



Rethinking Gramsci's Political Philosophy

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ABSTRACT: This paper is a clarification and partial justification of a novel approach to the interpretation of Gramsci. My approach aims to avoid reductionism, intellectualism, and one-sidedness, as well as the traditional practice of conflating his political thought with his active political life. I focus on the political theory of the *Prison Notebooks* and compare it with that of Gaetano Mosca. I regard Mosca as a classic exponent of democratic elitism, according to which elitism and democracy are not opposed to each other but are rather mutually interdependent. Placing Gramsci in the same tradition, my documentation involves four key points. First, the *Notebooks* contain an explicit discussion of Mosca's ideas such that when Gramsci objects to a theoretical concept or principle, he often presupposes a common methodological orientation, and when he objects to a particular method or approach, he often presupposes a common theoretical view. Second, Gramsci accepts and gives as much importance to Mosca's fundamental principle that in all societies organized elites rule over the popular masses. Third, Gramsci accepts Mosca's distinctive theory of democracy defined as a relationship between elites and masses such that the elites are open to the influx of members from the masses. Finally, there is an emblematic practical political convergence between the two: in 1925, both opposed a Fascist bill against Freemasonry. Although their rhetoric was different, their speeches exhibit astonishing substantive, conceptual and logical similarities.

The aim of this paper is to suggest that the political theory of Antonio Gramsci is in large measure a constructive criticism or critical development of that of Gaetano Mosca. Before justifying this claim, some qualifications are in order.

The most immediate clarification is that the Mosca I have in mind is not the "proto-fascist" or reactionary alleged by some, but rather a thinker in the tradition of democratic elitism; this is a tradition which rejects the view that democracy and elitism are incompatible, but tries to combine them. (1) Second, I said "in large measure," and this does not mean "entirely"; that is, I think it would be wrong to claim that all of Gramsci's political theory derives only from Mosca since there is no question that there are other sources, such as Marx, Lenin, Hegel, Gentile, Croce, and Machiavelli. (2) Third, when I speak of political theory, I am not referring to the totality of Gramsci's thought, but to that part which deals with questions which are strictly and explicitly political and social, such as classes, forces, crises, revolutions, governments, parties, and states. For example, I am not referring to Gramsci's philosophical conceptualizations of the dialectic and the theory-practice nexus, nor to his historical interpretations of the Italian Risorgimento and French Revolution.

Naturally, this distinction among political-theoretical, philosophical-conceptual, and historical aspects is not meant to be a separation since there are important relationships among them; however, the distinction aims to avoid confusion. Fourth, I should like to make clear that it would be an intellectualist error to pretend that Gramsci's thought derives only from other thought, be it Mosca's, Croce's, or Marx's; there can be no doubt it derives also from Gramsci's practical activity as a labor-union, socialist, and communist organizer. Moreover, aside from the question of origins, it would be one-sided to suggest that the study of Gramsci's thought exhausts the interest for the person of Gramsci. Obviously, his life was a drama in which thought and action interacted in a dialectical manner, and it must be studied and understood in relation to the history of his time. (3)

Having granted that thought and action should be distinguished but not separated, and interrelated but not confused, it would be reductionist and prejudicial to stress his active political life or a part of it (such as the period 1921-26), and then interpret his thought on the basis of it. For one would thereby give the status of serious thought to things written by Gramsci when he did not have the time to reflect seriously, calmly, and coherently, as he himself admitted; (4) or one would be overstressing things written when he had the time (in prison), but whose content merely echoes previous events and thoughts.

Even the originator of the traditional Marxist interpretation of Gramsci (Palmiro Togliatti) had the occasion once to suggest that perhaps Gramsci should be interpreted in a way that transcends the history of Italian communism. In a passage which Togliatti wrote on the eve of his death he said: "it is certain that today ... I thought the person of Gramsci should be placed in a more vivid light, which transcends the historical vicissitudes of our party." (5) But this is easier said than done. How can Gramsci be placed in a new light which would transcend the vicissitudes of communism? Well, the critical comparison between the political thought of Mosca and Gramsci is one way of accomplishing this. (6)

The Gramsci-Mosca connection has been generally neglected. Of the more than ten thousand titles listed in the Gramscian bibliography, I think that only about ten deal with this topic. (7) Moreover, none of these essays undertakes a systematic and exhaustive examination, and almost all deal with the relationship between Gramsci and the elitist school in general, which includes also Pareto and Michels. On the other hand, Mosca scholars usually do not even bother to discuss the question explicitly in the body of their analyses, but do it incidentally, parenthetically, or in footnotes; (8) nevertheless, they usually admit the correctness of Gramsci's criticism of the Moschian concept of political class. In other words, no one seems to have studied in a direct, explicit, and special manner the Gramsci-Mosca relationship. (9)

In a sense it is not surprising that the Gramsci-Mosca relationship has been generally neglected, given that Mosca seems to have been a conservative, anti-Marxist, anti-socialist, and anti-communist, while Gramsci seems tied to the history of revolutionism, Marxism, socialism, and communism. However, this is at best a first approximation, whereas the obligation of a scholar is to try to penetrate beneath the surface of phenomena and to deepen the analysis of superficial appearances.

On the other hand, the connection, or at least the contrast, between Mosca and Gramsci has an initial plausibility, which could be explained as follows. Mosca was undoubtedly one of the most relevant, well-known, and influential scholars of political science during Gramsci's life; Mosca was in fact the founder of political science in Italy. Now, it is certain that the Prison Notebooks contain a research project in political science. Therefore, the critical examination of Mosca's doctrines by Gramsci would have been completely normal and natural.

To this one could object that the Notebooks contain other important aspects. However, I have no difficulty in granting this since I do not want to follow a reductionist approach. At any rate, it should be added that another very important Gramscian interest is the art of politics; and this fact reinforces the initial plausibility of the Gramsci-Mosca connection because the same is true of Mosca. In fact, although Mosca was not fond of the phrase "art of politics" (as Gramsci was), Mosca's work easily reveals an aspect which is often labeled "ideological." To speak less ideologically, one could say that Mosca's political doctrines have a practical function or normative dimension and are not an abstraction divorced from reality. Gramsci himself recognized that Mosca's work had a dimension of political art besides political science (Q1561-62). (10)

My suggestion is thus that the idea of a Gramsci-Mosca comparison is not at all desperate, but is more promising than it might seem. It is now time for this analysis to become more concrete. I will summarize some key points.

First, there are in the Notebooks many passages where Gramsci explicitly discusses Mosca's ideas and works. I would argue that the Gramscian critiques are partly constructive; in part, when they are theoretically negative, they often presuppose methodological similarities; and in part, when they are methodologically negative, they presuppose theoretical similarities. For example, Gramsci mentions some real lacunae in Mosca's concept of political class (Q1565) and gives an original reinterpretation of it from the viewpoint of his own theory of intellectuals (Q1956). Moreover, the prisoner criticizes some aspects of the approach in Mosca's main work, but reinterprets some of its main theses from the viewpoint of his own "science and art of politics" and theory of the "different aspects of relations of force" (Q1561-62). And Gramsci criticizes the 1925 republication of Mosca's book on the theory of governments, but appreciates its original 1884 edition, thus presupposing a type of contextualism or nonpejorative opportunism which Mosca in his own way also accepted. (11)

Moreover, there are many intellectual ties between the two thinkers; that is, frequently Gramsci expresses concepts and principles and follows approaches and orientations which have a Moschian character, without mentioning Mosca's name or stating the fact.

A crucial example of this theoretical convergence is Gramsci's recognition of the fundamental law of Mosca's political science, which I would call the analytical principle of elitism; that is, the formulation of the distinction between the governors and the governed or leaders and followers. Gramsci's formulation deserves to be quoted: "all of political science and art are based on this primordial and irreducible fact ... the fact that there exist leaders and followers, the governors and the governed" (Q1752). (12) And neither Mosca nor Gramsci limit themselves to a general and abstract formulation of the elitist principle. Both use and develop it in the analysis of specific phenomena. For example, Mosca (13) argued that even in a representative system of government, in which there are elections of the governors by the governed, the above mentioned principle continues to be valid, for it is not the popular majority which chooses freely the government officials, but it is the political elite which gets them elected, by proposing various candidates by means of various party mechanisms and other political organizations. And in the Notebooks Gramsci (Q1624-25) gives a similar elitist analysis of the electoral process, though he does it in a context in which he defends the principle of universal suffrage, whereas Mosca had been a critic of it.

Next, one of the most important shared characteristic is perhaps the one which involves the concept of democracy, namely the question of how to define the notion of democracy, the problem of the meaning to give to the concept. To me it is still a mystery how in so many discussions of the relationship between hegemony and democracy, hardly anyone has ever analyzed or even quoted the following Gramscian passage:

"Among the many meanings of democracy, the most realistic and concrete one seems to me to be that which connects with the concept of hegemony. In an hegemonic system, there is democracy between the leading group and the groups led to the extent that (the development of the economy and thus) the legislation (that expresses this development) favors the (molecular) transition from the groups led to the leading group. In the Roman Empire there existed an imperial-territorial democracy through the granting of citizenship to conquered peoples, etc. There could not be democracy in feudalism on account of the existence of closed groups, etc." [Q1056]

Now, this conception coincides with the definition of democratic tendency which Mosca elaborated in his maturity. ⁽¹⁴⁾ Gramsci uses this definition in many other discussions in the Notebooks (e.g., Q1634), and sometimes he even speaks of democracy as a "tendency" (Q1547-48), which is an emblematically typical Moschian characteristic.

Finally, we come to a particular but equally emblematic case of convergence between the two thinkers. This involves the speech delivered by Gramsci in the Chamber of Deputies of the Italian Parliament on May 16, 1925 against the bill on secret organizations, and the speech on the same subject made by Mosca at the Senate on November 18 of the same year. A comparative analysis of these two speeches is extremely important for at least two reasons. One is that Gramsci's speech is the first and only one he ever delivered in Parliament during his two years of service there, and so it is an intrinsically precious document. The other reason stems from the fact that both members of Parliament declare their opposition to the bill proposed by the Fascist government, and so we have a case where they are both on the same side from the point of view of practical politics.

Naturally, one may think at this point that their respective justifications for their common opposition could be very different, such as to express very different philosophies. Certainly it is abstractly possible to arrive at the same conclusion from different and even opposite premises, just as it is possible to arrive at opposite conclusions on the basis of partially common premises. These points are immediate consequences of the most elementary principles of logic. The issue here is whether this is in fact the situation in the case at hand. In fact, it is quite surprising that Gramsci's and Mosca's speeches share many similarities, and that their number and depth make the convergence nothing less than astonishing and spectacular.

The proposed law did not explicitly mention Freemasonry but rather secret organizations; however, it was commonly labeled the anti-Masonic law. The bill was presented in Parliament on January 12, 1925 by prime minister Mussolini and was entitled "Regulation of the Activities of Associations, Organizations, and Institutions and of the Membership therein by Employees of the State, of Provincial and Municipal Governments, and of Public-Service Institutions." ⁽¹⁵⁾ The first article of the law obliged all organizations to provide various kinds of information to the police, whenever the latter requested it; this was information about bylaws, the identity of officials, and membership lists; moreover, this article gave the chief of police the authority to disband an organization in case of failure to comply with the request. The second article prohibited all public employees from belonging to organizations which were formed and operated in a secret manner and whose members were bound to secrecy; the penalty for violation was dismissal. Before receiving final approval, the bill's second article was amended to include a retroactive clause to the effect that all public employees had to declare their past as well as current membership in such organizations, whenever requested to do so.

The convergences between Mosca and Gramsci involve the following points. First, both follow a realist or anti-formalist approach in the analysis of social and political phenomena, that is, they stress effective reality vis-a-vis both utopian ideals and superficial appearances.

Second, both accept the fundamental principle of analytical elitism, according to which political leadership by organized minorities is indispensable for the masses and majorities, without thereby necessarily favoring the role of the former in an illegitimate manner. Third, Freemasonry is interpreted as an effective political organization which has had and continues to have an important role in Italian history. Fourth, both give a partially positive and favorable evaluation of Freemasonry, because of its progressive and democratic contribution according to Gramsci, and as a moderating and conservative force according to Mosca. Fifth, there is a common objection to the Fascist bill insofar as both predict that the new law will be used by the Fascist government to replace officials and employees who are or have been Freemasons with Fascists. Sixth, both object also on the basis of the prediction that the Fascists will abuse the new law, for Gramsci specifically in order to persecute proletarian organizations, and for Mosca in order to destroy the right of free association among dissidents.

Finally, as a consequence of these convergences, their respective arguments against the proposed law coincide in some essential points and thus may both be reduced to the following: the bill is unacceptable for two reasons; first, the new law would enable the Fascist government to replace with Fascists the administrative personnel of the state since Freemasonry has historically been the best organized political force in Italy; second, the new law would result in the persecution and suppression of opponents because its wording does not define a precise limit to the right of association and gives the government excessive powers of repression.

In summary, I have sketched a justification for an approach to Gramsci's political philosophy which I believe has some originality. It consists of reading his Prison Notebooks from the point of view of Mosca's political theory, interpreting the latter in terms of democratic elitism. I have mentioned two political-theoretical similarities between the two thinkers: the fundamental elitist principle and the conception of democracy in terms of open elites. I have also summarized at slightly greater length the curious and emblematic case of their 1925 Parliament speeches opposing the Fascist bill on Freemasonry.

Notes

(1) P. Bachrach, *The Theory of Democratic Elitism* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1967); A. J. Gregor, *The Ideology of Fascism* (New York: Free Press, 1969); R. A. Nye, *The Anti-Democratic Sources of Elite Theory* (London: Sage, 1977); and R. A. Dahl, *Democracy and Its Critics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 2 and 264-79.

(2) For Marx, see J. V. Femia, *Gramsci's Political Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981). For Lenin, see L. Paggi, *Le Strategie del potere in Gramsci* (Rome: Riuniti, 1984); and cf. M. A. Finocchiaro, "Marxism, Science, and Religion in Gramsci: Recent Trends in Italian Scholarship," *The Philosophical Forum* 17(1985-86):127-55; and idem, *Gramsci critico e la critica* (Rome: Armando, 1988), 204-17. For Gentile, see A. Del Noce, *Il suicidio della rivoluzione* (Milan: Rusconi, 1978). For Machiavelli, see B. Fontana, *Hegemony and Power* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993). And for Croce and Hegel, see M. A. Finocchiaro, *Gramsci and the History of Dialectical Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

(3) G. Fiori, *Vita di Antonio Gramsci* (Bari: Laterza, 1966); J. Joll, *Antonio Gramsci* (New York: Penguin, 1977); W. L. Adamson, *Hegemony and Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980); D. Germino, *Antonio Gramsci* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990); and G. Liguori, *Gramsci conteso* (Rome: Riuniti, 1996).

- (4) A. Gramsci, *Lettere dal carcere* (Ed. S. Caprioglio and E. Fubini. Turin: Einaudi, 1965), 480; idem, *Letters from Prison* (2 vols. Trans. R. Rosenthal. Ed. F. Rosengarten. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 2:66; idem, *Lettere dal carcere* (Ed. A. A. Santucci. Palermo: Sellerio, 1966), 457-58.
- (5) P. Togliatti, *Antonio Gramsci* (Rome: Riuniti, 1972), 218-19.
- (6) For an outstanding example of another such attempt, see R. Holub, *Antonio Gramsci* (New York: Routledge, 1992).
- (7) J. M. Cammett, ed., *Bibliografia gramsciana: 1922-1988* (Rome: Riuniti, 1991); J. M. Cammett and M. L. Righi, eds., *Bibliografia gramsciana: Supplement Updated to 1993* (Rome: Istituto Gramsci, 1995); M. A. Finocchiaro, "Mosca, Gramsci, and Democratic Elitism," in *Italian Echoes in the Rocky Mountains*, ed. S. Matteo, C. D. Noble, and M. U. Sowell (Provo, Utah: David M. Kennedy Center for International Studies, 1990), 135-50; and idem, "Gramsci, Mosca, e la Massoneria," *Teoria politica* 9(1993):135-61.
- (8) J. H. Meisel, *The Myth of the Ruling Class* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1958), 270, 279, and 315; and E. Ripepe, *Gli elitisti italiani* (2 vols. Pisa: Pacini, 1974), 83-84.
- (9) The available studies do, however, possess some merits; see the appreciation in Finocchiaro, *Gramsci critico e la critica*, 111-12. The most serious attempts so far have been by R. Medici, *La metafora Machiavelli* (Modena: Mucchi, 1990); and G. Zarone, *Classe politica e ragione scientifica* (Naples: Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane, 1990). A systematic analysis is now found in M. A. Finocchiaro, *Beyond Right and Left: Democratic Elitism in Mosca and Gramsci* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999).
- (10) A. Gramsci, *Quaderni del carcere* (4 vols. Critical edition by V. Gerratana. Turin: Einaudi, 1975), 1561-62. Subsequent references to this work will be given only in parenthesis in the text, with the page number preceded by "Q."
- (11) G. Mosca, *Scritti politici* (2 vols. Ed. G. Sola. Turin: UTET, 1982), 1040-42; and idem, *The Ruling Class* (Trans. H. D. Kahn. Ed. and intro. A. Livingston. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1939), 428-29.
- (12) Mosca, *Scritti politici*, 608; idem, *Ruling Class*, 50.
- (13) Mosca, *Scritti politici*, 711-12; idem, *Ruling Class*, 154.
- (14) Mosca, *Scritti politici*, 1005; idem, *Ruling Class*, 395.
- (15) B. Mussolini, "Disegno di Legge n. 314, 12 gennaio 1925," *Atti Parlamentari, Camera del Deputati, Legislatura XXVII, Sessione 1924-25, Documenti, Disegni di Leggi e Relazioni*, vol. 9, no. 314 (Rome: Tipografia della Camera dei Deputati, 1925).