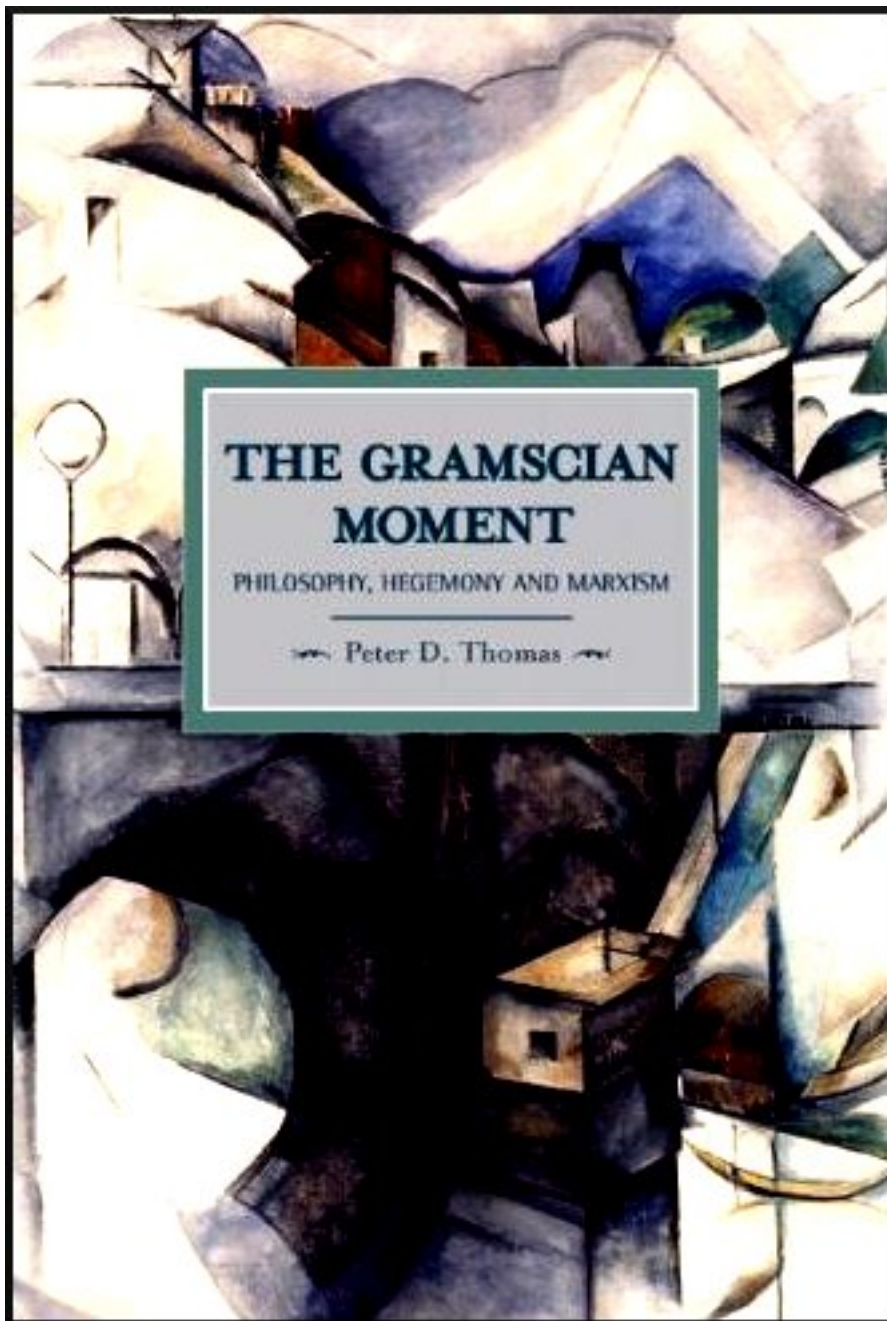


# "The Gramscian Moment": an interview with Peter Thomas

Peter Thomas's book "The Gramscian Moment", about the ideas of the Italian Marxist leader Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937), is now available in paperback from [www.haymarketbooks.org](http://www.haymarketbooks.org).



It has been welcomed by reviewers:

- "An astonishing work of scholarship";
- "This should become the standard text in English on Gramsci's thought... deftly overturns the received orthodoxy";
- "Henceforth... the critical point of reference for all serious work in the field";
- "A milestone in Gramscian scholarship";
- "The most thorough and illuminating philosophical study of Gramsci yet to appear in English".

The following interview with Peter Thomas about his book, and the dissertation it was based on, was conducted by Martin Thomas in stages over a period of about three years.

Peter Thomas has also outlined and discussed key ideas from his research in talks at Workers' Liberty events.

## "HEGEMONIC APPARATUS"

**You argue that Gramsci's discussion of "hegemony" is more political and class-based than those who interpret it the idea as a diffuse striving for cultural influence would admit, and moreover is crystallised in a project of a "hegemonic apparatus". You explain Gramsci's idea of "hegemonic apparatus" in this way. "A class's hegemonic apparatus is the wide-ranging series of institutions (understood in the broadest sense) and practices - from newspapers to educational organisations to political parties - by means of which a class and its allies engage their opponents in a struggle for political power... the means by which a class's forces in civil society are translated into power in political society".**

**In that sense, however, the working class does not have a hegemonic apparatus in any country in the world. There is class struggle, there are institutions based in the working class where that struggle takes place, but no "hegemonic apparatus". What guidance does the idea of "hegemonic apparatus", or of united front, give us in this situation? Or again. Take the strongest ever revolutionary working-class party to exist in a capitalist country, the German Communist Party of the early 1920s. It was very decidedly a minority in the trade unions, and not clearly a majority in the factory councils. The united front tactic was about contesting those areas. The unions, for example, were not part of a "hegemonic apparatus" as something already set up and strategically integrated. What would the idea of "hegemonic apparatus" indicate about what to do in the unions?**

It's useful to come back to another question: in what way did Gramsci further develop the idea of hegemony? It's important to note that Gramsci derives the concept of hegemony directly from the debates in Russian Social Democracy, where it meant a leading position of the working class in relation to the peasantry in the context of a democratic revolution against Tsarism. It is also important, and sometimes not noted, that Gramsci also develops the post-revolutionary concept of hegemony, as it was elaborated by Lenin in particular.

Hegemony, in the Russian context, is used continuously by Lenin as a synonym for political leadership. Gramsci himself explicitly makes this equation of hegemony with political leadership on numerous occasions throughout the Prison Notebooks. He also explicitly refers to the way in which Lenin in his final years had tried to theorise and to develop practically a concept of hegemony that went beyond the earlier debates, one that would indicate a leading role for the Russian working class in the post-revolutionary process.

What Gramsci is referring to there, in a very complicated and difficult form, is the policy that Lenin attempted to outline and to realise after the civil war - what Moshe Lewin describes as "Lenin's last struggle". Under very difficult cir-

cumstances, the Russian working class needed to assume the responsibility of political leadership in the process known as the New Economic Policy, a process filled with all sorts of contradictions. Lenin saw the possibility within that process of the Russian working class now not simply leading the peasantry in a struggle against Tsarism, but positing a political programme that could reshape the social relations inside a social formation devastated after the civil war.

On an international level, that battle had an important link to the politics of the united front - the necessity of the politics of the united front, not merely as a tactical consideration, but in a deeper conception of the political potential of the organised working class not only in Russia but internationally.

In the *Prison Notebooks* Gramsci attempts to further develop insights that he believes to see in the political practice of the last Lenin, in particular from the time Gramsci was in the Soviet Union, between June 1922 and November 1923, and during which time he was interacting directly with the Bolshevik leadership. The concepts of hegemony and political leadership were of course widespread in the Communist movement of the 1920s. Gramsci was not the only person to develop a theory of hegemony. (Stalin, for example, quite explicitly invoked the category and its "Leninist" heritage; Gramsci was well aware of this attempted inheritance and was highly critical of its vulgarisations and deformations). Gramsci wanted to develop the concept further through reflecting on Lenin's considerations and in particular his political practice.

I think he developed it in two directions. On the one hand, on his return to Italy, and throughout the mid-1920s, when he assumed the leadership of the Communist Party of Italy, in very difficult circumstances, he tried to comprehend what the concept of the united front could mean under fascist rule in Italy. In prison, Gramsci continued that project, in a theoretical form, by considering the possibilities for working-class leadership in the struggle against fascism. In this period of isolation from daily political engagement as a professional revolutionary, Gramsci also attempted to develop the concept of hegemony into what he refers to as a historical-political criterion, a criterion for historical study. He tries to discern the ways in which such a concrete concept of political leadership can be used to throw light back on the long process, the long democratic revolution of modernity and the constitution of the new forms of modern politics.

On the basis of experiences that occurred in the "East" - according to the classic distinction - Gramsci attempts to comprehend the history of the "West". In some sense, the intensity of the Russian revolutionary process had opened up forms and ways of thinking, new concepts for Gramsci, that could help him understand what was specific about democratic politics in its broadest sense in the context of the modern bourgeois state, the way that different social groups attempt to win support and consent, to engage in acts of coercion

against their opponents, to expand their own forces while reducing those of their opponents, and so forth.

As he was studying the history of the West, he noted a whole series of practices deployed by the bourgeoisie throughout the "long nineteenth century", from the French Revolution onwards, that were aimed to consolidate its position of political leadership. (For Gramsci, political leadership is not opposed to social or cultural leadership; it necessarily includes those elements and provides their fullest development). He simultaneously retranslates the term hegemony back into a consideration of the kind of hegemony it would be necessary for the working class to build in the West. He finds here many similarities with the forms of association which the bourgeoisie had developed – networks, societies, groups, clubs etc. – but he also finds an important distinction.

He states it this difference in very traditional, remarkably classical philosophical terms. Bourgeois hegemony, because it is leadership by a class that needs to conceal the unequal social, economic and juridical relations which that lie at the heart of bourgeois claims to formal equality, necessarily engages in a distortions and mystifications; a politics of the absence of the truth. For a proletarian hegemony, Gramsci argues that a politics of truth is necessary. He states on many occasions that the precondition for doing mass politics in the working classes is to speak the truth.

"The philosophy of praxis, on the other hand, does not aim at the peaceful resolution of existing contradictions in history and society but is rather the very theory of these contradictions. It is not the instrument of government of the dominant groups in order to gain the consent of and exercise hegemony over the subaltern classes; it is the expression of these subaltern classes who want to educate themselves in the art of government and who have an interest in knowing all truths, even the unpleasant ones, and in avoiding the (impossible) deceptions of the upper class and - even more - their own" (*Further Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, p.395-6).

That is necessary for the new forms of democratic associations – of societies, networks, and so forth – that would be capable of functioning in what I call in my book "a dialectical pedagogical relationship". It means forms of proletarian hegemony that would attempt to echo, and deepen, and make even more complex, the forms of hegemony that Lenin in his last years attempted to realise.

It is often forgotten that one of Lenin's last overriding concerns was the need for the Russian working classes to play not only a role in economic reconstruction but also in cultural renovation. The "last" Lenin was concerned, for example, with literacy programmes. Why? Because mass literacy would enable mass participation in politics. He was concerned with the establishment of cultural institutions that would extend the possibility of political relationships and practices, not merely in the city but throughout the countryside, permitting a genuinely democratic participation in political life by all strata of the labouring classes.

His work was dedicated to convincing layers of the working class to take part actively in this process, in a role of leadership. They would then become forces for modernisation and renovation of all the social relations throughout Russian society.

In this sense, there is a very important continuity of Lenin's legacy in Gramsci's thought, both before his imprisonment in his role as leader of the Italian Communist Party but even more intensely, in a theoretical form, in the *Prison Notebooks*.

One of the ways in which Gramsci goes beyond the Russian debates – not only the pre-revolutionary debates, but also the contribution of "the last Lenin" – consists in the development of the concept of a "hegemonic apparatus". This concept, with Gramsci, develops slowly in his work throughout the *Prison Notebooks* project and is equated with different terms on different occasions. One particularly significant one is that of the "material structure" of the superstructures. Gramsci was attempting to think through the way in which the superstructures, as derived from the base-superstructure metaphor, could be conceived of not simply in ideological terms, as ideas and concepts, but quite materially, as practices, relations and institutions. He wanted to look at the way in which these became unified as an articulated system of institutions under the banner of the project of a particular class or social group.

We thus have in Gramsci not only the notion of a hegemonic apparatus, in the singular, but also of hegemonic apparatuses, in the plural – a whole series of hegemonic apparatuses that come together and are unified at the political level by the capacity of elements of a particular social group or class to draw into a dialogue, or, to use Gramsci's term, to "translate" between, different hegemonic practices in different fields of the society.

## REVOLUTIONARY PARTY

**A "hegemonic apparatus" is not just a "series of institutions", is it? In the sense of a string of things, one after the other? Doesn't it need to have an internal structure? Doesn't a working-class "hegemonic apparatus" require the development at its centre of a revolutionary political party, shaping and leading the other institutions, trade-unions, community organisations, workers' councils, and so on?**

Certainly, we are not dealing with an indifferent series of one thing after another. Gramsci is quite aware that there are different hierarchies and structures and relations between practices. Not all practices are equal to each other, or rather, not all practices have the same capacity to mobilise and valorise other social and political practices. In other words, Gramsci is not an indifferent liberal pluralist.

A hegemonic apparatus, or a unity in translation of different hegemonic apparatuses, does indeed have a structure. However, the fundamental question for Gramsci is how such a structure of hegemonic apparatuses is constituted, because this determines the type of structure that it will become. Herein lies one of the real novelties of Gramsci's conceptual-

isation of the nature of modern social formations and of the formation of an adequate instrument of political leadership, or of a revolutionary political party.

Gramsci was not interested in the very widespread conception – dominant in his time, as diffused by neo-Kantianism – of a series of essentially unrelated value-spheres, a series of zones in the society which are aggregated to form society but which are relatively, or sometimes even absolutely, autonomous from each other. He was aware that all social practices are interrelated, precisely because of his Marxist emphasis on social practices as social relations within a social totality, not merely as the expressions of some regional logics.

That led him to conceive of what I would describe as the "political constitution of the social". Politics, for Gramsci, was not conceived of as a moment of administration or command from above, but always in terms of the transformative dimensions of a social formation or relations between social formations. It is the transformative dimension, and the possibility of intervention by various projects, which then defines the possibilities concrete forms of "the social", or the social relations in which we live our everyday lives. Gramsci does not argue that politics emerges from and then separates itself from the social, as an administrative instance, in a process of rationalisation; such would be one of the readings of the political theory of a figure slightly older than Gramsci, namely, Max Weber. Rather, for Gramsci, politics figures as an immanent transformative instance of social relations that both go beyond it and also, in a certain sense, fall behind it.

This theory of what I have described as the "constitution of the political" leads Gramsci to conceive of the revolutionary political party not as the centre of this series of practices and relationships that are articulated in a hegemonic apparatus, as in the conception of the political party which was widespread in Gramsci's own time, both theoretically and practically; the role of the party in classical German Social Democracy before the First World War would be the prime example of this. As I note in my book, however, Gramsci's notion of a political party, "the Modern Prince", remained in many ways a promise for the future, not realised in his time. In many respects, he outlined in the *Prison Notebooks* a novel theory of the political party that goes beyond the main currents of his own time, and indeed, also beyond his own prior practice in the "Bolshevisation" of the Italian Communist Party.

It has sometimes been assumed that "the "Modern Prince" in Gramsci is merely a codeword or a euphemism for actually-existing political parties in his own time. But that reading neglects the fact that in the *Prison Notebooks* Gramsci engaged in a very intense self-critique of his own political role and of the different conceptions of a political party that he had affirmed in his years as an activist. Those ranged from a rejection of the political party-form through to some of the undesirable elements of "Bolshevisation" [in 1924-5] and, at some moments, it needs to be admitted, invoking making too many concessions to bureaucratic deformations of the party-form in his own practical work.

Gramsci engages in intense self-critique of this in the *Prison Notebooks*, as of many elements of his previous work, and wants to conceive of a qualitatively new form of a political party which that will be adequate to respond to what he sees

as the challenges of the time. When he refers to the party as the "Modern Prince", in an allusion to Machiavelli, he is attempting to think through the capacity for a unitary but plural conception of a revolutionary political party, which becomes itself a laboratory for experimentation in the forms of democratic political practice that it will be necessary also to carry outside the party into the society as a whole.

That party for the Gramsci of the *Prison Notebooks* thus does not function as the centre, or the origin, of a hegemonic apparatus. It does not just begin from a core group of militants in one particular zone of society who progressively articulate and develop their networks, spreading out through society. Gramsci conceived of the Modern Prince as a new type of dialectical-pedagogical political and social relation capable of being translated into different contexts and then, just as crucially, of being retranslated backwards, enriched by the dialectical pedagogical exchange and interchange. We have at the end a vision of the Modern Prince not as a particular geographical location in the society, or even as a pre-existing element, but as the result of all of these relations, translations, and re-translations, as they are constituted in an ongoing process.

Gramsci conceived of the revolutionary political party, in its institutional form, more as a "result" which could then be used to describe, retroactively, an entire political process, but which does not precede or determine it in the sense of a traditionally linear relation of cause and effect. More accurately, we should say that the revolutionary political party is itself a political process, a new type of social and political relation capable of continuously drawing new elements into a dialogue which will not simply transform those external elements but also transform the Modern Prince itself as an active social relation.

## "THE DECISIVE ELEMENT"

**Yes, the revolutionary political party is not an already-finished thing, with a "finished programme" and so on, which then just radiates out and "colonises" other groups. Trotsky argues in *Lessons of October* that even the revolutionary party best-prepared in advance will probably need to face internal crises and transform itself to succeed in revolutionary conditions. But surely the party is central. It is the organised body of activists who are systematically and collectively politically active in a continuous way, not just at high points; who, with a continuously-developed and sustained theoretical basis, most resist the "conceptions of the world mechanically imposed by the external environment"; who best represent a concentrated power of political initiative. As Gramsci put it: "The decisive element in every situation is the permanently organised and long-prepared force which can be put into the field when it is judged that a situation is favourable (and it can be favourable only in so far as such a force exists, and is full of fighting spirit). Therefore the essential task is that of systematically and patiently ensuring that this force is formed, developed, and rendered ever more homogeneous, compact, and self-aware". Or again: "The protagonist of the new Prince could... only [be] *the political party*". (Emphasis added).**

Again, the question is: what type of party? And further: how is this party formed?

Gramsci was well aware that, in the broader sense, there is nobody without a party, or nobody who is not in a certain way a "partisan", even if only in a practical state, of certain choices, values and interests they share with others in similar social positions. Similarly, he recognised very clearly in the politics of his own time that the structured political party played a decisive role in the organisation of its class's forces. Furthermore, he noted that there were important differences between the party organisation of different classes or social groups, differences that he argued needed to be analysed in terms of the social and economic relations that structured the social base of those parties.

However, when Gramsci attempts in prison to outline a theory of a new type of party, the "Modern Prince", I think he was attempting to move beyond any conception of political organisation that was instrumentalist, or that could be subjected to instrumentalist deformations. It is therefore not a case, it seems to me, of stating that, regardless of complicating and intervening factors, the party remains "central", in either the first or the last instance. This way of stating the problem presupposes precisely the element that Gramsci was attempting to problematise – namely, the process that constitutes and makes possible such a party, or if you like, "centre" of directly political coordination, organisation and leadership. Like Machiavelli, Gramsci recognised that the type of political formation that he wanted and that he thought would be necessary for a workers' revolution was not pre-given in any of the models he had experienced himself; it would need to be actively constructed, and that meant thinking seriously about its constitution, that is, the process of constructing it and the ongoing "maintenance work" necessary to make it endure as an "organisation of struggle".

By focusing on the Modern Prince as a dynamic social relation of democratic pedagogy, I think Gramsci was attempting to develop an active conception of the dynamism that would be necessary for the formation – and continuous re-formation, internal development and transformation – of a genuinely effective political party, as a representative political instance of much wider social relations. That is, he had an expansive conception of the types of social relations that should be viewed as making up the Modern Prince, in all its complexity. This was not to deny in any sense that at decisive moments, in relation to specific objectives and on specific terrains of the social formation, coordinated and concentrated action would be necessary to deal decisive blows against the bourgeois class project – Gramsci's reflections on military metaphors and their significance for political struggle point to his clear sense of the significance of this (just as it did for figures throughout the history of early social democracy, from Engels and Kautsky to Lenin and Trotsky, for whom such open struggle between constituted political forces was a real and present possibility). It was to emphasise, however, that such an instance of coordination and organisation would only become strong enough to perform its role in the struggle if it developed an awareness of the dynamic social relations that made it possible, and with which it needed to work if it was to provide an expansive rather than limiting conception of political leadership. Rather than conceiving of the party as a "centre", it might be better in this Gramscian perspective to

think of such explicitly institutional-political coordinating and organising functions as the tip of the iceberg of the Modern Prince, the visible 10 % supported by the invisible 90% below the waterline.

## MARXISM AND MASS MOVEMENT

**What bearing does any of this have in a situation where there is class struggle but no "hegemonic apparatus" of the working class? There appears to be a sort of Catch-22 here. Gramsci seems to be saying that a Marxist world view cannot be developed without having a mass revolutionary working-class movement; but how can this mass revolutionary working-class movement develop without having at least some pioneer elements with some approximation of a Marxist world view?**

Gramsci is operating in a period in which there are mass revolutionary parties of the working class already in existence, and indeed where there is an accepted social form called a working class with which and against which people identify. Our own times are very different. The very existence of mass political parties that could be characterised as "of the working class" has been placed in doubt, depending on how we understand the phrase "of the working class", as a relation of possession, or of identification and so forth. Even more importantly, for many people, including people on the left, the notion of the working class itself has been radically placed in question.

Obviously we can and should have extended discussions about the definition of the working class. In my view, we can very easily demonstrate that the working class, defined as those who engage in wage-labour as the principal source of their access to the means necessary for their continuing existence, in a wage-labour/ capital relation, is now much larger than ever before in world history. It is expanding exponentially, to the point that in some so-called advanced capitalist countries the percentage of the population that could be defined as the working-class in the broadest terms approaches 70 or 80%, if not more.

The difficulty, of course, is that many of the members of this working class in no sense identify subjectively with the working class, and have various other identifications which they may see as more important. I would suggest that at this stage in history the workers' movement in the broadest sense is confronted with the challenge of attempting to recompose notions of the working class and rethinking ways in which we can place the question of labour relations at the centre of social and political discussions.

Regardless of the other elements that exist in people's lives, which are certainly not unimportant, one element that all members of the broadly-defined working class have in common is the daily empirical fact of being subjected to a wage-labour/ capital relation continuously. In other words, while we can be united by many things and often choose to unite with people for many different reasons, we are forced to share in common everyday the fact of being exploited by capital (clearly, "exploitation" should be understood here in the sense in which Marx uses it, not as a moral category – at least, not in the first instance – but as a scientific category to

describe the appropriation of surplus-value from wage-labour by owners of capital). We need to build new institutions that will be able to respond to that fact and transform those relations.

What does it mean to try to build a hegemonic apparatus in the contemporary context? Against voices that declare the death of the working class, we need to insist that it is a possible project; but we also need to acknowledge, I think, that it is a project that will only be successful if it is able to acknowledge the very real difficulties and challenges it presently confronts. The attempt to construct a hegemonic apparatus of the workers' movement, and the plurality of different hegemonic practices that will be necessary to compose it, is in many respects a process that still needs to occur within the contemporary working class or working classes, conceived in a broader sense. Years of defeats, disaggregation and transformation of social relations and practices have severely damaged if not destroyed some of the older traditions and institutions that were identified as "of the working class", and helped to give a sense of the "unity in diversity" that the working class always was and is even more so today. We need to continue the struggle within the working class to build the institutions that can help to recompose a more composite social body, which will be capable of confronting the capitalist class in political terms; in the first and not the last instance, this includes political struggle itself, as an active form of aggregation, or drawing together of forces in struggle.

What does that mean concretely? I think it includes a wide series of cultural practices, of different ways of linking together practices that already exist with institutions of the working class. In the first place, this refers to institutions inside the trade-union movement and to different associations and committees, even including sporting associations, community groupings and so forth. All those remain important areas that need to be explored and built in order to find some way of linking everyday practices to questions that pose the question and perspective of labour as a central way we organise our lives together in society.

It also means assuming a political responsibility, of the positing of explicitly political elements. I think that occurs on two levels. One, in the current period, is the positing of questions of the theoretical perspectives that are necessary to recompose the workers' movement. In my view, that involves a revitalisation of Marxism, and its recovery from the long series of deformations to which Stalinism subjected it. We need today a flourishing of a Marxist theoretical culture that seriously and concretely explores forms of thought that can help us to build the type of "culture" – in the broadest sense, as Gramsci or Raymond Williams would understand that word – that can sustain political struggles at all levels, both theoretical and practical. Another is the level of political organisation and intervention in ongoing forms of political resistance. We need to link together the theoretical cultures and the political, interventionist cultures, or in Gramsci's terms, we need to find the relations of ongoing and reciprocal "translation" between them that will enable both to flourish. It is only through the linking of theory and what Marx referred to as "material force" that both of them will be transformed and begin to forge the necessary active conception of workers' self-emancipation.

## "THE LAST LENIN"

**In hindsight, Lenin's fairly fragmentary writings from late 1921 onwards show us a record of a heroic battle – considering how ill he was, and the very difficult circumstances – but also that he was very far from fully appreciating what was going on in the nascent Stalinist counter-revolution and having an answer to it. You referred to the struggle for literacy, but that was not an innovation of that period. The Red Army during the civil war probably spent more time teaching soldiers how to read than it did fighting. How far did Gramsci reflect further on the processes of Stalinisation which were already under way when he was in the Soviet Union in 1922-3?**

Lenin's last articles and reflections are indeed limited – necessarily so, given the difficult conditions in which they were composed. There is no need to overblow either their intrinsic importance or Gramsci's reflections on them. The importance of emphasising the centrality of the "last Lenin's" legacy for the *Prison Notebooks*, however, is to acknowledge the explicitly political dimensions of Gramsci's theory of hegemony – something which has not always been done, particularly in some Eurocommunist and later Post-Marxist interpretations of it.

In that last period, Lenin was confronting the problem of the working class as a leading group inside the workers' state. It was no longer simply a question of opposition, of rallying the forces to oppose Tsarism, but a problem "within" the new "non-State State". What were the forms of leadership in which the working class needed to engage in order to be successful in its own project, which is the abolition of exploitation and making possible the removal of oppressive social relations?

There are elements in Lenin's final writings – and just as crucially, his practice – that show an emphasis or a tendency, a direction or an orientation which it is necessary to take, but they are obviously only very rudimentary coordinates.

In the *Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci wanted to take up those rudimentary coordinates and to elaborate them into a prospective mapping of the forms of proletarian political practice. It was precisely because he saw the various deceptive forms in which bourgeois hegemony had been established and consolidated in the long 19th century that he wanted to think through the new types of democratic practice that the working class needed to engage in to build its own project of a "politics of truth".

From 1926 onwards, from the very latest, Gramsci was quite clear on the nature of what had emerged in the Soviet Union and the ongoing process of Stalinisation and bureaucratisation. He objected to it quite explicitly in political terms. In a famous letter of 14 October 1926 which Togliatti refused to deliver, he explicitly condemned the political inadequacy of the responses of the Russian leadership. He regarded the attempted bureaucratic manipulation and censorship of the minority position in the Russian party as a dishonest form of conducting political struggle, particularly inside the leadership of the only communist party that had successfully carried through a revolution and founded a workers' state.



This perspective deepened in very substantive terms when he was in prison. That caused huge conflict inside the prison with other members of the Italian Communist Party and effectively led to his isolation inside the prison and difficult reverberations as news of his position and what he had been saying reached the outside. There is currently underway, in Italy and elsewhere, extensive research into the details of Gramsci's relation with the Party, with the Soviet leadership and even inside his wife's family, on the basis of newly available archival material. It is perhaps still too early to reach any definitive judgements on Gramsci's position. Nevertheless, from the material that has already become available and the first studies, it seems quite clear that Gramsci's "heterodoxy" was much greater than has been thought in the past. Furthermore, it seems clear that his dissent from the direction of the international communist movement, particularly in relation to the politics of the "Third Period", was well known, and constituted a very complicated factor in his party, personal and even familial relations.

Moreover, from the evidence of the critical edition of the *Prison Notebooks*, at least, some things are already quite clear: a principled condemnation of all forms of bureaucratic manoeuvring as a political technique; an absolute opposition to the politics of the "Third Period" and its triumphalism (the line of "after them, us", as a response to fascism); and a profound disagreement with the culture that had developed in the Communist movement, of top-down leadership. Gramsci's emphasis became increasingly strong over the years. Inside the Modern Prince, he argues, disaggregation is necessary. Breakdown and conflict are necessary in order to build the Modern Prince. It is through what we should call explicitly factionalism, struggle, disagreement, open and organised disagreement, that the Modern Prince is able to build itself.

That is not because this open conflict of policies would then, on the model of a scientific experiment, be a way of testing different theses in order to find the one "true" one and then to eliminate false ones. Rather, it is because such disaggregation and conflict is the nature of modern social relations and of the different interests that subtend them. This approach became for Gramsci a way of drawing the dynamic conflictuality of modernity inside his proposed party-form itself, as a positive and productive dimension of proletarian organisation.

This distinction between Gramsci and the orthodoxy which became dominant not only in Russia but in the Communist movement as a whole shows that Gramsci, despite all his important disagreements with other members of the far left - with Trotsky and with the Left Opposition, and with Bordiga - nevertheless needs to be claimed as a member of the anti-Stalinist, Marxist tradition. His positions can be regarded as one of the principled perspectives that rejected the deformation of Marxism, united with those other currents - fittingly, given their common rejection of the silencing of comradely debate by the imposition of a bureaucratic orthodoxy from above - in their often quite significant substantive and analytical disagreements.

## GRAMSCI AND STALINISM

**In the early 1930s, a whole "Right-Communist" current - Brandler, Thalheimer, Lovestone, and so on, people who had looked to Bukharin before 1928-9 - criticised the "Third Period" policies and Stalin's bureaucratic methods, including inside the USSR, but without identifying the Stalinist bureaucracy as a socially-distinct ruling caste, class, or incipient class, as the left oppositionists did. Do you think that Gramsci developed a sharper criticism of Stalinism than the "Right Communists" did?**

I think it would be exaggerating to claim that Gramsci had a developed theory of the internal class composition of the Stalinist USSR, such as we can find in the Left Opposition or other far left currents such as Bordiga or the council communists. He did not. His disagreement with Stalinism emerged from concrete disagreements about particular problems of political strategy, both in the Italian party and in the international movement, which he saw as deleterious for the building of the mass forces he correctly regarded as necessary for any chance to defeat fascism. He disagreed openly with the use of bureaucratic manoeuvres to silence opposition inside the Russian party. His rejection of the perspective of the third period was based upon an assessment of its likely disastrous effects on the international working class movement, dividing it and weakening it. Insofar as Gramsci developed a principled political critique of Stalinism as a strategic international perspective and bureaucratic deformation inside the Russian process, there are points of affinity with many currents of the far left critique of the degeneration of the Bolshevik revolution into Stalinist dictatorship - which is not to say that they were the same or that all were equally valid on all points. From our perspective today, it is important to note that Gramsci's political principles, and the analyses that followed from them, were fundamentally incompatible with a regime that sought to weaken proletarian democracy, on all levels.

**Did Gramsci ever comment on the question of "socialism in one country"?**

Gramsci commented obliquely on that theme at a number of points in the *Prison Notebooks*. His insistence was always that the national and the international remain intertwined. Gramsci critically took up analyses of imperialism, and was concerned to a much greater extent than I think is acknowledged in many English-language commentaries with the dynamics of capitalist accumulation on an international scale. The notion that "socialism in one country" could be a goal for the socialist movement, or even a possibility, must, I think, be acknowledged as incompatible with Gramsci's analysis of the necessary international dimensions of the capitalist mode of production, and thus the necessity for any attempts to negate it and replace it with socialism also to be international. In this sense, Gramsci's perspective remained close to the early years of the Third International, when the "Russian question" was always analysed in relation to the international situation and the future of the Soviets was seen as fundamentally tied to the future of the international revolutionary movement.

**In writings of the mid-1920s, like the Lyons Theses of January 1926, Gramsci wrote about seeking an economy "better fitted to the structure and resources of the country" for Italy...**

First, the Lyons Theses were at a relatively earlier stage in Gramsci's development. I don't think there is any political opposition between Gramsci before prison, and Gramsci in prison, but I do think it is important to draw distinctions between the different periods. There is no "totalised" picture that is available from any one citation of Gramsci. It is necessary to put together all the perspectives and the general theory that is used to analyse them, paying close attention to the development of Gramsci's thought within and across the different political conjunctures.

Second, in relation to the "Bolshevisation" of the Italian party in 1924-5 and related political perspectives from this period, Gramsci made what I regard as errors, and what I think he came to regard as errors too, albeit ones that occurred in very difficult circumstances. We should also note that not all the Lyons Theses were written by Gramsci. A full translation of all the theses into English with scholarly apparatus is currently underway. Clearly, an adequate comprehension of their significance, both in terms of Gramsci's development and that of the Italian Communist Party, can only be gained if we analyse them in the political context of their time and place. Finally, the strategic perspective of Gramsci's contribution to the Lyons Theses should be noted: in many respects, they were an attempt to give a concrete response to Lenin's demand for western communists to devise revolutionary strategies and programmes based upon an accurate investigation of the class composition, balance of forces and real potentials for revolutionary transformation in their own societies. As Gramsci always acknowledged, any hegemonic project would need to be based upon a capacity to address fundamental problems of economic organisation, and to propose solutions to the problems that the bourgeoisie was structurally incapable of addressing.

## EAST AND WEST

**Italy and Russia in the early years of the 20th century are generally seen as Italy being part of "the West", and Russia of "the East". But in overall industrialisation they were not very far apart. In terms of the productivity of agriculture they were not very far apart.**

**The big specific difference was that Italy had a much larger urban proportion of the population. It had a much larger urban non-proletarian population. One of Trotsky's chief arguments in *Results and Prospects* had been that Russia was exceptional in the smallness of the urban petty-bourgeoisie.**

**Gramsci made implicit references to that difference of class structure between Italy and Russia, scattered through his writings, but I know of nowhere where he poses it squarely and tries to tease through the differences.**

In my book I say that there has been too much emphasis placed on a few words cruelly ripped from their context in which Gramsci counterposes East and West. Gramsci's words are often not interpreted in terms of the debates of his time, where differences between "East" and "West" were also a major concern for other Marxists, above all Trotsky and Lenin.

The distinction between "East" and "West" was not peculiar to Gramsci, or even to Gramsci, Trotsky, and Lenin. It is an old theme that goes back a long way in Western political thought, as far back as the ancient Greeks and distinctions in Greek political thought between the (largely) Eastern "barbarians" and the civilised Greeks. The theme traverses the entire history of Western political thought and was also very present in the discussions of early Social Democracy. Kautsky's profound objections to the Russian Revolution were due, in part, to his different understanding of historical development, but also, in part to his conviction that there were "immature" political forms present in Russia, which made a successful socialist transition impossible.

Gramsci complexified this picture entirely, and was interested in conceiving the ways in which there are differences between social formations, but which are united in one international system.

Yes, Italy was much closer to Russia in decisive respects than it was to the United States or to England. In both Russia and Italy you had a relatively highly politicised working class in urban centres being a minority in social formations dominated by a massive peasantry. That is one reason why the Russian discussions on hegemony resonated with Gramsci so strongly, because he could see the links with his own situation.

And then even if we move to the most "Western" of all "Western" social formations, the United States, in Gramsci's analysis you see some very "Eastern" features. In the "East", Gramsci wrote, the political superstructures were less developed. That comment has often been taken out of context. I think Gramsci's analysis was that it had been easier, because of the relative lack of mediating institutions, to topple the Tsarist state, but the problem of construction after the revolution was much more difficult than it might have been in the western countries. That point was not one original to Gramsci; it was one he took quite directly from Lenin and Trotsky and the early debates of the Third International.

When Gramsci analyses the United States, he sees, with the emergence of "Fordism", something very similar to the pattern in Russia – a lack of mediating institutions that had been organically unified into a hegemonic apparatus. Even in the most "Western" of all "Western" social formations, you had elements that would seem not to correspond to the model of the sophisticated, elaborate, politicised civil society supposedly characteristic of the "West".

One of Gramsci's most important analytical developments in the *Prison Notebooks* was precisely to problematise the East-West dichotomy, and instead to concentrate much more strongly on the social relations inside different state forms.

## PASSIVE REVOLUTION

**You distinguish three senses, each more general than the previous one, in which Gramsci uses the term "passive revolution"...**

Gramsci's analyses in the *Prison Notebooks* were conducted in the late 1920s and early 1930s, and his references related



to "the epoch of imperialism" in the sense of the period through from the late 19th century through to his own times...

**And up to the period after World War Two, when it became clear that the old colonial empires had been mortally wounded in that war...?**

The general logic of Gramsci's narrative perhaps could be extended that far, but Gramsci's own reflections terminate before that date, for obvious reasons.

**There are some passages in which you describe "passive revolution" as "permanent structural adjustment *avant la lettre*", i.e. as relevant to recent times, and others where you protest against "a dominant interpretation that extends passive revolution to the contemporary world".**

I use the term "permanent structural adjustment *avant la lettre*" simply as a rhetorical device to draw the reader's attention to some similarities and parallels – but also differences – with our own times. It is important to acknowledge the context in which Gramsci developed the concept of passive revolution.

He took it from Vincenzo Cuoco, who essayed the concept in the context of a discussion of the Neapolitan revolution. Gramsci used it first to analyse the Risorgimento, and then extended it in different ways and at different dates to consider states like Italy and Germany in comparison to France as a type of model of modern state formation.

Thirdly, he extended it out to cover an entire period of historical development, such that "passive revolution" might be read as coinciding with the epoch of imperialism, if not predating it.

Why did he do that? We need to remember that he developed these reflections in the 1930s. They were used as a counterpoint to the triumphalism of the Stalinist Third Period and its type of teleology, which saw a continuous accumulation of the "progress" of the revolutionary movement. In some ways Gramsci was close to Walter Benjamin's critique of the implicit idealism of German Social Democracy's concept of historical progress, from which Stalinism was not, in the last analysis, as distant as it claimed with the thesis of "social fascism".

Gramsci was looking for a concept that could help him to explain the way in which things continued to "go on as they were", to use Benjamin's terms. Indeed, he came to see such stabilisation or at least maintenance of the established order despite deep conflicts and contradictions at social and political levels as the real crisis to which the revolutionary movement needed to respond. He was trying to develop a concept that would help him understand where he was, in the 1930s, and which would be a powerful enough narrative – analytically, historically and politically – to be able to be set against the dominant Stalinist one. While doing so, he was always very careful continually to refer to Marx's critique of political economy as his fundamental touchstone, seeking to measure the political significance of this new category with Marx's reflections on the nature and specificity of a mode of

production, its specific social relations, the interaction of forces of production and so forth.

I wouldn't deny that the concept of passive revolution can have a more general analytical validity, and could indeed even be used to analyse processes up to the present day. Some contemporary scholars have been doing just that, with some interesting perspectives produced by such an optic, such as in the work of Adam Morton. But I think there are other concepts in Gramsci that demand equal attention for describing the present, as potentially more fruitful for our own situation.

For example, I think neo-liberalism might be more usefully described with the Gramscian category of a counter-reform. This has been emphasised by the Brazilian Gramscian Coutinho. With the concept of counter-reform, Gramsci is much more interested in juridical processes and the destruction of political forms solidified in the state which different classes had been able to access and use for their own ends. In neo-liberalism, the state has been used to dismantle itself, in a certain sense, at least at its social level, by different impositions which have made forms of class organisation even more difficult for the labouring and subaltern classes.

Using the concept of passive revolution today, I think, involves a gambit. We then have to develop an analysis that connects Gramsci's analysis through to our own, through continuities or transformations in the mode of production and in the political forces.

In all Gramsci's discussions of passive revolution, he was concerned with the presence of at least two elements, which set it apart from similar concepts in the Marxist tradition that have been used to characterise periods and forms of reaction or defeat of popular forces. Passive revolution is not simply Bonapartism. It is not simply revolution from above. It is not simply counter-revolution. It is a more complex category. In one sense, it is still a "revolutionary" process, or an overthrowing of the old and institution of new social forms. In a passive revolution, concrete gains are made in productivity or efficiency, political institutions are "modernised", and so forth. But it involves a pacifying element, whereby such "modernisation" is accompanied not, as in instances such as the French Revolution, with the becoming active politically of large masses of the working classes, but on the contrary, with their deliberate and structural pacification by political means. Gramsci described this process as a molecular transformation, as a decapitation of mediating instances, the absorption of elements of the leadership of the popular classes into the state apparatus or into the hegemonic apparatus of the bourgeoisie. The masses are still indeed called to participate in a process of modernisation, but in a passive form, without being able to develop political forms such as had occurred in "non-passive revolutions", above all, the French. They are not allowed to make the transition from the economic-corporative to the political moment which would be the construction of their own hegemonic apparatus.

If we want to extend the Gramscian concept of "passive revolution" in its specificity and complexity to the contemporary situation, we first need to determine if both of these elements are present in it: both "revolution", of a type, and its passive deformation. In the neo-liberal programme of the last

30-35 years we can see the denial of political forms to the subaltern classes and the decapitation, co-option, subsumption of their representatives.

But as to the possibility of this process producing genuine qualitative and quantitative progress, in the form of some type of progress that could be reconciled with a narrative of modernisation, I think we have to be more sceptical. The neo-liberal programme has led to regression in many countries, most notably in some of the supposedly advanced capitalist states. It has led to a state in which there has been, not a "second modernity", as some social theorists suppose, but processes of de-modernisation, of the destruction of social forms, of a continual destruction, if not of productivity itself, at least of its possibility of social utilisation and distribution.

In sum, the notion of passive revolution can help to add new dimensions to an analysis of new forms of imperialism, but it needs to be used critically and with an attention to its historical embeddedness. As I have suggested, I think it may turn out, upon further reflection, that some of Gramsci's other categories have a greater critical purchase on the present.

A further point that I think is worth emphasising, against some interpretations of the notion of passive revolution, is that Gramsci was not Weber. Passive revolution does not denote some inevitable process of rationalisation which terminates in an iron cage. Gramsci was much more open and alert to the possibilities of struggle within passive revolution. It was precisely for this reason that he set out to develop the concept, against the fatalism of the third period perspective, which could legitimately be described as a philosophy of history with a Stalinist face.

Gramsci wrote at an advanced stage of his research and development of this concept that we need to link the concept of passive revolution quite directly with perspectives from Marx regarding the nature of the mode of production and the capacity of social formations for immanent transformation; but that we also need to purge Marx's perspectives of any trace of fatalism, which he admitted could be found in some prominent interpretations of Marx and possibly in Marx's ambiguities themselves. Gramsci always insisted that nothing is inevitable in these historical processes. They always depend on a political intervention, and are open to political transformation.

### **FUSION OF PHILOSOPHY WITH POLITICS? THE "DEMOCRATIC PHILOSOPHER"**

**Does Gramsci overstate the democratic and class character of philosophy when he writes of the fusion of philosophy with politics? He seems to posit a very close relation between Marxist philosophy, as he sees it, and a mass revolutionary working-class movement. That takes us back to a Catch-22: no Marxist philosophy without a mass revolutionary working-class movement, and no revolutionary mass working-class movement without Marxist philosophy. Yet many of the texts from Marx which Gramsci based himself on were written in the absence of any mass revolutionary working-class movement.**

The notion of the "philosophy of praxis" in Gramsci has often been taken to be simply a euphemism for Marxism. The contention in my book, following a number of other Gramscian scholars, is that Gramsci used this term to describe a new philosophical position which represents his intervention into debates following the Russian Revolution about the nature of Marxism as both a philosophy and broader conception of the world. Gramsci's "philosophy of praxis" is therefore not simply equivalent with Marxism (which of course is never singular, but has always been defined in different ways by different political currents and perspectives); rather, it represents Gramsci's particular version of Marxism, or more precisely, his proposal for the further development of the Marxist tradition that he inherited. Furthermore, it was not only a proposal regarding what a Marxist philosophy could be, but also included a critical perspective on the political nature of philosophy as such, even in its seemingly least "political" forms.

In his analysis of previous philosophy, Gramsci identified various contradictions at work in them, whether they were idealist or materialist. He came to a position that argued that in so far as they involved various forms of linguistic practice, that is, complex forms of social relations, philosophical statements were already political instances - "political" here meaning the transformative instance of social relations and practices. Already, in a sense, philosophical statements serve to organise human social relations - linguistic and conceptual relations that form an integral part of all other social relations, overdetermining them and overdetermined by them in their turn.

Gramsci argued that previous philosophies, even those that might at first sight seem to be at a far remove from explicitly political themes and focused instead on classically "speculative" notions, had been engaged in highly mediated but nevertheless political forms of organisation, of the shaping, crafting, and transformation of conceptions of the world.

He therefore wanted to investigate what could be a philosophical form that would be adequate to the goals and practices of a democratic workers' movement. He came to the view that it is only by acknowledging the always-already-practical nature of philosophy that it is possible not only to criticise previous forms of philosophy (including, crucially, the criticism of previous conceptions of Marxist philosophy), but also to go further and attempt to develop a new form of philosophical practice that would arguably be more genuinely philosophical than the contending and rival positions, if we are to understand philosophy as always a practice, as a "love of wisdom", in the classic sense.

The claim would be not to be the "wise man" (the *sophos* of presocratic philosophy), but simply to be a lover of wisdom; that is, not the claim to already possess the truth in some form, but to be searching for it. The Western philosophical tradition in fact begins precisely from such a "distance taken", from the claim to possess truth already in the form of an achieved wisdom, to the claim that we are merely seeking truth, or trying to become wise. For Gramsci, that conception of the search for wisdom, and of being open to the continual corrections of history, became a way of fusing history and philosophy. Philosophy became a historical practice. It also became political, insofar as philosophy, as one of the most

developed forms of conceptual-linguistic organisation, can be seen as one of the forms in which a conception of the world is created and crafted – a political relation of leadership.

Gramsci wanted to pose the question of the interaction between politics, in this much broader sense, and philosophy in the workers' movement. Ultimately, Gramsci came to the position that the politician was a philosopher, and the philosopher was a politician, at various degrees of mediation. The philosopher was already engaged in the political practice of comprehending the transformation of social relations, intervening in those transformations by means of organising and socialising, via linguistic and conceptual practice, their potential theoretical significance. The politician was also engaged in a comprehension, or a grasping, of philosophical problems. Why? Because philosophy, according to this perspective, could not be defined in its totality as simply concepts and ideas, but was always constituted as a shared, social conception of the world that actively worked to organise it, a particular mode of coherent organisation.

In this perspective Gramsci's reference once again was to his great "master" - in a classical sense, the person from whom he learned, and whose teaching enabled him to speak for himself - that is, Lenin. Gramsci argues quite specifically that in elaborating a hegemonic apparatus of the working class, equipping the Russian working class with the institutions and the perspectives that would be necessary for self-government, Lenin accomplished not only a political act but also a philosophical event of great importance.

"The theoretical-practical principle of hegemony has also epistemological significance, and it is here that Ilyich [Lenin]'s greatest theoretical contribution to the philosophy of praxis should be sought. In these terms one could say that Ilyich advanced philosophy as philosophy in so far as he advanced political doctrine and practice. The realisation of a hegemonic apparatus, in so far as it creates a new ideological terrain, determines a reform of consciousness and of methods of knowledge: it is a fact of knowledge, a philosophical fact..."

Reforming the institutions in which we live socially also reforms our conceptions of the world. It changes the foundation of philosophy, providing the possibility for a new conception of the world and therefore for the development of new forms of philosophy.

In order to specify the nature of this type of philosophical practice, Gramsci developed the figure of the "democratic philosopher". He mentions this concept only once in the *Prison Notebooks*, but in many respects to can be taken as his proposal for a new type of intellectual and new type of philosopher, as an integral element of a broader political movement: "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".

In that figure there was, I think, a conception of a new form of philosopher that would be adequate to democratic political

forms. The previous, aristocratic, conception of the philosopher as the speculative metaphysician standing above society – or, as Nietzsche claimed, thinking thousands of miles above others - that conception was fundamentally negated by Gramsci. He was conceiving of the way in which, following Marx in the Theses on Feuerbach, the "educator" was also "educated". That is, philosophers – whether "professional" philosophers or "everyday" philosophers, remembering that for Gramsci we are all philosophers in some sense, in so far as we try to think coherently about the world and our place in it – were already necessarily involved in different social relations that had formed them and that provided not only the basic linguistic conceptuality they used in order to elaborate their thoughts, at different levels of coherence, but also all the problems they considered in their philosophical practice. The question then was whether someone could acknowledge the way in which they were continually interpellated, continually called into different relations and forced to respond to them in the form of a dialogue. The "democratic philosopher", for Gramsci, became the philosopher who was mature enough to acknowledge the foundation of their thought in the common everyday practices of the people, a philosopher who was open to the capacity for transformation of those instances, and sought himself or herself to contribute to their transformation through his or her intervention in linguistic, conceptual, or political forms.

Ultimately, Gramsci's figure of the "democratic philosopher" is not simply the philosopher in the traditional sense at all, but comes to be equated with, in Machiavelli's terms, the active citizen, engaged in acts of virtuous self-governance. We could say that, in Marxist terms, the democratic philosopher is an example of the type of everyday search for wisdom that is – and needs to become even more – an essential element of the ongoing self-emancipation of the working class and its struggle to enlarge the field of active democratic participation in the organisation of society.