Party tasks:

(a) Immediate convocation of a Party congress;

(b) Alteration of the Party Programme, mainly:

(1) On the question of imperialism and the imperialist war;

(2) On our attitude towards the state and our demand for a “commune state”;

(3) Amendment of our out-of-date minimum programme;

(c) Change of the Party’s name.

10) A new International (*LCW*, vol. 24, p. 24)

For Lenin the class character of a party has more to do with strategy rather than sociology. The stake is to ensure that the largest part of the working class will recognize itself in the political current that represents the possibility of proletarian revolution. A careful reading of Lenin’s texts immediately before and immediately after October 1917 shows how his main concern and at the same time the element he thinks is an expression of the “ripening of conditions”, is the extent of the influence of the Bolsheviks in the Russian working class.

However, there is also a tension in his intervention. On the one hand Lenin quickly incorporated the Soviets in his conception of revolutionary politics, acknowledging that they represented a practice of politics and a form of power that was antagonistic to the bourgeois practice of politics. This is expressed in his conception of

dual power, his insistence that the Soviets were going to be the forms of the State under the dictatorship of the proletariat. We also know that, in a manner similar to that of Marx in regard to the Paris Commune, Lenin incorporated into his conception a form of autonomous class organization that emerged within class struggle itself and was not initially a choice of the Bolshevik current (Shandro 2007). We also know that even after the revolution Lenin was thinking in terms of a certain relation of autonomy between the Soviets and the parties of currents that participated in them in the struggle for hegemony. It would be through the experience of the Civil War and later in the Stalinist era that the idea of the single party system and the full identification between the proletarian party and the supposedly proletarian State would become the orthodoxy along with the abandonment of the Soviet model in favour of the single-party State parliamentarism of the “People’s democracies”.

Of course, one might say that some of Lenin’s interventions, especially those specific to the confrontation between the Bolsheviks and other currents, such as the particularly centralizing conception of the Central Committee as the main decision body in contrast to local organizations, can indeed to a bureaucratic conception if taken out of context and applied as general rules. In this sense, some of the more critical observations by Rosa Luxemburg in her critique of Lenin on questions of organization were valid and in particular her position that there were no organizational guarantees against opportunism (Luxemburg 1961). At the same time, although Lenin insisted on the relation between party, theory and revolutionary consciousness as the means to turn the organization into the production process of strategic initiatives, the particular way that this should be accomplished and in particular the question of the elaboration of an antagonistic political intellectuality still remained open.

1.3 Georg Lukács: The question of organization as an intellectual question

One of the most important theoretical interventions in the period after the Russian Revolution was Georg Lukács’s *History and Class Consciousness*. And it is here that the question of political intellectuality is posed in an explicit way in the last essay of the book, which deals with the question of organization (“Towards a

Methodology of the Problem of Organization”).⁶ For Lukács the contradictory views that different tendencies of the working class movement had in regard to the Russian Revolution and the persisting influence of “Menshevik” currents provided evidence of an ideological crisis of the proletariat and an inability to think on the basis of its own class perspective, as a result of the divisions running through the proletariat but also of the effects that the capitalist division of labour had upon the consciousness of the proletariat. If political organization can be defined as the “form of mediation between theory and practice” (Lukács 1971, p. 299), the crucial question is to what extent actual communist organizations perform this mediation. Moreover, the necessary independence of the communist parties (exemplified in the break with social democratic parties) should not be seen as the formation of a “General Staff” detached from the working class but a “new relation between spontaneous action and conscious theoretical foresight” (Lukács 1971, p. 317), which demanded the participation of members in all aspects of organizational life, in order to bring forward the proletarian worldview and struggle against all the inherited influences of bourgeois “reified” consciousness. When Lukács opposed the idea that the party “consists merely of a hierarchy of officials isolated from the mass of ordinary members” (Lukács 1971, p. 336), this was not only in order to avoid the reproduction of bourgeois politics but also it was a necessary condition for the party to perform this particular unity of theory and practice which would represent the proletarian worldview in the struggle for communism.

In Lukács’s analysis there are no simple organizational or “military” metaphors of the party as leadership or “general headquarters”. Rather the party and the organization are presented as spaces of collective thinking, practice and transformation. We can see the same concerns in other texts by Lukács of that period (Lukács 2014), in which he deals with two crucial questions, one referring to tactics (the debate in the German communist movement regarding the “*Teilaktionen*”) and the other referring to the party (“mass party or sect”). Lukács insists that the question

⁶ On the importance of this text and of Lukács’s thinking on questions of organization in general see Thomas 2013.

cannot be answered by means of bureaucratic centralization, but by enhancing the full development of the consciousness of members. That is why for Lukács ‘the question of organization reveals itself to be an intellectual [*geistig*] question’ (Lukács 2014, p. 116).

It is obvious that for Lukács the question of political *intellectuality* becomes one of the determining aspects of any potential revolutionary politics, and consequently of the organizational form of any such politics, in a manner very similar to how Gramsci would later face again the challenge of this question, and on a similar basis with Lukács, namely the open questions and contradictions of the period after 1917.

1.4. *Can politics be thought?*

Before moving into Antonio Gramsci’s writings on questions of organization, I would like to turn to some more recent interventions. This detour (and slight anachronism) will help me show how Gramsci’s thinking is not only pertinent to these debates, but also offers a way out of crucial aporias regarding contemporary interventions.

If we speak about the party of an independent expression of the revolutionary dynamic of the working class, or about Lenin’s conception of the party as the way to enhance the revolutionary consciousness of the proletariat, or about the questions posed by Lukács, it is obvious that there is a recurring question regarding the connection between (revolutionary) politics and thinking, it is the question whether politics can be thought.

This has been a question running through the work of Alain Badiou. *Can politics be thought?* was even the title of one of Badiou’s important interventions in the 1980s (Badiou 2018). In his reading of Sylvain Lazarus’s *Anthropology of the Name* (Lazarus 2015) Badiou suggests that it is possible to find in Lazarus’s work a distinct form of intellectuality in regard to politics, a distinct “configuration of intellectuality [*dispositif d’ intellectualité*]” (Badiou 2005, p. 27, *translation modified*).

“People think” and “politics as thought”: Both Lazarus and Badiou oppose these two theses to any classical conception of theory in its relation to social reality and its potential transformation, including any conception of a dialectic of theory and practice. In contrast, for Badiou “[t]hought is not a relation *to* the object, it is

an *internal* relation of its Real” (Badiou 2005, p. 28) and the localization of a political singularity.

Politics is a thought. This statement excludes all recourse to the theory / practice pairing. There is certainly a ‘doing’ of politics, but it is immediately the pure and simple experience of a thought, its localization. Doing politics cannot be distinguished from thinking politics (Badiou 2005, p. 46).

In the line of reasoning presented by Lazarus and Badiou, the emphasis is always on the singularity of thought and the singularity of revolutionary sequence. In a certain sense, politics and thinking, thinking politics and doing revolutionary politics are part of the same self-constituting process, which unites the subjective condition and the fact that people now think under the event, under the new terrain opened by the opening of a singular revolutionary sequence. For Badiou this is exemplified in Lazarus’s insistence that “the possible is a category in subjectivity” and that “the prescriptive possible is thus the content of subjectivities and practices that presided over what has taken place” (Lazarus 2015, p. 160). For Badiou,

[t]his clarifies why one is able to think the singularity of a thought within a strictly prescriptive and self-constituting realm of interiority, both rationally (through the category of the name and places of the name), and without having to immerse it in the heterogeneity of time: what has taken place is thinkable, both as a precarious singularity restricted by dates [...] and as indifferent to time. To think a singularity does indeed determine it, in the words of Thucydides, in the guise of an ‘eternal acquisition’ (Badiou 2005, p. 38).

The notion of interiority is crucial in this conception of the intellectuality of politics. For Lazarus interiority suggests that it is a politics based in subjectivity and in relation to a singular sequence. “Politics in interiority is a politics in subjectivity” (Lazarus 2016, p. 110). It is also a politics of singularity and of producing new ways to do politics and new ways of organization.

Politics in interiority, in its assignment to the principle *people think*, produces a politics in subjectivity. In its assignment to *historicity*, it is what makes it possible to grasp the way in which politics exists, when it does exist, as *relation of a politics to its thought*: this is the theory of *politics’ historical mode*. The category of politics’ historical mode is what makes it possible to apprehend a politics in the *singular invention* that it presents, the equally singular practices that it deploys, its hitherto unseen forms of organization (Lazarus 2016, p. 112).

However, how can we define this form of intellectuality associated with new forms of politics and organization aiming at social emancipation and transformation? Although Lazarus and Badiou offer some lines of demarcation such as the insistence upon the need for a politics at a distance from the State, the insistence on the break with parliamentary logic and the fidelity to the communist idea, yet the question of organization remains open. Moreover, one can say that especially Badiou seems to reject any attempt to think the question of political intellectuality as also an organizational question.

This lack of a particular reference to the question of organization as a space and process producing militant intellectualities, can also be related to Badiou's critique of what he has defined as a democratic materialism and a certain form of democracy. Bruno Bosteels has suggested that this has to do with Badiou's critical position against a certain postmodern conception of radical democracy "paradoxically anchored in the essential unfulfillment of both subject and object as the founding poles of modernity" (Bosteels 2011, p. 252), in the sense of a radical lack at the centre of social non-ontology. "Grounded in the inherent lack of the field of the political, radical democracy always seeks to avoid the imminent threat of totalitarianism that lies at the core of democracy itself" (Bosteels 2011, p. 261). In contrast to this, according to Bosteels Badiou aims to "to think the actuality of the present and to historicize the processes of subjectivization" (Bosteels 2011, p. 261), by means of a politics based upon the communist hypothesis.

However, by delinking the question of the fidelity to the communist hypothesis from any considerations regarding questions of organization, political experimentation and revolutionary practice, Badiou in the end oscillates between a militant decisionism and an almost Platonic dogmatism. This is one of the limits of his conceptualization of politics.

In contrast, Jacques Rancière "bends the stick to the other side" in his egalitarian conception of the intelligence of everybody as a prerequisite of emancipation:

Instead it is the intelligence that does not fit any specific position in a social order but belongs to anybody as the intelligence of anybody. Emancipation

then means: the appropriation of this intelligence which is one, and the verification of the potential of the equality of intelligence (Rancière 2010, p. 168).

For Rancière the answer to this is a communism of the intelligence:

Emancipation means the communism of intelligence, enacted in the demonstration of the capacity of the ‘incapable’: the capacity of the ignorant to learn by himself, says Jacotot. We can add: the capacity of the worker to let his eyes and his mind escape from the work of his hands, the capacity of a community of workers to stop work even though it does not wait and even though they need it for their livelihoods, to transform the private space of the workshop into a public space, to organize production by their own forces or to take on the task of governing a city that its rulers have deserted or betrayed (Rancière 2010, p. 168).

This is a fascinating position and in a certain sense it has the extra advantage in comparison to Badiou’s position that it does not limit thinking to the conjuncture of a potentially revolutionary sequence. However, there are some open questions. Although Rancière stresses the political and intellectual potential of the subaltern social groups, he underestimates the need for any antagonistic political intellectuality, both as theory/knowledge and strategy, to be produced, elaborated, articulated and not just taken give. Although a useful reminder that the subaltern can actually think, in contrast to any doctrinaire and elitist conception of politics, this position refuses to see the importance of the organizational forms and political practices that enhance this “communism of intelligence” and turn into into a political strategy and emancipatory process.

Moreover, there is another important point. It is not only that the people think. The State also thinks, in the sense of producing discourses, knowledges and subjectivities. Although this is a position we tend to attribute to Foucault and his conception of the State producing discourses and truth regimes, I would like to turn our attention to Poulantzas and how he encapsulated this question in *State Power and Socialism*

This presupposes that, in the various codes of thinking, the state itself is *overcoded*: that it serves as the frame of reference within which the various

segments of reasoning and their supporting apparatuses find homogenous ground for their differential functioning. Through a process of measured distillation, this overcoding is inculcated in the totality of subjects. Thus, the capitalist State installs a uniform *national language* and eliminated all other languages. [...] It is therefore the mission of the *national State* to organize the process of thought by forging the materiality of the people-nation, and to create a language which while doubtless situated within ideological formations, is by no means reducible to an ideological operation. (Poulantzas 2000, p. 58).

So the question is how we counter this collective and materialized knowledge and intelligence, this over-coding produced by the State. And the question becomes even more important if we consider the fact that the people or the subaltern are neither outside the State nor immune to its ideological and intellectual functioning (something also underestimated by the way Rancière takes this communism of intelligence as given). What are the collective practices and forms, what are the forms of organization that can actually help people think politics and think a politics of emancipation and can induce the emergence of forms of intellectuality that maintain and expand the constitutive interiority to the possibility of a revolutionary sequence? It is obvious that these are open questions in the entire history of the working-class movements and their political forms. To try and answer these questions we must turn to Antonio Gramsci.

2. Gramsci and the challenge of mass political intellectuality

2.1 Gramsci's confrontation with questions of organization

Gramsci's thinking on questions of organization cannot be separated from his conceptualization of the integral State and his theory of hegemony, and is part of his broader confrontation with the question of how to rearticulate a revolutionary strategy in a period of defeat of the revolution. As I will try to show, all these can explain his particular emphasis on the question of organization of a mass political intellectuality as a necessary condition of the potential conquest of hegemony by the subaltern classes.

Gramsci's thinking on questions of organization was also conditioned by his own experiences of political militancy: his participation in the formation of an independent communist party oscillating between sectarianism – in the particular version

represented by Bordiga – and the emerging line of the United Front, which would also be the background of Gramsci's last interventions before his imprisonment; his experience and participation in a unique experiment of autonomous class organization, the worker's councils, would be a constant reference point as a case study of proletarian self-government; his first hand experience of the Communist International in a period when there was still open discussion and confrontation between different opinions before the advent of a supposed "monolithic" functioning.

Of all these experiences it is important to stress the formative character of Gramsci's involvement in the factory council movement in Turin and in the publication of *Ordine Nuovo* (d'Orsi 2017, pp. 98-131). The factory council movement presented for him an example of an emerging workers' democracy: "The socialist State already exists potentially in the institutions of social life characteristic of the exploited working class" (Gramsci 1977, p. 65). At the same time this experience made him confront the complex question of the relation between spontaneous movements and organized political forms, something evident in the tension in his writings at that time regarding the roles of the party and the councils (Silvestrini 2017).

The importance of the factory council / *Ordine Nuovo* experience is also evident in Q3§48, a note written between October and November 1930. The reference in the title of the note to *spontaneity and conscious leadership* sets the tone of the note. For Gramsci "pure spontaneity does not exist in history" (Gramsci 1975, Q3§48, p. 328; *PN* Vol. 2, p. 48) and elements of conscious leadership are always active in movements of the subaltern classes, "but none of them predominates or goes beyond the level of 'popular science' – 'common sense,' that is the [traditional] conception of the world – of a given social stratum" (Gramsci 1975, Q3§48, p. 328; *PN* Vol. 2, p. 49). Gramsci defends the Turin movement against accusations that it was sponteneist or voluntarist and defends "the creativity and soundness of the leadership that the movement acquired". And this is how Gramsci describes this creativity and soundness:

This was not an "abstract" leadership; it did not consist in the mechanical repetition of scientific or theoretical formulas; it did not confuse politics – real action – with theoretical disquisition. It devoted itself to real people in specific

historical relations, with specific sentiments, ways of life, fragments of worldviews, etc., that were outcomes of the “spontaneous” combinations of a given environment of material production with the “fortuitous” gathering of disparate social elements within that same environment. The element of “spontaneity” was not neglected, much less disdained: it was *educated*, it was given a direction, it was cleansed of everything extraneous that could contaminate it, in order to unify it by means of modern theory but in a living historical manner (Gramsci 1975, Q3§48, p. 330; *PN* Vol. 2, p. 50)

Gramsci here points to a complex conception of leadership as a transformative process, where the “spontaneous” elements in the resistances and aspirations of the subaltern classes are transformed into a conscious political practice by means of a “pedagogical” intervention that brings along theoretical elements not in order to replace the spontaneous elements but to unify them. Consequently, “[t]he unity of ‘spontaneity’ and ‘conscious leadership,’ or ‘discipline,’ is precisely the real political action of the subaltern classes” (Gramsci 1975, 3§48, p. 330; *PN* Vol. 2, p. 51). This makes evident that Gramsci not only always had a reference to the experience of the factory councils movement, but also that his conception of political “leadership” also included this articulation and reciprocal relation between the “party form” and the collective practices and ingenuity of the subaltern masses in struggle, especially when such forms of self-organization emerged.

Lukács also dealt with the same question in his 1968 *Process of democratisation* when he stressed that “seemingly overpowering mass spontaneity was even expanded, consolidated and directed toward concrete goals through the organizational work of the council movement [*Rätebewegung*]. Originating in the Commune of 1871, spontaneously cropping up anew in 1905, the council movement became the paradigmatic model of socialist democracy in and after 1917” (Lukács 1991, p. 125; translation modified). However, it is interesting that in this intervention, Lukács insisted on the impossibility of repeating the experience of the councils and stressed instead the role of the party in regard to the task of democratizing socialism: “the present, extremely widespread apathy of the laboring masses can only develop itself to such socialist democratic activity through goals provided it by an outside force”. For Lukács it was the Communist Party that should take up the task “of mobilization, of taking the currently private, intersubjective, and

subterranean movements and organizing them in practical life as emancipator, as goal-oriented behavior” (Lukács 1991, p. 162).

Returning to Gramsci, in a note on Machiavelli, originally in Notebook 8 and then in a second draft in Notebook 13, he encapsulates the necessity of the political party, in opposition to other forms of organization exactly on the basis of a need not only to form a collective will but also to enable it to articulate and execute a political project. Here the opposition is to Sorel, who is accused by Gramsci that, by remaining confined to the conception of the “myth” (the ideological and political imagery that would inspire the masses), he also remains within the limits of the trade union and the general strike, without being able to think either the notion of the party or a more general project of political transformation.

A study might be made of how it came about that Sorel never advanced from his conception of ideology-as-myth to an understanding of the political party, but stopped short at the idea of the trade union. It is true that for Sorel the “myth” found its fullest expression not in the trade union as organisation of a collective will, but in its practical action – sign of a collective will already operative. The highest achievement of this practical action was to have been the general strike – i.e. a “passive activity”, so to speak, of a negative and preliminary kind (it could only be given a positive character by the realization of a common accord between the various wills involved), an activity which does not envisage an “active and constructive” phase of its own (Gramsci 1975, Q13§1, pp. 1556-57; *SPN*, p. 127).

It is upon this basis that Gramsci can suggest the analogy between Machiavelli’s Prince, namely the way that the Florentine thinker sought the person that could function as the catalyst for a process of national unification of the fragmented Italian space, and the modern political party. The aim was to suggest that the communist party (but also the United Front) should also function in this unifying way, articulating the fragmented and “molecular” practices and aspirations of the subaltern in a common political demand for radical transformation.

The modern prince, the myth-prince, cannot be a real person, a concrete individual. It can only be an organism, a complex element of society in which a collective will, which has already been recognized and has to some extent asserted itself in action, begins to take concrete form. History has already provided this organism, and it is the political party – the first cell in which

there come together germs of a collective will tending to become universal and total (Gramsci 1975, Q13§1, p. 1558; *SPN*, p. 129).

This drawing of a line of demarcation from Sorel is also in fact Gramsci's way to transcend a politics of simply investing upon the spontaneous political forms emerging in the class struggle. However, transcending does not mean denying or rejecting. Rather it means acknowledging limits and confronting the challenge of a politics referring to political level per se. This can account for the positive account of Jacobinism as a reference point for the Modern Prince, with Jacobinism becoming a synonym for a politics aiming at the formation of a collective will for hegemony.

The abstract character of the Sorelian conception of the myth is manifest in its aversion (which takes the emotional form of an ethical repugnance) for the Jacobins, who were certainly a "categorical embodiment" of Machiavelli's Prince. The Modern Prince must have a part devoted to Jacobinism (in the integral sense which this notion has had historically, and must have conceptually), as an exemplification of the concrete formation and operation of a collective will which at least in some aspects was an original, *ex novo* creation. And a definition must be given of collective will, and of political will in general, in the modern sense: will as operative awareness of historical necessity, as protagonist of a real and effective historical drama (Gramsci 1975, Q13§1, p. 1559; *SPN*, p. 130).

Consequently, for Gramsci the Modern Prince is a way to think the political operation of the revolutionary party (and also the United Front as the principal form of doing mass politics), treating it as the terrain par excellence for the elaboration of a collective will capable of being the protagonist of a process of social transformation. That is why the duties of the Modern Prince also include another crucial Gramscian notion: "intellectual and moral reform". This notion points to the way in which Gramsci considers both historical materialism and the communist perspective to refer to the universal transformation of all instances of social existence.

The Modern Prince must be and cannot but be the proclaimer and organiser of an intellectual and moral reform, which also means creating the terrain for a subsequent development of the national-popular collective will towards the realization of a superior, total form of modern civilization. (Gramsci 1975, Q13§1, p. 1560; *SPN*, pp. 132-3).

This is indeed a very important and very dense passage from Gramsci, since it both incorporates and at the same time transcends the “Jacobin” notion of the collective will, with the inclusion of a defining aspect of subalternity in the notion of “national-popular”, connecting it to the communist perspective (hence the reference to a superior and total form of modern civilization) and insisting that the terrain for the elaboration for such a political practice is indeed the Modern Prince.

2.2. *Mass intellectuality and common sense*

What is also particularly important is how Gramsci has a fairly broad conception of the intellectual aspect of all social practice:

There is no human activity from which every form of intellectual participation can be excluded: *Homo faber* cannot be separated from *homo sapiens*. [. . .] The problem of creating a new stratum of intellectuals consists therefore in the critical elaboration of the intellectual activity that exists in everyone ... (Gramsci 1975, Q12§3, pp. 1550-51; *SPN*, p. 9).

This broad definition of intellectuality is a very crucial node in Gramsci’s attempt to link the possibility of a subaltern hegemony with the form of intellectuality inherent to the practices of the subaltern classes. This need to find the elements of intellectuality that exist in the practices of the subaltern in order to transform them as part of a politics for hegemony, is also evident in his approach to the notion of the *common sense* [*senso comune*].

Every social stratum has its own ‘common sense’ and its own ‘good sense’, which are basically the most widespread conception of life and of man. Every philosophical current leaves behind a sedimentation of ‘common sense’: this is the document of its historical effectiveness. Common sense is not something rigid and immobile, but is continually transforming itself, enriching itself with scientific ideas and with philosophical opinions which have entered ordinary life. ‘Common sense’ is the folklore of philosophy, and is always half-way between folklore properly speaking and the philosophy, science, and economics of the specialists. Common sense creates the folklore of the future, that is as a relatively rigid phase of popular knowledge at a given place and time. (Gramsci 1975, Q24§4, p. 2271; *SPN*, p. 326, footnote 5).

What is important in this conception is that this is not just a relation of transforming common sense into “good sense”, which would suggest a traditional “pedagogical” conception of politics as “political education”. One way to think these questions is by

turning to Gramsci's conception of hegemony as a pedagogical practice and relation. This is exemplified in the following well-known passage from Q10II§44):

This problem can and must be related to the modern way of considering pedagogical doctrine and practice, according to which the relationship between teacher and pupil is active and reciprocal so that every teacher is always a pupil and every pupil a teacher. [...] This form of relationship exists throughout society as a whole and for every individual relative to other individuals. It exists between intellectual and non-intellectual sections of the population, between the rulers and the ruled, elites and their followers, leaders [dirigenti] and led, the vanguard and the body of the army. Every relationship of "hegemony" is necessarily an educational relationship and occurs not only within a nation, between the various forces of which the nation is composed, but in the international and world-wide field, between complexes of national and continental civilisations (Gramsci 1975, Q10II§44, p. 1331; *SPN*, pp. 349-50).

Pedagogy in Gramsci has a specific signification and there is always a dialogue with Marx's third *Thesis on Feuerbach*, the *thesis* that articulates a dialectical pedagogical relation based upon the premise that the educator must also be educated with revolutionary *praxis*:

The materialist doctrine concerning the changing of circumstances and upbringing forgets that circumstances are changed by men and that it is essential to educate the educator himself. This doctrine must, therefore, divide society into two parts, one of which is superior to society.

The coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-changing can be conceived and rationally understood only as *revolutionary praxis*. (MECW, Vol. 5, p. 4, translation modified).⁷

2.3 From the integral state to the possibility of integral autonomy

Gramsci did not only offer an important contribution to the theory of the State and hegemony. He also attempted an answer to

⁷ In the *MECW* *revolutionäre Praxis* is translated as *revolutionary practice*. I think that *praxis* is more accurate, especially since *praxis* is a crucial notion of Gramsci. It is also interesting that when Engels first included the "Theses on Feuerbach" as an appendix to his *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*, he made certain modifications to the text of Marx's original manuscript. One of these was to replace *revolutionäre Praxis* with *umwälzende Praxis*. Gramsci in his own translation of the 'Theses' seems to use Engels's version and to follow a tradition that begins with Gentile and translates *umwälzende Praxis* as "rovesciamento della praxis" (Gramsci 2007, p. 744. See also the note of the editors (Giuseppe Cospito and Gianni Francioni) on pp 814-815).

the question to “how does the State think”, which is also a contribution to any potential theory of organization. Of particular importance is Gramsci’s conception of the “integral state” (Thomas 2009), which includes political society and civil society, public and private hegemonic apparatuses, the aspect of coercion, of direction / leadership but also of consent.

[T]he 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 (Gramsci 1975, Q15§10, p. 1765; *SPN*, p. 244).

Gramsci’s reference to practical and theoretical activities is very important and it points towards a highly original relational and practical conception of the State. It points towards a thinking of the state neither as an instrument nor as a headquarters but as a terrain where the dominant classes produce discourses, ideologies, knowledges, strategies referring to their hegemonic practice.

However, there are differences between how the state thinks and how the subaltern classes can think the possibility of their unity in the struggle for emancipation. It is exactly here that the question of organization emerges. The question is not whether the subaltern classes can influence, directly or indirectly, social and political relations of forces. Rather, the question is how to transform the subaltern classes into an autonomous social force in order for the question for a conquest of hegemony by the subaltern to be posed. In the following passage Gramsci not only establishes the terms of this challenge but also makes evident that the aim has to be organizational forms that enable their autonomous political constitution and mobilization:

The subaltern classes, by definition, are not unified and cannot unite until they are able to become a “State”: their history, therefore, is intertwined with that of civil society, *it is a “dismembered” and discontinuous function of the history of civil society* [è una funzione «disgregata» e discontinua della storia della società civile] and thereby of the history of States and groups of States. Hence it is necessary to study: 1. the objective formation of the subaltern social groups, by the developments and transformations occurring in the sphere of economic production ; their quantitative diffusion and their origins in pre-existing social groups, whose mentality, ideology and aims they conserve for a time; 2. their active or passive affiliation to the dominant political formations, their attempts

to influence the programmes of these formations in order to press claims of their own, and the consequences of these attempts in determining processes of decomposition, renovation or neo-formation; 3. the birth of new parties of the dominant groups, intended to conserve the assent of the subaltern groups and to maintain control over them; 4. The formations which the subaltern groups themselves produce, in order to press claims of a limited and partial character ; 5. those new formations which assert the autonomy of the subaltern groups, but within the old framework ; 6. those formations which assert the integral autonomy, . . . etc. (Gramsci 1975, Q25§5, p. 2288; *SPN*, p. 52. The italicized line, inadvertently omitted from *SPN*, is here reinstated with the consequent modification of a preposition that follows).

According to this approach, on the one hand we have the integral state as the material terrain of bourgeois hegemony and on the other hand the exigency for organizational forms that could enhance the integral autonomy of the subaltern classes in their struggle for an antagonistic form of hegemony. However, one point is very important. This seemingly apparent symmetry between *Stato integrale* and *autonomia integrale*, should not be treated in a simplistic way. The State and the organizational forms that enable this integral autonomy of the subaltern classes are fundamentally different apparatuses. They represent antagonistic forms of organization and practice of politics.

2.4. *The emergence of a new intellectuality*

How can we think such an antagonistic form of political intellectuality? Gramsci offers some important points. First, he insisted that “everyone is a philosopher” (Gramsci 1975 Q11§12, p. 1375; *SPN*, p. 323), thus pointing to the element of intellectuality inherent to any practice, as already discussed, but also the possibility of the emergence of mass forms of transformed intellectuality. Moreover, he stressed that the most important aspect refers to the transformation of the ways that people think when they think in a “coherent” way namely when they strive for their autonomy.

For a mass of people to be led to think coherently and in the same coherent fashion about the real present world, is a “philosophical” event far more important and “original” than the discovery by some philosophical “genius” of a truth which remains the property of small groups of intellectuals. (Gramsci 1975 Q11§12, p.1378; *SPN*, p. 325).

Gramsci insists that “[t]he political party for some social groups is nothing other than their specific way of elaborating their own category of organic intellectuals directly in the political and philosophical field and not just in the field of productive technique” (Gramsci 1975 Q12§1, p. 1522; *SPN*, p. 15). However, he makes it clear that does not refer to some group or stratum of “specialists” but to all the militants.

That all members of a political party should be regarded as intellectuals is an affirmation that can easily lend itself to mockery and caricature. But if one thinks about it nothing could be more exact. (Gramsci 1975, Q12§1, p. 1523; *SPN*, p. 16).

In his struggling effort to think the mass formation of organic intellectuals for proletarian hegemony as integral subaltern autonomy, Gramsci insists that “[i]f the ‘new’ intellectuals put themselves forward as the direct continuation of the previous ‘intelligentsia’, they are not new at all (that is, not tied to the new social group which organically represents the new historical situation) but are a conservative and fossilised left-over of the social group which has been historically superseded” (Gramsci 1975, Q11§16, p. 1407; *SPN*, p. 453). These new intellectuals must be formed within the struggle of the working class for autonomy, but also within the practical effort for new forms of social organization and production. The fact that their formation is not limited to the traditional institutions associated with intellectual activity calls to mind Foucault’s conception of the “specific intellectuals” (Foucault, 2002: 126-133), although it should be noted that Gramsci stresses the direct connection with revolutionary political practice. This is evident in passages such as this:

On this basis the weekly *O[rdine] N[uovo]* worked to develop certain forms of new intellectualism and to determine its new concepts, and this was not the least of the reasons for its success, since such a conception corresponded to latent aspirations and conformed to the development of the real forms of life. The mode of being of the new intellectual can no longer consist in eloquence, which is an exterior and momentary mover of feelings and passions, but in active participation in practical life, as constructor, organiser, “permanent persuader” and not just a simple orator (but superior at the same time to the abstract mathematical spirit); from technique-as-work one proceeds to technique-as-science and to the humanistic conception of history, without

which one remains “specialised” and does not become “directive” (specialised and political). (Gramsci 1975, Q12§3, p. 1551; *SPN*, pp. 9-10).

Another important element pointing to the same direction, is to return to Gramsci’s conception of the philosophy of praxis as also a form of mass critical intellectuality and as a different practice of philosophy, There we can also find the figure of the “democratic philosopher” which also points to new way to think this antagonistic form of political intellectuality.

One could say therefore that the historical personality of an individual philosopher is also given by the active relationship which exists between him and the cultural environment he is proposing to modify. The environment reacts back on the philosopher and imposes on him a continual process of self-criticism. It is his “teacher”. This is why one of the most important demands that the modern intelligentsias have made in the political field has been that of the so-called “freedom of thought and of the expression of thought” (“freedom of the press”, “freedom of association”). For the relationship between master and disciple in the general sense referred to above is only realised where this political condition exists, and only then do we get the “historical” realization of a new type of philosopher, whom we could call a “democratic philosopher” in the sense that he is a philosopher convinced that his personality is not limited to himself as a physical individual but is an active social relationship of modification of the cultural environment. When the “thinker” is content with his own thought, when he is “subjectively”, that is abstractly, free, that is when he nowadays becomes a joke. The unity of science and life is precisely an active unity, in which alone liberty of thought can be realised; it is a master-pupil relationship, one between the philosopher and the cultural environment in which he has to work and from which he can draw the necessary problems for formulation and resolution. In other words, it is the relationship between philosophy and history. (Gramsci 1975, Q10II§44 pp. 1331-32; *SPN*, p. 350).

This conception of an active social relation of transformation of the cultural environment offers the starting point for a transformative practice of political intellectuality that goes beyond the way suggested by Badiou. Here we are dealing with a process that included what people do in the struggle for emancipation, how they learn, think and change within struggle. This offers a much more dialectical image that combine doing politics and thinking politics, while at the same time being part of a movement that is transforming social relations and forms and this way producing the

intellectual elements and conditions that are necessary for such a movement. One might say that Gramsci had in mind not only a new quality of militancy but also a new form of mass intellectuality as a condition for hegemony.

For Gramsci we can find here one of the main duties of intellectuals: ‘the task of the intellectuals is to determine and to organise moral and intellectual reform, in words to fit culture to the sphere of practice (Gramsci 1975, Q11§16, p. 1407; *SPN*, p. 253). In the first draft of this text in Notebook 8, instead of moral and intellectual reform Gramsci writes “cultural revolution” (Gramsci 1975, Q8§171, p. 1044). As Fabio Frosini (Frosini 2003, p. 95-97) and Peter Thomas (Thomas 2009, pp. 232-234) have stressed the notion of the cultural revolution comes from the discussions of the NEP period and “Lenin’s last battle” (Lewin 1968), when in the thinking of Lenin there is a constant return of questions referring to the need for a new civilization and the new mass intellectuality as an answer to the contradictions of the transition process.

2.5. The party as laboratory

However, there are still open questions: how are these new mass forms of militant intellectuality going to be produced, especially when Gramsci was not simply suggesting copying the ways that the bourgeoisie formed its hegemonic apparatuses and articulated its hegemony? What form could the hegemonic apparatuses of a potential hegemony of the subaltern have? It is here that the conception of the political party as the terrain for new forms of mass political intellectualities emerges:

One should stress the importance and significance which, in the modern world, political parties have in the elaboration and diffusion of conceptions of the world, because essentially what they do is to work out the ethics and the politics corresponding to these conceptions and act as it were as their historical “laboratory”. The parties recruit individuals out of the working mass, and the selection is made on practical and theoretical criteria at the same time. The relation between theory and practice becomes even closer the more the conception is vitally and radically innovatory and opposed to old ways of thinking. For this reason one can say that the parties are the elaborators of new integral and all-encompassing intellectualities and the crucibles where the unification of theory and practice, understood as a real historical process, takes place (Gramsci 1975, Q11§12, p. 1385; *SPN*, p. 335 translation modified).

This is a very dense passage that offers a highly original conception of the political organization that at the same times offers both form and content to the question posed by Lukács when he referred to the question of organization as an intellectual question. The metaphor of the laboratory and the terrain of experimentation are radically different from the metaphors suggested for the party in the history of the working-class movement. In particular, it is important to stress that they do not point to imitating the State and its apparatuses. Gramsci presents the party as neither *imperium in imperio* nor as the general staff of the proletarian army. In contrast, he points towards the unification of theory and practice, proposing a political process for the production of knowledges, strategies, tactics, and forms of intellectuality, where the elements that come from the participation in struggles (experience, sensitivities, encounters with other forms of knowledge and discourse, theories, collective experiments) can be elaborated and transformed. It is this functioning of the party as a laboratory of intellectuality that enables it to contribute to the formation of a new historical bloc. It is only through such a process that the particular version of representation and transformation associated with a politics for communism.

If the relationship between intellectuals and people-nation, between the leaders and the led, the rulers and the ruled, is provided by an organic cohesion in which feeling-passion becomes understanding and thence knowledge (not mechanically but in a way that is alive), then and only then is the relationship one of representation. Only then can there take place an exchange of individual elements between the rulers and ruled, leaders [dirigenti] and led, and can the shared life be realised which alone is a social force with the creation of the “historical bloc” (Gramsci 1975, Q11§67 pp. 1505-6; *SPN*, p. 418).

There are certain conditions for such a conception of the political party. It is important to stress the distance between Gramsci and a bureaucratic conception of centralization and his opposition to the Stalinist version of the “party spirit”. The following passage from Q9§68, written between July and August 1932 (and then included in Q13§36) refers exactly to this point:

The most accurate name would be bureaucratic centralism. “Organicity” can only be found in democratic centralism, which is so to speak a “centralism” in movement –i.e. a continual adaptation of the organization to

the real movement, and is organic to the extent that it takes account of movement which is the organic way that historical reality manifests itself (Gramsci 1975, Q9§68, p. 1139; cf. the second draft in *SPN*, pp. 188-9).

Giuseppe Cospito (2016, pp. 169-184) has shown, by means of a very detailed presentation of all the relevant passages from the *Notebooks*, the displacements in the way that Gramsci deals with bureaucratic, organic and democratic centralism. Initially Gramsci opposes democratic centralism, which is presented as his own choice, to both bureaucratic centralism (in essence the Stalinist version of centralism) and organic centralism (which refers to Bordiga's conception of the party) thinking that they have similar problematic aspects. However, at a later stage, expressed in passages such as the one quoted above, the main enemy is bureaucratic centralism, namely the Stalinist conception of the party and democratic centralism is presented as the one that can also have the necessary organic character. This implies that the democratic functioning of the political organization is not only the guarantee to avoid bureaucracy, but also the necessary condition to achieve an "organic" character, namely close connection to the working class and to the potential emergence in a concrete historical conjuncture. Moreover, "organic" is an adjective that we often encounter in the *Notebooks* and it always refers to close relation, historical depth, and real adequation between politics and historical dynamics.

It is in this sense that for Gramsci one of the gravest dangers that a party faces is to become an anachronism. And although the following passage comes from a note referring to the broader issue of the role of political parties in a period of organic crisis, it is interesting how it can also refer to the political organizations of the working class:

This order of phenomena is connected to one of the most important questions concerning the political party – i.e. the party's capacity to react against force of habit, against the tendency to become mummified and anachronistic. Parties come into existence, and constitute themselves as organisations, in order to influence the situation at moments which are historically vital for their class; but they are not always capable of adapting themselves to new tasks and to new epochs, nor of evolving *pari passu* with the overall relations of force (and hence the relative position of their class) in the country in question, or in the international field. In analysing the development of parties, it is necessary to distinguish: their social group; their mass member-

ship; their bureaucracy and General Staff. The bureaucracy is the most dangerously hidebound and conservative force; if it ends up by constituting a compact body, which stands on its own and feels itself independent of the mass of members, the party ends up by becoming anachronist and at moments of acute crisis it is voided of its social content and left as though suspended in mid-air. (Gramsci 1975, Q13§23, p. 1604; *SPN*, p. 211).

Gramsci's distancing from Stalinist practices in regard to the internal fighting inside the party was evident in various moments. In the famous letter of 1926 on behalf of the Italian Party, in which they asked the leadership of the Soviet Party to not jeopardize the unity of the international communist movement, in his refusal inside the prison to endorse the denunciations of the "Opposition", despite his criticism of Trotsky and Bukharin, his critique of "statolatry" (Gramsci 1975, Q8§130, pp. 1020-21; *PN* Vol. 3, pp. 310-11), but also his dense critique of the evolution of the Stalinism in notes 74 and 76 of Notebook 14 (*SPN* pp. 254-7), written in March 1935 (notes that at the same time offer an insightful analysis of fascism).⁸

In contrast, Gramsci's conception of democratic centralism points towards a conception of the party as an open political and intellectual process, constantly adapting itself to the surrounding social environment and the dynamics of the conjuncture. It is very important that Gramsci insists that this process is experimental in nature, it is an experimental practice. The very notion of the experiment expands the notion of the laboratory towards an experimental conception of politics. The following passage from Q9§68 exemplifies this position:

In parties representing socially subaltern groups, the element of stability represents the organic need to ensure that hegemony does not belong to privileged groups, but to the progressive forces, those organically progressive with respect to other forces that are allied but composed of and oscillating between the old and the new. In any event, what is important to note is that in the manifestations of bureaucratic centralism the situation evolves due to the lack of initiative; that is, due to the political primitiveness of the peripheral forces, even when these are homogeneous with the hegemonic territorial group. Especially with international territorial organisms, the emergence of such situations is extremely harmful and dangerous. Democratic centralism is an elastic formula that lends itself to many 'incarnations'; it exists because it is

⁸ See the reading of these passages in Cospito 2016.

continually interpreted and continually adapted to necessity, and it consists in the critical search for that which is equal in the apparent dissimilarity and distinct and opposite in the apparent uniformity, and in organizing and closely connecting that which is similar, but in a way that this organization and connection should appear as an 'inductive', experimental practical necessity and not the result of a rationalistic, deductive, abstract procedure that is, produced by 'pure' intellectuals. This continual effort to distinguish between the 'international' and 'unitary' in the national and local reality represents, in reality, the concrete political operation, the merely productive activity of historical progress. This effort requires an organic unity between theory and practice, between intellectual strata and the masses, between governors and governed. The formulae of unity and federation lose much of their meaning from this point of view; they instead produce their poison in the 'bureaucratic' conception, according to which in reality unity does not exist, only superficially calm and 'mute' stagnant swamps; neither does federation exist, only sacks of potatoes; that is, the mechanical juxtaposition of individual 'units' without any interrelationship (Gramsci 1975, Q9§68, pp. 1139-40).⁹

3. *The question of organization today*

I think that in Gramsci we can find a much more dialectical approach to the question posed by Lazarus and Badiou regarding a form of thinking of politics in interiority to a potentially revolutionary sequence but also with an answer to the questions posed by Lukács. If we are talking about organizations that refer to a communist horizon, the question is much broader than simply avoiding bureaucratic sclerosis. Such organizations must also be a permanent learning process, production sites of thinking. This is suggested by the analogy to the laboratory. This points towards spaces where people coming from the movements come in order not only to be politicized, something that in the tradition of the Left was considered as synonymous with ideological indoctrination, but to contribute with their own voice, but also in their own voice, and experience to the complex process of elaboration of alternatives, while at the same time constantly struggling against the disaggregating effects of bourgeois ideology and politics. It also points towards the formation of antagonistic forms of theory and knowledge production, beyond and outside traditional academic frameworks, an approach that can be found in the history of the labour movement from Marx's *enquête ouvrière* to the idea of co-research in workerism / operaismo (Lanzardo 1965; Alquati 1975;

⁹ We use the translation of this passage in Cospito 2016, pp. 77-78.

Alquati 1993; Panzieri 1976; Wright 2002), to other experiments with alternative forms and practices of knowledge production. The analogy with the laboratory also includes an experimental approach, which is exactly the “gnoseological” aspect of any politics of transformation, since it points towards learning by struggles but also from the collective experimentation and ingenuity of the subaltern.

Such a conception of the organization, the party or the front as a laboratory and open learning process, enables us to think the hegemonic aspect of politics along with the element of encounter and articulation of movements, demands and political strategies beyond the limits of any claim to horizontality, a notion that cannot account for the element of transformation and potential unifications of resistances into a common hegemonic project, a path of collective experimentation towards communism. At the same time, it avoids the logic of imposing an imaginary unity or an almost metaphysical conception of the ‘political line, insisting on the open and necessarily but also creatively contradictory and transformative character of the process. Alan Sears has recently stressed this aspect:

A truly effective anti-capitalism requires a deep commitment to learning from every situation which requires both open-endedness and fundamental orientating principles. The resources of anti-capitalism cannot consist of the shards of the last infrastructure of dissent preserved as holy relics and passed on as “truth”. The current marginal anti-capitalist left is too often grounded in a faith-based politics, founded on a worshipful approach to the experience of twentieth-century socialism or anarchism. The next new left needs to work creatively and open-endedly together to identify emergent trends and develop new politics that fits the times and is informed by past struggles (Sears 2014, p. 111).

This need to restore the voice to the masses as part of the attempt towards a refoundation of the politics of emancipation was also stressed by Althusser in the 1970s. In one of his confrontations with the open crisis of the French Communist Party, which was not only strategic but also had to do with the prevailing organizational culture, Althusser insisted upon the importance of

restoring their voice to the masses who make history. Not just putting oneself ‘at the service of the masses’ (a slogan which may be pretty reactionary), but *opening one’s ears to them*, studying and understanding their aspirations and their con-

traditions, their aspirations in their contradictions, learning how to be attentive to the masses' imagination and inventiveness.(Althusser 1977, p. 11).

This call by Althusser, which was part of his broader self-critical acknowledgement of the crisis of the communist movement, can of course be linked to Badiou's insistence that people think that we have already discussed, they think in their aspirations and contradictions and their imagination and inventiveness. Yet this requires the terrain for this voice and this thinking to be heard. It is here that Gramsci's "Modern Prince" enters the stage and sets the terms of the debate. The party as laboratory represents this possibility.

This also gives a new meaning to the need for new forms of democracy and participation, new democratic forms of militancy. It is at the same time an attempt to create political spaces the offer a better "sociality" than the everyday confrontation with rigid hierarchies, exploitation, oppression and sexism and an attempt to enable this collective "restoring the voice", this opening to the lessons coming from the struggles and the movements and the experiments with alternative social configurations, along with new forms of radical theory and new forms of militant research.

I think that all these questions are today more pertinent than ever.¹⁰ The varieties of radicalism emerging after 2011 have confronted the question of organization in different and contradictory ways. The new forms of democracy and equal voicing in sometimes led to an underestimation of the question of organization of a new type, a question lost in the debates regarding horizontality and intersectionality. Traditional forms of "Leninist" organizing, at least in Western Europe and the US also went through a period of crisis, since the mentality of the "small group" cannot stand up to the challenge offered by mass movements of a different magnitude. Broad Fronts, especially those organized by means of forms of mass digital participation also showed their limits not only in strategic political terms (in the sense of an inability to work towards the formation of a new historical bloc) but also in the absence of any actual interaction between leadership and base. Putting aside the question of organization, as in a certain manner Badiou has

¹⁰ On the importance of Gramsci's consideration for the organization question today see also Thomas 2013.

suggested, in the name of the danger of all “party politics” turning into parliamentary “State politics”, is not an answer.

In the sense exactly as the integral State was defined by Gramsci as the “entire complex of practical and theoretical activities” (Gramsci 1975, Q15§10 p. 1765, *SPN* p. 244) that ensure the hegemony of the bourgeoisie, the Modern Prince can only be understood as the entire complex of the theoretical and practical activities that emerge out of the subaltern classes in their struggle for integral autonomy and hegemony. It is on the basis of this analogy that we can say that today the Modern Prince can only take the form of an *integral united front*.

Consequently, the question does not simply refer to the democratic character of organizations and fronts. In the same way that the integral state represents the unity of political society and civil society, in all their complexity and contradictory character, the integral united front represents the contradictory and tendential unity of political organizations and movements (against exploitation and precariousness, oppression, racism, neo-colonialism, patriarchy and heteronormativity). It is the reason that we cannot think of the party as an apparatus, even a complex one. We are referring to plurality of processes, practices, resistances and collectivities. Their potential unification requires thinking the party or the organization as a laboratory producing intellectualities, strategies, tactics, but also as a hegemonic practice. It is a constant encounter between practices, experiences and knowledges.

“Building the party” today – which in the contemporary historical period of fragmentation of the forces, militants and experiences that oppose capitalism, points towards the creation of united fronts rather than single parties – means transforming the terrain, forming networks, spaces and new public spheres along with new militant practices and a renewed conception of political discipline in a communist horizon above and beyond any ritualistic and mechanistic conception of political discipline. Moreover, this should be combined with new and original forms of struggle, of resistance, blockage, reappropriation and emancipation. In this sense it is not about a simple recruiting campaign but about a “permanent constituent process”, combined with the autonomy of the forms of self-organization and counter-power of the subaltern. The very fact that today the terrain of rethinking the very notion of the Modern Prince in-

cludes parties, organizations, movements, and networks points to the uneven and complex character of the process but at the same time offers a way to actually think the potential of such a process.

In this sense, we can return to the comparison that Negri makes and for whom the party should be a factory of strategies and an enterprise of subversion. Taking into consideration the changes that have taken place in the very form of the factory and the fact that capitalist production today is organized in a much more fluid way, more dispersed, more fragmented, at the same time that new, original and more complex forms of coordination are used, we can say that also the form of the party and the front need to change, while remaining loyal to their essential role: to produce strategies and subversive practices, to form a terrain in order for the movements that are at the heart of social antagonism to be transformed in all their multiplicity to hegemonic projects for communism. This also entails rethinking the forms of international coordination and a new international, in order to go beyond the quest for an “international revolutionary centre”, in order for an international public sphere to emerge, based upon a new anti-imperialism, in order to rethink and elaborate new strategies based upon local experiments. The entire history of the revolutionary tendencies of the working class movements is also the history of international debates, with the most fruitful of them being those where the emphasis was upon treating local experiences as experimental sites instead of looking for the “fidelity” to the line of some revolutionary centre.

Rethinking critically and in a practical manner the question of organization today means rethinking the possibility of a democratic laboratory for new forms of collective militant intellectuality, for the production of organic intellectuals of a new type and militant “democratic philosophers”, in order to put in practice the idea that “all members are intellectuals” and “everyone is a democratic philosopher”.

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