

**Pessimism of the Intellect, Optimism of the Will:
Gramsci's Political Thought in the Last Miscellaneous
Notebooks**

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Pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will: Gramsci's political thought in the last miscellaneous notebooks

Abstract:

In the *Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci combines a “pessimistic” analysis of the growing authoritarian trends of the 1930s with an “optimistic” commitment to the potential for socialist transformation and the elaboration of an effective strategy for the workers’ movement. By discussing key texts from the miscellaneous notebooks 14, 15, and 17, I investigate the way in which, in the last phase of his work in prison, Gramsci interprets the changing political and social dynamics that characterise “western” countries (and that are central, *mutatis mutandis*, also in present-day politics). In particular, I focus on the complex conceptual cluster elaborated by Gramsci (with the categories of “bureaucracy”, “police”, “discipline” and “political party”) in order to illustrate the way in which he explains the transformations of the mechanisms of political participation, and the new, “totalitarian” forms of political engagement of his own times, as well as their possible solutions.

Keywords:

Antonio Gramsci; *Prison Notebooks*; political thought; state apparatuses; 1930s.

Article text:

1. *Introduction*

“Pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will” is one of the most famous sayings attributed to Gramsci, inspired by a similar *formula* of the French writer Romain Rolland.¹ It appears in Antonio Gramsci’s works in a particular sense: to describe the (seemingly contradictory) coexistence of, on the one hand, a realistic description of the *status quo* and, on the other hand, a genuine commitment to the possibility of transforming reality. This expression recurs more frequently in his pre-prison writings, but it is used also in Gramsci’s prison letters as well as in his *Prison Notebooks*.²

I would argue, however, that its significance reaches far beyond its explicit occurrences. It can be said that this formula reflects the core of Gramsci’s project – a project in which a realistic approach to the actual state of things is combined with a commitment to and a belief in the socialist revolution. In particular, I think that this expression can be fruitfully used to interpret his political thought as it unfolds in the last phase of Gramsci’s creative work in prison, which corresponds to notebooks 14, 15 and 17.

1“Pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will” is indeed a motto created by Romain Rolland, and not by Gramsci, who expanded and developed the initial phrase, according to his technique of adopting a previously existing category and giving it a new and richer meaning. On this conceptual ‘strategy’, cf. Showstack Sassoon 1990. Gramsci adopts first this formula in the article “Address to the Anarchists” [*Discorso agli anarchici*], published in *L’Ordine Nuovo*, 3-10 April 1920 (cf. Gramsci 1977, p. 188). He explicitly attributes it to Rolland, who used it a few days before, in the review of *The sacrifice of Abraham* by Raymond Lefebvre (Paris, Flammarion, 1919; the review appeared in *L’Humanité*, 19 March 1920). On this source, cf. Gramsci 1994, vol. 1, 300, n. 1.

2On this famous expression by Gramsci, cf. for instance Frosini 1995 and Prestipino 2006. As to more general instances of this formula, cf. Showstack Sassoon 1999 and, more recently, Panitch 2016.

In fact, the context of the years 1933-1935 is from many points of view different to that of the early 1930s, and it is even more clearly distinct from that of the 1920s and, evidently, of the First World War and pre-war period. As a consequence of the authoritarian drift taking place in Europe (cf. the growing strength of Mussolini's dictatorship in Italy and the establishment of the Nazi regime in Germany) as well as of the changing features of international socialism (the situation in Russia plays an obvious role), both society and state are taking previously unseen forms. The borders between society and the state become increasingly blurred and the pursuit of hegemony follows new, totalitarian pathways.³ To investigate these deeply changed political and social dynamics represents a challenge for Gramsci, who adapts his categories to this new context. The result is an intriguing (and open-ended) reflection on contemporary politics that, while aware of the increasingly tragic and negative aspects of reality, does not give up on the project of socialist revolution.

2. *The last miscellaneous notebooks 14, 15, and 17*

As pointed out by Gianni Francioni, notebooks 14, 15 and 17 are “miscellaneous” notebooks, that means notebooks that gather notes on different topics, in opposition to the so called “special” or “monographic” notebooks, in which Gramsci transcribes and thematically organises the notes previously written.⁴ These notebooks continue the “chain” of miscellaneous notebooks identified by Francioni, since Notebook 14 is the

³On Gramsci's analysis of the European political scene of the 1930s, cf. Potier 1999, Vacca 2012 and Rossi 2017.

⁴As to the distinction between “miscellaneous”, “special” and “mixed” notebooks, cf. the introduction by Francioni in Gramsci 2009, 21-60. For a detailed analysis of the physical features and of the themes developed in the notebooks, cf. the introduction to the single notebooks in the anastatic edition of the *Prison Notebooks* (Gramsci 2009).

successor of Notebook 9 (as it is known, notebooks 10, 11, 12 and 13 are special notebooks).⁵ As to their chronology, they have been dated between December 1932 and 1935.⁶

Generally speaking, scholarship has not paid much attention to the notes contained in these notebooks, with the partial exception of the texts on the category of passive revolution, developed largely in Notebook 15.⁷ That is due, in part, to the way in which Gramsci's thought was presented in the post-war period and its subsequent readings.⁸

⁵According to the diachronic reading of the *Prison Notebooks* developed in recent decades by Gramsci scholars, the notebooks represent an uninterrupted and intertwined sequence of writings, in which (almost) every notebook has an antecedent and a successor. In particular, it is possible to retrace a “series” of miscellaneous notebooks (the “chain” mentioned above). The special notebooks, which can be divided into two groups, were written partially in parallel with the miscellaneous notebooks and they are the result of a plan of “systematisation” of the written material elaborated by Gramsci in the Spring-Summer 1932. As Frosini 2003 has pointed out, we can trace three different phases in Gramsci’s works (first phase: mid-1929/first months of 1932; second phase: mid-1932/mid-1933; third phase: mid-1933/mid-1935): “the rupture between the second and third phase is of a *medical* nature – the very serious crisis of 7 March 1933 – but that between the first and the second is of a *theoretical* nature” (Frosini 2003, 23; my translation).

⁶On the chronology of the texts, cf. Cospito 2011, 881-904. Gramsci started notebooks 14, 15 and 17 while in prison in Turi (Bari) and continued working on two of them (notebooks 14 and 17) at the clinic of Doctor Cusumano in Formia (nearby Latina, on the Mediterranean coast of Lazio), where he was transferred due to health reasons in December 1933 (he remained there until August 1935, when he was transferred again to the clinic Quisisana in Rome, where he died in April 1937). On the connection between Gramsci’s biography and his work plans, cf. again Frosini 2003. Without going into the details of the philological discussion on these notebooks (whose chronology has been recently called into question by Gianni Francioni), their “liminal” character should be highlighted, i.e. the fact that they stay at a “threshold”, both in Gramsci’s thought (as I will try to illustrate in this paper) and in his personal life.

⁷On this category, cf. Thomas 2006. For a reassessment of Gramsci’s conception of passive revolution, cf. Thomas 2018.

⁸I refer to the first, thematic edition of Gramsci writings, which appeared between 1948-1951 (on this edition, cf. Thomas 2009, *passim*). However, after the appearance of the critical edition by Valentino Gerratana (Gramsci 1975), scholars focussed mainly on the special notebooks as well as on the first group of miscellaneous notebooks (1-9), that contain the first versions of the texts later redrafted in the special notebooks.

Another cause is represented by the heterogeneous nature of these notebooks and to their peculiar style of writing, often concise and even obscure.⁹

In spite of the “dispersed” character of these notes by Gramsci, I think that it is possible to identify in these notebooks a number of texts that deal with political issues broadly conceived, mostly under the headings *Past and Present* and *Machiavelli*. Moreover, within this group, articulated and consistent reflections on specific topics can be identified.¹⁰

I would argue that, thanks to a careful exegesis of Gramsci’s texts, we can reconstruct his investigation of contemporary political dynamics, that develops further the analysis previously elaborated. Indeed, such an analysis would highlight the specific evolutions of Gramsci’s thought in the development of the *Notebooks*. In particular, I believe that such a reading could offer a new way to understand the evolution of Gramsci’s thinking about the nature of contemporary politics in the early/mid 1930s: if the miscellaneous notebooks 14, 15 and 17 are no doubt in continuity with the earlier notebooks, they represent also a significant “new beginning”, by opening a new (and, due to obvious reasons, incomplete) phase of Gramsci’s reflection on politics in the *Prison Notebooks* – even in comparison, for instance, to notes written just beforehand, or almost at the same time, like the notes of Notebook 13.

In this essay I shall try to outline the main aspects of the political reflection elaborated by Gramsci in these last miscellaneous notebooks, by relying on the ongoing philological work on the critical edition of Gramsci’s writings and on the scholarship’s

⁹It should be remembered that Gramsci had been in jail since 1927 and that his health was worsening (on Gramsci’s life in prison, cf. Vacca 2012).

¹⁰Due to reasons of space, the analysis provided here will be limited to a few themes developed by Gramsci.

most recent achievements. In the first place, I will describe the main coordinates of Gramsci's analysis of contemporary politics (§ 3), by highlighting its totalitarian features (§ 4). Then the focus will be on the conception of hegemony that emerges in these notebooks and on the "democratic-bureaucratic" nature of modern regimes; I will concentrate more specifically on the issue of bureaucracy (§ 5) as well as on the police (§ 6), in order to show the new, enlarged functions of these organisations. The counterpart of such a reflection is represented by the analysis of Gramsci's conception of discipline (§ 7) in which emerges his attempt to rethink successfully the current political and social dynamics. I will conclude by dwelling on Gramsci's theory of the party and by sketching the different levels of analysis embedded in his observations on political parties (§ 8).

3. *Modern times*

Gramsci's categories of hegemony, state, civil society and so on have been widely investigated by scholars, who have shown how his conception relies on a complex theoretico-political analysis as well as on a broader historical investigation.¹¹ But which are the salient features of the modern state? And what is the specific role played by civil society in the creation of a hegemonic relationship in Gramsci's times?

According to Gramsci, we can talk of a contemporary era (or "modern", as he says), from the First World War onwards.¹² This period is characterised by major changes that involve both the structural and the superstructural levels and that are the result of trends

¹¹Cf., among others, Thomas 2009 and Liguori 2015.

¹²In fact, Gramsci adopts a quite peculiar historical terminology. He does not talk about a "modern" age followed by "contemporary" history, but, instead, he distinguishes between a "pre-modern" and a "modern" era that goes up to his time; cf. in this regard Burgio 2014, 157-164.

that can be traced back to the 1870s.¹³ In this context, the most relevant ones are no doubt the transformations within the capitalist system of production, the growing bureaucratisation of the State and the politicisation of the masses, that Gramsci widely investigates in his prison writings.

This last element, in particular, has a strong impact on the relationship between politics and civil society. The political dimension is not limited any more to the government, the parliament or the traditional political parties; hegemony becomes a social issue, a project to be carried out (or an achievement to be maintained) on the terrain of civil society and through civil society.¹⁴ In the *Prison Notebooks* Gramsci reflects extensively on this increasingly blurred distinction between State, conventionally understood as a synonym of political society, and civil society. He develops a new and original conception, effectively synthesised by the formula of the “integral State”.¹⁵

The counterpart of this reflection is Gramsci’s famous military metaphor of the “war of position”, that describes modern political struggles, in opposition to the “war of movement”, that applies mostly to preceding historical epochs, but also to underdeveloped countries such as Russia.¹⁶ An essential part of Gramsci’s investigation of the war of position consists in the analysis of social practices and institutions outside the official state apparatus, practices and institutions that belong to the sphere of the civil society but have a strong political influence. As Gramsci writes, “the massive

13However, such a general trend does not cancel the differences between the various national contexts (on Gramsci’s “plural temporalities”, cf. Thomas 2017a and Thomas 2017b).

14Cf. Frosini 2016b; on these themes, cf. also Antonini 2016.

15Christine Buci-Glucksmann (1980 [1975]) coined the term “enlarged state” to describe the political weight of private institutions and organisations, by consciously recalling Gramscian terminology and concepts (however, Gramsci does not use the expression “enlarged state”, but only that of “integral state”).

16On this topic, cf. in particular Egan 2016.

structures of the modern democracies, both as State organisations, and as complexes of associations in civil society, constitute for the art of politics as it were the ‘trenches’ and the permanent fortifications of the front in the war of position: they render merely ‘partial’ the element of movement which before used to be ‘the whole’ of war, etc”.¹⁷

4. *Totalitarian dynamics*

This description of the war of position in Notebook 13, § 7 represents an excellent summary of Gramsci’s reflection on the topic. However, we can read this note also as a point of departure for a further exploration of the dynamics of hegemony in contemporary societies, as it develops in notebooks 14, 15 and 17.¹⁸

It is not by chance, indeed, that Gramsci employs here the adjective “massive”, in order to characterise the structures of modern states.¹⁹ By doing this, he establishes a meaningful connection with his previous dominant use of the term, in relation to religious apparatuses (especially of the Catholic Church) and their strict relationship with the popular masses.²⁰

17Q 13, § 7; Gramsci 1999 [1971], 503. In the following pages I will refer to the Italian critical edition of the *Prison Notebooks* edited by Valentino Gerratana (Gramsci 1975) by indicating the number of the notebook (Q) and that of the paragraph (§). As regards the translations, I will rely on Gramsci 1985, 1992-1996, 1995, 1999 [1971]; when the English version of Gramsci’s text is not available, the translation is mine.

18Chronologically speaking, the writing of Notebook 13 and of Notebook 14 partially overlaps: Gramsci worked on Notebook 13 during May 1932 and November 1933; Notebook 14 was started in December 1932 (cf. Cospito 2011). That explains some clear affinities between the notes of the special notebook on Machiavelli (especially since they go deeper than their first draft texts) and Notebook 14.

19The expression “massive structures of the modern democracies” does not appear in the first draft text of this note, Q 8, § 52. It is therefore a novelty that Gramsci introduces in this note of Notebook 13, that echoes Gramsci’s analysis of “totalitarian” trends in the last miscellaneous notebooks.

20Cf. Q 2, § 90; Q 5, § 134; Q 10, I, § 1. In modernity this adjective highlights instead the oppressive and repressive character of the ‘new’ bourgeois hegemony (cf. *infra*).

In the final miscellaneous notebooks Gramsci develops further this aspect, by focussing on the “totalitarian” dimension of modern states. First of all it should be noted that, in the *Prison Notebooks*, the adjective “totalitarian” is neutral in itself. Gramsci never uses the term “totalitarianism” and he obviously does not share the current understanding of the term (following Hannah Arendt’s *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 1951); his account has to be contextualised within the early-twentieth century debate, in order to avoid undue anachronisms.²¹ “Totalitarian” describes here the effort of an ideology or of a group to become dominant and to destroy its opponents. In this sense “totalitarian” means simply “holistic”, “absolute” (vs “partial”).²² Being “totalitarian” is therefore a requirement for any political organisation that aims at becoming truly hegemonic, as Gramsci writes in Q 15, § 6: “hence the conclusion that in building a party, it is necessary to give it a ‘monolithic’ character rather than base it on secondary questions; therefore, painstaking care [must be taken] that there should be homogeneity between the leadership and the rank and file, between the leaders and their mass following”.²³ Thus, this principle, in itself neutral, constitutes an important part of the framework of historical materialism.²⁴ However, Gramsci applies it also to contemporary dictatorships (namely Fascism in Italy and Germany), in so far as it grasps some essential features of these systems.²⁵ They “absolutise” their world-view and tend to completely absorb civil

21On this point, cf. Petersen 1975.

22Cf., for instance, Q 1, § 139 or Q 6, § 188. It is noteworthy that also the adjective ‘totalitarian’ (as ‘massive’) applies mostly to Catholicism in the *Prison Notebooks*. On the totalitarian dimension of ideologies see the entries *Concezione del mondo* (by G. Liguori) and *Totalitario* (by R. Caputo) in Liguori-Voza 2009, 148-149 and 851-853.

23Q 15, § 6; Gramsci 1999, 368; translation modified.

24Cf. Q 4, § 75; Gramsci 1992, 246: “historical materialism will have or may have this function which is not only totalitarian as a conception of the world, but it is also totalitarian in that it will permeate all of society down to its deepest roots”.

25On totalitarian tendencies in Europe in the 1930s cf. Griffin 2005 and Roberts 2006; on Fascism, in particular, cf. Gentile 2008.

society in themselves, that means that they have a “totalising relationship” with civil society. Q 17, § 37 is illuminating from this point of view. Here Gramsci writes:

the phenomenon reveals interesting aspects in countries where there is a single, totalitarian, governing party. For the functions of such a party are no longer directly political, but merely technical ones of propaganda and public order, and moral and cultural influence. The political function is indirect. For, even if no other legal parties exist, other parties in fact always do exist and other tendencies which cannot be legally coerced; and, against these, polemics are unleashed and struggles are fought as in a game of blind man’s buff. In any case it is certain that in such parties cultural functions predominate, which means that political language becomes jargon. In other words, political questions are disguised as cultural ones, and as such become insoluble.²⁶

The changes that occur on the level of civil society in a totalitarian framework are elsewhere defined by Gramsci as the “total and molecular (individual) transformation of ways of thinking and acting”.²⁷ From these words, it is clear that these transformations reflect meaningfully also on the ‘traditional’ political level (parliament/party), by generating a crisis of representation, and a shift from direct political action to a cultural and social intervention.

²⁶Q 17, § 37; Gramsci 1999, 355.

²⁷Q 17, § 51; Gramsci 1999, 540.

5. *Bureaucracy and hegemony*

This new primacy of the cultural and social aspects corresponds to a reassessment of the role of institutions like the bureaucracy and the police. As to the first one, if the reflection on the category develops already in the first notebooks, it acquires a new meaning on the background of these considerations on contemporary totalitarian politics.

First of all, from the summer 1932 onwards, the term “bureaucratic” has to be understood as opposed to “democratic”: this is the result of Gramsci’s reflection on the issue of centralism and on the functioning of the political party.²⁸ In short, a “democratic” attitude reflects the real relationships among forces and promotes their development and transformation, through the passage of hegemony from one social group to another, coherently with the evolution of the political, social and economic dynamics. The “bureaucratic” attitude goes in the opposite direction, aiming at the preservation of a given order, whatever the conditions are.

However, the two tendencies cannot be separated, since the modern totalitarian regimes are in their very essence “democratic-bureaucratic”, as Fabio Frosini has pointed out.²⁹ That means that, even if the direction remains an indispensable element also in critical moments (whence the specific character of “struggle between hegemonies” of the current war of position), it must be achieved at the price of an unprecedented and

²⁸Cf. Frosini 2016a, 147. The category of “centralism” was particularly relevant in the Italian context, due to the use made of the expression “organic centralism” by Bordiga. On Gramsci’s account of centralism as well as on the changing meaning of the terms “democratic”, “organic” and “bureaucratic”, cf. Cospito 2016, 169 ff.

²⁹Frosini 2016a, 133; my translation. As for the expression “democratic-bureaucratic”, cf. also, for instance, Q 8, § 21.

“frantic” centralisation of forces, i.e. the progressive absorption by the state of all those elements of civil society able to educate the population and to organise the consensus.³⁰

In the framework of this new, “post-jacobin” hegemony,³¹ Gramsci’s historical and theoretical analysis of bureaucracy represents a *Leitmotif*. This theme is developed in many notes of Notebook 14. In § 38 Gramsci deals with the non-national character of the Italian bureaucracy, contrasting Italian bureaucratic centralism with French national centralisation (positively conceived): “in France there had been a unitary national movement, of which the centralisation was the bureaucratic expression. In Italy there was not the same national process, rather the centralized bureaucracy had hindered such a process”.³² A similar interpretation returns in § 47, where Gramsci compares Italy and Germany. Here Gramsci underlines how the German bureaucracy, historically belonging to the Junker class, was connected to the rest of the social structure and thus collaborated in the creation and strengthening of the national state. On a more general level, Q 14, § 49 highlights the alternative between a form of bureaucracy intended as a “sclerotic” and conservative body and a form of bureaucracy that, instead, contributes positively to the politico-statal organisation.

An analogous reasoning can be found also in § 62 and in § 69. Here Gramsci establishes a significant opposition between “organisation” and “initiative” on the one hand, and bureaucracy on the other (“the truth in the latter case was that there was neither ‘initiative’ nor ‘organization’ but merely bureaucracy and a fatalistic fad”;³³ “why the

³⁰Frosini underlines also how this new form of hegemony implies a “broadening of the mass of intellectuals” and a “multiplication of their functions” (cf. Frosini 2016a, 135; my translation).

³¹This is a definition by Frosini (cf. Frosini 2016a).

³²Q 14, § 38, 1695; my translation.

³³Q 14, § 62; Gramsci 1985, 405.

organisation, that should boost the individual initiative, should transform it into a bureaucracy, that is to say, into the blockage of the individual forces?”³⁴).

Thus, Gramsci develops in this notebook a conception of bureaucracy that goes beyond its simple identification with a specific state apparatus. Not only is bureaucracy connected explicitly to the analysis of the different components of society and to their interaction, but it also has an essential role in the creation and the establishment of hegemony, since it influences the entire state organisation (in a positive sense or, more frequently, in a negative sense). In this sense, *mutatis mutandis*, Gramsci’s understanding can be compared with the contemporary reflections by Weber on the growing bureaucratisation of modern mass societies.³⁵

More generally speaking, in Gramsci’s time, bureaucracy represents a pivotal instrument to bind political society and civil society; from a certain point of view, it embodies the “totalitarian” unity of the contemporary regimes.

6. *Police and police-like apparatuses*

A similar “enlargement” characterises also the category of the police, as it emerges again in Notebook 14.³⁶ In § 34, Gramsci writes: “It is difficult to deny that all political parties (those of subordinate as well as ruling groups) also carry out a policing function

34Q 14, § 69, 1732; my translation.

35Cf. in this regard, the fascinating analysis by Juan Carlos Portantiero (1981). However, the Weberian influence on the socio-political theory of the *Notebooks* should not be overestimated. In fact, Gramsci had a limited and mediated (by Michels) knowledge of the thought of Weber. Moreover, an important role in defining Gramsci’s conception of bureaucracy may have been played by other sources (cf. in particular Marx’s *Eighteenth Brumaire*).

36As Guido Liguori points out, the extension of the category of police runs in parallel to the enlargement of the concept of state (cf. the entry *Polizia* in Liguori-Voza 2009, 651-652).

– that is to say, the function of safeguarding a certain political and legal order”.³⁷ The progressive or regressive meaning of this action is defined by Gramsci on the basis of the relationship between the party and the “old” and “new” social forces. As a consequence, he concludes that if the political party “is progressive it functions ‘democratically’ (democratic centralism)”, then it can be defined as such.³⁸ When, instead, it “functions ‘bureaucratically’ (bureaucratic centralism)” it does not represent a party any more.³⁹ “The party in this second case is a simple, unthinking executor. It is then technically a policing organism, and its name of “political party” is simply a metaphor of a mythological character”.⁴⁰ Such a description is of absolute interest, last but not least for the connection with the above mentioned categories of “bureaucracy” and “democracy” and for the observations on the changing nature of the political party. Gramsci deals more directly with the issue of the police in a note contained in Notebook 2, but closely connected to the text of Notebook 14 previously quoted.⁴¹ Here he affirms that if the term police does not stop defining the “public service designed for the repression of crime”,⁴² it describes also all those organisations that control and ‘contain’ the social body:

[the police] is certainly not just that particular official organization which is
juridically recognized and empowered to carry out the public function of

37Q 14, § 34; Gramsci 1999, 363.

38Q 14, § 34; Gramsci 1999, 364.

39Q 14, § 34; Gramsci 1999, 364.

40Q 14, § 34; Gramsci 1999, 364.

41The text is a single draft written in January 1933 (cf. Cospito 2011). Q 14, § 34 is dated January-February 1933. That means that Q 2, § 150 is more or less contemporary to Q 14, § 34 (it is hard to say if Q 2, § 150 precedes or follows Q 14, § 34).

42Q 13, § 27; Gramsci 1999, 466.

public safety, as it is normally understood. This organism is the central and formally responsible nucleus of the ‘police’, which is a much larger organization in which a large part of a state’s population participates directly or indirectly through links that are more or less precise and limited, permanent or occasional, etc.⁴³

And he concludes that “the analysis of these relations, much more than many philosophical juridical dissertations help one understand what the ‘state’ is”.⁴⁴

This account of the police reflects clearly the new features of politics in the modern world. It sheds a meaningful light on the relationship between coercion and consensus, domination and direction: if the coercive aspect does not fail (whence, for instance, the indirect reference to repression in Q 2, § 150), the decisive element can only be the consensus, due to the impossibility to control the politicised masses and due to the increasing weight of the superstructures. However, as said before, this hegemony is different from that of the expansive phase of the capitalist-bourgeois world. It is rather ambiguously “totalising”, as it aims to involve the people within the political project of the ruling class, and, at the same time, to repress all the potential forms of subversion and of autonomy, as well as to ban the conception of the world alternative to that of the dominant group.

7. Towards a new discipline

43Q 2, § 150; Gramsci 1992, 361.

44Q 2, § 150; Gramsci 1992, 361.

Given this analysis, it might seem that civil society, state, party, etc. are out-of-date categories and that there is no escape from this totalitarian order. Neither the working class movement nor its political strategies seem to be adequate to the new situation. Gramsci, however, does not limit his analysis to the negative aspects of the actual state of things, but, on the contrary, he never loses his commitment to the socialist revolution. In the notebooks here analysed, extremely realistic observations on the current situation are intermingled with proposals for the creation of a new communist party, as the premise for a radical transformation of state and society. In this respect, a key-word is without a doubt the term of “discipline”. Various notes are devoted to the analysis of this category, whose meaning is summarised by Gramsci in Q 14, § 48. Here he writes:

How should one understand discipline, if what is intended by this word is the continuous and permanent relation between rulers and ruled that realises the collective will? Certainly not like a passive and supine welcoming of orders, not like the mechanical execution of a duty, but rather as a conscious and clear assimilation of orders to be realised. Thus the discipline does not cancel personality in an organic sense, but only limits the arbitrary and irresponsible impulsivity, not to speak of the illusory vanity of emerging.⁴⁵

“Discipline” is therefore opposed by Gramsci to “individual whim” and “impulsivity”, while it is similar to “self-control”, “responsibility” and also (true) “liberty” (from this point of view, § 48 is related to Q 14, § 61, on spontaneity and discipline, and to Q 15, § 45Q 14, § 48, 1706; my translation.

46, where Gramsci gives the example of discipline in the university system).⁴⁶

Interestingly, Gramsci explains it through a parallel with the combination of predestination and free will in the religious sphere.⁴⁷

This conception of discipline is closely connected to democracy. Indeed, if “authority is a specialised technical function and not an ‘arbitrariness’ or an extrinsic and external imposition, discipline is a necessary element of democratic order, of freedom.

Specialised technical function will be to say when authority is exercised in a socially (or nationally) homogeneous group; when it is exercised by a group on another group, the discipline will be autonomous and free for the first, but not for the second”.⁴⁸

This reflection evokes the issue of the relationship between rulers and ruled. In a truly democratic perspective, according to Gramsci, even a decision “from above” can be acceptable; furthermore, even if wrong, such a decision could be better, within certain

46The theme of discipline returns in Gramsci’s thought, as he has dealt with it already in the 1920s (cf. for instance McNally 2008). For a survey of Gramsci’s usages of the concept both in the pre-prison writings and in the *Prison Notebooks*, cf. the entry *Disciplina* (by L. La Porta) in Liguori-Voza 2009 (however, La Porta does not stress the new importance of the category in the last phase of Gramsci’s reflection).

47Cf. the following passage: “even the concept of ‘predestination’ proper to some currents of Christianity does not annul so-called ‘free will’ in the Catholic conception, since the individual accepts ‘willingly’ the divine will (as Manzoni poses the question in the *Pentecoste*), which, it is true, he could not oppose, but with which he collaborates (or not) with all his moral forces. Therefore, discipline does not annul the personality and freedom: the question of ‘personality and freedom’ arises not from the fact of discipline, but from the ‘origin of the power that orders discipline’” (Q 14, § 48, 1706; my translation). The parallelism between politics and religion is significant. On the human level, the counterpart of the divine will is represented by the political and social ideals embodied by the political party. There are also evident differences, though: while the divine will is transcendent (and, therefore, “given forever”), in politics and society the values are continuously discussed and reassessed, and they are the result of an endless process of creation of hegemony (cf. in this regard Gramsci’s crucial observations on the concept of ‘immanence’; see on this point Frosini 2010, 112 ff.).

48Q 14, § 48, p. 1707; my translation.

limits, than an autonomous and in itself fairer choice. In this context, Gramsci's observations on a possible balance between autonomy and conformity are meaningful. It is clear also that, thanks to this formula of "liberating conformism" (that is, in its very essence, Gramsci's conception of discipline) Gramsci is reassessing and expanding a traditional communist dogma. Such an innovative approach allows him to dwell on the issue of the political party and to imagine a possible, successful path for communism in the contemporary framework.

8. *The political party between ideal and reality*

As a matter of fact, the essential condition for the "moral and intellectual reform"⁴⁹ of contemporary societies desired by Gramsci is a radical renewal of the party, as to its structure and, above all, to its spirit. These observations clearly evoke Gramsci's conception of the "modern prince", as it unfolds mainly in Notebook 13.⁵⁰

I would argue that his reflections on the nature of political organisations contained in the miscellaneous notebooks 14, 15 and 17 deepen this central element of the *Prison Notebooks*; at the same time, however, they seem to adopt a new approach to the issues embedded in this formula, in so far as Gramsci aims to return here to the 'basics' of politics – cf. in this perspective his observations on democracy and centralism that have already been mentioned, but also his fundamental reflections on the "legislator".⁵¹

⁴⁹On this formula, elaborated by Gramsci before his imprisonment, cf. Rolfini 1990, Rapone 2011 and Fonseca 2016.

⁵⁰Gramsci's conception of the "modern prince" has been extensively debated by scholars. An old but still valid point of view on this issue is represented by Paggi 1970; for contemporary analyses, cf. in particular Thomas 2009, Thomas 2013 and Thomas 2015.

⁵¹The theme of the "legislator" is developed in particular in Q 14, §§ 9 and 13 (but Gramsci hints at this figure also in § 32 of Notebook 14 and in Q 2, § 150). As already seen with the categories of bureaucracy and police, this concept has to be understood

The most meaningful note in this sense is no doubt § 70 of Notebook 14. This long text deepens the tripartite conception of the party developed by Gramsci from the pre-prison writings onward, by investigating the conditions for the successful establishment of a political organisation.⁵²

In opposition to other notes on the topic, where he focusses mainly on the intermediate element, here Gramsci deals mostly with the features of two extreme poles. In the first place, he affirms that the apparently oxymoronic combination of freedom and (self-)discipline (illustrated before) applies both to the base and to the head of the party, although with different degrees and in different forms. As to the masses, discipline is represented by loyalty to the group's projects, i.e. by a new, positive "conformism" (Gramsci talks about "a mass element, composed of ordinary, average men, whose participation takes the form of discipline and loyalty").⁵³ For the party leadership, discipline means organising capacity ("this element is endowed with great cohesive, centralising and disciplinary powers")⁵⁴ and even creativity ("creative spirit or organisational ability").⁵⁵ If these conditions are fulfilled, a historical bloc will be realised and, ultimately, the transformation of the individuals will make possible the transformation of reality itself.

also in a broader sense, as the "the set of beliefs, feelings, interests and reasonings spread in a community in a given historical period" (Q 14, § 9, 1663; my translation). In short, the legislator embodies a legislative activity that goes beyond its specific political-juridical limits, in order to (re)shape the political and social community as a whole. In this perspective, it represents the counterpart of Gramsci's reflection on the party sketched here. In this perspective cf. also, *mutatis mutandis*, Coutinho 2000.

52On Gramsci's tripartite scheme, cf. Showstack Sassoon 1987, 150-79.

53Q 14, § 70; Gramsci 1999, 360.

54Q 14, § 70; Gramsci 1999, 360.

55Q 14, § 70; Gramsci 1999, 360.

Furthermore, he adds that it is a duty of the leading group to involve the party's base in its political project. That is essential in order to avoid that a party will be destroyed by "normal means" (this formula returns also in the title of the text, *Machiavelli. When one can say that a party has been formed and it cannot be destroyed with normal means*, and hints at the troubled times in which Gramsci lives, in which the parties are rather destroyed by the authoritarian regimes with "unorthodox" means, e.g. through the assassination or imprisonment of their members – the reference to Gramsci's own experience is clear). The survival of an "endangered" party occurs to the extent that the leadership is able to envisage the "defeat in the struggle" and to prepare its successors, by leaving them an ideological and moral "legacy" from which the party can be reborn ("it should leave as its heritage a ferment from which it [the party] may be recreated").⁵⁶ This peculiar combination of "realism" and "idealism" is fascinating and it shows how pivotal the issue of the political party is in the framework of Gramsci's last political reflections. Such a theme would require a much more extended analysis, that cannot be provided here. It should be remembered, however, that Gramsci deals extensively in the notebooks 14, 15 and 17 with the nature of past and present political parties, both in a historical and in a theoretical perspective.⁵⁷ He focuses also on their "sectarian" features;⁵⁸ he investigates the current crisis of parliamentarism in Europe and he dwells on so-called "black parliamentarism".⁵⁹

56Q 14, § 70; Gramsci 1999, 361.

57See in this regard especially Q 14, §§ 3, 10 and 53, but also Q 15, §§ 2, 4 and 62.

58Cf. in particular Q 15, §§ 4 and 55.

59On the crisis of parliamentarism, cf. Q 15, §§ 47 and 48; on "black parliamentarism", cf. Q 14, §§ 75, 76, 77 and 78. The formula "black parliamentarism" describes a form of parliamentarism that is not formally established; Gramsci reflection on this topic is strictly connected to his (highly problematic) judgement of the growing authoritarian tendencies in USSR – on this complex theme cf. the hints contained in Cospito 2016, 73-75.

9. Conclusions

To conclude, it is clear that behind Gramsci's general observations on categories such as bureaucracy, police, discipline and, of course, political party, there is a penetrating analysis of the alarming political, social and economical dynamics in Italy and Europe, as well as a reflection of the transformations of socialism on a global level.

As I have tried to demonstrate, against the background of the dramatic situation of the 1930s, Gramsci's political reflections acquire a further depth. The peculiar combination of a "pessimistic" reflection on the actual authoritarian regimes with an "optimistic" commitment to their possible overthrow allows Gramsci to offer an intriguing insight into the complex dynamics of twentieth-century politics, highlighting the interconnection of consent and control, agreement and coercion, whose combination, according to him, represents the very "essence" of modernity.

Although necessarily partial and synthetic, I think that this recognition of the political notes of miscellaneous notebooks 14, 15 and 17 contributes in shedding light on some unexplored paths in Gramsci's thought, that deserve much closer attention. In particular, I aimed to show that in these notebooks a "new" conception of politics (in opposition to the "old-style", "nineteenth-century" model) stands out. Gramsci outlines here a political system characterised by "totalitarian" features, a system in which the state adopts "unconventional" strategies in order to maintain control over civil society, and in which the very nature of the party is changed. At the same time, however, he also sketches a "new" political alternative to this reactionary scenario, which goes through a radical reassessment of politics itself. In this framework, it is interesting to compare this

reflection with the theme of the “*costituente*”, which is sometimes evoked by Gramsci, i.e. a “constituent”, democratic assembly that could oppose the Fascist dictatorship and lead to the overthrow of the regime.⁶⁰

Moreover, I would argue that such a reading of the *Prison Notebooks* can contribute, to a certain extent, also to reflect on our present-day political issues, since they still relate to debates on the nature and on the usefulness of parties, on the transformations of the mechanisms of political participation, and on new forms of political engagement.

Mutatis mutandis, the themes of the control of the state over society, of the relationship between politics and culture, and so on, are sadly more central today than they have been in decades and represent one of the major challenges of contemporary politics both on the national and on the global level.

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⁶⁰On this complex theme, cf. the entry by G. Cospito in Liguori-Voza 2009, 173, but also Rossi-Vacca 2007, Vacca 2012, *passim* and, from a different perspective, Kalyvas 2000.

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