

Chapter 4

Gramsci and Machiavelli: The Republic of Virtue

The central theme of Gramsci's developing theory was the problem of emergent political culture. This issue is generally discussed in the marxist tradition as the 'transition problem', usually understood as involving the mechanism by which an objectively revolutionary situation and the (tendentally) class-conscious proletariat produced by it in turn produce a social revolution. For Gramsci, however, the transition problem was itself only a moment in a historically discontinuous and potentially indeterminate process of the formation of political consciousness, a process intricately conditioned by a variety of social and historical factors not directly determined by economic relations. Gramsci wanted to understand how large masses of people could move (and be encouraged to move) from the variety of local, particular identifications that characterize groups structurally excluded from official political life, to a robust, active involvement in collective decision-making. This movement could not be accomplished purely in the economic sphere; indeed, his fascination with Niccolò Machiavelli would make little sense if Gramsci did not see politics as autonomous at some level.¹

In the *Prison Notebooks*, as is well known, Gramsci used Machiavelli to focus his investigation of the strategies to be pursued by the communist party, the 'modern prince', in bringing about the revolution or 'transition'. But his engagement with Machiavelli went far beyond the practical political level of seizing and holding power that is the primary subject of *The Prince*. By reconstructing the republicanism of Machiavelli's *Discourses*, only hinted at in the more notorious text, Gramsci found a historical and conceptual analog to his own political project.² In *The Prince*, Machiavelli had buckled down to

¹A more precise approximation would be that for Gramsci, who was after all a marxist, politics was ultimately or 'in the last analysis' determined by class relationships, but often so indirectly as to be functionally autonomous at any given moment. The difference between this formulation and the complete abandonment of class reductionism is an open space on the margins of marxism. See, e.g., *SPN*, 158-68.

²I say 'reconstructing' because Gramsci cited the *Discourses* least of Machiavelli's major works, and it is not clear that he was thoroughly familiar with them. He seems to have worked primarily with *The Prince* and *The Art of War*, both of which are far more elliptical about the virtues of re-

make the best of a bad situation, the fragmentation and helplessness of Italy in relation to foreign powers in the early sixteenth century. But in the *Discourses* he explored what he argued was the best, most stable form of politics and society ('*vivere politico*', political life³), the republic. Similarly, in fascist Italy Gramsci had a bad situation to make the best of; at the same time, his aspirations ran far past the overthrow of Mussolini's regime.

In essence, both were interested in the problem of motivating, harnessing and directing social energy to create a stable yet dynamic new order. In *The Prince*, Machiavelli relied on an innovating lawgiver to impose this new order on the chaos of Renaissance Italy, while in the *Discourses* he explored how such an order could be best maintained and renewed by the collective effort of its people.⁴ These projects were combined in Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*, where theoretically the role of the prince as innovator was taken collectively by the party and sustained by the structured political action of masses led to consciousness of their common interest in self-emancipation by a process of political acculturation.

For both Machiavelli and Gramsci, the blockages to the emergence of stable, unified political culture were formidable, but masterable. This confidence in the power of humans to shape their world by acting collectively in the face of difficulty is characteristic of

publicanism. This is certainly reflective of Gramsci's method of using Machiavelli as a lever to expose the historical relations of power between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie (as well as a convenient metaphor to dodge the censors), but it means that he was frequently getting at Machiavelli's republicanism the hard way. This focus also accounts for his conviction that Machiavelli was attempting to leave classical republicanism behind in favor of the newly historically emergent absolute monarchies, without quite knowing how to do so. Q 6, § 52, 724.

³By using the verb *vivere*, to live, as a noun, Machiavelli encompassed a whole mode (way) of life or existence: the phrase '*vivere politico*' must therefore be taken in the broadest possible sense.

⁴For years it was a scholarly commonplace that *The Prince* was extracted from the vaster, more comprehensive material of the *Discourses* by Machiavelli in response to immediate political needs. See, for example, Max Lerner's Introduction in Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince and the Discourses* (New York: Modern Library, 1950), xxx. I cite this not because it is good, but because it is ordinary. More recently, it has been argued on the basis of textual and contextual evidence that Machiavelli first wrote *The Prince* in 1513, and then, disappointed in his effort to rejoin public service under the Medici, began the *Discourses* in 1514. Quentin Skinner sums up this debate in *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought, Volume One: The Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1978), 153-4. Dates of composition beg the issue of the conceptual elaboration of the material, which is likely to have been a lifelong process. In any event, the material in the *Discourses* most directly resembling the discussion in *The Prince* begins roughly in the middle of Book I, Chapter XVI.

republican thought. Gramsci's investigation of the historical reasons for the failure of Italy to develop a 'national-popular will', as Machiavelli had hoped, illuminates Gramsci's own commitment to republican ideals in the classical sense. This commitment located him in a community of social and political thought, or discursive space, for which the irrationality of mass action was especially visible as a problem needing a comprehensive solution.⁵

I. History, Contingency, Irrationality

Within their shared republicanism, the analysis of contingency is the primary dimension of Machiavelli's significance for Gramsci. In *The Machiavellian Moment*, J.G.A. Pocock argues that medieval and Renaissance political thinkers were constrained in the way they were able to account for irrational conduct and historical indeterminacy by a conceptual language in which timeless universals were the basis of any assessment of rationality. He suggests that "...the late medieval and Renaissance intellect found the particular less intelligible and less rational than the universal; that since the particular was finite, it was local both in space and time, so that time became a dimension of its being and consequently shared in the diminished rationality and intelligibility of the particular."⁶ Thus, early modern republican theory must be seen in the context of an

⁵This variant of modern thought, called in different contexts classical or civic republicanism, has been enjoying renewed scrutiny as either an alternative to or component of liberalism (and in some instances, conservatism). I take it to be a distinct conceptual space, although its adherents share the language of liberty with liberals and of community with conservatives. The best book on the subject is forthcoming: Jeff Weintraub, *Freedom and Community: The Republican Virtue Tradition and the Sociology of Liberty*, in which Weintraub discusses the 'republican virtue tradition' of social and political thought, and surveys the literature. As everyone seems agreed that republicanism is the key identifying component, this is the word I will use here, modified as contextually appropriate. Weintraub, in Chapter II, resists this simplification in favor of his coinage, as a means of distinguishing republicanism, based on the central and interrelated concepts of virtue, willed community, freedom, and citizenship, from the variants of liberal republicanism that rely on constitutional mechanisms for social and political order. This is a coherent position, but the heuristic utility of his coinage depends on a consensus that will have to await the publication and acclaim of his book to be relied upon. Nevertheless, with his distinction in mind, it should go without saying that the party of Ronald Reagan, Newt Gingrich, and the Bushes, whatever its merits and history, is not what I have in mind. In general, my understanding and discussion of republicanism is based on and may be supplemented by Weintraub's book, as well as the work of J.G.A. Pocock, discussed below, and Quentin Skinner, already cited, in all of which more background may be found.

⁶J.G.A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1975), 4. Pocock's formulation here has a peculiar quasi-circularity that seems characteristic of his argument, poised between subtlety and exquisite

“emerging historicism,” so that the Machiavellian moment “...is a name for the moment in conceptualized time in which the republic was seen as confronting its own temporal finitude, as attempting to remain morally and politically stable in a stream of irrational events conceived as essentially destructive of all systems of secure stability.”⁷ “Consequently, a vital component of republican theory — and, once this had come upon the scene, if no earlier, of all political theory — consisted of ideas about time, about the occurrence of contingent events of which time was the dimension, and about the intelligibility of the sequences (it is as yet too soon to say processes) of particular happenings that made up what we should call history.”⁸ With the revival of republicanism during the late Renaissance, politics explicitly became the art of managing and controlling contingency.⁹

Machiavelli called the irrationality of history ‘*fortuna*’: fortune, or chance. Fortune was essentially anything not controlled by effective human will, or ‘*virtù*’ (virtue). Under conditions of social and political chaos and degradation, or ‘corruption’, virtue could hardly be expected on a widespread basis; only the concentrated effort of a uniquely gifted individual could seize the moment and dominate the myriad forces of history, including the corrupt people themselves.¹⁰ Thus, in Italy, which everyone knew to be corrupt beyond all others — enslaved, dispersed, leaderless, orderless, beaten, despoiled, lacerated, vulnerable, and ruined — only the prince could impose a new order. For “in Italy the material is not lacking for the introduction of any form. Here there is great virtue in the members, when it is not lacking in the leaders.”¹¹

self-referentiality. This may be due to the fact that, although he is perhaps its greatest student, Pocock has little sympathy for the republican tradition. Weintraub discusses Pocock’s attitude toward republicanism in *Freedom and Community*, Notes to Chapter 1.

⁷Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment*, viii.

⁸Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment*, 3.

⁹Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment*, 156.

¹⁰Indeed, the corrupt society itself is a realm of fortune (as any good entrepreneur knows).

¹¹Machiavelli, *The Prince*, XXIV (the concluding ‘exhortation’). See also *Discourses*, Book II, Introduction. As there are many editions of Machiavelli’s works, all citations are to the internal divisions of the texts. I have used *Il Principe e altre opere politiche* (Milan: Garzanti, 1976). All translations are my own; those especially interested may care to check my renditions against their favorites, as some of the usual translation strategies tend to be very poor from the standpoint of the argument I am making here. In general, it should not be difficult to grasp that when Machiavelli said *virtù* he meant virtue, not ‘prowess’ (*prodezza*) or some other partial and misleading circumlocution; and that when he used one word or another over and over (virtue, order) this was because it was the *right word*, not because he was too ignorant or rude to think of a synonym. I will strive for the most literal formulation, at the expense of elegance but for the sake of concep-

Even in this short statement from *The Prince* of Italy's problems and their proximate solution, the complexity of Machiavelli's historically rooted political sociology can be glimpsed. The historical moment was a particularly difficult one: corruption reigned, order was missing, barbarians ruled the land. Italians lived in a world of pure contingency, governed by fortune.¹² Yet, the main problem was a lack of virtuous leaders who could boldly dominate the situation. That is, the situation contained the seeds of its own overcoming. The raw material for a solution was available, ready at hand, needing only to be organized. This raw material was the virtue of the Italians themselves; but this popular virtue needed a leader to activate and channel it.¹³ Thus, in *The Prince* there is already a dynamic interrelationship between leaders and led, that relies on the virtue of both sides to make the collective domination of fortune possible.

The nature of this dynamic receives a more refined treatment in the *Discourses*. In the more comprehensive text, Machiavelli makes it clear that the special role of the prince is to establish and order the *vivere politico*, a task that is far better accomplished by the one than by the many. "And this must be taken as a general rule: that never or rarely does it happen that any republic or realm is well-ordered from the beginning, or altogether reformed from its old order, if it is not ordered by one... but a prudent orderer of a republic, if he has this will to benefit not himself but the common good... has to arrange to have this authority alone; nor will a wise mind take issue with any extraordinary action necessary to order a realm or constitute a republic." But once constituted, the new order is best placed in the hands of the people if it is to remain stable: "if one is appropri-

tual reliability.

¹²Pocock distinguishes fortune from corruption in terms of the distinction between "mere randomness" and moral degradation; but since their social/ political consequences interpenetrate and are even to a degree identical, he cannot avoid a certain conceptual slide present also in Machiavelli himself. See Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment*, 211. Corruption is actually only possible where there was previously virtue, and this does make a difference: for Machiavelli, returning a corrupt people to virtue is difficult, but instilling virtue in a people entirely unused to it may be impossible. Thus, his high hopes for Italy.

¹³Skinner points out the irony that "the century following the Peace of Lodi in 1454 witnessed the final triumph of princely forms of government almost everywhere in Italy. And yet it was during the same period, in the twilight of the city republics, that incomparably the most original and important contributions were made to republican political thought." *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought, Volume One: The Renaissance*, 139. I would argue that one of Machiavelli's least appreciated contributions to modern thought was his attempt to incorporate both of these elements into a comprehensive political theory.

ate to order things, the order will not last long when it remains on the shoulders of the one, but very well when it remains in the care of many, and when it is up to many to maintain it. Because just as many are not suited to order a thing, due to not knowing its good because of the diverse opinions among them, so once they know it they cannot agree to abandon it.”¹⁴

The prince is not the whole story, but occupies the very particular role of innovator and organizer, that is, the initial moment of conquering radical contingency. Without the intensity of virtue that the single leader brings to the situation, the fragmentation and disorder characteristic of historical contingency cannot be overcome. Nor can the more diffuse virtue of the multitude be stimulated and channeled into an overwhelming force. So, even in this initial moment, the consent and active participation of the people is crucial; indeed, it is the *point* of the whole enterprise. The greatness of the prince lies in renewing or establishing the common good, and the ratification of this good is the multitude’s recognition and appropriation of it — at which point the prince’s work is done.¹⁵ “And if the princes are superior to the peoples in ordering laws, forming civic lives [*vite civili*], ordering statutes and new orders, the peoples are so superior in maintaining things in order, that they without doubt add to the glory of those who have ordered them.”¹⁶

Order, then, is not something that is simply imposed by the prince; it is accepted and applied actively by the people. The relationship between leader and led in the republic of virtue is a dialectical one, based not on domination but on consent. But it must be ordered to function properly, so that the virtuous commitment of both the prince and the people to the common good is channeled into constructive action. Pocock elucidates: “The republic can dominate *fortuna* only by integrating its citizens in a self-sufficient *universitas*, but this in turn depends on the freely participating and morally assenting citizen... By the institutionalization of civic virtue, the republic or polis maintains its own stability

14Machiavelli, *Discourses*, Book I, Chapter IX.

15“‘The welfare of a republic or a kingdom is not therefore in having a prince who governs prudently while alive, but one who orders it in such a way that with his death it is maintainable.’” Machiavelli, *Discourses*, Book I, Chapter XI.

16Machiavelli, *Discourses*, Book I, Chapter LVIII. From this passage it can especially be seen how laden the concept of ‘order’ is in Machiavelli; every element of society must be subject to or the product of conscious ordering — a most modern sociological conception hidden in the ‘overuse’ of one word.

in time and develops the human raw material composing it toward that political life which is the end of man.”¹⁷

This consent could only with difficulty be interpreted as contractual. Machiavelli had very little to say about laws, or formal juridical relationships of any kind; the order he had in mind concerned before all else the modes of involvement of people in the republic, and was a matter of continuous and active maintenance, distinct from the political passivity that is allowed to citizens under the law following their initial acceptance of a social contract.¹⁸ Indeed, where order is no good (or “the material is corrupted”) even the best laws do no good.¹⁹ Further, the inescapable contingency of individual passions requires the intricate organization or ordering of social involvement — the detailing of which consumes most of the *Discourses* — but ultimately assures even the impossibility of ordering a perpetual republic.²⁰ This being the case, the political education (or acculturation) of the republic’s citizens assumes a central place, since they must be counted on to appreciate and maintain the whole — and renew it as necessary — in resistance to a historical transitoriness that they in part embody.

II. Political Education, Willed Community

As the preceding discussion has shown, for Machiavelli the best guarantee of a people’s receptivity to virtuous participation in ‘willed community’ (Weintraub’s term, intended to call attention to the contrast between traditional community and politically active community) is a previous familiarity with virtue. Indeed, it may be that without such experience a republic is altogether impossible.²¹ For Gramsci, the transition had to be possi-

¹⁷Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment*, 156, 184.

¹⁸For his distinction of laws and order, similar to the distinction of technique and structure, see Machiavelli, *Discourses*, Book I, Chapter XVIII.

¹⁹Machiavelli, *Discourses*, Book I, Chapter XVII.

²⁰“And because to such disorders that may be born in republics certain remedy cannot be given, it follows that it is impossible to order a perpetual republic, because for a thousand unconsidered reasons its ruin may be caused.” Machiavelli, *Discourses*, Book III, Chapter XVII. Yet republics may be renewed; indeed, they only fail when they are not periodically renewed. Book III, Chapter I.

²¹“And this conclusion can be drawn: that where the material is not corrupt, tumults and other scandals do no harm; where it is corrupt, well-ordered laws do no good, if they are not proposed by one who enforces them with extreme force so much that the material becomes good; but I do not know if this has ever happened or if it is possible for it to happen.” Machiavelli, *Discourses*, Book I, Chapter XVII. See also Book I, Chapter LV, a very rich chapter overall.

ble under any initial circumstances; but he accepted that in the corrupt and leaderless Italy of the 20th century it would be extremely difficult, and would require a lengthy and intricate political education. So the elements of political education in Machiavelli, who thought virtue was difficult to encourage, maintain, and manage even under the best of circumstances, were highly relevant to Gramsci. The essential point of comparison (and the basis for Gramsci's engagement with Machiavelli on this point) is that each saw the 'transition problem' as a moment in a process that had to be prepared; thus, the foundation of the republic of virtue was not for either theorist a sudden or cathartic transformation, but the emergence of a political and social order that was both qualitatively new and well rooted in historical relationships.

In what may look like a surprise for such a notorious opponent of the Papacy, Machiavelli recognized religion to be the first element of a successful education into public virtue.²² This was because religion (any religion, clearly enough) supplied a basic ethical framework without which the more specific and conscious political virtues would have been flesh without a skeleton. For Machiavelli, religion is the original model of collective order. "Therefore the princes of a republic or a kingdom must maintain in them the foundations of the religion that they hold: and having done this, it will be an easy thing for them [the princes] to keep their republic religious, and consequently good and united."²³

In essence, for Machiavelli religion occupies for people (to use anachronistic terms) the social-psychological space of a basic conception of the world. As such, it is the initial pre-rational mode of engagement with social life, providing the basic premises from which social action and interaction will depend. Thus, the question of religion is politically crucial and inescapable, particularly when the objective is a republic based on shared values and common participation in collective order. Virtuous commitment to the community must first of all be grounded in the primitive acculturation created by religion. When nothing of this sort is available to a society, virtue and freedom are impossible.

But beyond this basic installation of rudimentary moral order that all religions accomplish, some are more suited to specifically republican virtue than others; this is the

²²The key passages on religion, its uses and limitations are to be found in Machiavelli, *Discourses*, Book I, Chapters XI-XV.

²³Machiavelli, *Discourses*, Book I, Chapter XII. Note that here the particular religion is not the issue, but the fact of it.

key to Machiavelli's critique of Catholicism. In assessing the success and longevity of the Roman republic as compared to the various Italian attempts to achieve political liberty,²⁴ Machiavelli identified religion as the source of modern weakness: "Thinking therefore whence could be born that in those ancient times the peoples were more lovers of liberty than [those of] these times, I think it is born of the same cause that makes men now lack in strength, which I believe is the difference of our education from the ancient one, founded in the difference of our religion from the ancient one."²⁵ In particular, by emphasizing rewards in an afterlife, modern religion saps the moral imperative to strive for "the honor of the world," glorifies personal humility and contemplation, and encourages mediocrity by failing through magnificent rites and sacrifices to demonstrate heroic values. In short, its moral engagement is passive rather than active, and thus it provides a poor foundation for republican virtue.²⁶

That Machiavelli's instrumental analysis of religion was strikingly secular has been remarked.²⁷ Religious belief, for Machiavelli, has the tremendous advantage of being

24In the republican tradition, collective liberty and individual freedom come from willing, disciplined participation in the political life of the community. Gramsci put it thus: "Liberty-discipline. To the concept of liberty ought to be accompanied that of responsibility that generates discipline, and not immediately discipline, that in this case is meant as imposed from outside, as a coercive limitation on liberty. Responsibility against individual arbitrariness: liberty is only that which is 'responsible', that is, 'universal', inasmuch as it is posed as an individual aspect of a collective or group 'liberty', as the individual expression of a law." Q 6, §11, 692. Also in *FSPN*, 274-5; the translation is my own: Boothman gives *arbitrio* as 'free will', which rather surrenders the issue in favor of liberal prejudices. To avoid this, the clumsy 'arbitrariness' may be preferable. This passage should act as a reminder of Kant's roots in the de-politicization of Rousseau.

25Machiavelli, *Discourses*, Book II, Chapter II.

26Skinner points out in his discussion of Machiavelli's attitude toward Christianity that Machiavelli's ultimate commitment to the freedom and survival of the republic in the face of fortune (this being the content of republican virtue) overrode any competing set of moral virtues that might have come from Christianity or elsewhere. *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought, Volume One: The Renaissance*, 182-5. This was certainly Robespierre's attitude; and marxists have long argued that revolutionary virtue surpasses and overrides hypocritical 'bourgeois' virtues (at least potentially); key arguments are Trotsky's *Their Morals and Ours* (1938) and Merleau-Ponty's *Humanism and Terror* (1947). (For Dionysian moralists, the relevant text is Merlot-Chianti's *Humidor and Terroir*.)

27In *Freedom and Community* Weintraub argues that this comparison of the relative merits of religions from the standpoint of republican virtue demonstrates that Machiavelli was "interested in religion only as civil (or, more precisely, civic) religion," a distinction that becomes quite valuable in the light of subsequent republicans like Rousseau, Robespierre, Saint-Simon, Mazzini, and Durkheim. Durkheim extended this sweepingly secular understanding of religion to its broadest implications for the basic conception of society in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, as the next chapter will reveal.

able to mobilize popular energy, something that mere discussion often fails to accomplish.²⁸ In this sense, Machiavelli saw religion as a tool to manipulate collective irrationality, or passion — a move indicating that for him, the virtue of the people lies in their moral and physical commitment to the community, not in their conscious understanding of it. Thus, religion is useful to organize consent, bolster confidence, and generate collective effort. This power of religion is something that Machiavelli explicitly encouraged princes to exploit for the good of the republic.²⁹

Yet, precisely because of its generality and its low level of moral and conceptual elaboration taken from the political standpoint, religion can be only one element of the emergence of political culture. Neither the ancient Roman religion nor Catholicism was primarily concerned with the civic virtues, although they crucially affected these as a secondary consequence. Nor should religion compete with the republic as the central focus of its citizens' moral commitment, because the solidarity that is the essence of willed community cannot survive such division of loyalty.³⁰

To develop fully the intensity of engagement and moral commitment necessary for citizens of the republic and to liberate the energies that only active involvement in the affairs of the community can produce, the experience of collective struggle is also necessary. In Machiavelli, this struggle takes two main forms: the struggle to construct the republic, an ordered space, out of the contingency of history and the struggle to defend and maintain it, against both its external enemies and its internal (or time-driven) enemies, decay and corruption. I discuss the first of these above: the virtuous leadership of the prince, who directs and shapes the diffuse and mainly traditional virtue of the people, issuing in an initial ordering of the republic to which the people actively consent.

²⁸Machiavelli, *Discourses*, Book I, Chapter XI.

²⁹E.g. Machiavelli, *Discourses*, Book I, Chapter XIV. It is certainly tempting to see the cults of Lenin and Stalin in this light.

³⁰Nor is there in Machiavelli any sense that a religion could be 'engineered to fit', perhaps because such a position would have been impossible to hold publicly in early sixteenth-century Europe. His remarks on the ancient Roman religion in general suggest that the founders of Roman virtue ordered the religion also, and that their compatibility was no accident — a convenient advantage, and part of the basis of Italy's traditional love of liberty. See *Discourses*, Book I, Chapter XI.

But in Machiavelli's view (which he shared with his time, as Pocock points out), this creative moment was doomed to decay unless it was constantly renewed.³¹ Thus, the moment of emergence of political culture could never be left behind; virtue, as an exceptional basis for group activity, constantly had to receive additional impetus to prevent its collapse back into corruption. The second, preservative form of struggle is consequently only conceptually distinct from the constitutive struggle, while in practice they must run together.

Certainly Machiavelli's fascination with the citizen militia is pronounced and gaudy enough to merit all the attention it has received, including from Gramsci.³² As both a school of virtuous participation in the maintenance of the republic and an especially effective use of the energetic virtue of the citizenry against foes who are not similarly advantaged, the military is crucial to Machiavelli's political theory. But attention to such external contingency is hardly novel and only glancingly addresses the issue of the internal obstacles to solidarity that may be expected to plague a republic. Machiavelli's insight that here too struggle is the essential guarantor of virtue is especially striking, because he acknowledged the irrationality (or passion) of collective action as an essential and unavoidable feature of political and social order, yet argued that, if properly channeled, this struggle could be a positive source of constantly renewed energy rather than a chaos to be compressed and managed.³³

For Machiavelli the key feature distinguishing good discord from the corrupt and corruptible play of passions and competing interests is solidarity: the fundamental agree-

³¹The emerging historicism described in the quotations from Pocock earlier in this chapter was characterized by awareness of the significance of history as contingency, but not yet by any sense of progress or development. Machiavelli and his contemporaries saw history as essentially cyclical.

³²Machiavelli's insistence on the superiority of the citizen army over mercenary forces is sprinkled throughout his works, not to mention his active career — he made an officially sanctioned attempt to organize a militia against the Spanish in 1512, though it did not perform well — and *The Art of War* is devoted almost entirely to the subject.

³³A brief treatment of the importance of discord and tumults to Machiavelli's theory of republican virtue, revealing in his view a clear break with the Italian republican tradition, is in Skinner, *Foundations, Volume One*, 181-2. A more extensive analysis of the contrast and continuity between the positive place of tumult in the *Discourses* and the negative attitude toward it in the later *Florentine Histories* is offered by Gisela Bock's "Civil discord in Machiavelli's *Istorie Fiorentine*," in Gisela Bock, Quentin Skinner, and Maurizio Viroli, eds., *Machiavelli and Republicanism* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990).

ment of all parties to the conflict that what is at stake is the good of the community as a whole, not (or secondarily) the selfish interests of individuals or groups. From such virtuous struggle, in which ideas of the common good are allowed to compete in public on an equal basis, a number of advantages flow.³⁴ Those of great ability can easily be identified by the wisdom and practicality of their positions, and properly rewarded for their virtue. This serves as a demonstration to the community of the benefits to be received for virtuous engagement and encourages such exceptional participation. Further, the role that all citizens play in adjudicating between the different positions assures that even those without great ability are crucial to collective decision-making. The comprehensive effect of this process is that the energies and passions of the citizens are both released and positively channeled into the effort to maintain the general stability and vigor of the republic.³⁵

III. The Neo-Machiavellians and the Theory of Elites³⁶

The central place of corruption, discord, and the manipulability of popular passions in Machiavelli's austere and unsentimental political theory makes it unsurprising that, when his insights were recreated by a generation of Italian (or adopted Italian)³⁷ social theorists in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the republican element was limited or stripped away entirely. In Machiavelli, since particularly virtuous princes could not be relied upon to stay alive and monarchic successions did not guarantee worthy leaders, active popular participation in collectively maintained order was the crucial feature in the long-term dominance of contingency.³⁸ But, in the social and political theories of Gaetano Mosca, Vilfredo Pareto, and Robert Michels, the element of active consent was squeezed entirely out of the conceptual space by the problem of managing collective irrationality as

³⁴Machiavelli had in mind a fairly precise division and balance of powers between the prince, the *ottimati* (civic elite), and the people. *Discourses*, Book I, Chapter II.

³⁵Machiavelli's discussion of the advantages that structured, principled disorder produced in the Roman republic (and the negative consequences of disorder without structure and principle) occupies some of the earliest chapters of the *Discourses*. See, e.g., Book I, Chapters IV-VIII.

³⁶As this section should make clear, in contrast to the discussion of Machiavelli's republicanism, the identification of Mosca, Pareto, and Michels as 'the neo-machiavellians' is at best a partial view, at worst prejudicial and misleading. Nevertheless, it has a certain utility as a 'shorthand'.

³⁷Robert Michels was a German; blocked in his pursuit of an academic career in Germany because of his socialist sympathies, he bounced between Italy and Switzerland, ending up in Italy.

³⁸A concise statement of this point is at Machiavelli, *Discourses*, Book I, Chapter XX.

part of historical contingency, from the viewpoint of ruling elites. Since the resulting compressed conceptual space was what Gramsci had to work with as the legitimate early 20th-century Italian analysis of society, it is important to understand something of these theorists' characteristic positions in order to get an initial sense of the intricacy of Gramsci's response to social psychologies far from straightforward rationality, as well as to adequately reconstruct his engagement with Machiavelli. This will also serve to raise some of the issues that will come up in more detail in the discussion of Gramsci and Weber.

It has been customary in the historiography of social and political thought and in the literature on Gramsci to dismiss Mosca, Pareto, and Michels, when they are considered at all, as conceptually limited curiosities produced by a backward intellectual culture. It is well known that the dominant intellectual presence in Italy from the end of the 19th century through the fascist period and beyond was Benedetto Croce (and Crocean idealism). Gramsci engaged directly with Croce throughout his intellectual career; what to make of the results is a matter of voluminous partisan discussion.³⁹ But Gramsci himself took notice of intellectual culture at all of its levels, from the highly sophisticated Croce to the buffoonish Loria.⁴⁰ If discussion is restricted only to the highest levels, there is a risk of missing Gramsci's insight that even (or sometimes, particularly) the stupidest theory can have an important conceptual/ political impact. From this standpoint, the marginal conceptual space of elite theory was an important one, and more relevant to Gramsci's directly political concerns than Croce;⁴¹ what is most interesting in this context is the elite

³⁹See the Appendix, as well as Paul Piccone, *Italian Marxism* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1983), which departs from a serviceable account of pre-Crocean Italian idealism; and Maurice Finocchiaro, *Gramsci and the History of Dialectical Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1988), probably the most elaborate (and relatively dispassionate) reconstruction and evaluation of the Gramsci/Croce relationship. But it should be noted that Finocchiaro constructs his argument in part on a misrecognition of Gramsci's *critique* of Croce as an *appropriation* of Croce. The essence of critical method is to use elements of a theory (or historical formation, or whatever the target) against the whole to explode it from within; this does not mean that the critic has adopted these elements herself.

⁴⁰See the Appendix for a discussion of Gramsci's approach to bad intellectual culture.

⁴¹For an important reading of the Machiavelli/ Gramsci relationship that goes through Croce, see Benedetto Fontana, *Hegemony and Power: On the Relation between Gramsci and Machiavelli* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1993). This is an interesting and important book, but of little direct relevance here; Fontana uses Gramsci as a lever for a new interpretation of Machiavelli, a project that sounds more similar to the method of this chapter than it actually is. Further, his discourse operates at a level of philosophical abstraction (related to the use of Croce as interlocutor) at which the emergence of political culture is very difficult to grasp as a problem of immediate political practice.

theorists' tacit mediation of one part of the machiavellian conceptual space to the generation of Italian intellectuals that included Gramsci.⁴²

What the neo-machiavellians, as they have been called,⁴³ offer is the very best of what Lukács would later call 'bourgeois science': insightful observation of real social and political relationships, under the methodological assumption that what people do makes for more legitimate and rewarding study than what they could or should or might do.⁴⁴ The strength of this approach, shared with Machiavelli, is a brutally honest and unsentimental appreciation of human limits and demonstrated capabilities. Its weakness, as Lukács pointed out, is a tendency to construct social 'facts' uncritically, and consequently to ignore emergent historical possibilities.⁴⁵

⁴²This is not to suggest that the theorists of elites were without intrinsic value (whatever that may mean). Pareto in particular, though extremely peculiar in his mode of expression, was an extraordinarily subtle theorist whose insights in many respects recall those of Weber — although his *blasé* irony at the limitations of science and the modern collapse of great values displayed none of the *angst* that makes the German so tragically fascinating.

⁴³E.g. by H. Stuart Hughes in *Consciousness and Society*, Chapter 7.

⁴⁴Of the three, only Pareto explicitly understood that scientific objectivity, even in the extremely limited sense that he gave it, is itself a rationalized construct based on non-logical premises or values, that in turn constructs its 'object'. That is, science cannot absolutize itself. But, he argued, if we approach undogmatically the world we observe, we can obtain local knowledge that is experientially 'true'. "We do not posit any dogma as a premise to our research; and our statement of principles serves merely as an indication of that course, among the many courses that might be chosen, which we elect to follow. Therefore anyone who joins us along such a course by no means renounces his right to follow some other." *The Mind and Society: A Treatise on General Sociology*, trans. Andrew Bongiorno and Arthur Livingston, ed. Arthur Livingston (New York: Dover, 1935 [1916]), § 5. "We seek the relationships obtaining between things within the limits of the space and time known to us, and we ask experience and observation to reveal them to us." § 19.

⁴⁵It is extremely difficult to take people at their word when they reject the standpoint of absolute truth, or the 'hidden god', especially when they then go on to voice strong opinions, as Pareto did. In his case, it is tempting to say that he made an unreflective view of 'experience' his god, but he was quite clear that this was meant to be no more absolutely justified than any other locally valuable strategy. Whatever mistakes we make about gravity theoretically, he observed, bridges built properly manage not to fall down. Pareto's ire was reserved for those who failed to recognize and acknowledge the limitations, or locality, of their premises and hence, conclusions. (In this he was genuinely machiavellian.) Thus, he only looks like a positivist if we do not take him at his word. Raymond Aron gives a comprehensible and mostly sympathetic treatment of these issues in *Main Currents of Sociological Thought II: Durkheim, Pareto, Weber*, trans. Richard Howard and Helen Weaver (Garden City: Anchor, 1967). It is interesting, in this connection, that Gramsci identified Pareto as a pragmatist: Q 11, 1465.

⁴⁵"Thus when 'science' maintains that the manner in which data immediately present themselves is an adequate foundation of scientific conceptualisation and that the actual form of these data is the appropriate starting point for the formation of scientific concepts, it thereby takes its stand simply and dogmatically on the basis of capitalist society. It uncritically accepts the nature of the

Recognition of the tremendous power of the masses, without any sense of how that power could produce on its own a positive result, is at the heart of the theoretical insight of the neo-machiavellians. For Mosca, Pareto, and Michels, the popular masses were essentially a force of nature, understandable as social material but not as social agents. Only restricted elites could ever distinguish themselves sufficiently from this incoherent aggregate to achieve genuine agency. In the first of the major texts of modern Italian social theory, *Elementi di scienza politica*, Mosca argued that whatever the form of government, only a limited “political class” actually had access or was even suited to power.⁴⁶ This basic observation, consistent with a reading of Machiavelli as the patron theorist of dispassionate power politics, was at the heart of mainstream Italian social and political theory during the years framing the turn of the century.

Under the influence of the radically restricted political culture of late 19th-century Italy, Mosca and Pareto were in a good position to notice (independently, though there was and is substantial debate on this point) that even in nominally parliamentary or democratic political systems, power is monopolized by elites; and further, that this has been true throughout history. As a matter of observation, then, human social and political groupings are marked by a division between rulers and ruled, a relationship involving some contextually determined mixture of force and (passive) consent that boils down to domination. This basic fact of social relationships, Pareto argued, then receives one or another rationalizing overlay of theory, or ideology (he called it ‘derivation’), the details of which are quite unimportant.

Michels, working from his experience of the European socialist movement, arrived at the same conclusion, which he generalized as the “iron law of oligarchy.”⁴⁷ He observed object as it is given and the laws of that society as the unalterable foundation of ‘science’. Georg Lukács, “What is Orthodox Marxism?” (1919), in *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: MIT, 1971), 7.

⁴⁶The first edition was published in 1896; the English translation, *The Ruling Class*, trans. Hannah D. Kahn (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1939) includes the revisions made by Mosca in 1923. *Elementi* was an extension of the argument made in *Sulla teorica dei governi e sul governo parlamentare* (1884).

⁴⁷Michels contrasted his insights, explicitly based on the work of Mosca and Pareto, with socialist theory in general and marxism in particular in the chapter on “Democracy and the Iron Law of Oligarchy” in *Political Parties: A Sociological Study of the Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracy*, trans. Eden and Cedar Paul (New York: Dover, 1915), 377-92. This general theoretical text followed studies on both Italian and German socialism. Michels saw himself as supplementing and completing historical materialism by identifying the necessary outcome of all class

that, even with the best of democratizing, liberationist intentions, the Social Democrats still managed to fall into patterns of active elite leadership and passive, subordinated mass. This was inevitable, he argued, due to the very nature of collective struggle. In order for the workers to have any power to change the world, they had to be organized; but organization created a set of imperatives that naturally led to stable, undemocratic hierarchies.

Michels identified a variety of interrelated mechanisms by which this happened, all of them familiar to anyone acquainted with practical politics, including: inertia, tradition, and the need for stability; reliance on technical expertise; divisions of labor and skill; the technical problems of quick decision-making and the inefficiency of collective decision-making; the consequent indispensability of leaders and incompetence of the mass; and so on. But in the end the deep motivation for this dynamic was in human nature itself.

The apathy of the masses and their need for guidance has as its counterpart in the leaders a natural greed for power. Thus the development of the democratic oligarchy is accelerated by the general characteristics of human nature. What was initiated by the need for organization, administration, and strategy is completed by psychological determinism.⁴⁸

Michels noted that crowd dynamics make them inherently vulnerable to manipulation, a phenomenon he referred to as the “pathology of the crowd.”⁴⁹ Anything more extensive than a small group naturally degenerated below the level of rational decision-making and became material for the equally natural impulse of the small group of leaders to rule.

Consequently, Michels assumed politics to be the realm of relations of power that are inherently dominative, so that to become involved in politics is automatically to participate in (and be corrupted by) domination. In this conceptualization of politics, democratic pluralism, based on the exchange and negotiation of conflicting views, is impossible; such disagreements as occur only make sense as conflict, the struggle for power between spe-

struggles, 390. ^

48Michels, *Political Parties*, 205.

49Michels, *Political Parties*, 24-5. Freud began making this type of argument around the same time, summed up in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1959 [1921]). The Great War stimulated a great deal of thought about collective irrationality.

cial interests.⁵⁰ Nor can commitment to higher ideals be relied upon to break this natural dynamic, beyond temporary moments of effervescence.⁵¹

In Machiavelli's terms, all this would seem to suggest that corruption is inescapable and that even the recognition and interactive channeling of collective passion that makes Machiavelli's republic so concrete is utopian. Certainly the marxist vision of unproblematic consensus based on common class consciousness could not then evade Michels' blows. "Thus the appearance of oligarchic phenomena in the very bosom of the revolutionary parties is a conclusive proof of the existence of immanent oligarchic tendencies in every kind of human organization which strives for the attainment of definite ends."⁵² This was the most direct, systematic, and 'machievellian' challenge to republican values imaginable.

IV. Gramsci's Political Theory — Order and Collective Will

Gramsci thought little of the neo-machiavellians, but he took their challenge seriously and rejected their conclusions completely.⁵³ During his active political career before his imprisonment, he had little time or need to respond to such intellectual arguments; and he had plenty of personal experience with the hierarchy of the PSI to develop his own critique of oligarchic political organizations.⁵⁴ When his attention shifted, in the *Prison*

50E.g. Michels, *Political Parties*, 389: "By a universally applicable social law, every organ of the collectivity, brought into existence through the need for the division of labour, creates for itself, as soon as it becomes consolidated, interests peculiar to itself. The existence of these special interests involves a necessary conflict with the interests of the collectivity."

51E.g. Michels, *Political Parties*, 126.

52Michels, *Political Parties*, 11.

53"We should bear in mind that [Gramsci] was working within an intellectual ambiance saturated with the 'findings' of élite theory — among them, the hideous effectiveness of manipulation, the widespread prevalence of ignorance and apathy, the de-humanizing effect of mass culture. Rather than ignore or simply reject these observations, Gramsci chose to accommodate them, to confront the arduous problem of *developing* the conditions of socialism." Joseph V. Femia, *Gramsci's Political Thought: Hegemony, Consciousness, and the Revolutionary Process* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987), 175; see also 240-3. Unfortunately, Femia does little to pursue this insight directly, or to connect it back to Machiavelli.

54A very partial account and schematic periodization of Gramsci's relationship to Mosca, Pareto and Michels is offered by Giorgio Galli in "Gramsci e le teorie delle 'élites'," in *Gramsci e la cultura 1717contemporanea II*, ed. Pietro Rossi (Rome: Riuniti, 1969). He suggests that Gramsci was influenced by the intellectual culture created by the theorists of the elite, especially insofar as this offered a way of preserving and teaching the revolution in non-revolutionary periods. This may be true, but it is more likely that whatever positive view of compact leadership is to be found in Gramsci's conceptual space came more directly from Machiavelli, in whom the republican ele-

Notebooks, to the general theory of revolutionary practice and organization, his objection to the neo-machiavellians and those who shared their restricted concept of politics was not that they made inaccurate observations,⁵⁵ but that they stepped beyond their observations of particular historical relationships to make claims about the *nature* of human motivation and political organization. His response to their quasi-machiavellian arguments (most often focused on Michels or the Belgian marxist renegade Henri De Man) was central to his construction of a deeply sociological political theory and relied in large part on recovering the republican component of Machiavelli that they had stripped away.

Gramsci was committed to the view that the masses are capable of participating actively in their own liberation. In order to overcome the objection of the neo-machiavellians, therefore, he had to be able to account for sources of resistance to the powerful oligarchic logic of organization and to the historically observable irrationality and substantive passivity of the mass. In essence, he had to construct an inclusive politics that was non-dominative without spinning off into anarchy. Machiavelli had solved this problem by employing a virtuous prince to re-direct the power/ dominance aspect of politics and the collective passions that for the neo-machiavellians were its natural object, into ordered collective struggle with both external and internal contingency. This was Gramsci's strategy as well, but now using the party as the collective prince.

One type of solution to this problem that Gramsci explicitly rejected was Sorel's. Quite aware of the oligarchic dangers of even revolutionary organization, Sorel swung wide to the side of collective moral engagement and the unstructured liberation and mobilization of passion as the key to revolutionary virtue. In Sorel, the machiavellian element is paramount. The story may be complicated further if we think of Gramsci's admiration for Lenin and the Bolsheviks.

⁵⁵"Michels' ideas on political parties are confused and schematic enough, but they are interesting as a collection of raw material and of empirical and disparate observations." *Q* 2, 237. "The pure descriptiveness and external classification of the old positivist sociology are another essential characteristic of Michels' writings: he has no methodology intrinsic to the facts, no critical point of view that is not a charming skepticism of the reactionary salon or caffè, that has replaced the equally superficial mischief [*sbarazzineria*] of revolutionary syndicalism and sorelism." *Q* 2, 238. Gramsci's most extensive survey of Michels' works, his relationship to Weber and Sorel, and his failures as a scholar is in *Q* 2, § 75. On Mosca, Gramsci's judgment was similarly harsh, based also on his interpretive insufficiency: "The elements of empirical observation which are habitually included higgledy-piggledy in works of political science (G. Mosca's *Elementi di scienza politica* may be taken as typical) ought, in so far as they are not abstract and illusory, to be inserted into the context of the relations of force, on one level or another." *SPN*, 176. For a more extended critique, see *Q* 13, 1565.

of the ordered channeling of collective passion dropped out to be replaced by spontaneity.⁵⁶ Gramsci criticized Sorel's reliance on the spontaneity of the masses, motivated by the irrational revolutionary myth, as a primitive response to the power of collective will that could never achieve a positive outcome. "Will not that collective will, with so rudimentary a formation, at once cease to exist, scattering into an infinity of individual wills which in the positive phase then follow separate and conflicting paths?... In Sorel's case it is clear that behind the spontaneity there lies a purely mechanistic assumption, behind the liberty (will — life-force) a maximum of determinism, behind the idealism an absolute materialism."⁵⁷ This was not the solution to the machiavellian challenge, nor even to its neo-machiavellian vulgarization.⁵⁸

Similarly, the simple transposition of the individual figure of Machiavelli's prince into modern politics as a mythic focus for collective passion could only be an improvisation, without the long-term element of order needed to create a new state⁵⁹ in which the liberated energy of the people can be channeled constructively.⁶⁰ The result of this maneuver is a transitory political state based on the particular virtues of one man, and dying

⁵⁶See Chapter 1, above, for my discussion of Sorel, and Chapter Six, below, for a further development of Gramsci's critique of Sorel.

⁵⁷*SPN*, 128-9. If spontaneity is absolute, then we are enslaved to spontaneity — and the material conditions that motivate it without our knowledge.

⁵⁸An intriguing, albeit brief discussion of Gramsci's approach to indeterminacy and debt to the sorelian myth is in James Miller, *History and Human Existence: From Marx to Merleau-Ponty* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1979) 132-6. Miller does slide over Gramsci's detailed critique of Sorel, however.

⁵⁹When reading Gramsci, it is important to notice that 'state' is for him a dialectically fluid concept, encompassing at different moments the spectrum from the coercive apparatus of class domination to the comprehensive moral and social order created by the revolution. This state may then be characterized by historical relations of class domination, but it may also include elements of consent, or even willed community. With such a term, a definition is impossible: context is crucial.

⁶⁰*SPN*, 129. Gramsci discussed this issue in terms of 'charisma', a concept that he had not gotten directly from Weber but from a variety of indirect appropriations of Weber — most immediately, Michels. *SPN*, 429 (note that in the editors' footnote, they miss the significance of this). For Gramsci's recognition that Michels probably got the idea from Weber (he thought it worth checking, but there is no evidence he ever did), see *Q 2*, 230-1. It is interesting, therefore, that his critique of charismatic authority so directly mirrored Weber's fears about it. Weber raised the same problems as the neo-machiavellians, based on the same restricted conception of politics as domination, but with far less positivistic confidence that he was describing the world as it must be under any circumstances. This will be discussed in Chapter Six, below.

with him.⁶¹ In the absence of a tendentially virtuous people, Machiavelli himself rejected this solution as inherently unstable, and Gramsci agreed: in modern mass politics, for Gramsci, long-term stability based on a collective will must be organized, or ordered, by a collective prince — the party.

In response to both of these unstructured liberations of political energy, or passion, Gramsci pointed out that “it is not possible to think of an organized and permanent passion. Permanent passion is a condition of orgasm and of spasm, which means operational incapacity.”⁶² Under these conditions, the collective energy of the masses is simply the irrational force of nature described by the neo-machiavellians, the ‘pathology of the crowd’, best treated by elites as a problem of management or manipulation. But Gramsci rejected the conclusion that collective action is always irrationally motivated and ultimately destructive.

The observation is correct and realistic insofar as it refers to casual crowds, collected together like ‘a multitude during a rainstorm under an overhang’, composed of men who are not bound by ties of responsibility toward other men or groups of men or toward a concrete economic reality, the collapse of which has repercussions in disaster for the individuals. It can be said, therefore, that in such crowds individualism not only is not overcome [*superato*] but is exacerbated by the certainty of impunity and irresponsibility.... But it is also a common observation that a ‘well ordered’ assembly of riotous and undisciplined elements comes together in collective decisions superior to the individual standard: quantity becomes quality. If this were not the case, the army would not be possible, nor for example would the unheard-of sacrifices that well-disciplined groups of humans know how to make in determinate occasions, when their sense of social responsibility is strongly awakened by the immediate sense of common danger and the future appears more important than the present.⁶³

The problem was to extend and generalize such moments of collective moral engagement and elevation. In order to achieve a new state with some element of stability that was not simply a continuation of contingency by other means, collective mastery and ordering of social reality were necessary. This was only possible through the mobilization of collective energy *structured* by a shared moral order, i.e. virtue. Following Machiavelli, Gramsci ar-

⁶¹This is to be distinguished from bonapartism, or caesarism, a transitory phenomenon resulting from the catastrophic balance or mutual incapacity of opposing forces that produces a unique opportunity for the compromise rule of one man or coalition. See *SPN*, 219-23.

⁶²*SPN*, 138.

⁶³*Q* 7, 861-2.

gued that “It is necessary therefore to explain how passion can become moral ‘duty’ — duty in terms not of political morality but of ethics,” that is, a deeply shared collective will.⁶⁴ This, in a nutshell, is the essence of the revolution.

Collective will was Gramsci’s term for the (at least tendential) virtue of the people, that is, their preparation to work together to master historical contingency. This was in turn identical to class consciousness, with its tendency to develop into socialist consciousness. As such, it was clearly the central issue for Gramsci: the question was how to develop and maintain it. Gramsci addressed this in his notes for *The Modern Prince*, his projected integral work on revolutionary politics: “One of the first sections must precisely be devoted to the ‘collective will’, posing the question in the following terms: ‘When can the conditions for awakening and developing a national-popular collective will be said to exist?’ Hence an historical (economic) analysis of the social structure of the given country and a ‘dramatic’ representation of the attempts made in the course of the centuries to awaken this will, together with the reasons for the successive failures.”⁶⁵

The initial form of this collective will was what Gramsci called the ‘national-popular will’. This was to be the first and most basic stage of emergent political culture, the most rudimentary sense of national consensus. Gramsci was fascinated with Machiavelli as the first theorist of this collective political will; he was a “precocious Jacobin” who had understood that to master historical contingency required the collective energy of the people, mobilized around a structuring moral center by a compact source of intense virtue (the prince, the Jacobins, the party). In this sense, Machiavelli was part of the pre-history of marxism, itself the most radical form of modern republicanism: “In his treatment, in his critique of the present, he expressed some general concepts, that present themselves in aphoristic and non-systematic form, and he expressed an original conception of the world, that could also be called ‘philosophy of praxis’ or ‘neo-humanism’ in that it does not recognize transcendental or immanent elements (in the metaphysical sense) but is based altogether on the concrete action of humans that makes and transforms reality by its historical necessity.”⁶⁶

64SPN, 139.

65SPN, 130.

66Q 5, 657. ‘Philosophy of praxis’ has generally been taken to be Gramsci’s prison circumlocution for marxism, and it was certainly that; but more generally, as sentences like this one reveal, it

This energy and its historical effectiveness were classically revealed by the republican armies of revolutionary France; in contrast, “in Italy there has never been an intellectual and moral reform that involved the popular masses.”⁶⁷ The basic characteristic of national-popular will is the organic bond between the national intellectuals and the people, such that there is at least a rudimentary conceptual and moral identification of the people and the ‘nation’. In Italy, even this primitive source of collective will was blocked by the historical political fragmentation of the peninsula, as a result of which Italy’s intellectuals were not national but cosmopolitan: they identified too generally with abstract values rather than with locally motivating and rooted ones.⁶⁸ Consequently, Italy’s history had taken the form of a series of ‘passive revolutions’, in which each renewal, in the machiavellian sense, had been carried out from above without any mobilization of active popular energy or consent. In this sense, the neo-machiavellians were quite right to identify in Italian politics a realm of elite domination in which the role of the masses was entirely that of raw material — with occasional spasmodic interludes.

Organization (or party), *without* this tendency to develop collective will and the virtuous interrelationship of leaders and led, was what Michels and the other elite theorists described.⁶⁹ For Gramsci, the division of rulers and ruled was a historical, not a ‘natural’ phenomenon. Thus, it must be taken into account historically in order to be overcome: “In the formation of leaders, one premiss is fundamental: is it the intention that there should always be rulers and ruled, or is the objective to create the conditions in which this

was the *style* of political thought (or conceptual space) based on the active, collective agency of humans in consciously making their world, of which marxism was for Gramsci the greatest development. Thus, philosophy of praxis is Gramsci’s term for what Weintraub calls the republican virtue tradition. Federico Sanguinetti makes a similar point in *Gramsci e Machiavelli* (Bari: Laterza, 1982), 65, although Sanguinetti offers no sense of the broader tradition involved.

67Q 4, 515.

68E.g. *SPN*, 17-8. About Italian literary culture, he had this to say: “The past, literature included, is not an element of life, but only of bookish and scholastic culture: something that then means that the national sentiment is recent, if it is not even necessary to say that it is still only in process of formation, reaffirming that in Italy literature was never national, but of ‘cosmopolitan’ character.” Q 23, 2251. See also Q 21, 2117.

69Femia frames these issues in terms of “a traditional dichotomy — characteristic of Italian political thought from Machiavelli to Pareto — between ‘force and consent’.” *Gramsci’s Political Thought*, 24. This dichotomy is, of course, not peculiar to Italian political thought, and may be said to supply the material for political thought in general. ‘Hegemony’, Gramsci’s distinctive formulation of the dichotomy, will remain a tacit subtext in this chapter, to be approached more explicitly later on.

division is no longer necessary? In other words, is the initial premiss the perpetual division of the human race, or the belief that this division is only an historical fact, corresponding to certain conditions?”⁷⁰ In societies marked by class struggle, or corruption, class provides only the tendential possibility of virtuous self-determination; the full development of this capacity requires the initial intervention of the collective prince, the party, to create the order in which all will be able to participate freely.

Gramsci argued that there had to be an organic relationship between leaders and followers based on shared class consciousness (parties being “only the nomenclature for a class” or class fragment)⁷¹ to overcome the dynamic of oligarchy.

...questions of democracy and oligarchy have a precise meaning that is given them by the class differences between leaders [*capi*] and followers [*gregari*]: the question becomes political, takes on, that is, a real value and no longer only of sociological schematism, when there is a class schism in the organization: this happened in the unions and the social-democratic parties: if there is no class difference, the question becomes purely technical — the orchestra does not believe the conductor to be an oligarchic boss — of division of labor and of education, that is the centralization has to take into account that in the popular parties education and political ‘apprenticeship’ become true in very large part through the active participation of the followers in the intellectual — discussions — and organizational life of the parties. The solution to the problem, complicated precisely by the fact that in the advanced parties intellectuals have a large function, can be found in the formation between the leaders and the masses of the most numerous possible intermediate stratum that serves as a balance to prevent the deviation of the leaders during moments of radical crisis and to elevate the mass more and more.⁷²

This dense passage, in direct and explicit response to Michels, contains the conceptual essence of Gramsci’s practical theory of party organization and democratic struggle.

There is, he allows, a clear division of labor between leaders and led, and this is based on the greater technical expertise and intellectual elaboration of the leaders. But in a party bonded on the basic level of class, that is, one whose members share a basic moral frame-

⁷⁰*SPN*, 144.

⁷¹*SPN*, 152.

⁷²*Q* 2, 236-7. Anne Showstack Sassoon, in *Gramsci’s Politics*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1987 [1980]), 167-8, has also noted the importance of this passage in the context of a rather different discussion. Her translation differs from my own in a slightly greater willingness to impose elegance on Gramsci’s notetaking. This book is perhaps the most straightforwardly lucid and useful exposition of Gramsci in English.

work akin to Machiavelli's understanding of religion but resulting from common historical/ economic relations, this relationship can be fluid and reciprocal.⁷³ For this to be the case, the interactions of leaders and led must be mediated at various levels by differentially elaborated strata of the party, so that both the intellectual and theoretical guidance of the leaders is always informed by the active will of the mass, and vice-versa.⁷⁴ This is the essence of hegemony in its positive sense.

Further, the boundaries between the party's strata must be permeable, because the 'political apprenticeship' of the masses progressively succeeds in producing intellectuals from the mass (or 'organic intellectuals'). But in all cases, it is the active, virtuous participation of all elements of the party in its political, organizational, and intellectual life at a variety of levels that breaks the logic of oligarchy and turns domination into leadership or guidance.⁷⁵ "Organicity' can only be found in democratic centralism, which is so to speak a 'centralism' in movement — i.e. a continual adaptation of the organization to the real movement, a matching of thrusts from below with orders from above, a continuous insertion of elements thrown up from the depths of the rank and file into the solid framework of the leadership apparatus which ensures continuity and the regular accumulation of experience." The flexibility of this relationship, based on the active involvement of all of the elements of the party, is its most important feature. The party only achieves the historical overcoming of dominative authority relationships when it is motivated by a historical movement of the masses themselves, and is not simply imposed on them: "Democratic centralism is 'organic' because on the one hand it takes account of movement, which is the organic mode in which historical reality reveals itself, and does not solidify mechanically into bureaucracy; and because at the same time it takes account of that which is

⁷³Here the question of discipline is crucial: "How should discipline be understood, if by this word is meant a continuous and permanent relationship between governors and governed that realizes a collective will? Certainly not as a passive and supine acceptance of orders, as the mechanical execution of an assignment (something that nonetheless will be necessary on determinate occasions, as for example in the middle of an action already decided upon and begun), but as a conscious and lucid assimilation of the directive to be realized. In any case, discipline does not annul the personality in the organic sense, but only limits arbitrariness and irresponsible impulsiveness, not to speak of the fatuous vanity to be noticed." *Q* 14, 1706.

⁷⁴This should recall the discussion of Gramsci's conception of the division of revolutionary labor in the last chapter; the discussion will be further elaborated below, in relation to Durkheim.

⁷⁵For one breakdown of the levels or elements of the party in conformity with this basic picture of leaders, led, and intermediate strata, the latter responsible for physical, moral and intellectual connections between the other two, see *SPN*, 152-3.

relatively stable and permanent, or which at least moves in an easily predictable direction, etc.”⁷⁶

Consequently, Gramsci’s understanding of ‘party’ was uniquely expansive; the party was essentially a unitary moral community that tended to become universal. He praised Machiavelli for understanding that “the three elements — religion (or ‘active’ conception of the world), State, party — are indissoluble...” and went on to argue that “in the modern world, a party is such — integrally, and not, as happens, a fraction of a larger party — when it is conceived, organised and led in ways and in forms such that it will develop integrally into a State (an integral State, and not into a government technically understood) and into a conception of the world.”⁷⁷ This is Machiavelli’s republic, based on the virtuous participation of all in the construction and maintenance of a new order. Anybody not included in such a party would by definition be swept away by the revolution in which the party makes itself the new order by constructing a new republic of virtue; thus, the party must tend to be all-inclusive. It must build a hegemony that increasingly encompasses both the proletariat and its various potential allies, peasants chief among them.

Gramsci’s view of the party was dialectical. At a first moment, characterized by the fragmentation and collective irrationality (corruption) of the masses, the party was the focused, compact, and exclusive source of intense virtue necessary to release, harness, and develop the energy of the people. Here, ‘leadership’ or ‘guidance’ was distinct from ‘dominance’ only insofar as the party was successful in motivating morally active but theoretically primitive support. In the second moment it became, through the success of a long process of active political acculturation involving a variety of tactics and subsidiary institutions (as it had been tendentially at first) an inclusive (or ‘integral’) moral community that would, with the revolution, become the state.⁷⁸ In this second moment, the first moment, like Machiavelli’s ordering prince, would ‘wither away’ as an external source of force and discipline, which by this time would have become thoroughly internalized.⁷⁹

⁷⁶*SPN*, 188-9.

⁷⁷*SPN*, 266-7. Elsewhere he also called this the ‘ethical’ state.

⁷⁸Tactics include education, literature, propaganda; institutions include the party (in the limited, technical sense), unions, and councils. Some initial statement of these issues was necessary here, but all of this will receive more detailed treatment in Chapter 5.

⁷⁹This paragraph is meant to illuminate a variety of apparently cryptic or contradictory passages in Gramsci; but see, e.g., *Q* 6, 749-51; *SPN*, 181-2, 252-3, 258-9. Interestingly, failure to fully ap-

It should be clear enough that, while the party must take the lead in guiding the masses in the direction of more and more extensive involvement in the collective will, or socialist consciousness, the legitimacy of this effort comes from ‘below’ and must be constantly ratified by the active consent and direct participation of the masses. Again the party, in this sense, is essentially inclusive. There is no question here of leninist vanguardism.

The affirmation that modern Italy has been characterized by volunteerism is correct ...but it should be noted that volunteerism, even in its historical value that cannot be diminished, has been a surrogate for popular intervention, and in this sense it is a solution of compromise with the passivity of the national masses. Volunteerism-passivity, they go together more than is generally believed. The volunteerist solution is a solution of authority, from above, formally legitimated by the consent, as it is usually said, of the ‘best’. But to construct durable history the ‘best’ are not enough, the most vast and numerous national-popular energies are necessary.⁸⁰

The difficulty of mobilizing these popular energies was not lost on Gramsci, but to take a shortcut was not the answer to this difficulty. Thus, it may be said that Lenin occupied in marxist conceptual space the compressed area of Machiavelli’s *Prince*, in which the domination of contingency includes in its object the people; while Gramsci moved in the more expansive space of the *Discourses*, in which the people are indispensably agents of their own liberation. “No one has thought that precisely the problem posed by Machiavelli in proclaiming the necessity of substituting national militias for the adventitious and untrustworthy mercenaries is not resolved until ‘volunteerism’ also has been replaced by the

preciate the expansive and dialectical sense of ‘state’ in Gramsci is responsible for the peculiar and misleading fact that the notes collected in the section on “State and Civil Society” are drawn almost entirely from his discussions focusing on what I have called the ‘first moment’, or even simply the technical apparatus of class domination. *SPN*’s headnote to this section is atypically confused and ineffectual as a result. In this context, the few included notes on the ‘ethical’ state seem to make little sense, encouraging a retreat to Hegel as a default. Hegel was certainly not foreign to the republican conceptual space, and Gramsci sometimes used him to frame his discussions, but there are much better ways of getting at what Gramsci had in mind when he talked about the state as an encompassing moral community. Unfortunately, this hegelian default is pervasive.

80Q 19, 1998-9. The proximate context of this note is a reflection on the historical dynamic of fascism, but its relevance to the theory of the revolutionary vanguard could not be more clear (with Bordiga a more likely immediate target than Lenin himself). Volunteerism is to be distinguished from voluntarism: the first refers to small movements of ‘volunteers’ acting in the name of the masses (e.g. Garibaldi’s ‘Thousand’); the second, to the philosophical opposite of ‘determinism’.

mass ‘popular-national’ phenomenon, because volunteerism is an intermediate, equivocal solution, just as dangerous as mercenarism.”⁸¹

These questions of political theory and organization, in which the emergence of political culture through the formation and nurture of an articulated collective will is the conceptual center, made up the framework of Gramsci’s investigations in the *Prison Notebooks*. But the formation of political culture, and the obstacles to it, were problems that Gramsci understood to be complexly and expansively involved in the historical development of societies; the neo-machiavellians and even Machiavelli himself are limited interlocutors for this problematic, because of their restricted understanding of the scope of politics. The skeleton is in place, but we must put meat on it. To fully mark out the expansive conceptual space that Gramsci was developing to cope with and revolutionize the complex world, the overlapping and contrasting conceptual spaces of the most sophisticated ‘bourgeois’ theorists of the early 20th century will be the most effective instruments.

⁸¹Q 19, 1980. See also Q 14, 1675-6 for the conditions of linkage between volunteers and mass that can make the vanguard temporarily valuable.