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Abstract:

What is the relationship between democracy and hegemony in Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*? Salvadori and Galli della Loggia argue that hegemony is best understood as a theory of dictatorship and is therefore incompatible with democracy. Vacca argues that hegemony is inconceivable in the absence of democracy. I bridge these divergent readings by making two arguments. First, hegemony is a form of rationalized intellectual and moral leadership, and therefore depends on liberal democratic institutions. Second, hegemony is established through revolution. Gramsci thus paradoxically combines a deep appreciation for liberal democracy with a basically Leninist conception of politics.



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Hegemony and Democracy in Gramsci's Prison Notebooks

Dylan Riley

Antonio Gramsci is once again moving to the center of debates in contemporary social theory. Sociologists have taken up the concepts of hegemony and civil society to analyze regimes and social movements (Riley 2010; Tugal 2009). Political theorists have used Gramsci as an inspiration for developing the idea of radical democracy (Laclau and Mouffe 1985). Scholars of international relations have found Gramsci's focus on global processes useful for analyzing neo-liberalism (Morton 2004, 125-127). Gramsci's work has also been central in the attempt to elaborate a "sociological Marxism" that moves beyond both the statist and economic biases of more traditional forms of Second and Third International historical materialism (Burawoy 2003; Wright 2010). But despite this outpouring of recent interest, many of the key elements of Gramsci's political theory remain obscure. In this context, this essay returns to the *Prison Notebooks*¹ to ask a specific question: "How did Gramsci conceive of the connection between democracy and hegemony?"

This question has already generated a substantial body of scholarship. But most of it can be placed into one of two positions. One interpretation views hegemony as a theory of revolutionary dictatorship: a "Leninism" for the West (Galli della Loggia 1977, 69; Salvadori 1977, 40-41). These writers tend to be highly critical of the various attempts by the *Partito Comunista Italiano* (Italian Communist Party, PCI) to use Gramsci as a symbolic justification for the party's moderate post-war strategy. As Galli della Loggia (1977, 29) acerbically noted in the late seventies:

That Antonio Gramsci's ideological convictions, and the political and strategic proposals that follow from them can be made consistent with, or at least adapted to, the schemes of contemporary parliamentary democracy is an idea that, despite the prodigious theoretical efforts made by the Communist party in the last twenty years, shows itself to have little substance as soon as one reads or re-reads the texts with an open mind.
(Translation mine)

¹ This essay relies primarily on *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci* translated by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (Gramsci 1971). I have used this edition because it is the most widely used one in social science discussions of Gramsci (for example see Burawoy 1990). However, for those who would like to locate the discussion in the context of the full *Quaderni del carcere* I have included page references to the corresponding passages in the four volume edition edited by Valentino Gerratana (Gramsci 2007). In most instances the passages I cite are widely known. The purpose of this essay is not to emphasize obscure citations from Gramsci's *Quaderni*, but rather is to provide a coherent conceptual framework for understanding the relationship between hegemony and democracy in his work.

This interpretation of Gramsci places him firmly in the political tradition of the Third International. The second position, currently and most vigorously expressed by the director of the *Fondazione Istituto Gramsci* (Gramsci Foundation Institute), Giuseppe Vacca, holds that “there is no hegemony without democracy” (1999, 24). This is also the view of Laclau and Mouffe (1985, 176). Scholars who advocate this interpretation of Gramsci tend to present his *Prison Notebooks* as a sharp break with Lenin’s ideas about the state and revolutionary strategy. According to this position, Gramsci is a theorist of radical democracy, not a Lenin for the West.

Perry Anderson suggests a useful way of transcending this debate. He points out that the concept of hegemony was extremely widespread in Russian Marxism (1976-77, 17-18). But whereas in this debate it referred to an alliance between workers and peasants in which workers would play the leading role, Gramsci in the *Prison Notebooks* “now employed the concept of hegemony for a *differential analysis of the structures of bourgeois power in the West*” (20). This is a crucial point. Although Anderson’s essay suggestively points to a way of reconciling the two meanings usually associated with hegemony, his claim that Gramsci’s originality lies primarily in applying the concept to bourgeois power is too limited.

This paper seeks to develop a new perspective on the debate. It argues that none of the currently dominant positions adequately grasps Gramsci’s theory of the connection between hegemony and democracy. While Vacca correctly emphasizes that for Gramsci any fully hegemonic state must be both liberal and democratic, his interpretation tends to transform the Sardinian revolutionary into a post-war Italian Eurocommunist, or a contemporary radical democratic theorist. In contrast, Galli della Loggia and Salvadori correctly emphasize Gramsci’s revolutionary political strategy, but misinterpret hegemony as a theory of the dictatorship of the proletariat. Anderson rightly focuses on the contrasting meanings of hegemony, but his reading of the concept as a theory of bourgeois class power fails to emphasize that Gramsci embraced hegemony as a political value. In contrast to all of these interpretations, I argue that Gramsci combined a deep appreciation for the importance of liberal political institutions, with a Leninist commitment to social revolution. This surprising combination is, I suggest, what makes his work so distinctive within the Marxist tradition and accounts for much of his contemporary relevance.

Specifically, I make two arguments. First, I suggest that hegemony is not just a form of intellectual and moral leadership in general; it is a form of rational intellectual and moral leadership. Because of its rational form, hegemony is inconceivable without pluralism and democracy. Gramsci, unlike what some scholars have suggested about Marx (Megill 2002, 58), did not conceive of socialism as the supersession of politics, or more particularly of deliberation. I develop this point by comparing Gramsci’s concept of hegemony with the Hegelian concept of ethical life. I suggest that two concepts are very similar, and that a misunderstanding of Hegel lies behind the interpretations of Salvadori and Galli della Loggia.

Second, I argue that hegemony is neither “secreted” by civil society, nor is it a “bottom-up” process of cultural transformation. Typically hegemony is created in a process of decisive political transformation: revolution. I maintain that Salvadori and Galli della Loggia correctly grasp this point. Where a new ruling class comes to power in a non-revolutionary manner, through a process of passive revolution (as in Italy), it is

extremely difficult to establish hegemony, and therefore democracy. Democratic forms may emerge, but they will remain weak. To summarize: the whole thrust of Gramsci's argument underlines the close connection between decisive revolutionary violence and functioning democratic systems. The *Prison Notebooks*, from this perspective, is an extended theoretical reflection on what historical sociologist Barrington Moore called "The Contribution of Violence to Gradualism" (1993). To understand Gramsci, then, requires one to grasp his commitment to democracy and pluralism and his revolutionary politics in a single intellectual framework.

1. Hegemony as Rationalized Intellectual and Moral Leadership

I begin with the discussion of hegemony as a technique of political rule. Gramsci writes that, "The methodological criterion on which our own study must be based is that the supremacy of a social group manifests itself in two ways, as 'domination' and as 'intellectual and moral leadership'" (1971, 57; 2007, 2010-2011). Supremacy then cannot be understood simply as a consequence of physical force. It also has a moral and intellectual component. Hegemony is also closely related to a second key concept of Gramsci's repertoire: civil society. This refers to "a system of superstructural institutions that is intermediary between economy and State" (Anderson 1976-77, 35). Civil society is the locus of hegemony for Gramsci.

This is very familiar terrain. However the real connection between civil society and hegemony needs to be carefully explicated. I begin this analysis by discussing the meaning of hegemony and emphasizing its close relationship to the Hegelian concept of ethical life. Then, I briefly compare Gramsci and Hegel's concepts of civil society to shed some light on the extremely close connection between hegemony and liberal democracy.

1.a. Ethical Life and Reason

Hegemony in the *Prison Notebooks* is a historical concept because the mechanisms of intellectual and moral leadership differ in different historical periods. More particularly, hegemony tends to become broader (include more of the population) and more rational as history progresses (Bellamy and Schechter 1993, 122-123, 125). Neither Galli della Loggia nor Salvadori adequately grasp this point, and as a result seriously misread the concept. Galli della Loggia argues, for example, that Gramsci is best understood as a left wing Silvio Spaventa advocating an authoritarian pedagogy and the propagation of Marxism as a secular faith capable of supplanting liberalism (1977, 85-87). Indeed he suggests that Gramsci carries over from Hegel precisely the idea that states must be based on a highly developed world-view or *Weltanschauung*. Such an interpretation gets both Hegel and Gramsci wrong.

Hegel's approach to the state is distinctive because for him the state is both a set of institutions and customs and a set of subjects who have a particular attitude or disposition toward those institutions and customs. This is what the German philosopher means when

he says that the state has both an “immediate existence” and a “mediate existence in the self consciousness of the individual” (Hegel 1991, 275).³ In the modern state, this configuration of dispositions, institutions, and customs takes the form of concrete freedom.

Modern states combine the two forms of freedom in a particularly intimate way. Immediate freedom is the ability to pursue one’s own interests. Mediated freedom is one’s self-awareness of the conditions in which it is possible to pursue one’s own interests. Hegel demonstrates a connection between these two forms of freedom in the modern state. Concrete freedom (the combination of immediate and mediated freedom) requires that “particular interests should reach their full development and gain recognition of their right” (Hegel 1991, 282). In other words, in the modern state men and women are not simply free, they are aware that existing political institutions and customs secure their freedom. Specifically this means that they recognize their individual freedoms as rights secured by the state.

This recognition of freedom as a right, and the awareness of the political context in which immediate freedom exists, is for Hegel the key to understanding the strength of the modern state. Hegel says that particular interests “pass over of their own accord into the interest of the universal.” This happens when particular interests “knowingly and willingly acknowledge this universal interest even as their own *substantial spirit*, and *actively pursue it* as their *ultimate end*” (1991, 282). Free beings are men and women then who pursue their own interests, but who are aware that these interests require a state for their pursuit. This is the abstract view. But Hegel also has an argument about how this develops.

The sections of *The Philosophy of Right* dealing with civil society argue that the pursuit of particular interests depends on the existence of an integrated system of needs (the economy); from the perspective of the individual in civil society this “system of needs” remains invisible as a system. When, however, the individual achieves an insight into the conditions that make his own individual freedom possible, and particularly the integration of needs in a market society, this leads to an understanding of a broader universal or social system that makes his or her freedom possible. That awareness now also takes the form of particular duties and rights.

The individual, whose duties give him the status of a subject, finds that, in fulfilling his duties as a citizen, he gains protection for his person and property, consideration for his particular welfare, satisfactions of his substantial essence, and the consciousness and self-awareness of being a member of the whole. (Hegel 1991, 285)

The modern state distinctively relies on individual subjects being aware of the connection between their interests *as individuals* and the interests of the state.

Hegel’s term for this awareness of the connection between individuality and the universality of the modern state is “duty.” “In the process of fulfilling his duty, the

³ I use the standard Cambridge edition of the *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* translated by H.B. Nisbet (Hegel 1991).

individual must somehow attain his own interests and satisfaction or settle his own account, and from his situation within the state, a right must accrue to him whereby the universal cause [*Sache*] becomes *his own particular cause*” (1991, 284-5). Hegel argues that this gives the modern state its “enormous strength and depth because it allows the principle of subjectivity to attain fulfillment in the *self-sufficient extreme* of personal particularity, while at the same time *bringing it back to substantial unity* and so preserving this unity in the principle of subjectivity itself” (282). Consequently, in the modern state the individual and particular interests of civil society become the basis of the development of duty.

A key question, from Hegel’s point of view, is how do the individuals of civil society actually attain an awareness of their universal interests? Hegel’s conclusion is that they cannot do so in civil society because universality remains constantly hidden behind the skein of individual interests, as evidenced in his analysis of the system of needs. For Hegel it is the constitution that leads to this awareness. It does so in part by objectifying the rights that individuals have in civil society. Moreover the constitution creates deliberative institutions, such as parliaments, in which public opinion can form. Opinion plays an absolutely crucial role in Hegel’s thinking.

Public opinion has been a major force in all ages, and this is particularly so in our own times, in which the principle of subjective freedom has such importance and significance. Whatever is to achieve recognition today no longer achieves it by force, and only to a small extent through habit and custom, but mainly through insight and reasoned argument. (1991, 353)

The distinctive feature of the modern state, then, for Hegel is that its commands are based on reason.

The state, suggests Hegel, in a crucial paragraph (§ 270) “knows what it wills, and knows it in its *universality* as something *thought*. Consequently, it acts and functions in accordance with known ends and recognized principles, and with laws which are laws not only *in themselves* but also for the consciousness” (1991, 291). As Hegel proceeds to explain in the paragraph, this is the fundamental difference between the state and religion. In religion the subject relates to doctrine in the mode of faith and with feeling. But Hegel is quite clear that the state does not demand faith. Instead it demands a rational acceptance of its authority. As Hegel puts the point, “since the state is not a mechanism but the rational life of self-conscious freedom and the system of the ethical world, the disposition [of its citizens], and so also [their] consciousness of this disposition in principles, is an essential moment of the actual state” (297). The modern state is therefore not based on untransformed custom but rather on reason. In particular, the modern state does not demand an elaborated *Weltanschauung*. Instead its cultural strength rests on the fact a critical rational citizenry with a fully developed sense of its own individual personality recognizes it as legitimate (Marcuse 1970, 213). Duty in the modern sense is *only* possible where there exists a wide scope for individual liberty. This idea of a political order based on reason anticipates in many respects Habermas’ notion of the rationalization of the life world. For Habermas (1981, 70), very much like Hegel, sees

historical development in part as the replacement of traditionally imposed norms with understanding produced as a consequence of deliberation. The absolutely crucial role of reason, and particularly of critical rational discourse, in Hegel's political theory is important because it means that to the extent that Hegel influenced Gramsci, the Sardinian could not have interpreted "hegemony" as faith, but rather as reason. Indeed there is considerable evidence to suggest that this is the case.

1.b. From Hegel to Gramsci

There are many parallels between Gramsci's idea of hegemony and Hegel's discussion of modern ethical life as reason. Indeed it could be argued that the role of the constitutional state in Hegel is taken over by the "philosophy of praxis," a term that means Marxism but also more specifically the self-awareness of men and women's fundamental capacity to remake both themselves and society (Gramsci 1971, 323; 2007, 1271-1272). The starting point for this sort of interpretation is that Marxism can no longer be understood with Gramsci as either doctrine or custom or ideology. The philosophy of praxis must itself be grasped as a relationship between a certain sort of subject and a certain sort of political project. This attempt to grasp Marxism both as a project and as a set of dispositions toward that project is strictly analogous to Hegel's conceptualization of the modern state as containing institutions, customs and subjects.

One of the most effective ways to show this is to investigate the connection between common sense (spontaneous philosophy embodied in language and un-reflected concepts) and the philosophy of praxis. A brief word is necessary on the origins of this latter term and the particular interpretation that Gramsci gives to it. Antonio Labriola (1972, 412) first coined the term philosophy of praxis to emphasize the importance of relationships rather than essences in Marxist ontology in a letter written to Georges Sorel in 1897.⁴ Giovanni Gentile then elaborated the concept in two critical essays that he wrote accompanying his translation of the *Theses on Feuerbach* (Del Noce 1977, 204; Frosini 2004, 93).⁵ Gentile's basic point in these essays is that Marxism, because of its materialism, had no adequate account of its own function as a social theory in the historical process. More particularly, Gentile argued, to the extent that Marxism became politically efficacious it had necessarily to lose "on the way...all its form and philosophical rigor" (1955, 123). As Sorel (1999, 19-20) understood, it had to be converted into a myth.

One useful way of reading Gramsci's notes on the philosophy of praxis is as an answer to this criticism. For, although Gramsci was extremely sensitive to the importance of culture in historical development, he saw Gentile's criticism as elitist and irrational. For him, the persuasive power of Marxism must above all be based on its ability to explain the world to ordinary men and women. Gramsci explains how he sees this

⁴ Labriola refers to the "filosofia della praxis," whereas Gentile refers to "filosofia della prassi" (Gentile 1955, 72).

⁵ The influence of Gentile on Gramsci remains a contentious subject. Frosini forcefully argues that Gramsci carefully distinguished his philosophy of praxis from Gentile's. Del Noce's highly suggestive essay, "Gentile e Gramsci" makes the opposite argument.

process unfolding in the notes where he addresses the transformation of common sense through the philosophy of praxis. As he states in the *Prison Notebooks*,

At this point, a fundamental theoretical question is raised: can modern theory [that is the philosophy of praxis or Marxism] be in opposition to the ‘spontaneous’ feelings of the masses? (‘Spontaneous’ in the sense that they are not the result of any systematic educational activity on the part of an already conscious leading group, but have been formed through everyday experience illuminated by ‘common sense,’ i.e. by the traditional popular conception of the world—what is unimaginatively called ‘instinct,’ although it too is in fact a primitive and elementary historical acquisition.) It cannot be in opposition to them. Between the two there is a ‘quantitative’ difference of degree, not one of quality. (1971, 199; 2007, 330-331)

This passage raises an important question. Why does Gramsci say that modern theory (Marxism) cannot be in opposition to the spontaneous feelings of the masses?

Now one kind of obvious objection to this claim would simply be to say that in a wide variety of historical circumstances the philosophy of praxis does not seem to have been adopted by “the masses,” however we might choose to define this term. But this sort of objection misunderstands what Gramsci means by the philosophy of praxis. The philosophy of praxis is not a set of received and established truths about the way the social world works. This is why Gramsci claims that it cannot be presented in the form of a “formally dogmatic, stylistically poised and scientifically balanced exposition” (Gramsci 1971, 433; 2007, 1424). The philosophy of praxis, or Marxism, for Gramsci is therefore not a *Weltanschauung* in the usual sense because it is not a doctrine. It is instead the progressive achievement on the part of the mass of the population itself of awareness of its own historical agency. As Gramsci puts it, “the philosophy of praxis, is precisely the concrete historicization of philosophy and its identification with history” (1971, 436; 2007, 1426).

From this perspective the whole view that suggests that the philosophy of praxis might exist against the “spontaneous feelings of the masses” is frankly nonsense. After all, the philosophy of praxis is only a philosophy of praxis if it in fact is the self-awareness of the mass of the population of its own potential historical role. If it is not the self-awareness of the mass of the population in this sense, it cannot be a philosophy of praxis but can only exist as an ideology: a doctrinal system separated from its object of analysis, which neither transforms its object, nor itself, in the very act of its analysis. In other words the philosophy of praxis cannot exist in the same way as “biology,” for example Its validity consists in establishing a critical rational relationship between the socialist political project and those subjects who might potentially support such a project.

This does not mean that Gramsci is a populist in the sense that he uncritically praises or celebrates popular culture. His derisive criticism of Henri de Man shows this.

De Man 'studies' popular feelings: he does not feel with them to guide them, and lead them into a catharsis of modern civilization. His position is that of the scholarly student of folklore who is permanently afraid that modernity is going to destroy the object of his study. (1971, 418-19; 2007, 1506)

However, the philosophy of praxis must be translatable into the language of "good sense;" it must also be a constant critique of "common sense." As Gramsci writes, "it must be a criticism of 'common sense,' basing itself initially, however, on common sense in order to demonstrate that 'everyone' is a philosopher and that it is not a question of introducing from scratch a scientific form of thought into everyone's individual life, but of renovating and making 'critical' an already existing activity" (1971, 331; 2007, 1383). The philosophy of praxis therefore must be aimed at transforming common sense.

Having stated Gramsci's basic problem we can now begin to ask, "What is wrong with common sense?" It is very important to think about this question since it is one of the central questions of Marxism with which Gramsci grapples. In making this connection, it is useful to recall what Lenin writes:

The history of all countries shows that the working class, exclusively by its own effort, is able to develop only trade union consciousness, i.e., the conviction that it is necessary to combine in unions, fight the employers, and strive to compel the government to pass necessary labor legislation etc. (Lenin 1975, 24)

Although Lenin did not give a very satisfactory explanation for why this was the case, it is worth remembering that his assumption, that the working class could not by its own efforts achieve a revolutionary consciousness, was widely shared in Bolshevik circles at the time that Gramsci was writing.

The most sophisticated attempt to explain why this was the case from a rather orthodox Leninist standpoint was available in the theory of reification developed by Lukács. The Hungarian philosopher claimed to have solved the twin theoretical problem of Marxism (failure of revolution in the West and success in the East) by developing Marx's theory of commodity fetishism as reification. He argued that the development of commodity relations and the rationalization of production in advanced capitalist societies acted as powerful counter-tendencies to the processes of class formation and class-consciousness that Marx famously set out in the *Communist Manifesto*. Gramsci rejects this view in important respects, and links the problem of class-consciousness to an entirely different set of questions.

Gramsci counters Lukács in his very dense note, "The So-Called 'Reality of the External World'"

The popular public does not think that a problem such as whether the external world exists objectively can even be asked. One just has to enunciate the problem in these terms to provoke an irresistible and gargantuan outburst of laughter. The public 'believes' that the external world is objectively real, but it is precisely here that the question arises: what is the origin of this 'belief' and what critical value does it 'objectively' have? (Gramsci 1971, 441; 2007, 1411-1412)

Here Gramsci explains the most general problem of common sense as the belief in the objective reality of the external world. This is what Gramsci calls the "naïve metaphysics [*metafisica ingenua*] of common sense" (444; 1415). What is wrong with it? Gramsci's point is that the statement "there exists an external world" is an abstract statement because it does not say from what standpoint this "extra-historical and extra-human objectivity" could appear (*ibid.*). Reality from Gramsci's perspective is neither extra-human objectivity nor subjectivity. Rather, it is an objectivity that exists in relationship to a subject for which it is an object.

Common sense, however, denies that reality is a relationship between an object and a subject for whom, and to whom the object appears as an object. Instead it affirms an "objectivity that exists even apart from man" (446; 1416). Now this is a common sort of Hegelian move. Lukács famously describes what he calls reification in a similar way:

The contemplative stance adopted towards a process mechanically conforming to fixed laws and enacted independently of man's consciousness and impervious to human intervention, i.e. a perfectly closed system, must likewise transform the basic categories of man's immediate attitude toward the world. (1971, 89)

Thus for Lukács, as for Gramsci, the belief in the reality of the external world is the result of a certain sort of subjectivity, a subjectivity that is not aware of itself as the producer of social reality. However Gramsci interprets this point in a very different way from other thinkers in the Marxist tradition. For him the source of this view is *not* commodity production, but religion. What does religion provide? For Gramsci religion provides the subject for which objectivity appears *as such* without any intermediation.

Who is able to put himself in this kind of 'standpoint of the cosmos in itself' and what could such a standpoint mean? It can indeed be maintained that here we are dealing with a hangover of the concept of God, precisely in its mystic form of a conception of an unknown God. (1971, 445; 2007, 1415)

From Gramsci's perspective, then, God as the ultimate subject is the guarantor of the belief in objectivity in-itself outside of a human subject. On this account there is a subterranean connection between the religious world-view and "positivism" (understood in a general sense as a stance toward the social world which identifies laws and institutions that are outside the intervention of human beings). As Gramsci puts the point, "Catholicism tends, in its competition with idealist philosophy, to appropriate to its side natural and physical science" (Gramsci 1971, 444; 2007, 1414). Catholicism and positivism are linked at the level of their basic understanding of reality. I want to emphasize that this is an extremely original move within the Marxian tradition. It harks back in some ways to an older critique of Aristotelian thought, which gets its start with Hobbes, but Gramsci powerfully develops it in the Marxist tradition. Gramsci's argument here also anticipates Louis Althusser's concept of ideology as interpellation (1971: 177-183), although in a very different idiom.

With respect to Lenin and Lukács and the thinkers of the Frankfurt school, this is really a new departure. Essentially, this other tradition of Marxism (the Russo-German one) argued that positivism, which we can take as shorthand for the idea of the objectivity of the external world, was somehow the immediate and spontaneous form of knowledge among the "masses." Gramsci reverses this way of thinking because he instead takes as a problem to explain "the origin of this belief" (Gramsci 1971, 441; 2007, 1411-1412). One might think that this turn toward religion indicates Gramsci's affinity with Feuerbach. But there is a sharp difference between the two. For Feuerbach the ultimate source of religious feeling is the human sense of dependence on nature (2004, 2). Gramsci's argument remains much more sociological and historical. For religion itself is the product of a specific social group: the traditional intellectuals. Because they are cut off from class and from production, traditional intellectuals tend to form "as a crystallized social group" (Gramsci 1971, 452; 2007, 1406-1407). Further they connect themselves with "preceding intellectual categor[ies] by means of a common conceptual nomenclature" (Gramsci 452; 1407). To extend Gramsci's argument, the consolidation of this common conceptual nomenclature tends to lead to hypostases. One of the best examples of this is idealism. Gramsci in a dense and elusive note on 'quality' and 'quantity' appears to suggest that idealists have tended to attribute concreteness and subjectivity to sets of human relationships such as the state (469; 1447). For him the conceptual error of idealism is not fundamentally different from that of vulgar materialism that, instead of divinizing human collectivities divinizes matter (ibid.). In short, from Gramsci's perspective the replacement of the action of things for the action of men and women is an occupational hazard of traditional intellectuals. In this general sense religion is the spontaneous ideology of the traditional intellectuals, which they then perpetrate on society as a whole. To formulate the point as sharply as possible something like reification or false consciousness indeed does exist for Gramsci, but far from being characteristic of workers, or even "the masses," it is the typical ideology of intellectuals.

The limits of the consciousness of traditional intellectuals from Gramsci's perspective are most obvious in their inability to establish a consistently immanent conception of the world. This inability is most radically present in Giovanni Gentile's philosophy. Gentile, like Gramsci, is basically concerned with establishing a synthesis of theory and practice (Harris 1960, 1). Although in some ways Gramsci shares this general program, he is sharply critical of the speculative form that Gentile gives it.

It must be demonstrated that while the 'subjectivist' conception has had its usefulness as a criticism of the philosophy of transcendence on the one hand and the naïve metaphysics of common sense on the other, it can find its truth and its historicist interpretation only in the concept of the superstructures. (Gramsci 1971, 444; 2007, 1415)

What does this mean? In my view the key problem for Gramsci with previous attempts to establish the philosophy of praxis is that the subject was always conceived as an individual subject. But the subject that can actually create an objective world, an absolute subject, is not an individual subject (however deified), but a collective subject. As Gramsci puts the point, "Man knows objectively in so far as knowledge is real for the whole human race *historically* unified in a single unitary cultural system.... There exists therefore a struggle for objectivity...and this struggle is the same as the struggle for the cultural unification of the human race" (1971, 445; 2007, 1416).

Now this cultural unification can only come about as the result of the elimination of both class antagonisms and the separation between intellectuals and non-intellectuals. A theory that fails to do this, that fails to transform common sense, is doomed to take a manipulative and contemplative view of social reality. This is sociology. From Gramsci's point of view sociology as a science (and also vulgar Marxism) is possible only to the extent that people in fact behave as things. As Gramsci writes "the fact has not been properly emphasized that statistical laws can be employed in the science and art of politics only so long as the great masses of the population remain (or are at least reputed to remain) essentially passive, in relation to the questions which interest historians and politicians" (1971, 428; 2007, 1429). But the philosophy of praxis cannot be sociology in this sense because its whole aim and purpose is to eliminate the conditions in which 'the great masses of the population' are passive. Its aim is to establish, to really establish, precisely that universal subject which is the speculative dream of idealist philosophy.

The above sketch suggests then that hegemony is not just a moral and intellectual leadership in general, but is a form of self-awareness a type of reason similar to what Hegel sketches out in the *Philosophy of Right*. Belief, faith, dogmatism may be understood as embryonic forms of hegemony, but a fully developed hegemony is a form of intellectual and moral leadership in which the mass of the population understands its own interests as being fundamentally compatible with the dominant social group. A fully developed hegemony *cannot* be a type of blind faith because it rests on the development of a critical consciousness in the mass of the population that can develop only in the context of substantial formal freedom (Vacca 1999, 22-23). Gramsci understands the institutional context of this formal freedom as civil society.

1.c. Civil Society in Hegel and Gramsci

Gramsci distinguishes the states of Western Europe from those of the East with reference to a set of institutions that grow up around the coercive core of the state, which Gramsci calls, drawing on Hegel, “civil society.” In the famous note where Gramsci makes this distinction he writes:

In Russia the State was everything, civil society was primordial and gelatinous; in the West, there was a proper relationship between State and civil society, and when the State trembled a sturdy structure of civil society was at once revealed. The State was only an out ditch, behind which there stood a powerful system of fortresses and earthworks. (1971, 238; 2007, 866)

Civil society refers to the “‘private’ woof of the state” (259; 56). Hegel, by developing this concept, argues Gramsci, already anticipated “the parliamentary State with its party system” (259; 57). Marx, although Gramsci says that he had “a sense for the masses,” was not able to reach this idea. His “concept of organization remains entangled amid the following elements: craft organization; Jacobin clubs; secret conspiracies by small groups; journalistic organization” (ibid.). This is a striking observation. From Gramsci’s perspective it is Hegel, not Marx, who really has the theory of the modern state.

Why is civil society significant? From the perspective of Salvadori, civil society is important for Gramsci because it constitutes a strategic obstacle to carrying out a Bolshevik revolution in Western Europe (Salvadori 1977, 41). There is no doubt that this is an important part of Gramsci’s thinking. As outlined in the note entitled “Political Struggle and Military War,”

The same reduction must occur in the art and science of politics, at least in so far as it concerns the most advanced states where ‘civil society’ has become a structure that is much more complex and resistant to catastrophic ‘eruptions’ of the immediate economic element (crises, depressions and so on); the superstructures of civil society are like the trench systems of modern war. (Gramsci 1971, 235; 2007, 1615)

But for Gramsci civil society cannot be reduced simply to a strategic obstacle. The concept also has a programmatic value.

Gramsci suggests that the bourgeoisie is the first class in history able to establish an “Ethical State”—precisely because it establishes an institutional separation between state and civil society. From a formal legal point of view, this sort of state treats every person as if he or she were a “bourgeois.” The historical project of this new form of state is to create the conditions in which “all mankind will be bourgeois” (1971, 259; 2007, 1050).

The modern state with a civil society grants men and women specific sorts of rights insofar as they are human beings. It does not recognize class differences politically. This distinguishes capitalist ruling classes from all previous ruling classes.

The previous ruling classes were essentially conservative in the sense that they did not tend to construct an organic passage from the other classes into their own, i.e. to enlarge their class sphere 'technically' and ideologically: their conception was that of a closed caste. The bourgeois class poses itself as an organism in continuous movement, capable of absorbing the entire society, assimilating it to its own cultural and economic level. The entire function of the state has been transformed; the State has become an 'educator,' etc. (260; 937)

What are the consequences of this observation for revolutionary politics? The basic lesson that Gramsci draws from this is that an effective socialist politics in the West must pose for itself the goal of realizing the project of civil society. It is not simply that civil society is an obstacle to a Bolshevik strategy in the West. The long-term goal for Gramsci is *not* to destroy civil society. Rather, civil society defines the content of the revolutionary project in the West (Vacca 1999, 21).

A class claiming to be capable of assimilating the whole of society, and which was at the same time really able to express such a process, would perfect this conception of the State and of law, so as to conceive the end of the State and of law—rendered useless since they will have exhausted their function and will have been absorbed by civil society.
(Gramsci 1971, 260; 2007, 937)

For Gramsci, the project of civil society is implicit already in Hegel's theory of the state and in all liberal doctrines.

The expressions 'ethical State' or 'civil society' would thus mean that this 'image' of a State without a State was present to the greatest political and legal thinkers, in so far as they placed themselves on the terrain of pure science (pure utopia, since based on the premise that all men are really equal and hence equally rational and moral, i.e. capable of accepting the law spontaneously, freely, and not through coercion, as imposed by another class, as something external to consciousness). (263; 764)

Therefore, the socialist project, from Gramsci's perspective, must be about creating the conditions under which the social order can be held together through rational consent, not

through ideology or coercion. Gramsci's term for this "State without a State" is a regulated society. The project of realizing civil society is the programmatic content of "hegemony."

The situation in the East was different. Paradoxically the history of the Russian revolution does not raise any particular problems for Gramsci. The Czarist state was not an ethical state, but an economic corporate regime based directly on force. This means that here the socialist project unfolds as a direct seizure of state power, and then the subsequent use of state power to create civil society "within the husk of political society" (Gramsci 1971, 268; 2007, 1020). There are dangers in this process, and much of Gramsci's writing on Stalinism is devoted to addressing these; but Gramsci's basic model here is the French Revolution and its aftermath. Here is the idea. In the 1790s the bourgeoisie smashes the absolutist state machine. During the Napoleonic period, and then in the Restoration, the state appears to revert again to an absolutist form, but within the context of this framework a new civil society is emerging. Gramsci suggests that Stalinism is basically analogous to the Restoration. The Soviet state is a Thermidorian regime, and the task of socialism here is to create a socialist civil society both within and against this regime.

The problem for Gramsci is not Russia, but the West where civil society already to some extent exists. The bourgeoisie has created the beginnings of an ethical state, although this ethical state is corroding as the bourgeoisie returns to its economic-corporate form. This means that the politics of socialism must transcend the economic corporate demands of the working class. The political position of the working class must be articulated as a project for realizing civil society as regulated society.

Hegemony, then, from Gramsci's perspective is basically inconceivable outside the context of a liberal and democratic state. Only a highly developed private sphere can allow for the sort of critical consciousness necessary for a hegemonic relationship between the ruling class and the mass of the population. Further, the very project of revolutionary socialism in the West is best understood as one aimed at realizing civil society. Vacca is therefore absolutely correct when he writes, "Between hegemony and democracy there is an intimate link, a nexus of reciprocal implication" (1999, 58). But what is the origin of hegemony, and what sort of politics does Gramsci's account of it motivate? It is to these two questions that I now turn.

2. The Revolutionary Origins of Hegemony

How does hegemony develop? Gramsci's answer is somewhat complicated and underdeveloped. It is also worth noting that his main empirical example of the development of hegemony, the emergence of the Italian state, is an instance of hegemonic failure. I argue in this section, however, that one of Gramsci's central messages is that hegemonies are created during revolutionary experiences in which a single social class comes to actually embody the interests of society as a whole.

It is particularly important to distinguish between two forms of hegemony. One form of hegemony refers to intra-class relations, and a second refers to inter-class relations. When Gramsci speaks of the ruling class of unified Italy he writes:

The formation of this class involved the gradual but continuous absorption, achieved by methods which varied in their effectiveness, of the active elements produced by allied groups—and even of those which came from antagonistic groups and seemed irreconcilably hostile. (Gramsci 1971, 58-59; 2007, 2011)

Hegemony, in short, can be exercised in relation to allied groups or hostile groups. For schematic purposes, it is useful to designate the first sort of hegemony intra-class hegemony, and the second sort inter-class hegemony. These two dimensions of hegemony are linked for Gramsci: the structure of internal or intra-class hegemony has consequences for the ability of a group to pursue external or inter-class hegemony.

In the specific empirical case that Gramsci deals with most fully in the *Prison Notebooks*—the Italian Risorgimento—the success of the Moderates in achieving a hegemonic position within the Italian bourgeoisie, had negative consequences for the ability of the Italian bourgeoisie as a whole to establish external hegemony, or hegemony over the non-bourgeois classes. In other words, the specific structure of intra-class hegemony that characterized the Italian bourgeoisie undermined its capacity to develop inter-class hegemony.

During the struggles over Italian unification after 1848, different strategies emerged. Two were particularly important: the proposal to extend the institutions of the Piedmontese monarchy to the entire peninsula, basically making Italy a larger version of Piedmont; and the contrasting project of establishing a federal system in which the states would retain some local control. The first, and more conservative option, was the plan of the Moderates, while the second, and more democratic, option, was the plan of the Action Party. Gramsci's basic historical problem in his "Notes on Italian History" is to try to understand why the moderate proposal for a Piedmontization of Italy won out over the Action Party's proposal for a federal democratic republic.⁶ But this historical question is also rooted in a theoretical problem. To understand this it is necessary to revisit Gramsci's conception of class.

For Gramsci classes are not groups; they are rather complex social structures with dominant and subordinate elements, something akin to what the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1985, 725) calls "fields" defined as "an objective space determining compatibilities and incompatibilities, proximities and differences." In every class in formation there is therefore a struggle for leadership of the class. This is one form of hegemonic struggle, and Gramsci analyzes it with reference to the struggle between the Moderates and the Action Party in the Italian Risorgimento.

Gramsci links this idea of classes as internally stratified, to a second more traditionally Marxist notion, that every ruling class has a set of historical tasks that it can fulfill. In the special case of the bourgeoisie, that set of historical tasks is the establishment of a unified national state and some kind of representative political system. If a class fails to achieve its historical potential during its period of ascendancy, this

⁶ The Action Party that Gramsci refers to in the *Prison Notebooks* was a mid to late nineteenth century formation, different from the post war anti-fascist grouping of the same name.

bequeaths a set of further obstacles to the succeeding classes. Positioning the issue this way, the question then becomes why did the Italian bourgeoisie fail to fully establish a functioning liberal-representative regime in Italy? Why did this particular national bourgeoisie fail to fulfill its historical task?⁷

Gramsci answers this question, as I have already suggested, with an analysis of intra-class hegemony. Because the Moderates won out in their struggle with the Party of Action the transition to a capitalist society in Italy, occurred as a passive revolution.

It was precisely the brilliant solution of these problems which made the Risorgimento possible, in the form in which it was achieved (and with its limitations)—as ‘revolution’ without a ‘revolution,’ or as ‘passive revolution’ to use an expression of Cuoco’s in a slightly different sense from that which Cuoco intended. (Gramsci 1971, 59; 2007, 2011)

The victory of the Moderates over the Action Party meant that the Italian bourgeoisie never experienced a heroic period in which it led a popular coalition against feudalism. Rather the older feudal aristocracy and the rising bourgeoisie formed a rough working coalition and established some elements of a capitalist society, without carrying out the basic political tasks of bourgeois democracy. However, this victory came at a price since it opened up a path of modernization that politically weakened the Italian bourgeoisie in the long run.

But why, according to Gramsci, did the Moderates win out in their struggle against the Action Party? Gramsci provides two somewhat different answers to this question. One refers to Italy’s relatively low level of economic development and the international circumstances of the unification period (Gramsci 1971, 82-3; 2007, 2032). But this is a relatively subordinate theme in Gramsci’s argument. For he believes that “subjective rather than objective reasons” explain the victory of the Moderates (82; 2032). The reason that the Moderates won out against the Party of Action is that they were the organic intellectuals of the Piedmontese bourgeois aristocracy, which in turn was the main social force for national unification. As Gramsci writes, “They were intellectuals and political organizers, and at the same time company bosses, rich farmers or estate managers, commercial and industrial entrepreneurs” (60; 2012). They were organic intellectuals in the sense that they represented “‘specializations’ of partial aspects of the primitive activity” of the Piedmontese ruling class. Gramsci suggests that this gave them a strength that the Party of Action lacked. As he puts the point, “the Moderates exercised

⁷ In speaking of “historical tasks” it is important not to be misled into thinking that classes for Gramsci are quasi-subjects traversing history and deploying individuals as their unwitting dupes. Rather what Gramsci means is that a range of structural transformations is compatible with the interests of certain groups. Interests deriving from property determine the outer limits of this range of transformation. For example, while the interests of private owners of means of production are compatible with the existence of universal suffrage and representative institutions, the interests of feudal lords who rely on extra-economic coercion in surplus extraction are not compatible with such institutions. But interests do not dictate how far along the possible trajectory of transformation the group will move. This, instead, is the outcome of political struggles both within classes and between them. One way of thinking about hegemony is as a struggle over how far along this trajectory a given class or class fraction might move.

a powerful attraction ‘spontaneously,’ on the whole mass of intellectuals of every degree who existed in the peninsula, in a ‘diffused,’ ‘molecular’ state, to provide for the requirements, however rudimentarily satisfied, of education and administration” (ibid.).

In contrast to the moderates, the Action Party was not a group of organic intellectuals linked to a specific social class. Rather, in the terminology of the note on intellectuals, we can understand the Action Party as a group of traditional intellectuals, a stratum with few connections to any decisive historical class. Gramsci describes this group as:

[s]teeped in the traditional rhetoric of Italian literature. It confused the cultural unity which existed in the peninsula—confined, however, to a very thin stratum of the population, and polluted by the Vatican’s cosmopolitanism—with the political and territorial unity of the great popular masses, who were foreign to that cultural tradition and who, even supposing they knew of its existence, couldn’t care less about it.
(1971, 63; 2007, 2014)

Being dispersed, and de-linked from any significant social class, this group turned out to be mobilizable into different class coalitions. The success of the Moderates lay in their ability to bring these traditional intellectuals, the Action Party, into a coalition in a subordinate position. The Moderates were able to do this, not only because they were organic intellectuals, but also because they were able to develop a concrete and realistic program that was “really progressive” in the sense that it not only satisfied the “existential requirements” of the Italian social elite, but also caused “the whole society to move forward” (60; 2012). The hegemony of the Moderates, as is true of hegemony generally in Gramsci, has a rational and economic core. A class or class fraction is hegemonic to the extent that it can carry forward a program that is “really” in the interests of a broad social coalition.

Now I can solve the second problem that Gramsci raises. What is the consequence of the victory of the moderates within the bourgeois coalition, for the nature of class relationships after the Risorgimento? The basic thrust of this argument is simple enough. Precisely because the moderates win out in the struggle against the Party of Action, the Italian state coalesces after the Risorgimento in a non-hegemonic form.

As Gramsci says of the Italian bourgeoisie, “They aimed at stimulating the formations of an extensive and energetic ruling class, and they did not succeed at integrating the people into the framework of the new state” (1971, 90; 2007, 2053-2054). They did not succeed because the basis of the program on which the Moderates could present themselves as the hegemonic fraction within the Italian bourgeoisie was fundamentally incompatible with the interests of the peasantry (61; 2012-2013).

During the political and social crisis of the late nineteenth century this incapacity emerged again as Italian political elites chose to base themselves on “a capitalist/worker industrial bloc, without universal suffrage, with tariff barriers, with the preservation of a highly centralized State (the expression of bourgeois dominations over the peasants, especially in the South and the Islands), and with a reformist policy on wage and trade union freedoms” (Gramsci 1995, 29). Therefore, the form in which intra-class hegemony

emerged in Italy during the unification period meant that the Italian bourgeoisie could never act as truly revolutionary force, and thus undermined its capacity for inter-class hegemony.

The contrast to this case of failed Italian hegemony is the successful French case. Gramsci discusses this in terms of the concept of Jacobinism. From Gramsci's perspective the main point about France is that the Jacobins were able to maximize the magnetic force of the French bourgeoisie. They did so by converting the demands of the third estate, which were initially the demands of a limited corporate group, into the most general possible form. Thus, the French Revolution, which began with a set of complaints on the part of group within the Old Regime, became the demand for a national assembly. This allowed the French bourgeoisie to form an alliance with the peasantry limited only by the outer bounds of the class interests of the bourgeoisie; but the merit of the Jacobins is that they pushed the bourgeoisie to the very limits of its hegemonic capacity (Gramsci 1971, 79; 2007, 2029). Importantly the ability of the French Jacobins to establish this alliance was based on their revolutionary political program.

3. Hegemony and Democracy

Having sketched both Gramsci's conception of hegemony and his explanation of it, I now turn to the issue of democracy. My view is that Gramsci understands democracy as the form that class rule assumes after the establishment of a fully-fledged hegemony as a consequence of a revolutionary break with the past. Since such a break is a precondition for hegemony in Gramsci's sense, it is also a precondition for a fully functioning democracy. Gramsci shared with Lenin two important arguments about democracy, and there is no evidence that he ever wavered from these. First, democracy in capitalist society was only possible when the forces in contention, and especially the working class, did not challenge the basic pillars of ruling class power, particularly private property. From Gramsci's perspective there is no way to institute socialism (a regime defined by a fundamental alternation in the property regime) democratically. Second, true democracy is incompatible with the state, because state power is by definition a violation of the rule of the people (Lenin 1975, 323). A radical democratization of society remained a goal for Gramsci, but democracy was an inadequate means to achieve it.

One of the central themes of the *Prison Notebooks* is the connection between physical violence or force—as exercised either by states or revolutionary movements—and consent. Gramsci's goal is to formulate a theory of their relationship that transcends the split between the Third and the Second International (between Leninism and Social Democracy). He argues that the failure to understand this relationship between force and consent has led in the West to a strategic impasse, and in the East to Stalinist degeneration.

Gramsci's starting point is the idea that it is important to match political tactics with the conditions in which they operate and the goals that they seek to pursue. One of the most important conditions concerns the specific type of political conjuncture in which movements operate. Drawing a fundamental distinction between “normal” and “revolutionary” politics (Adamson 1980, 627-8), Gramsci recognizes that one of the most

serious political mistakes that a movement or a leadership can make is to apply tactics appropriate to revolutionary situations to normal situations, and vice versa. How does he make this distinction?

Gramsci's terminology for revolutionary situations is "organic crisis." Organic crises have two characteristics. First they reveal the class nature of the state, which remains disguised in periods of normal politics. Second the outcome of an organic crisis depends on mobilizing social forces outside the core social classes of capitalism: workers and owners of means of production. (One particularly important group from Gramsci's perspective is the rural bourgeoisie.)

During periods of normal politics state power is not at issue. Instead political struggles are focused on government. They concern who will manage an existing state machine. Struggles over state management occur through elections and in parliament, which for Gramsci constitute a "legal terrain" of equilibrium for a system of forces (1971, 256; 2007, 1744). Politics, in this sense, does not place the basic interests of a dominant class in question. "When a struggle can be resolved legally, it is certainly not dangerous; it becomes so precisely when the legal equilibrium is recognized to be impossible" (256-257; 1744). Although Gramsci does not say too much about elections per se, another way of thinking about normal politics is what Schumpeter describes as competitive elitism (1942, 273). Legal struggles unfold between competing teams of political elites, and do not threaten state power.

Underneath this froth of politics the core of the state for Gramsci is "the bureaucracy...which exercises coercive power and at a certain point...becomes a caste" (1971, 246; 2007, 752). During periods of normal politics this bureaucratic core does not directly engage in political struggle. Normal politics therefore are best understood as struggles that occur within a given state structure. To put it in a sentence, the formula is alternating governmental teams and bureaucratic continuity.

The terrain of politics is radically different under conditions of organic crisis. During an organic crisis "the relative power of the bureaucracy (civil and military), of high finance, of the Church, and generally of all bodies relatively independent of fluctuations of public opinion" increase (1971, 210; 2007, 1603). These are the moments when the armed force of the state appears. As Gramsci writes "it is not true that armies are constitutionally barred from making politics; the army's duty is precisely to defend the Constitution—in other words the legal form of the State together with its related institutions" (212; 1605). Gramsci's main view is that any transition to socialism will have to address this coercive core of state power. Normal political means (centrally electoral struggle) are not appropriate for periods of organic crisis.

This vision of the state underlies Gramsci's ferocious critique of Social Democracy and reformism more generally. The error of social democracy is that it sees a legal road to socialism because it ignores the existence of the coercive core of the state (Salvadori 2007, 96). It thus confuses revolutionary politics with normal politics, and applies techniques appropriate to normal politics to revolutionary periods.

From Gramsci's perspective, revolutions must always pass through a period of organic crises that typically lead to a period of Bonapartism or Caesarism, which "represents the fusion of an entire social class under a single leadership, which alone is held to be capable of solving an overriding problem of its existence and of fending off a mortal danger" (1971, 211; 2007, 1604). This is the aspect of Gramsci's thought that

forms the basis of Salvadori's claim that Gramsci basically see himself as supplementing Leninism, rather than replacing it with something fundamentally different (Salvadori 1977, 44). To summarize, for Gramsci the nature of politics depends above all on the presence or absence of an organic crisis. When a ruling class is stably in the saddle, politics is primarily a matter of consent. During periods of organic crisis when political movements with contending visions of the state arise, politics becomes more a matter of force.

4. Conclusion

This paper has developed a reading of Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* that overcomes some of the problems with both of the dominant formulations of the relationship between hegemony and democracy. Vacca's reading of hegemony is very convincing as a description of Gramsci's idea of a post-revolutionary society. Hegemony is certainly not, as Salvadori would have it, the same thing as dictatorship (1977, 45). But Gramsci was also a revolutionary, not a Eurocommunist or theorist of radical democracy. Although he did not hold hegemony to be equivalent to dictatorship, he did think that a dictatorship would be necessary to lay the foundations for a new hegemony and subsequently a new democracy. The Sardinian is thus a "rare bird." He was a man who deeply understood and appreciated the value of democracy and liberalism, yet he never abandoned his essentially Leninist conception of revolutionary transformation. Indeed for him social revolution, with its inevitable transitional dictatorship, was the path to the realization of the utopian dream of a regulated society implicit in all liberal accounts of political order. This was the basic lesson that Gramsci drew from French Revolution (understood in a broad temporal sense). The fundamental intellectual and political question that remains is whether Gramsci's account of hegemony is compatible with his account of revolutionary transformation. The only thing that can really be said definitively about this is that history has not decisively disproved Gramsci's theory. But to fully explore these issues would require another essay.

There is also a set of conclusions to be drawn focused specifically on recent Italian history. The reading of the *Prison Notebooks* that I have rehearsed above suggests not only an explanation for fascism, but also an account of the continuing crisis of Italian democracy. Gramsci suggested that the Italian bourgeoisie in the late nineteenth century missed the historical opportunity to create a functioning representative democracy. In this context it became the task of the working class and the peasantry paradoxically to carry out the bourgeois project of establishing a representative state. How does this thesis look in the gloomy twilight of the late Berlusconi era? Although ideas of Italy as a particularly anomalous western democracy are overdrawn since the country has deeply rooted traditions of local self government and political engagement, it is undeniable that a functioning alternation of the political elite has never really taken hold on the peninsula (Ginsborg 2010, 47-54). Indeed today even the tenuous achievements of the first Republic seem to be rapidly fading. One rather depressing conclusion is possible. Perhaps Gramsci was correct in his evaluation of the Italian bourgeoisie, but overly sanguine in his estimate of the political prospects of the Italian working class. While the revolution

that would complete the *Risorgimento* is perhaps as pressing as ever, the social agents that might carry out such a project are difficult to discern. Can the *ceti medi* (Italian middle class) provide an adequate substitute for a worker and peasant alliance (Ginsborg 2010, 118-124)? This is one of the burning questions of the coming period in Italian politics.

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