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Dizionario gramsciano / Gramsci Dictionary: Modern Prince

Abstract

This is an English-language translation of Lelio La Porta's entry on the "Modern Prince" in the *Dizionario gramsciano* (ed. G. Liguori and P. Voza, Roma: Carocci 2007).

Keywords

Gramsci, Prison Notebooks, Machiavelli, Modern Prince, Party, Communism

Dizionario gramsciano / Gramsci Dictionary: The Modern Prince

Lelio La Porta

Machiavelli's Prince is for Gramsci not only the founding text of the science of politics; in it, without doubt, there is to be found the original separation of politics from religion and morals, as well as an identification of the general and universal laws of the work of those who, among the great people of history, created politics. But above and beyond this, as Gramsci underlines, *The Prince* is a political text to be read within the sweep of the historical context in which it was produced. From this type of reading, we see the emergence of the Machiavelli's concrete aim, i.e. the political subject to whom "the revolutionary class of the time, the 'people' and the Italian 'nation'", the citizen democracy that gave birth to men like Savonarola and Pier Soderini, rather than to a Castruccio or a Valentino". Machiavelli, Gramsci comments, "had in mind 'those who are not in the know'"¹, in other words his intended public was not the politicians, who in the course of time had always applied the things that he was expounding, while at the same time hiding themselves defensively behind an "anti-Machiaellianism" of convenience. He had in mind, rather, those who had to "recognize that certain means as necessary, even if they are the means of tyrants".² The ones who were "not in the know" is a reference therefore to the revolutionary class of the sixteenth century whom Machiavelli, in Gramsci's view, wishes to persuade, so that it becomes convinced of the "necessity of having a 'leader' who knew what he wanted and how to obtain it, and accepting him with enthusiasm even if his actions might conflict or appear to conflict with the generalised ideology of the time – religion".³ This implies there should be a leader, a prince who, in the conditions of

¹ Gramsci, *Quaderni del carcere*, ed. V. Gerratana, Torino: Einaudi 1975, Q13§20, p. 1600; in English *Selections from the Prison Writings*, (henceforward *SPN*), ed. and trans. Q. Hoare and G. Nowell-Smith, London: Lawrence and Wishart 1971, p. 135; cf. also the translation of the less detailed first draft (Q4§8, p. 431) in *Prison Notebooks* (henceforward *PN*), Vol. 2, ed. and trans. J. A. Buttigieg, New York: Columbia University Press 1996, p. 151.

² Q13§20, p. 1601; *SPN*, p. 136.

³ loc. cit.

modernity, will have to become involved both in the construction of a modern revolutionary political project and of the realization of such a project through revolutionary praxis, through action. In this sense, this political subject cannot be any other than the “political party”,⁴ “the first cell in which there come together the germs of a collective will tending to become universal and total”,⁵ a collective will which is to be understood as operative awareness of historical necessity, as protagonist of a real and effective historical drama.⁶ Even more clearly, “the protagonist of this ‘new Prince’ should not be the party in the abstract, a class in the abstract but rather a determinate historical party operating in a precise historical environment, with a particular tradition, in a distinctive and quite specific combination of social forces”.⁷

The “modern Prince”, therefore, as a “political party” and not as an “individual hero” [*eroe personale*]⁸ even if Gramsci had already reasoned on the figure of the “leader” (or “chief”) as a fundamental passage in the construction of the project of the “modern Prince”, when in 1924 he recalled that the link between the Russian Communist Party and the Russian proletariat and therefore the entire Russian nation had its leader in Lenin, to the extent that “it is not possible even to imagine one without the other”.⁹ The figure of Lenin, and hence of the leader, as observed, as a fundamental passage in the construction of the project of the “modern Prince” is evoked by Gramsci in the form of a myth in which the revolutionary aspirations of the peasant masses, poor, oppressed and historically and culturally backward, would be embodied. This is expressed in a letter from Vienna of 1924, in which he describes the funeral in an Italian village, three days after Lenin’s death (21 January 1924), of “an agricultural wage worker [who had] died, a communist who (...) had himself buried, dressed in red, with ‘Long live Lenin’ on his breast. (...) These names, in a great part of the poor and backward part of the masses, become almost a religious

⁴ Q5§127; in English *PN* Vol. 2 p. 382.

⁵ Q13§4, p. 1558; in English *SPN*, p. 129.

⁶ Q13§4, p. 1559; in English *SPN*, p. 130.

⁷ Q4§10, p. 432; in English *PN* Vol. 2, p. 152.

⁸ Q13§21, p. 1601; in English, *SPN*, p. 147.

⁹ *Capo* in “L’Ordine Nuovo”, March 1924, then republished in “L’Unità”, 6 November 1924 and now in Gramsci, *La Costruzione del Partito Comunista 1923-1926*, Torino: Einaudi, 1971, p. 14; in English *Leader in Selected Political Writings 1921-1926*, ed. and trans. Q. Hoare, London: Lawrence and Wishart 1978, p. 210.

myth. And this is a force that must not be destroyed”.¹⁰ The content of this letter allows us to understand why Gramsci identifies the basic nature of Machiavelli’s book not in its being “a systematic treatment, but a ‘live’ work, in which political ideology and political science are fused in the dramatic form of a ‘myth’”.¹¹ Different from Sorel, Gramsci realizes that in Machiavelli, and above all in the prince-myth that he created, a passion is present, indeed the Florentine is impassioned (“Machiavelli [...] is a passionate man, an active politician”), as he writes,¹² a man who – far from subtracting scientific content from his treatment – empowers it and makes it indeed a “‘live’ work”.¹³ For this reason, in Gramsci’s view it is not at all improbable that sometimes, in order to work on popular imagination in the attempt to raise it above the level of “common sense”, it will be necessary to have recourse to myths, to metaphors (“the philosophy of praxis, in setting itself the task of the moral and intellectual reform of culturally backward social strata will sometimes have recourse to metaphors that at times are ‘crude and violent’ in their popularity”),¹⁴ which are on a level with those used by Machiavelli in *The Prince* and which, if they served him to educate the revolutionary class of his time, by analogy will also be of use to those who, in modernity, wish to create a revolutionary politics. The new aspect introduced into political science by Machiavelli lay in the fact that, different from all preceding utopian construction, it embodied the theoretical element in a *condottiero* “who represents plastically and ‘anthropomorphically’ the symbol of the ‘collective will’”.¹⁵ This collective will, which forms with the aim of attaining a political goal, is represented “in terms of the qualities, characteristics, duties and requirements of a concrete individual. Such a procedure stimulates the artistic imagination of those who have to

¹⁰ Gramsci, 10 March 1924 letter to his wife Jul’ka; typed transcription in the *Archivio Antonio Gramsci*, Fondazione, Gramsci Rome, with earlier transcription in the Comintern Archives, RGASPI (Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History), Moscow, fascicules 519-1-95 and 519-1-104. In English in Gramsci, *Letters 1908-1926. A Great and Terrible World*, ed. and trans. D. Boothman, London: Lawrence and Wishart 2014, pp. 249-50.

¹¹ Q13§1 p. 1555; in English *SPN*, p. 125.

¹² Q8§84 p. 990; in English *PN* Vol. 3, 2007, p. 283.

¹³ Q13§1 p. 1555; in English *SPN*, p. 125.

¹⁴ Q11§50 p. 1474; in English *Further Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. D. Boothman, London: Lawrence and Wishart 1995, p. 315.

¹⁵ Q13§1 p. 1555; in English *SPN*, p. 125.

be convinced, and gives political passions a more concrete form”.¹⁶ The prince-myth comes over in all its dramatic intensity at the end of Machiavelli’s book, where he “invokes the real *condottiero* who is to incarnate him historically”.¹⁷

A considerable part of political action in a revolutionary sense, of which the “modern Prince” must be the protagonist, has “an intellectual and moral reform” as its aim¹⁸, in pursuance of which the protagonist must assert itself as an almost absolute subject: “[t]he modern Prince, as it develops, revolutionises the whole system of intellectual and moral relations, in that its development means precisely that any given act is seen as useful or harmful, as virtuous or as wicked, only in so far as it has as its point of reference the modern Prince itself, and helps to strengthen or to oppose it”.¹⁹ Bearing in mind the historical context within which Gramsci developed his theory of the “modern Prince” one cannot overlook the fact that his being presented as an absolute power, who “takes the place of the divinity or the categorical imperative”, is to be placed in relation to the then dominant totalitarian force (fascism) and its ideology. Against this, on the side of the future construction of socialism, another instrument must be opposed, which is also a bearer of certainties. But Gramsci is aware that an intellectual and moral reform is not possible without the socially depressed strata of society having experienced “a previous economic reform and a change in their position in the social and economic fields”, just because “the programme of economic reform is precisely the concrete form in which every intellectual and moral reform presents itself”. Precisely in so far as it is the protagonist of such a complex upheaval of historical processes which, beginning from the structure arrives at involving the super-structures, the “modern Prince” then “becomes the basis for a modern laicism and for a complete laicisation of all aspects of life and of all customary relationships”.²⁰

In order to assert itself as the “proclaimer and organiser of an intellectual and moral reform”,²¹ in order to leave behind the

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Q13§1 p. 1560; in English *SPN* p.132.

¹⁹ Q13§1 p. 1561; in English *SPN* p.133.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Q13§1 p. 1560; in English *SPN* p.133.

abstract territory within which Sorel maintained his myth – exactly because he experienced an aversion that, in the form of a “passion”, became “an ethical repugnance”²² for the Jacobins – “the modern Prince must have a part dedicated to the Jacobins” as Gramsci continues immediately afterwards, in other words a conceptual apparatus that is able to reconstruct historically the birth of the collective will and an organizational apparatus able to give this will the most appropriate forms for dealing with and solving that historical drama that “the first Italian Jacobin”, viz. Machiavelli, had singled out in the lack of an integral Italian State able to constitute an army with the aim of organizing “the hegemony of the city over the countryside”.²³ In other terms, Machiavelli had realized that without the irruption of the peasant masses into political life, through the reform of the militia, no national-popular collective will would have been formed; from this intuition of his, which constituted the base from which the French Jacobins began, the “modern Prince” had also to begin. But Machiavelli’s intuition must be read together with two other intuitions forming the political base of the activity of the “modern Prince”. The first is found in the authority-consent dialectic in so far as there are “allusions to the moment of hegemony or consent in *The Prince* too, beside those to authority or force”,²⁴ which make explicit the “dual nature of Machiavelli’s centaur – half-animal and half-human – [...] the levels of force and of consent, authority and hegemony, violence and civilisation, of the individual moment and of the universal moment [...], of agitation and of propaganda, of tactics and of strategy, etc..²⁵ The second intuition regards Machiavelli as a “democrat”, in other words the theoretician who defines the political subject to whom the action of the Prince is directed. Gramsci does not at all hide the possibility that the teachings of *The Prince*, as already pointed out, may be directed towards the holders of power but, at the same time, he indicates

²² Q13§1 p. 1559; in English *SPN* p.130. [To the *SPN*’s wording “emotional” we prefer here the literal “passion”, thereby maintaining the conceptual link to Croce’s notion of politics as a “passion” and Gramsci’s critique of that notion – trans. note.]

²³ Gramsci, *Lettere dal Carcere*, ed. Antonio A. Santucci, Palermo: Sellerio, Vol. 2 p. 479 (letter to Tat’jana of 7 Sept 1931). In English *Prison Letters*, ed. F. Rosengarten and trans. R. Rosenthal, New York: Columbia University Press, Vol. 2, p. 67; the word order is here modified to put the focus on “hegemony”.

²⁴ Q13§5 p. 1564; in English *SPN* p. 125, footnote 3.

²⁵ Q13§14 p. 1576; in English *SPN* pp. 169-70.

that between the parties in combat, i.e. the rulers and the ruled, it is above all the those who are ruled who benefit most, in that they are “where the historically progressive force is to be found.”²⁶ Therefore, the action of the “modern Prince” (also defined as the “New Prince”²⁷) has the result “that the unity based on traditional ideology is broken; until this happens, it is impossible for the new forces to arrive at a consciousness of their own independent personality”.²⁸

There is nothing in common between this modern or new Prince and the one discussed by Mussolini in his “Prelude to The Prince” of 1924.²⁹ In this 1924 work there is only political cynicism, not realism, only politics in the sense of the exercise of force at the moment when an evident rupture was taking place, such as the one immediately after the First World War, between the masses and the dominant ideology.³⁰ At that historical moment, since the dominant class had lost consent, it had lost its capacity to lead, remaining merely dominant and therefore needing a coercive force that would allow it to retain this dominance; fascism, in the form of a regressive “Caesarism” provided it with this force.

Two particular characteristics of the “modern Prince” remain to be highlighted. The “modern Prince” possesses a State projection. Since no “division of its political powers” can be admitted, the modern Prince “is an embryonic State structure”.³¹ What distinguishes the activity of the “modern Prince” is the will towards “founding a new State”, in that it is constituted with this aim.³² Exactly from this comes the second characteristic, namely a totalitarian, all-encompassing nature, which does not regard only the government parties.³³ The “modern Prince” is the component that is already directive of the whole subaltern area in so far as “some part of even a subaltern mass is always directive and responsible” and, in this way, it prefigures the new social order: “the philosophy of the part always precedes the philosophy of the

²⁶ Q13§20 p. 1601; in English *SPN* p. 136.

²⁷ Q13§21 p. 1601; in English *SPN* p. 147.

²⁸ Q13§20 p. 1601; in English *SPN* p. 136.

²⁹ [“Preludio al Principe”, published in the monthly review *Gerarchia*, April 1924 – tr. note.]

³⁰ Q3§34 p. 332 [where “Preludio al Principe” is referred to as “Preludio al Machiavelli” – tr. note]; in English *PN* Vol. 2, 1996, pp. 32-3.

³¹ Q3§42 p. 320; in English *PN* Vol. 2, p. 42.

³² Q13§21 p. 1601; in English *SPN* p. 147.

³³ Q6§136 p. 800; in English *PN* Vol. 3, pp. 107-8.

whole, not only as its theoretical anticipation but as a necessity of real life”.³⁴ This means that the “modern Prince”, in other words the revolutionary party, is potentially the State of the subaltern classes, the place in which the collective will is made coherent by posing the basic question of a new political order. For Gramsci, this represents the totalitarian nature of the “modern Prince”, an entity located within the organic crisis of bourgeois society that found its outlet in fascism, and which places on the agenda a decisive conflict involving all social, political and military forces.³⁵

³⁴ Q11§12 p. 1389; in English *SPN* p. 337.

³⁵ Q6§138 pp. 801-2; in English *PN* Vol 3 p. 109 and alternative translation in *SPN* pp. 238-9.