

GRAMSCI AND LEFT-WING ELITISM¹

Giuseppe Tosi ²
pinuccio@uol.com.br

Synthesis

The theory of elites, developed by Pareto, Mosca and Michels, is an anti-democratic theory because it denies the founding principle of democracy, namely the political competence of citizens. The theory, however, admits various readings, including a democratic reading, which influenced Italian liberal and anti-fascist authors such as Gobetti, Dorso, Burzio, Einaudi, Croce and Salvemini. Bobbio interprets this democratic aspect of elitism not as a denial of the existence of democratic regimes, but as a realistic view of 'democracy as it is', and not an idealist view of 'as it should be'. Bobbio is thus included among the authors inspired by the doctrine of democratic elitism, such as Hans Kelsen and Joseph Schumpeter. From this perspective, Bobbio analyses the influence elitism had on the Italian and international socialist and communist left, in particular on the thought of Antonio Gramsci. This paper discusses a possible 'elitist' reading of Gramsci's political thought, which shows the criticisms and differences that separate him from the elitists, but at the same time the elements of an elitist theory of Gramsci present in some key concepts of his political conception: intellectuals, party, hegemony, historical block, vanguard, mass/intellectuals/governed relationship.

Key words: Theory of Elites; Democratic Elitism; Antonio Gramsci; Norberto Bobbio.

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² Professor in the Department of Philosophy and Postgraduate Program in Philosophy and Human Rights at the Federal University of the State of Paraíba, Brazil. Currently retired.

1. The influence of the Elitists in Italy.

*One always wants there to be rulers and ruled
or do you want to create conditions in which the need
of the existence of this division disappear?
That is, one starts from the premise of the perpetual division of mankind
or is it believed to be only a historical fact, fulfilling certain conditions?
Gramsci, Quaderni del Carcere.*

*The theory of elites recovers what is realistic,
and not merely ideological,
contains the traditional doctrine of Democracy
and, has as its consequence not so much the denial of the existence
of democratic regimes, but rather a redefinition
of Democracy that ended up becoming
preponderant in today's political science.
N. Bobbio, Dizionario di Politica, entry 'Democrazia'.*

The theory of *elites*, elaborated in the late 19th and early 20th century by Vilfredo Pareto (1848-1923), Gaetano Mosca (1858-1941) and Robert Michels (1876-1936), is not a democratic theory, because it denies the founding principle of democracy, namely the political competence of citizens. According to these authors, in all political regimes, including democratic ones, it is never the people who govern but always the *elites*: economic, political, social, religious and technological.

The theory was so influential in Italy in various ideological circles that Bobbio stated that: "The foundations for an empirical study of politics were laid in Italy by Mosca and Pareto. Political science can be considered to have appeared in Italy in 1896, with Mosca's *Elements of Political Science*'³ .

According to the philosopher from Turin, the theory was gradually separated from its ideological character and accepted as 'historically correct' for its scientific value by liberal, democratic and anti-fascist authors such as Piero Gobetti (1901-1926), Guido Dorso (1892-1947), Filippo Burzio (1891-1948), Luigi Einaudi (1874-1961), Benedetto Croce (1866-1952) and Gaetano Salvemini (1873-1967)⁴ .

Of the first three authors Bobbio writes:

In our three authors, the theory of *elites* is presented now as a political programme, now as a scientific doctrine. [...] The differences are not only of inspiration, but also of substance. Gobetti and Dorso rely on the ideological use of the theory, with the contraposition between an old elite, which has already exhausted its task, and a new elite, which should renew Italian political mores; between a real elite, anchored to the employer classes, and an ideal elite, allied to the popular classes in movement⁵ .

In these authors, the theory of elites does not appear to contradict democracy or even liberalism:

In this juxtaposition, we first see the incorporation of the theory of elites into a democratic conception of political life. It is always small groups that direct politics. [...] A democratic politics is a politics devised by minorities who express progressive needs and ideas and lead the popular

³ N. Bobbio, *Ensaio sobre a ciência política na Itália*. Editora UnB, Brasília; Imprensa Oficial do Estado, São Paulo 2002, p. 16 (Translation by the author).

Ibid, p. 312.

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 280.

classes to an awareness of their own rights and historical mission. In Burzio, in this context, one should more appropriately speak of a grafting of the theory into a liberal conception of political life, understanding liberal society as that in which the best conditions for open antagonism between rival groups are created⁶.

Bobbio takes a position favourable to the theory of elites and proposes a less ideological and more scientific reading of democratic elitism that, according to him, was already present *in nuce*, if not in Pareto, in the early Michels and, above all, in Gaetano Mosca's doctrine of the political class⁷.

Bobbio interprets this democratic aspect of elitism 'not so much as a denial of the existence of democratic regimes, but as a redefinition that has come to prevail in today's political science of democracy', i.e. a realistic view of 'democracy as it is', and not an idealistic view of 'as it should be'.

According to Bobbio, there is also a left-wing version of the theory, present in the conception of Marx and Lenin. The Russian leader, in full autonomy from the elitists, develops in *What to Do* (1902) the famous thesis that 'without revolutionary theory, there is no revolutionary movement', stating that for there to be a revolutionary theory, there must be a leading group (in this case the Bolshevik party) that acts as the vanguard of the proletariat.

In the chapter entitled *The Spontaneity of the Masses and the Consciousness of Social Democracy*, Lenin states that revolutionary political consciousness can only be introduced 'from outside' the working class.

We said that the workers *could not yet possess* a social democratic consciousness. It could only be brought to them from outside. The history of all countries attests to the fact that the working class, on its own strength, is only able to develop a social-democratic consciousness, i.e. the conviction of the need to unite in trade unions, to lead the struggle against the bosses, to demand from the government this or that law necessary for the workers, etc. The doctrine of socialism arose from those philosophical, historical, and economic theories that were elaborated by the educated representatives of the ruling classes, the intellectuals. Because of their social position, the very founders of contemporary scientific socialism, Marx and Engels, were bourgeois intellectuals. In Russia too, the theoretical doctrine of social democracy arose completely independently of the spontaneous development of the workers' movement; it arose as a natural and inevitable result of the development of thought among revolutionary socialist intellectuals. In the epoch with which we are concerned, i.e. around 1895, not only did this doctrine completely inspire the program of the 'Emancipation of Labour' group, but it had won over the majority of the revolutionary youth of Russia⁸.

In *Os intelectuais e o Poder*, Bobbio notes that this thesis is already present in Kautsky:

Kautsky maintained the thesis, later to become famous because it was accepted by Lenin in *What to Do*, according to which it must be considered completely false that socialist consciousness is the necessary and direct product of the class struggle of the proletariat; since this consciousness, on the contrary, can only arise on the basis of profound scientific knowledge, the exclusive patrimony of intellectuals; reason for which "socialist consciousness is an element imported from outside the class struggle of the proletariat, and not something that arises spontaneously from it"⁹.

⁶ *Ibid*, p. 280-281.

⁷ N. Bobbio. 'Teoria delle Elite', in N. Bobbio, N. Matteucci, G. Pasquino, *Dizionario di Politica*. UTET, Turin 2004, pp. 303-309.

⁸ V. LENIN. *Que fazer*. São Paulo: HUCITEC, 1978, p. 31 (translation from Portuguese by the author).

⁹ N. Bobbio, *Os intelectuais e o poder*. Dúvidas e opções dos homens de cultura na sociedade contemporânea. Editora UNESP, São Paulo: 1997, p. 123.

According to Bobbio, the thesis persists, albeit in a different form, in Gramsci:

Having changed the historical subject, no longer the prince, but the proletariat (whose party will be Gramsci's 'modern prince'), the pedagogical task of the man of science will not change, which will continue to be that of enlightening the ruler. There is no need to recall the dispute over the thesis that went down in history as the Leninist thesis of socialist consciousness brought to the workers' movement by intellectuals, harshly criticised by Plekhanov who accused it of idealism. For the discourse I am making here about intellectuals, it suffices to recall that that thesis is connected to the polemical interpretation of the Russian Revolution as a revolution of intellectuals (more specifically of classless, alienated, marginalised intellectuals, etc.)¹⁰.

Not only the Leninist theory, in its 'eastern' version, but also the 'western' version of the 'cadre and mass party' as 'modern prince', proposed by Gramsci and realised in post-war Italy by Togliatti, can be read as a 'left-wing' version of the theory of elites, as we will try to demonstrate.

Although the word has a pejorative meaning, elitist theory *lato sensu* simply affirms the existence, in every form of government, of a ruling group, a political class that governs - a minority, and another group that is governed - the majority. The more conservative elitist theorists naturalise this theory, considering it an immutable natural law; others historicise it as a historical law that has existed until now.

The elitists also influenced Gramsci, as well as other left-wing intellectuals, in the period of the formation of his political thought, while they later became among his main interlocutors and opponents in the mature phase of his political reflection and action.

In studying the influences on the formation of Gramsci's political thought, Bobbio shows the importance of the theory of elites¹¹.

What characterised Italian political thought in those years [after the First World War] and would also characterise it later to the point of constituting a kind of registered brand, was the theory of elites that could count on the authority of scholars such as Pareto, Mosca and Michels. Mosca and Michels are very well known to Gramsci¹². [...]Frequently quoted and always mistreated with harsh judgements on both persons and works¹³.

Gramsci describes Mosca's book, *Elements of Political Science*, as 'an enormous mixture of sociological and positivist character, with, in addition, the tendentiousness of immediate politics, which makes it less indigestible and literally livelier'¹⁴.

As far as the theory of elites was concerned, his opinion was opposite to that of Gobetti, who had stated that Mosca's theory of the ruling class was one that opened infinite territories for research¹⁵.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ N. Bobbio, 'Gramsci e os estudos políticos na Itália', in Id., *Ensaio sobre Gramsci e o conceito de sociedade civil*, Paz e Terra, Rio de Janeiro 1999, pp. 89-106.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 92: 'In 1923, the second revised and expanded edition of Gaetano Mosca's *Elements of Political Science* appeared, which Gramsci knew. Mosca had been a professor at the University of Turin until 1924'.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 96.

¹⁴ *Quaderni del Carcere*, II, § 24, p. 956. We will use: A. Gramsci, *Quaderni del Carcere*. Critical edition of the Gramsci Institute. Edited by Valentino Gerratana. Einaudi, Turin 2007. 4v. (Electronic edition edited by the International Gramsci Society).

¹⁵ P. Gobetti, in N. Bobbio. *Ensaio sobre a ciência política na Itália*, cit., p. 97.

He considers Mosca's political class theory unclear:

§ (52) . *Machiavelli. The Modern Prince*. The question of the political class (see Gaetano Mosca's books). But in Mosca, the question is posed in an unsatisfactory manner: it is not even clear exactly what Mosca means by political class, so much so that the notion is undulating and elastic. He seems to embrace all the landowning classes, the entire middle class; but what then is the function of the upper class? At other times it seems to refer only to a political aristocracy to the 'political personnel' of a state, and again, to that part that operates 'freely' in the representative system, i.e. to the exclusion of the bureaucracy even in its upper stratum, which for Mosca must be controlled and guided by the political class. Mosca's deficiency appears in the fact that he does not address the problem of the 'political party' as a whole, and this is understandable given the character of his books and especially his *Elements of Political Science*. (*Quaderni del Carcere*, 8, §52, p. 972).

In this regard, Bobbio asks: 'But was Gramsci's refutation of the theory of elites justified? Above all, was it consistent with his analysis of society and history? And with his programme of action?' And he replies: 'Despite this intolerance for Mosca's work, perhaps due more to ideological than rational reasons, in Gramsci's conception of history the idea of the role of elites in promoting the progress of society is not at all strange'¹⁶ .

Communists belong, according to Gramsci, 'to a category of men who clearly distinguish themselves from the rest of humanity and tend to build an *aristocracy of spirit and moral character*'¹⁷ . There is no need to emphasise again the importance in Gramsci's thought of the work of intellectuals in shaping the consciousness of the masses. It is enough to quote one passage among many: "Critical self-consciousness means historically and politically the creation of an *elite of intellectuals*, whereby 'intellectuals' is meant, in a broad sense, 'organisers and leaders', 'a stratum of people 'specialised' in philosophical conceptual elaboration"¹⁸ .

It is in this sense that we advance the hypothesis of a possible Gramscian 'theory of elites', obviously a left-wing elitism that is different from the conservative elitism of the founders of the doctrine and that of Leninist avant-gardism.

2. Gramsci and the theory of elites.

The fundamental text for our reflection is, as is always the case with Gramsci, a dense and complex text that must be interpreted:

§ (4. *Machiavelli. Elements of Politics*. It must be said that the first to be forgotten are precisely the first elements, the most elementary things; on the other hand, they, repeated countless times, become the pillars of politics and of any collective action. The first element is that there really are ruled and rulers, leaders and dependents. All political science and art are based on this primordial, irreducible fact (under certain general conditions) (*Quaderni del Carcere*, 15, § 4, p. 1752).

Apparently, Gramsci here agrees with the irreducibility of the existence of rulers and ruled, as the elitists claimed; but in the following argument he treats this fact as problematic, as something that needs to be studied to see if and how it can be overcome:

¹⁶ N. Bobbio, *Gramsci e os estudos políticos na Itália*, cit., p. 98.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* The Gramsci quotation is from 'Ordine Nuovo': front page and chronicles of Turin, 1921 (italics mine).

¹⁸ *Ibid.* The quotation from Gramsci is taken from: *Quaderni del Carcere*, 11, § 12, p. 1386.

The origins of this fact are a problem, which will have to be studied in its own right (at least it can and must be studied how to attenuate and make the fact disappear by changing certain conditions that can be identified as operative in this sense), but the fact remains that there are leaders and the directed, rulers and the governed. Given this fact it will be necessary to see how one can direct in the most effective way (given certain ends) and how therefore to prepare the leaders in the best way (and in this more precisely consists the first section of political science and art), and how on the other hand one knows the lines of least resistance or rationality in order to have the obedience of the directed or governed (*Quaderni del Carcere*, 15, § 4, p. 1752).

The fact exists and requires finding the most effective way to prepare leaders to gain obedience or consensus among the governed. And Gramsci concludes this argument by going to the heart of the matter:

In forming leaders, the premise is fundamental: do you want there to always be ruled and rulers or do you want to create the conditions in which the necessity of the existence of this division disappears? That is, do you start from the premise of the perpetual division of the human race, or do you believe that it is only a historical fact, responding to certain conditions? (*Quaderni del Carcere*, 15, § 4, p. 1752).

This position corresponds to his historicism:

Note II. One cannot separate philosophy from the history of philosophy and culture from the history of culture. In the most immediate and adherent sense, one cannot be a philosopher, i.e. have a critically coherent conception of the world, without an awareness of its historicity, of the phase of development it represents and of the fact that it is in contradiction with other conceptions or with elements of other conceptions. One's conception of the world responds to certain problems posed by reality, which are well determined and 'original' in their actuality. How is it possible to think about the present and a well-determined present with a thought developed for problems of the often well-distinct and outdated past? If this happens, it means that one is 'anachronistic' in one's time, that one is a fossil and not a modern living being. Or at least that one is bizarrely 'composite'. And in fact, it happens that social groups that in some respects express the most developed modernity, in others are backward with their social position and are therefore incapable of complete historical autonomy. (*Quaderni del Carcere*, 11, §12, footnote II, p. 1375).

With his characteristic insight and lucidity, he perceives the relevance of the challenge that elite theory poses to the Marxist left and identifies the central issue of elitism. The philosopher responds to the challenge by historicising the elitist thesis, removing its character as a 'natural and universal law' based on a permanent and immutable characteristic of human nature.

The author of *the Quaderni del Carcere* argues:

The fundamental innovation introduced by the philosophy of praxis into the science of politics and history is the demonstration that there is no fixed and immutable abstract 'human nature' (a concept that certainly derives from religious thought and transcendence), but that human nature is the set of historically determined social relations, i.e. a historical fact that can be ascertained, within certain limits, using the methods of philology and criticism. Therefore, political science must be conceived in its concrete content (and in its logical formulation) as a developing organism (*Quaderni del Carcere*, 13, § 20, p. 1598).

However, historicization is not sufficient to remove the challenge posed by elitists, both theoretically and empirically. Gramsci suggests that this distinction, being historical, can be overcome, but does not provide a clear answer. This raises an interpretative debate.

According to some interpreters, e.g. Maurice A. Finocchiaro, Gramsci's political theory would be a critical development of Gaetano Mosca's theory¹⁹. On the contrary, Carlos Nelson Coutinho, one of Brazil's leading Marxist philosophers, states that in the *Quaderni del Carcere*, Gramsci historicises the thesis of the elitists, removing its character as 'natural and universal law', and questions Finocchiaro's interpretation.

This historicist position leaves no doubt that Gramsci distanced himself from the 'political science' of his time - for example from that formulated by Gaetano Mosca - as radically as Marx distanced himself from the Political Economy of Smith and Ricardo. It therefore seems to me absolutely unjustifiable the position of a North American scholar who, claiming to defend the indefensible hypothesis that "Gramsci's political theory is in large part a constructive criticism or critical development of Mosca's theory" says, correctly, that "Mosca seems to theorise the eternity and immutability of this fact [the division makes the governed governors], while Gramsci seems to presuppose the opposite", but hastily concludes "that this diversity would be barely apparent"²⁰.

Carlos Nelson Coutinho states that the question is whether there should always be rulers and ruled, or whether this division should disappear:

Gramsci undoubtedly adopts the second alternative. [...] For him, this division has not always existed and will not exist forever, but it may disappear in the 'regulated society' (the beautiful pseudonym Gramsci coined for 'communism'), in which the division of society into antagonistic classes will be overcome²¹.

According to Nelson Coutinho, "regulated society" for Gramsci means "a complex and well-articulated civil society, in which the individual governs himself without his self-government coming into conflict with political society, on the contrary becoming its normal continuation, its organic complement" (*Quaderni del Carcere* 3, § 130, p. 1020). And he observes: 'Now, the *self-government* proposed here aims precisely at overcoming the division between the governed and the governed'²².

The price to be paid for this historicization of the issue is adherence to the Marxian philosophy of history of the end of the state and the self-regulation of the associated producers: a utopia much more radical than that of the utopian socialists criticised by Marx and very little 'scientific'.

Without wishing to enter this discussion and exhaust such a complex topic, it seems to me that Gramsci's position on the subject goes in the direction of a persistence of the *distinction* between the governed and the governed, albeit historically reformulated.

At least **three central elements** of Gramscian thought lead to the identification of a relevant presence of left-wing elitism in the political science of the Italian Marxist philosopher: the role of intellectuals, the role of the party as

¹⁹ M. Finocchiaro, 'A. Gramsci e Gaetano Mosca', in R. Giacomini, D. Losurdo, M. Martelli (eds.), *Gramsci e l'Italia*. Città del Sole, Naples 1994, pp. 114 and 120. Finocchiaro explored the subject in *Beyond Right and Left*. Democratic elitism in Mosca and Gramsci, Yale University Press, New Haven and London 1999. See also L. Basile, 'Mosca, Gramsci and the Ruler-Governed Distinction. Some Preliminary Considerations', in *Cogito - Multidisciplinary Research Journal*, 2:11-22: <https://www.cceol.com/search/article-detail?id=290479>.

²⁰ C. N. Coutinho, *De Rousseau a Gramsci*. Ensaios de teoria política, Editora Boitempo, São Paulo 2011, pp. 113-114. On this same position see: A. Bianchi, L. Aliaga, 'Pareto e Gramsci: itinerários de uma ciência política italiana', in *Análise social*, 203, XLVII (2.º), 2012.

²¹ C. N. Coutinho, op. cit., p. 114.

²² *Ibid.*

'collective prince', and the concept of ideological and political hegemony, elements that, in turn, lead to the concept of the historical block.

We will try to define, albeit briefly, the main features of a Gramscian theory of elites.

2.1. Organic and traditional intellectuals.

A first confrontation with the elitists takes place when Gramsci likens Mosca's political class to Pareto's elite and reads both concepts as attempts to interpret the historical phenomenon of intellectuals.

§ <24> . *History of Intellectuals*. Mosca's *Elements of Political Science* (new 1923 augmented edition) is to be examined for this column. Mosca's so-called 'political class' is nothing other than the intellectual category of the dominant social group: Mosca's concept of the 'political class' is to be approximated to Pareto's concept of the *elite*, which is another attempt to interpret the historical phenomenon of intellectuals and their function in state and social life (*Quaderni del Carcere*, 8, § 24, p. 956).

The reference is obviously to Gramsci's famous distinction between traditional and organic intellectuals, which, according to Bobbio, gave 'continuity, albeit with a critical spirit, to the line that had characterised the history of the revolutionary intellectual, that of the identity between political and cultural commitment'²³.

Gramsci had stated in *the Quaderni del Carcere*:

§ 1) . Are intellectuals an autonomous and independent social group, or does each social group have its own specialised category of intellectuals? The problem is complex because of the various forms that the actual historical process of forming the various intellectual categories has taken so far. The most important of these forms are two: 1) Each social group, being born on the original ground of an essential function in the world of economic production, organically creates together one or more classes of intellectuals that give it homogeneity and awareness of its own function not only in the economic field, but also in the social and political field (*Quaderni del Carcere*, 12, § 1, p. 1513).

The organic intellectuals of a certain class, be it the ruling class or the new rising class (the proletariat), act at its service in the formation of consensus and social coercion.

The traditional intellectual is defined as one who is bound to a class and a social and economic structure that is in decline, but persists:

2) But every 'essential' social group emerging to history from the previous economic structure and as an expression of its (this structure's) development, found, at least in the history so far unfolding, pre-existing social categories that indeed appeared as representing an unbroken historical continuity even from the most complicated and radical changes in social and political forms (*Quaderni del Carcere*, 12, § 1, p. 1513).

Intellectuals organic to the ruling class are defined as follows:

Intellectuals are the dominant group's 'clerks' for the exercise of the subordinate functions of social hegemony and political government, i.e: 1) of the 'spontaneous' consent given by the great masses of the population to the direction imprinted on social life by the fundamental dominant group, a consent that arises 'historically' from the prestige (and thus the trust derived 1) to the dominant group from its position and function in the world of production; 2) of the apparatus of state coercion that 'legally'

²³ N. Bobbio. *Democracia*, in Id. *O filósofo e a Política*. Antologia. Organização de José Fernandez Santillán, Contraponto, São Paulo 2003, p. 457.

ensures the discipline of those groups that do not 'consent' either actively or passively, but is constituted for the whole of society in anticipation of moments of crisis in the command and direction in which spontaneous consent breaks down (*Quaderni del Carcere*, 12, § 1, p. 1519).

What is of interest for our hypothesis is the essential character that intellectuals, organic or traditional, assume in Gramscian theory, for the preservation or transformation of society: this shows *the need for an elite*.

The role of intellectuals is so relevant for Gramsci that we find a surprising statement that seems modelled on Michels' 'iron law of oligarchy'. When discussing the relationship between theory and practice in historical materialism, Gramsci writes:

Critical self-consciousness means historically and politically the creation of an elite of intellectuals: *a human mass does not 'stand out' and become independent 'for itself' without organising itself (in a broad sense), and there is no organisation without intellectuals, i.e. without organisers and leaders, i.e. without the theoretical aspect of the theory-practice nexus being concretely distinguished in a stratum of people 'specialised' in conceptual and philosophical elaboration. But this process of the creation of intellectuals is long, difficult, full of contradictions, of advances and retreats, of demobilizations and regroupings, in which the 'loyalty' of the mass (and loyalty and discipline are initially the form that mass adhesion and its collaboration in the development of the entire cultural phenomenon takes) is sometimes put to the test* (*Quaderni del Carcere*, 11, § 12, p. 1386, italics mine).

The intellectual vanguard has the mission to historically promote the self-awareness of the masses, so that they become independent. However, this process does not happen arbitrarily, the intellectual acts within a collective subject that is the party, the 'modern Prince'.

2.2 The party and moral and intellectual reform.

In the case of the revolutionary intellectual, the party is the place where he can exercise his transformative action. In Gramsci's original remarks on the party as modern prince we read:

The modern Prince, the mythical Prince cannot be a real person, a concrete individual; he can only be an organism, a social element in which the concretisation of a collective will recognised and partially affirmed in action already begins. This organism is already given by historical development and is the political party, the modern form in which the partial collective will tends to become universal and total (*Quaderni del Carcere*, 13, § 1, p. 1558).

To the party Gramsci entrusts the role of moral and intellectual reform of the nation.

An important part of the modern Prince is the question of an intellectual and moral reform, i.e. the religious question or worldview. Here, too, we find an absence of 'Jacobinism' and fear of 'Jacobinism' expressed in philosophical forms (last example: Benedetto Croce). The modern Prince must be the herald of an intellectual and moral reform, which is the ground for a further development of the popular national collective will in the terrain of an accomplished and total form of modern civilisation (*Quaderni del Carcere*, 13, § 1, p. 1560).

The task Gramsci attributes to the party as a modern *Prince* (alluding to Machiavelli's book) is grandiose: to shape a collective national will to promote a moral and intellectual reform of Italy. The Jacobin and Machiavellian derivation of this idea is evident:

The modern Prince must have a section devoted to *Jacobinism* (in the full sense of the notion already set out in other notes) as an example of how a concrete and operative collective will is formed. And it

must define the 'collective will' and the *political will* in general in the modern sense, the will as the working consciousness of historical necessity, as the protagonist of a real and immediate historical drama (*Quaderni del Carcere*, 8, § 21, p. 952).

The reference to Jacobinism, which also inspired the Bolsheviks, is significant because of the leading role the French revolutionaries played in shaping a strong collective will; as is the reference to historical necessity, in which Gramsci's historicism finds expression. The goal is the 'National Revolution', in truth the communist revolution which, Bobbio comments: 'as a total fact requires a total commitment'²⁴.

Any formation of a popular national collective will be impossible without the masses of the cultivating peasantry *simultaneously* entering into political life. This is what Machiavelli wanted through the reform of the militia, this is what the Jacobins did in the French Revolution, this is the [early] Jacobinism of Machiavelli, the fertile seed of his conception (of) national revolution (*Quaderni del Carcere*, 13, § 21, p. 951-952).

In the Italian case, to shape this popular-national will, it was essential to include not only the urban working class, but the huge mass of peasants who still made up a large part of the population, especially in the South (hence Gramsci's famous reflections on *The Southern Question*).

The truly titanic task is to elevate the national popular will to a superior and total form of civilisation. The party thus assumes an almost absolute ethical-political role, which does not allow for reconciliations, mediations and becomes a 'categorical imperative' that invests all human life and relations:

The modern Prince, as it develops, disrupts the entire system of intellectual and moral relations insofar as its development means precisely that every act is conceived as useful or harmful, as virtuous or wicked, only insofar as it has the modern Prince himself as a point of reference and serves to increase his power or to oppose it. *The Prince takes the place, in consciences, of divinity or the categorical imperative*, he becomes the basis of a modern secularism and a complete secularisation of all life and all relations of custom (*Quaderni del Carcere*, 13, § 1, p. 1561, italics mine)²⁵.

This conception of the party is analogous to Giovanni Gentile's conception of the ethical state, albeit of the opposite sign²⁶. The characteristics that Gentile attributes to the state, according to a 'totalitarian' reading of Hegel's *sittliche totalität*, are now attributed to the party, which assumes an ethical-political mission of total intellectual, political and moral renewal of society, thus creating a synthesis between political and civil society. Obviously, no longer in the name of the Hegelian objective spirit, but of historical and dialectical materialism in its historical necessity. Ultimately Marx, Croce, Gentile and Gramsci are all heirs of Hegelian historicism!

It is to this grand project that organic intellectuals must dedicate themselves. Their main mission is to strive for ideological hegemony, understood as more

²⁴ N. Bobbio, 'Democracia', in *O filósofo e a Política*, cit. p. 459.

²⁵ In sentences of this kind the reader may find some assonance with Carl Schmitt's positions on political theology as a secularisation of Christianity: C. Schmitt *Le categorie del 'politico'*, il Mulino, Bologna 1972.

²⁶ Cf. G. Semeraro, "A utopia do Estado Ético em Gramsci e nos Movimentos populares", in *Revista Educação Pública*. Cuiabá v. 20 no. 44 p. 465-480, Sep./dez. 2011.

important than changes in economic and social relations, because, without it, such changes would not occur.

2.3. Ideological hegemony: consensus and domination.

The subject of hegemony in Gramsci is extremely complex. We will limit ourselves here to a few observations, especially in relation to the role of intellectuals in the dispute over hegemony. The organic intellectual, acting in the Party, performs a function of ideological, cultural and political hegemony in society, in the administration of consensus and domination/dominance.

Gramsci derives the concept of hegemony from Lenin:

§ (12) . *Introduction to the Study of Philosophy* The proposition in the introduction to the *Critique of Political Economy* that men become aware of structural conflicts in the terrain of ideologies must be regarded as a statement ofgnoseological and not purely psychological and moral value. From this it follows that the theoretical-practical principle of hegemony also has agnoseological significance and therefore Ilici's greatest theoretical contribution to the philosophy of praxis is to be found in this field. Ilici would [effectively] advance philosophy [as philosophy] insofar as he advanced political doctrine and practice. The realisation of a hegemonic apparatus, insofar as it creates a new ideological terrain, brings about a reform of consciousness and methods of knowledge, is a fact of knowledge, a philosophical fact. In Crocian language: when one succeeds in introducing a new morality that conforms to a new conception of the world, one ends up introducing that conception as well, that is, one brings about an entire philosophical reform (*Quaderni del Carcere*, 11, § 12, p. 1250).

Hegemony in Gramsci has two dimensions, a cultural/intellectual one, which aims at consensus in civil society and a more properly political one, which aims at domination through control of the State. Both dimensions are essential for the conquest of political power: hegemony is direction plus domination.

The historical-political criterion on which one must base one's research is this: that a class is dominant in two ways, that is, it is 'dirigiste' and 'dominant'. It is dirigiste of the allied classes, it is dominant of the opposing classes. Therefore, a class even before coming to power can be 'dirigiste' (and must be): when it is in power it becomes dominant but continues to be 'dirigiste' as well. (*Quaderni del Carcere*, 1 § 44, p. 41. *Class political leadership before and after coming to power*).

Hegemony combines consensus and coercion, ensuring that one class is dominant; however, this is only possible through *ideology*, which in Gramscian thought is the vector par excellence of hegemony.

The realisation of hegemony, as a combination of force and consensus, requires not only the use of the repressive apparatuses of the state, but also the cultural education necessary to shape the dominant opinion. The accession procedure of the subordinate classes therefore passes through persuasion in the various private devices of hegemony: school, church, trade unions, press, parties, etc.

Gramsci emphasises the importance of systems or devices of hegemony, and particularly the school. The school relationship is understood, however, in the broader sense of a pedagogical relationship:

But the pedagogical relationship cannot be limited to specifically 'scholastic' relationships, whereby the new generations encounter the older ones and absorb their historically necessary experiences and values while 'maturing' and developing their own historically and culturally superior personalities. This relationship exists in society as a whole and for everyone in relation to other individuals, *between*

intellectual and non-intellectual classes, between rulers and ruled, between elites and followers, between leaders and directs, between vanguards and army corps. Every relationship of 'hegemony' is necessarily a pedagogical relationship and occurs not only within a nation, between the different forces that compose it, but in the entire international and world field, between national and continental civilisations (*Quaderni del Carcere*, 10, § 44, p. 1331, italics mine).

It is thus that Gramsci proposes an extension of the concept of intellectuals, guided by the task of forming collective intellectuals in the construction of an alternative hegemony, responsible for the organisation and formation of critical consciousness in favour of the subordinates. It is therefore not a question of maintaining the existence of *exclusive* intellectuals, but of elevating everyone to the *function of intellectuals*, i.e. to the ability to *direct* society. This is one of the main differences from the classical elitists who considered the 'people' incompetent to govern and only capable of being governed. This aspect brings Gramsci's thinking closer to Protagoras' thesis that every citizen possesses the political art.

The ideological struggle for cultural hegemony thus appears necessary for the conquest of power and cannot be limited to the use of domination and force, always implying the moment of consensus. Hence the importance given to intellectuals and the struggle for cultural hegemony in civil society: one of Gramsci's main innovative contributions compared to the economicist conception of Leninist reformist and voluntarist historical materialism.

3. The historical block.

Organic intellectuals, political party and hegemony converge in the historical block: 'the complex and discordant set of superstructures are a reflection of the set of social relations of production' (*Quaderni*, 8, § 182. *Structure and Superstructures*, p. 1051).

Structure and superstructure form a historical block, in which intellectuals exercise the role of hegemony and consensus, as Gramsci says, recovering Benedetto Croce's ethical-political conception of history:

Croce's thought must therefore be appreciated as an instrumental value, and so it can be said that it has energetically drawn attention to the study of the facts of culture and thought as elements of political domination, to the function of great intellectuals in the life of states, to the moment of hegemony and consensus as a necessary form of the concrete historical block. Ethical-political history is thus one of the canons of historical interpretation that must always be considered in the examination and in-depth study of historical development, if one wants to make integral history and not partial or extrinsic histories (*Quaderni del Carcere*, 10, *Summary*, p. 1211).

In the formation of the historical block, the intellectual plays a fundamental role; but - Gramsci warns - only if he does not isolate himself from the people-nation, if he relates to the elementary passions of the people. Regarding the historical block, it is worth mentioning a passage in *Quaderni* 11, which is very pertinent, especially when it comes to the relationship mass/elite, or intellectuals/people:

§ 〈67〉 . Passage from knowing to understanding, to feeling, and vice versa, from feeling to understanding, to knowing. The popular element 'feels' but does not always understand or know; the intellectual element 'knows' but does not always understand and especially 'feels'. The two extremes are therefore pedantry and philistinism on the one hand and blind passion and sectarianism on the other. Not that the pedant cannot be passionate, on the contrary; passionate pedantry is just as ridiculous and dangerous as the most unbridled sectarianism and demagogy. The intellectual's error consists 〈in believing〉 that one can *know* without understanding and especially without feeling and

being passionate (not only about knowledge in itself, but about the object of knowledge), i.e. that the intellectual can be such (and not a pure pedant) if he is distinct and detached from the people-nation, that is to say, without feeling the elementary passions of the people, understanding them and thus explaining and justifying them in the given historical situation, and linking them dialectically to the laws of history, to a superior, scientifically and coherently elaborated conception of the world, 'knowledge'; there is no history-politics without this passion, that is, without this sentimental connection between intellectuals and people-nation (*Quaderni*, 11, § 67, p. 1505).

The élite/mass relation or dialectic is quite different from the one proposed by the elitists, it is pedagogical and open to a closer confrontation between the 'feeling' of the masses and the 'knowledge' of the intellectuals, to avoid the extremes of pedantry, on the one hand, and fanaticism, on the other.

However, despite Gramsci's pedagogical concerns and attentions, there is something implicit in the whole discourse that cannot be questioned: the 'superior world conception', scientifically elaborated is scientific socialism, the philosophy of praxis, the historical and dialectical materialism to which the people-nation must be 'elevated' or 'educated', through an organic (sentimental and intellectual) relationship, in which the distinction between rulers and ruled, leaders and guided, is not eliminated, but articulated in the formation of the 'historical block'.

There is no history-politics without this passion, that is, without this sentimental connection between intellectuals and the people-nation. In the absence of this connection, the relations of the intellectual with the people-nation are or are reduced to relations of a purely bureaucratic, formal order; intellectuals become a caste or a priesthood (so-called organic centralism). If the relationship between intellectuals and the people-nation, between leaders and subordinates, between rulers and the governed, is given by an organic adhesion in which the feeling-passion becomes understanding and therefore knowledge (not mechanically, but in a living way), only then is the relationship one of representation, and the exchange of individual elements takes place between ruled and rulers, between leaders and leaders, that is, the life of the whole is realised, which alone is the social force, the 'historical bloc' is created. (*Quaderni del Carcere*, 11, § 67, p. 1505, 1506).

In the historical block, understood as the 'unity between nature and spirit (structure and superstructure) unity of contraries and distinctions' (*Quaderni* 13, § <10> , p. 1569), the relationship between intellectuals and the people, despite all Gramscian cautions against the danger of intellectuals becoming a caste, is asymmetrical, as the role of the intellectual is to elevate the masses to the already defined scientific knowledge, which is none other than Marxism.

In this sense, Bobbio states: 'The Bolshevik revolution could be classified as a revolution of the intellectuals'; not only because 'the majority of the ruling class of the Bolshevik group was composed of members of the intelligentsia', but above all because the revolutionaries were aware that they were realising, in practice, one of Marx's famous theses in his youthful writings, namely that 'theory also becomes a material force when it takes control of the masses'²⁷ .

Not only from a theoretical point of view, but also from the point of view of the actual historical process, Marxism was a political movement that, in practice, realised the elitist theory. Gramsci, despite all his originality, is still a Leninist who reflects on defeat and thinks about revolution in the more complex conditions of the state and civil society in the West.

²⁷ N. Bobbio. 'Intellectuais', in *O filósofo e a política*, cit., p. 459. Marx's text can be found in *Hegel's Critique of the Philosophy of Right. Introduction*.

Final considerations

The elements of an elitist conception of politics in Gramsci can be found in several aspects of his thought. Firstly, in his recognition of the existence of rulers and ruled as a historical fact that must be studied and possibly overcome; but which, as long as it exists, must be dealt with. Here the speaker is not just the theorist, but the leader who must make decisions in the political struggle.

Capitalism has already created this class, through its organic intellectuals (and in the rearguard of traditional intellectuals) in multiple forms. The working class must create its organic intellectuals. The political party as a 'modern prince' is where this formation takes place, a party of cadres and masses at the same time, in which the intellectuals take the lead.

With the theory of intellectuals, the party, ideological hegemony and the historical block, Gramsci proposes a left-wing version of Michels' 'iron law of oligarchy':

Critical self-awareness means historically and politically the creation of an elite of intellectuals: a human mass does not 'stand out' and become independent 'for itself' without organising itself (in a broad sense) and there is no organisation without intellectuals, i.e. without organisers and leaders, (*Quaderni del Carcere*, 11, § 12, p. 1386).

This avant-garde-mass relation to promote ideological hegemony has something to do with the élite-mass relation, in Schumpeter's democratic version of elitism, which defined democracy as a competition between elites for consensus and control of the masses. But it is also something profoundly different, because the democratic elitists were liberals who did not have the ambitious goal of representing the 'self-awareness of the historical mission' of a class, the proletariat, but of representing interests.

There is an ambiguity in Gramsci's (and Marxism in general) thought here in relation to the concept of science that is presupposed: while the elitists use a 'positivist' concept of science, Gramsci uses a 'historicist' concept of science.

The not so implicit assumption of these statements is that the 'people', the 'working class', the 'proletariat' and the 'masses', according to different contexts and ideologies, have a unique interest as an oppressed class. According to the canons of historical and dialectical materialism, understood as the 'ontology of social being', the socio-economic condition determines or conditions social consciousness. This class consciousness, however, does not arise spontaneously; it is up to the party, as a collective intellectual, to raise the self-consciousness of the masses to the level of its historical mission.

This is the profound presupposition of the scientific elitism (scientific socialism) and, at the same time, messianic (secularised philosophy or theology of history) of Marxism²⁸: to elevate the class to the recognition of its 'true' interests, even 'against' the working class itself, when it does not recognise what its true interests are. On this point the entire discussion initiated by Bobbio, regarding Marxism as a philosophy of history, is grafted to shelter the theory from possible authoritarian outcomes.

²⁸ K. Löwith. *Significato e Fine della Storia*. I presupposti teologici della Filosofia della Storia. Milano: Il Saggiatore, 2015 (Marx, p. 51-69).

It is worth mentioning here one of the most enlightening passages from Bobbio's essay entitled *The Intellectuals*, from the anthology edited by Santillán:

When Marx, in a text from his youth, enunciated his famous thesis that "theory is transformed into material power when it takes possession of the masses", and "philosophy finds its material weapons in the proletariat, just as the proletariat finds its spiritual weapons in philosophy", and "philosophy cannot be realised without suppressing the proletariat, and the proletariat cannot abolish itself without first realising itself in philosophy", he stated the premises and proposed the ideal of the identification of theory and practice²⁹.

Marx thus placed the heavy burden of being the heir and realiser of classical German philosophy on the shoulders of the proletariat.

Gramsci's original reflections on the role of organic intellectuals, the role of the party as a collective prince, the concept of political hegemony, elements that, in turn, converge in the concept of the historical block, indicate a left-wing elitism, even in Gramsci, that is more refined and complex than Lenin's, because it is designed for the conditions of civil society and the state in the West.

To affirm the similarities between elitist theory and Gramscian theory as 'left-wing' elitism is not to deny the differences of this position not only from those of 'classical' elitist theorists, but also from those formulated by liberal and democratic elitist theorists.

Gramsci recognised the political competence of all in governing and being governed, including the popular classes traditionally excluded from political power and considered ignorant and incompetent - unlike those elitists who reserved political competence and leadership to a narrow aristocratic or oligarchic group.

Gramsci attributes to the proletariat and the subordinate classes, a political protagonism that goes beyond Pareto's simple 'circulation of elites', which is nothing more than a co-optation of new elites into the ruling group. Gramsci, on the contrary, thinks of a circulation of elites in which the subordinate classes take on the role of ruling group with the aim of overcoming the division between rulers and ruled.

In this context, he attributes to intellectuals a more organic and inclusive relationship with the masses traditionally excluded from power. The intellectual/mass relationship is a dialectical relationship that goes in two directions, from popular to scientific knowledge and vice versa, and deconstructs the idea of a merely passive mass³⁰.

There is, however, an assumption, not so implicit despite Gramsci's reticence due to the conditions in which he was obliged to write, namely the mission of the organic intellectual to 'elevate' the masses to an already defined 'scientific-philosophical' knowledge, i.e. to historical and dialectical materialism.

From this point of view, Gramsci's idealism and historicism are specular to the idealism and historicism of Croce and Gentile, albeit from opposite directions: it is a debate between two totalities or totalitarianisms of right and left, conservative and progressive, reactionary and revolutionary respectively.

In this respect, we find a quotation in *Gramsci's Dictionary* that I find illuminating:

²⁹ N. Bobbio, 'Intellectuais', in *O filósofo e a política*, cit. p. 459.

³⁰ On the differences between the elitists and Gramsci see L. Aliaga, *Gramsci e Pareto: ciência, história e revolução*. Appris Editora, Curitiba 2017. See also G. Semeraro, 'A concepção revolucionária da política em Gramsci: uma análise do Caderno 13', in *Movimento - Revista de Educação*, v. 6, pp. 34-53, 2017.

However, when unmasking the Gentile position as a mere hypostatisation of the totalitarian regime imposed by the Fascist Party, Gramsci distinguishes between situations in which "the given party is the bearer of a new culture and there is a progressive phase" from others in which "the given party wants to prevent another force, the bearer of a new culture, from becoming 'totalitarian' itself; and there is a regressive and objectively reactionary phase". (*Quaderni del Carcere* 6, §136, p. 800) *The difference between fascist totalitarianism and communist totalitarianism* consists in the fact that while the former tends to reabsorb civil society within the State, reducing hegemony to force, in the latter "the coercive State element can be imagined to be exhausted as increasingly conspicuous elements of regulated society (or ethical state or civil society) become established"³¹.

It is a great task, aimed at 'shaping a collective national will to promote a moral and intellectual reform of Italy', as a 'historical need' to bring about a 'national revolution', to form a strong collective will to achieve a 'superior and total form of civilisation'; to assume an almost absolute ethical-political role, which does not allow for reconciliations, mediations and becomes a 'categorical imperative that invests all life and normal relations'.

These convictions, in the end, show the limits of Gramsci's education, which never completely freed itself from the influence of Croce's idealism, historicism and neo-Hegelianism, which conditioned his reading of Marx, himself at bottom a neo-Hegelian, albeit a leftist. Gramsci lived in a political-historical-conceptual context in which there was no way out of the tragic alternative between two totalitarianisms, the fascist and the communist, on the horizon. We must always remember that he wrote his *Quaderni* in prison and at a time when fascism, Nazism and Stalinism were in vogue. Despite this, he was able to think beyond them, moving towards a different future, and this is the strength of his legacy and relevance. Gramsci tried to relax Marxist categories and find a path to socialist revolution that was original and appropriate to complex Western societies, 'hoping against hope' that there would be a different future after the Nazi-fascist barbarism.

In this sense, after seventy years, we can give a more detached reading of the author, placing his thought in a new historical context, far from the rigid categories of Marxism. Gramsci's theory of the intellectual/mass relation can be seen in a line of continuity with the great thinkers of humanity: with Plato's 'intellectual and moral' aristocracy, with the need shared by the entire ancient and modern world for an education (*paideia*) and training (*Bildung*) of citizens to political life, with Machiavelli's valorisation of the riots of the plebs, with the Enlightenment legacy of the universalisation of scientific knowledge against obscurantism, and with that of socialism to include in the political game masses that have become autonomous and conscious, with the struggle of the oppressed of the entire world against exploitation.

This reading makes Gramsci an indispensable thinker for the present and the future.

³¹ G. Cospito, 'Egemonia', in G. Liguori and P. Voza (eds.), *Dizionario Gramsciano (1923-1937)*, Carocci Editore, Roma 2009, p. 268.