Theory as Translation: Gramsci's Reading of Machiavelli and Marx

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August 2021

A thesis submitted to McGill University in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of Master of Arts, Political Science

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements

I am thankful to William Clare Roberts and Tania Islas Weinstein for their illuminating and detailed comments on the proposal for this thesis. I am also profoundly indebted to my thesis supervisor, Yves Winter, for his generous and thought-provoking feedback and unwavering encouragement.

Abstract

This thesis examines Antonio Gramsci's reading of Niccolò Machiavelli and Karl Marx through the lens of the theme of translation running through Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*. Against interpretations that frame Gramsci's vocabulary of translation in the *Prison Notebooks* as a metaphor for the passage from theory to praxis, it recasts translation as a distinct interpretive and creative practice that Gramsci develops out of his reading of Machiavelli (particularly of *The Prince*) and Marx. More specifically, it proposes that, on Gramsci's interpretation, both thinkers approach the work of theory as a matter of translating elements of reality into a language aimed at arousing popular political passions and illuminating possible avenues of collective political action.

Résumé

Ce mémoire examine la lecture faite par Antonio Gramsci de Nicolas Machiavel et de Karl Marx à travers le thème de la traduction, qui parcourt les *Cahiers de prison*. Contre les interprétations qui présentent le vocabulaire de la traduction dans les *Cahiers de prison* comme une métaphore décrivant le passage de la théorie à la pratique, ce mémoire redéfinit la traduction comme une pratique interprétative et créative que Gramsci développe à partir de sa lecture de Machiavel (en particulier du *Prince*) et de Marx. Plus précisément, ce mémoire soutient que, selon l'interprétation de Gramsci, les deux penseurs abordent le travail de la théorie comme consistant à traduire des éléments de la réalité en un langage visant à susciter les passions politiques populaires et à éclairer les voies possibles de l'action politique collective.

I. Introduction

Antonio Gramsci divided his time in prison between his own theoretical research and translating other thinkers' writing into Italian: out of Gramsci's thirty-three notebooks completed in prison, four were devoted entirely to translation – including a translation of an anthology of Karl Marx's work from German – and many of the other twenty-nine notebooks contain entire sections dedicated to translation exercises (Buttigieg 2011a, ix). After having obtained permission to keep notebooks in his cell in 1929, Gramsci wrote a letter to his wife informing her that he has devoted his newfound permission to write to "immers[ing] [himself] in translation" – an occupation that "calms [his] nerves and relaxes [him]" (Buttigieg 2011a, 89; *Prison Letters* [hereafter *PL*] 252). In the *Prison Notebooks* themselves, references to Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach* and the preface to *A Contribution of the Critique of Political Economy* in Gramsci's own reflections can be identified as contemporaneous with Gramsci's translations of these texts in the notebooks used for translation exercises (Thomas 2009, 98, 107, 246). Unsurprisingly, then, the vocabulary of translation extends into Gramsci's own theoretical work: in the *Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci writes not only of translating from one language to another, but also of theory as a mode of transposing other thinkers' ideas across historical contexts and into a contemporary "political language" (*Q5, §127*), thereby illuminating the avenues of political action in a particular set of historical conditions.

This essay examines the role of the concept of translation in Antonio Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*. It argues that, for Gramsci, translation constitutes a distinct interpretive method that provides a framework for understanding his carceral theoretical project more broadly. Alongside Anne Showstack Sassoon (1990, 15), I propose that Gramsci's preoccupation with language in the *Prison Notebooks* cannot be explained away by the prominence of the linguistic question in

early twentieth-century Italian politics, or by Gramsci's own university education as a linguist. The Italian linguist Franco Lo Piparo claims that "[t]he primitive matrix of [Gramsci's] philosophy should not be searched for in Marx or Lenin (...) but in the science of language" (Lo Piparo 2010, 21). Against this claim, I contend that Gramsci's writing on language cannot be thought apart from his Machiavellian and Marxist intellectual roots. In the *Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci's ideas about language and translation are frequently developed alongside his original writing on the work of other political thinkers, as well as his reflections on the mobilization of the fragmented twentieth-century Italian working class. It is precisely the combination of Gramsci's formal education in linguistics and his political education as a Marxist that enables him to establish the link between translation understood in the conventional sense – as a way of facilitating communication between two languages – and translation as an interpretive method and a form of mediation between intellectual and political activity.[1] Rather than viewing either linguistics or Marxism as the "primitive matrix" (Lo Piparo 2010, 21) of Gramsci's thought, I conceive of the link between the methods of linguistics and historical materialism in Gramsci as running in both directions: Gramsci uses each one to think through the other, and assumes a historical materialist approach to language itself. In his references to linguistics in the *Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci builds on the innovative historical approach to linguistics championed by Matteo Bàrtoli, his professor of linguistics at the University of Turin, writing that "Bàrtoli's originality consists" in the fact that he "took linguistics, narrowly conceived as a natural science, and transformed it into a historical science rooted in 'space and time' and not in the physiology of the vocal apparatus" (*Q3, §74*). On the other hand, in his notes on historical materialism, Gramsci both treats particular philosophical languages as mutually translatable – writing, for

[1] Peter Ives (2006, 16) makes a similar claim in his essay on Joseph Buttigieg's English translation of the *Prison Notebooks*, arguing that "Gramsci's interest in and practice of translation should not be separated from the rest of his research project."

instance, that "[t]he principle of [the] mutual translatability [of philosophical systems] is an inherent 'critical' element of historical materialism" (*Q7, §1*) – and describes the primary task of the theory in linguistic terms, calling on the theoretician to "'translate' the elements of historical life into theoretical language, but not vice versa, making reality conform to an abstract scheme" (*Q3, §48*). Bridging the two matrices of Gramsci's thought together, my reading of Gramsci frames theory itself as a translational activity.

My framing of Gramsci's theoretical work as translational also sheds light on Gramsci's application of a parallel interpretive method to two of the most prominent figures in his carceral notes: Niccolò Machiavelli and Karl Marx. More specifically, Gramsci's interpretation of Machiavelli and Marx rests on his understanding of both thinkers as translators, rather than merely readers or chroniclers, of the political and economic conditions they analyze: both thinkers, for Gramsci, are "theoreticians of militant politics" (*Q4, §10*), intent on transmuting existing social forces into a popular "collective will" (*Q8, §21)*. On my reading, Gramsci's Machiavelli and Marx are translators in two primary senses. First, both draw on 'foreign' languages, both literal and philosophical, to interpret their immediate political reality. The starting point for both thinkers' political-theoretical work is the task of interpreting the political forces at play in their particular historical conjuncture with the aid of the comparison of historical developments across geographic regions – a comparison that requires recognition of the mutual translatability of various cultures and ideologies or conceptions of the world. Second, for both, on my account of Gramsci's reading, this interpretation is translated into a language conducive to praxis – one that points to the possible lines of action in a given historical moment and makes this map of political opportunity legible to the social strata best suited, in the two thinkers' views, to enact political change.

These two dimensions of translation are interrelated: Machiavelli, on Gramsci's account, is at once an interpreter of political forces, a "political scientist" who "bases himself in effective reality" and accurately identifies the "relations of forces" that constitute it, and a translator of these theoretical observations into popular language, an "active politician, who wishes to create a new balance of forces" by allying himself with "the particular force which [he] believes to be progressive" (*SPN* 172). Likewise, Gramsci writes that Marx's demonstration of the mutual translatability of French and German philosophical currents makes him a "historian of culture and ideas" (*Q4, §46*), and, at the same time, highlights the active element in Marx's thought: Gramsci describes Marx as a thinker who, unlike Hegel, had "a sense for the masses," and interprets Marx's eleventh thesis on Feuerbach as asserting that "philosophy must become 'politics' or 'practice' in order for it to continue to be philosophy" (*Q8, §61)*. By referring to Machiavelli and Marx as political-theoretical translators on Gramsci's reading, I intend to suggest that Gramsci does not merely use language and translation as an analogy for transforming Marxist theory into praxis. Rather, for Gramsci, translation serves as a distinct interpretive and creative theoretical method – one that he identifies in the work of thinkers like Machiavelli and Marx and endeavors to apply to his own political writings. Such a framing clarifies the role of theory in Gramsci's work, illustrating how Gramsci's rejection of the purely "bookish" (*Q4, §8; Q6, §27*) attitude to the study of culture and philosophy cannot be reduced to a denigration of theory in favor of practical political strategy. Gramsci argues not for the primacy of praxis over theory so much as the unity of theory and praxis: he writes in pursuit of a "'living philology'" (Q11, §25), a collective self-awareness that obviates the boundary between the activities of intellectuals and the sentiments of the masses. Gramsci's account of the role of theory is thus, as I propose, more robust than his criticism of positivist or 'bookish' theoretical

approaches to the study of politics might make it seem, and is firmly grounded in his study of the theoretical methods of Machiavelli and Marx.

A paradigmatic example of the crossover between Gramsci's linguistic vocabulary and his reading of Machiavelli and Marx is his passage on Machiavelli's *The Prince* in Notebook 5 (*Q5, §127*), where Gramsci writes that "[i]f one had to translate the notion 'Prince' as it is used in Machiavelli's book into modern political language" – if one understands the figure of the Prince to stand for "a political leader who wants to conquer a state or establish a new type of state" – one could understand the political party to serve the function of a "modern prince" (*SPN* 129). Gramsci further argues that, given that "[a]nyone born into the traditional governing stratum acquires almost automatically" knowledge of the practices required to lead or establish a state, Machiavelli's intended audience for his theorization of the practice of politics must be "'those who are not in the know'": not actual princes, but the masses, for whom Machiavelli illuminates the path of revolutionary political action that would bring about the formation of a national-popular state. This democratic characterization of the modern prince serves as a bridge between Gramsci's readings of Machiavelli and Marx: if "the notion 'Prince'" (*SPN* 129) is understood broadly as the leader or leaders of a social stratum best positioned to bring about a new equilibrium of forces in a particular historical period, then a parallel can be drawn between the role of the Prince in Machiavelli's work and the role of the proletariat in Marx's thought.

Although the relationship between Gramsci's linguistic theoretical work and his reading of Machiavelli and Marx is hinted at in the secondary literature, discussions of Gramsci's linguistic influences and his readings of Machiavelli and Marx have tended to be kept separate. In his 2004 book *Gramsci's Politics of Language*, Peter Ives notes that the work of Italian linguist Franco Lo

Piparo was, at the time of publication of Ives's book, "the only extensive investigation" of the role of the study of language in general in Gramsci's thought (2004, 17). While references to Gramsci's employment of the vocabulary of translation in his reflections on politics and culture throughout the *Prison Notebooks* have been noted by several Gramsci scholars (Badaloni 1979, 98, 104; Sassoon 1987; Sassoon 2002; Ives 2006; Ives and Lacorte 2010; Lichtner 2010; De Mauro 2010), only a handful have endeavored to clearly map out what Gramsci's method of translation entails (see, for instance, Ives 2004), and fewer still have examined his translational method alongside his reading of both Machiavelli and Marx. In a chapter of his book devoted to Gramsci's method of translation (2004, 97–133), Ives compellingly argues that "[the] notion of translation is central to Gramsci's reading of Marx," highlighting Gramsci's multiple references to Marx's description of the affinities between French politics and German philosophy in *The Holy Family* (2004, 111-2). Machiavelli, on the other hand, comes up only once in the chapter, in the context of Gramsci's attempt to translate Machiavelli's thought across national contexts by describing him as the "'Italian Luther'" (Ives 2004, 103) – even as Ives notes in another chapter of his book that Gramsci's reading of Machiavelli is crucial to Gramsci's understanding of the relationship between history and language (2004, 117) – and hence, as I propose, to his translational theoretical method.

By attending to the ways that Gramsci develops his interpretive method alongside his reading of Machiavelli and Marx, I outline one potential way of reading the *Prison Notebooks*. Given the volume of Gramsci's notes and the variety of topics he discusses, any effort to unify the *Prison Notebooks* under a single theme risks losing sight of the richness of Gramsci's work. Likewise, given the wide array of interlocutors that Gramsci engages with in the *Prison Notebooks*, it would be incorrect to frame Machiavelli and Marx as the only thinkers that Gramsci draws on to

develop his theoretical conception of translation. Timothy Brennan's (2014) discussion of Giambattista Vico – a thinker Gramsci likewise references multiple times in the *Prison Notebooks* – in his book *Borrowed Light*, for instance, draws in part on Gramsci's efforts to wed Marxist theoretical methods with philology, or the historical study of language. Brennan writes that "[b]oth Marxism and philology adhere to historical forms of knowing, to the sedimentary traces of a past that happened, to the ultimate creativity of the unnamed, unheralded, popular elements of society" (Brennan 2014, 10) – a statement echoing Gramsci's contention that the historical materialist's starting point ought to be consciousness of the self as "a product of the historical process to date which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory" (*SPN* 324). Gramsci's engagement with Vico might be useful for understanding the provenance of Gramsci's theoretical method – more specifically, of his account of the theoretical debts of Marxist interpretive methods to philology. Gramsci notes, for instance, that "[t]he 'experience' of historical materialism is history itself, the study of particular facts, 'philology" (*Q7, §6*). Likewise, in his introduction to the English translation of the first volume of the *Prison Notebooks*, Joseph Buttigieg writes that "[t]he fragmentary character of the notebooks is due, at least in part, to the 'philological' method governing their composition" (Buttigieg 2011a, 61). Still, I argue that Gramsci combines what might be called a Vichian philological method – one that "tak[es] account of the variations within language across periods and cultures, establish[es] chronologies, (...) wrestl[es] with connotations" and, importantly, considers such historical scrupulousness a springboard for political strategy rather than an impediment to it (Brennan 2014, 56) – with the explicit aim of translating rational or intellectual knowledge into what he calls "idea-force" or "word-force" [*"tradu[rre] in idee-forza, in parole-forza"*] – a process culminating in the production of a system of "living" philology that I view as distinct from

philology conceived primarily as a mode of detailed historical study (*Q3, §33*; *Q11, §6*; see also *SPN* 125).

II. Structure

This essay is divided into four sections. I begin with an overview of my methodology and scope, beginning with a discussion of the limitations of this project in light of the absence of full English translations of twenty-one out of Gramsci's twenty-nine carceral notebooks. This discussion of the limitations of reading Gramsci in English translation provides an entry point into a broader overview of several scholars' answers to the question of how the *Prison Notebooks* should be read and interpreted, given their fragmentary and unfinished form. In the second section, I provide summaries of what I see as the two main currents of interpretation of Gramsci's translational language: as metaphor and as political practice. I then propose my own reading of Gramsci's translational vocabulary – one that frames translation as a method of textual and empirical interpretation that Gramsci draws out of his study of Machiavelli and Marx.

The two subsequent sections examine Gramsci's reading of each of the two thinkers in greater detail. In the third section, I focus on Gramsci's reading of Machiavelli. This section is loosely organized around two themes in Gramsci's reading of *The Prince*: myth and opportunity. Throughout the *Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci attributes the enduring philosophical, cultural, and political relevance of Machiavelli's *Prince* to its myth-like, 'living' quality. In this section, I consider what the characterization of the work as 'living' means for Gramsci, and suggest that the description is related to Machiavelli's successful translation of historical developments across Europe into a language aimed at "arous[ing] and "organis[ing] [the] collective will" of a "dispersed and shattered" Italian populace (*SPN* 126), thereby facilitating the *popolo*'s

organization into a unified political force. I also consider, alongside Thomas (2018, 77), Gramsci's description of *The Prince*'s "dramatic form" (*SPN* 125). I suggest that Gramsci's framing of *The Prince* as a dramatic text helps open up a reading of Machiavelli's realism not as skepticism towards the possibility of radical political change, but as dramatic verisimilitude – itself achieved through the translation of political know-how into the language of those "not in the know" (*SPN* 129) – that empowers the masses to 'perform' their collective will into being. This consideration brings me to Gramsci's argument on the significance of Chapter 26 of *The Prince*. Drawing on a sentence in the final paragraph of *The Prince* in which Machiavelli foretells Italy's redemption from "the barbarians" and urges the reader "not [to] let this opportunity slip by" [*"[n]on si deve* (...) *lasciar passare questa occasione"*] (Machiavelli 1995, 79, 80; 1968 [1891], 371), I examine Gramsci's sketches for a future theoretical project that he titles "The Modern Prince," focusing on what it means for Gramsci to translate the language of *The Prince* into contemporary political language to illuminate the concrete opportunity to be captured by the twentieth-century Italian political party. I intend for this reading to clarify some of the debates concerning Gramsci's view of the relationship between theory and practice. If the theoretician's work is framed not as political praxis itself, but rather as a way of translating a set of conditions into an opportunity that is to be seized by a collective will, then the role of the theoretician in Gramsci's thought is at once more modest (since it does not straightforwardly equate theory with praxis) and more robust (given its capacity to facilitate the performance of this collective will into being in the first place) than certain interpretations – encapsulated by Joseph Buttigieg's statement that, for Gramsci, "intellectual activity is itself a form of political praxis" (2011a, 17) for Gramsci – might suggest.

In the fourth section, I turn to Gramsci's reading of Marx, focusing on a passage from Marx and Engels's *The Holy Family* on the mutual translatability of French and German political and philosophical languages that Gramsci cites several times in the *Prison Notebooks*, as well as on Gramsci's account of Marx's 'translation' of Hegel. In the first subsection, I argue that, basing his observations primarily on Marx and Engels's *The Holy Family*, Gramsci identifies an interpretive method in Marx that involves recognizing the mutual translatability of political and philosophical languages to map out the points of convergence between structural and superstructural, or material and ideological, realms. I suggest that the two observations can be tied together by a view of theory as a mode of translation in Marx's thought. I then examine Gramsci's suggestion that the student of Marx's work attend to the "rhythm" (*Q4, §1*) of his thought, in light of what I view as a broader auditory streak running through the *Prison Notebooks*. I end this section with a consideration of what has been referred to as Gramsci's "Machiavellian Marxism" (Femia 2005, 341; Speer 2016, 13; Marasco 2019, 355; Boothman 2010, 112; Tosel 2010, 272), where I bridge together my discussions of Gramsci's respective readings of Machiavelli and Marx to suggest that Gramsci neither forcibly reads Marxism 'backwards' onto Machiavelli (as the Marxist-Leninist school of Gramscian interpretation might suggest), nor that Machiavelli's significance for Gramsci is best considered in isolation from his Marxist influences, as Fontana (1993, 157) might propose. Rather, I suggest that Gramsci identifies a parallel translational methodology in both Machiavelli and Marx that aligns with both thinkers' aims of illuminating revolutionary political opportunity in their respective historical conjunctures. Finally, the conclusion offers some theoretical and practical implications of attending to what I have called Gramsci's translational interpretive method.

III. Methodology

My methodology in this paper involves the textual analysis of the available archive of Gramsci's work in English, as well as related secondary literature. In the two subsections below, I outline some of the limitations of my method, including the lack of availability of complete English translations of Notebooks 9 to 29. I also consider, against the backdrop of calls among Gramsci scholars for greater rigor in readers' use of Gramsci's concepts, what it might mean to adopt translation as an interpretive method suited to the *Prison Notebooks*.

Given the "massive and unwieldy" – as Buttigieg (2011c, x) puts it – nature of Gramsci's carceral notes, I narrowed down my archive by subdividing key passages in the available English translations of the *Prison Notebooks* (Buttigieg's translations of Notebooks 1 to 8 and Smith and Nowell's *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, which contain selected passages from all twenty-nine of Gramsci's notebooks) into three categories: first, mentions of translation, language, or linguistics; second, mentions of Machiavelli; and third, mentions of Marx. Although this essay occasionally makes use of notes that do not contain references to these themes, I do not suggest that understanding Gramsci's interpretive method as a mode of translation provides a universal key to a deeper understanding of any one of Gramsci's countless carceral notes – nor do I assume that a fully elaborated, cohesive account of Gramsci's understanding of the term 'translation' can be pieced together from his fragmentary notes. As Peter Ives notes, Gramsci employs the term 'translation' throughout the *Prison Notebooks* "without a clear or systematic definition" (2004, 133). To endeavor to construct such a systematic definition would appear to run counter to the spirit of Gramsci's theoretical project. As Jean-Marc Piotte writes, any effort at interpreting Gramsci's fragmentary carceral notes is necessarily a creative act: on any given

reading of the *Prison Notebooks*, "the interpretation produced is other than what Gramsci has said. We must not deceive ourselves: the articulated thought is not to be found in the fragments; it is not directly legible there; it is not a question of uncovering, as an archaeologist would, what is 'already there', in hidden form" (Piotte 1970, 11).[2] Although he does not use the term 'translation', Piotte seems to suggest that to interpret Gramsci is always to translate him into a new language. Rather than presuming that Gramsci intended for a precise, ready-made definition of translation, or a particular method of reading, to be 'uncovered' by the reader, I intend only to suggest that attunement to the motif of translation, in its diverse iterations, opens up a way of reading Gramsci that ties together a number of his notes, thus bringing into sharper relief the outlines of a distinct theoretical method that Gramsci develops over the course of his carceral studies.

Of the twenty-nine notebooks containing Gramsci's original theoretical work, only eight are currently available in full to anglophone readers. This thesis makes use of the three volumes (out of an originally projected six) of the critical edition of Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* translated to English by Joseph A. Buttigieg, as well as the 1971 volume *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, translated and edited by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, which includes excerpts from some of the notebooks that have not yet been translated as part of the critical edition. Although the lack of available English translations of Notebooks 9 to 29 (which are significantly shorter than Notebooks 1 to 8) considerably restricts the archive available for this essay, Gramsci's tendency to rewrite his notes multiple times (albeit often with revisions) might partially attenuate this loss. A number of Gramsci's later notebooks – particularly Notebooks 10

[2] Translation mine. The original is: "(...) l'interprétation produite est autre que ce qu'a dit Gramsci. Il ne faut pas se leurrer : la pensée articulée ne se retrouve pas telle quelle dans les fragments, elle n'y est pas directement lisible; il ne s'agit pas, par un travail d'archéologue, de découvrir ce qui était 'déjà là', sous une forme cachée." (Piotte 1970, 11).

to 13, 16, and 18 to 29 – are composed of fragments of his earlier work. For instance, Notebooks 10 and 11 – on Croce and on Marxist theory respectively – are made up almost entirely of copies of existing notes in Notebooks 7 and 8 (Buttigieg 2011a, ix–x). Likewise, Notebook 13, devoted to notes on Machiavelli, contains a number of entries on *The Prince* that appear in Gramsci's earlier notebooks (Buttigieg 2011a, 38).

On the other hand, Peter Thomas (2018, 84) makes the argument that these repetitions are "[n]o mere 'transcriptions.'" Rather, Thomas argues, Gramsci's reorganization of his previous notes in the "special notebooks," or Notebooks 9 to 29, composed from 1932 onwards – none of which are currently available in English in their entirety – "fundamentally transforms their meaning, even and especially when (...) their outward form may seem simply 'to repeat' with greater or smaller revisions the content of earlier notes." On Thomas's reading, the shorter nature of the 'special notebooks', coupled with their revised content, signals Gramsci's effort to reorganize and condense his notes into a more consolidated "'living book'" along the lines of Machiavelli's *The Prince* – one whose incompleteness guarantees its perennial "openness" to stagings in novel political circumstances. Thomas further argues that the function of the 'special notebooks' can be likened to that of Chapter 26 in Machiavelli's *The Prince*, which Gramsci reads as a moment intended to provoke the *popolo*'s realization of the historical task before it, a point at which the people "suddenly realises that along (...) it has only been observing itself" (Thomas 2018, 81). If the reader takes seriously Thomas's contention that Gramsci's 'special notebooks' constitute a shift in his methodology from the preceding notebooks, then the absence of English translations of Notebooks 9 onwards would appear to pose a considerable obstacle to anglophone research on Gramsci, foreclosing the possibility of the later texts' 'reverberation' through earlier ones – whether this reverberation harmonizes with Thomas's assertion that it is only in the 'special

notebooks' that Gramsci brings to life the figure of the "modern Prince" (Thomas 2018, 82) or opens up new lines of interpretation. Still, I read Thomas's call for readers not to overlook the 'special notebooks' as an expression of concern more for the form of Gramsci's later notebooks than their content: Thomas writes that, in Notebooks 9 to 29, the "architecture of the Prison Notebooks fold back upon itself, as lines of research in earlier notebooks are 're-formed' in the context of [a] refoundation of Gramsci's politico-theoretical project" towards a search for the "possible forms of a proletarian hegemonic apparatus" (Thomas 2018, 84). If Thomas's concern is taken to lie more with the changing form or structure of the later *Prison Notebooks* than with changes in their content, then the textual analysis of the available anglophone archive of Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* might not be as limited in terms of access to Gramsci's 'true' project as Thomas would appear to suggest.

Further, despite the availability of *Notebooks* 1-8 in English translation, the fact that this essay makes use of translated versions of Gramsci's work, instead of the original Italian texts, might be considered a major methodological limitation. In his note on the question of how to interpret and systematize Marx's thought, Gramsci advises the reader of Marx to "[s]earch for the *Leitmotiv*, for the rhythm of the thought as it develops" (*Q4, §1*). My focus on the role of 'living,' popular, or vernacular language in Gramsci structures my reading of the *Prison Notebooks* throughout this essay, but it also calls into question the extent to which the "rhythm" of his thought is preserved when his work is not read in the original Italian. Just as Machiavelli is "wholly a man of his times" (*Q1, §10*) for Gramsci, so the geographical and historical specificity of the latter's work – with its frequent use of Italian idioms and popular sayings, and its references to philosophical and political figures who might strike the contemporary readers as obscure – poses a considerable challenge to the contemporary's readers grasp of the rhythm of Gramsci's thought.

Nonetheless, if my argument in this essay is that the mutual translation of philosophical and political languages is possible, then contemporary readers of Gramsci need not take this specificity as a barrier against the insights contained in Gramsci's carceral notes. Rather, much like Gramsci approaches Machiavelli's *Prince* as a "'dramatic'" text (*Q4, §152*), the *Prison Notebooks'* often unfamiliar cast of characters could be treated as personages in the "unfolding historical drama" (*Q4, §10*) of early twentieth-century Italian political life, without precluding the possibility of the translation of the situations presented into contemporary language.

IV. Gramsci's Method of Translation

Translation as Metaphor

In much of the literature discussing the theme of translation in Gramsci's work, translation is referred to as a metaphor. Peter Ives writes, for instance, that Gramsci uses translation as a "central metaphor for political and cultural analysis, for reading Marx, and for revolution itself" (2006, 16) or that he uses language and translation "as a metaphor for political analysis" (2006, 4). In the introduction to their book *Language, Gramsci, and Translation*, Ives and Lacorte likewise write that Gramsci uses the "linguistic concept" of translation "to its full metaphorically analytical power" (2010, 9) in the *Prison Notebooks*. Derek Boothman similarly notes that Gramsci uses the term "'translate'' in a "broad and metaphorical sense," particularly in his early carceral notes (Boothman 2010, 109). On this reading, Gramsci's translational vocabulary serves as a way of working through and communicating certain political ideas: an analogy that facilitates understanding of the realm of politics, which is conceived of as separate from that of language.

I question, however, whether the framing of Gramsci's concept of translation as metaphorical might not be missing the innovation that Gramsci's vocabulary of translation introduces into his broader theoretical method. The framing of Gramsci's vocabulary of translation as metaphorical might convey the impression that the affinities that Gramsci identifies between linguistics and politics takes place at the level of Gramsci's overlapping interests, rather than that of Gramsci's observation of an identity that might be central to Marxist methodology conceived more broadly. Gramsci himself criticizes Nikolai Bukharin's statement in *Historical Materialism: A System of Sociology* that Marx uses the term 'immanence' "metaphorically" in his theory (*Q4, §17*). Gramsci contends that Bukharin's proclamation offers little insight into the intentions behind Marx's use of the term, since all language contains traces of its past: "language is a living thing and simultaneously a museum of fossils of past life." The word "'disaster,'" for instance, shows that "modern civilization is also a development of (...) astrology" – even as the use of the word does not indicate that its user is a believer in astrology. On Gramsci's reading, when Marx uses the word 'immanence,' crucial to Hegel's idealist philosophy, he "continues the philosophy of immanence, but he rids it of its whole metaphysical apparatus and brings it to the concrete terrain of history." That Marx retains the term while purging it of its traditional meaning – as "the presence of the divine in the world" (Lichtner 2010, 187) – is not so much indicative of Marx's metaphorical use of the term, but, as I will suggest, of his translation of the language of German idealism into that of historical materialism.

On my reading, the interpretation of the term 'translation' as a metaphor in Gramsci is vulnerable to criticism for the same reason that Gramsci criticizes Bukharin's remark that Marx's use of the term 'immanence' is metaphorical. If all language is metaphorical, in the sense that all language extends beyond the conceptions of the world that gave rise to it and is thus permanently haunted

by the historical conditions in which it arose, then the claim that a theorist uses a certain term metaphorically says little about the theorist's choice of the term. When Gramsci uses the term 'translation,' he extends a word that is familiar to the reader from the field of linguistics into the field of theory and politics. To view Gramsci's use of translation as metaphorical would be to assume that the linguistic definition of the term 'translation' is static, and that the fields of linguistics and politics are protected by impermeable disciplinary boundaries, such that the application of the terms of one field to the other is always imperfect and figurative. On my reading, however, such an interpretation provides too rigid a view of Gramsci's approach to language, and does not take Gramsci's claim that the theoretician's task is translational as literally as Gramsci would appear to. As Anne Showstack Sassoon remarks, Gramsci's theoretical work alerts the reader to the fact that "we are often stuck with the old words as developments grow beyond the old significations" (1990, 17) – she warns of the "constant danger," in the interpretation of the *Prison Notebooks*, "that the reader uses the old definition while Gramsci is referring to something new" (1987, ix). In Gramsci's use, on my interpretation, the term 'translation' is not mere metaphor – rather, the term grows beyond its conventional meaning, denoting a divorce of the activity of translation from its linguistic "apparatus" that brings the practice of translation "to the concrete terrain of history" (*Q4, §17*). Rather than overlaying the vocabulary of translation onto terrain of philosophy and politics in a purely analogic manner, Gramsci considers translation a crucial element of the historical materialist method. Thus, when Gramsci refers to French and German political and philosophical languages as "mutually translatable" *(Q4, §42)*, or when he contends that the "constitutive elements of a single conception of the world" – its philosophical, political, and economic languages – can undergo "reciprocal translation" *(Q4, §46)*, I read him as using the term 'translation' literally, as

the outline of a precise textual interpretive practice that takes shape throughout the *Prison Notebooks*. The two subsections below examine this line of interpretation in greater detail.

Translation as Political Practice

Rather than shedding light on the theoretical provenance of Gramsci's translational method, references to Gramsci's method of translation in the secondary literature on the *Prison Notebooks* have tended to focus on Gramsci's use of linguistic analogies to frame the task of bringing the Russian Revolution to Italy (Mouffe and Sassoon 1977, 34; Sassoon 2002, 109–10, 130; Ives 2006, 19). On this reading, Gramsci's theoretical project revolves around transplanting the revolutionary situation in 1917 Russia into the Italian context, albeit with the understanding that such a transplanting must attend to Italy's cultural specificity rather than directly replicating Lenin's political strategy. Such an interpretation could be viewed as bound up with the metaphorical line of interpretation: Ives (2004, 101) discusses the development of Gramsci's concept of translation against the historical backdrop of political calls in the early twentieth century for Italy to do "'the same as in Russia,'" writing that Gramsci was aware that revolutions must be translated, not repeated, across historical contexts. In doing so, Ives frames the task of translating the Russian Revolution as the focal point of Gramsci's "metaphor" – as he describes it – of translation (2006; 16; 2004, 99). For Ives, the idea that Gramsci employs the language of translation metaphorically is closely related to a reading of Gramsci's "translation" as shorthand for the passage from theory to praxis – that is, for the idea that to 'translate' a particular philosophy or political strategy is to enact it in practice. On this reading, the leap from interpreting to acting upon one's political circumstances is described metaphorically as a form of translation. Similarly, in their overview of French and Italian literature on Gramsci, Chantal Mouffe and Anne Showstack Sassoon (1977, 34) write that, in the years following the Russian

Revolution, "Gramsci was concerned above all to *translate* the Soviet experience into Italian reality," suggesting that, for Gramsci, translation takes place across empirical political contexts, rather than theoretical ones.

This reading of Gramsci's vocabulary of translation may be well-supported by Gramsci's pre-prison writings: in 1925, for instance, he writes in *L'Ordine Nuovo* – a weekly newspaper founded by Gramsci, among others, in 1919 – that "[s]tudy and culture (...) are nothing other than theoretical knowledge of our immediate and ultimate goals, and of the manner in which we can succeed to translate them into deeds" (Gramsci 1971, quoted in Buttigieg 2011a, 20). In another *Ordine Nuovo* article from 1926, Gramsci similarly writes that "[o]nly the working class is capable of translating into action" the economic and political changes necessary for Italy's revolutionary development (343). Following from this line of interpretation, one might read Gramsci's note on Lenin's 1921 statement that "[w]e have not been able to 'translate' our language into the 'European' languages" *(Q7, §2)*[3] as little more than the admission of the failure, couched in metaphorical language, of the attempts to spread the success of the Russian Revolution to Western European countries.

While Gramsci admittedly employs the vocabulary of translation to his discussion of the passage from theory to praxis, or the treatment of the differences between the hegemonic makeup of the East and the West and the corresponding necessity of adapting revolutionary political strategy to Western conditions *(Q7, §17)*, this emphasis on the task of translating the Russian Revolution

[3] As Peter Ives writes, this is actually a misquoting of Lenin's statement: Lenin proclaimed at the Third Congress of the International that the Bolsheviks have "'not learnt how to present our experience to foreigners'" (Lenin 1966, 430–2, quoted in Ives 2006, 19) . Interestingly, however, Gramsci makes a similar statement in an *Ordine Nuovo* article published in 1924, discussing the failures of the Communist Party of Italy: "We had not been capable of conducting a systematic campaign. of a kind that could have reached all the nuclei and constitutive elementS of the Socialist Party and forced them to reflect. We had not been capable of translating into language that could be understood by every Italian worker and peasant, the significance of each of the llalian events of the years 1919 and 1920" (*SPW II*, 214).

into the Italian context in the secondary literature might lead one to assume that translation serves for Gramsci merely as a metaphor for the carrying over of political strategy from one set of social and cultural conditions to another. Such an interpretation of Gramsci's translational method would place one in line with the first of three main currents of Gramscian interpretation that Fontana (1993, 2) calls the "orthodox or Leninist school", which presents Gramsci as the "Italian Bolshevik who (...) enriched [Lenin's work] with his knowledge of Italian culture and history" – an interpretive line that Fontana traces through Gramsci scholars such as Palmiro Togliatti, Christine Buci-Glucksmann (1980), and Perry Anderson (1976). However, this view of Gramsci – as interested merely in developing a revolutionary political strategy that would be fashioned after the Russian Revolution but rendered appropriate to the Italian context – leaves ambiguous the question of how exactly political strategies are to be translated across historical and cultural contexts, thereby missing the opportunity to draw a clear link between Gramsci's theoretical interventions and his practical prescriptions for the course of Italian politics. Such an interpretation thus reduces Gramsci's use of the vocabulary of translation to one specific instance – the revolutionary task of bringing communism to Italy – rather than attending to how the concept of translation structures the rest of Gramsci's political-theoretical work. Investigating the theoretical origins of Gramsci's conception of translation shows how the idea develops out of Gramsci's efforts to synthesize the history of Italian thought with Marxist theory, and structures much of Gramsci's theoretical work beyond its discussion of contemporary political strategy. Gramsci's use of translational vocabulary is not merely a matter of the convergence between his education in linguistics and his activity on the Italian political scene, but rather an effort to develop a concrete political-theoretical method that is historical and interpretive, on the one hand, and creative and politically engaged, on the other.

Translation as Interpretive Method

So far, I have suggested that a number of Gramsci scholars – among them Peter Ives, Chantal Mouffe, and Anne Showstack Sassoon – have referred to Gramsci's language of translation largely as a metaphor for the passage from theory to praxis, or for the transposition of political strategy from one cultural context to another. In the following section, I expand the conceptualization of Gramsci's translational vocabulary beyond the metaphorical, arguing that Gramsci's application of linguistic vocabulary to his political-theoretical notes in the *Prison Notebooks* can serve as a useful way into making sense of Gramsci's broader interpretive method, beyond his considerations on immediate political strategy. In my mapping of Gramsci's translational theoretical method, I further shed light on the polemical character that translation assumes in Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*. For Gramsci, translation is not a philosophically neutral practice: it entails more than matching concepts found in one linguistic or historical context to another. Instead, translating the work of other authors often involves exposing their shortcomings and gaining a grasp of how their words inadvertently reflect the political and historical processes that the theorist must seize hold of. For instance, Gramsci describes the work of the nineteenth-century philosopher Giuseppe Ferrari as an indispensable resource for understanding the "problems of the Risorgimento," while acknowledging that Ferrari's writing lay largely "outside of concrete Italian reality": the Italian philosopher had spent several decades of his career in France, and had failed to grasp the proper relationship between the French and the Italian political situation – to "translate 'French' into 'Italian'" – in his writing. As a result of Ferrari's adaptation of "French schemes which represented a situation much more advanced than the Italian" for his analysis of the Risorgimento, his theories "left no mark on the real movement" in Italy – in other words, they failed to adequately illuminate political Italian

conditions and provide a practical path forward for the Italian figures involved in the Risorgimento *(Q1, §44)*. Translation is thus also not a neutral practice in the political sense: Gramsci views translation as a way of bridging the gap between the intellectual and political activity of the masses, and hence of mapping out the "possible lines of action" (*SPN* 173) in a given historical conjuncture – an aim he draws out of his reading of Machiavelli and Marx. In the section below, I elaborate on the two senses in which translation constitutes a historicizing and polemical interpretive method for Gramsci.

In the first sense, Gramsci's translational interpretive method is related to mapping out the relationship between the past and the present: as Peter Ives writes, "Gramsci always sees languages as they exist in history" (Ives 2004, 12). Importantly, however, Gramsci does not see languages as they appear in dictionaries or other 'official' linguistic documents, but rather as they express a particular ideology or conception of the world at a given time – as they exist in a 'living' way. The work of Matteo Bàrtoli, under whom Gramsci studied at the University of Turin, might be helpful in making sense of Gramsci's employment of linguistics in the service of historical materialist research. As Italian linguist Giacomo Devoto writes in a summary of Bàrtoli's contribution to the field of linguistics, "Bàrtoli's central formula [was] that 'Every word has its own history and every phase its own area'" (Devoto 1947, 212). The early twentieth-century American linguist Robert A. Hall Jr. writes that Bàrtoli's scholarship, which belonged to a current known as neo-linguistics, criticized the late nineteenth-century neogrammarian school of thought for its "neglect of geographical and chronological relationships" across spoken languages. Hall Jr. suggests that in the background of Bàrtoli's focus on geographic and temporal linguistic change is the influence of the idealist philosophy of Benedetto Croce, who held that "linguistic activity derives directly from spiritual activity," and

hence that linguistic change is a reflection of a "change in spiritual activity," or the "'advance of the human spirit'" (Hall Jr. 1946, 277). Yet, as Ives (2004, 22, 25–6) points out, Bàrtoli's historicist approach to the study of language also splits from Croce's idealist philosophy, leading Gramsci to conclude that he "[does] not perceive any direct relationship of dependence between Bàrtoli's method and Croce's theories," and that "Bàrtoli's relationship is with historicism in general, not with a particular form of historicism" (*Q3, §74*). One might assume that Gramsci's studies in linguistics thus led him to appreciate the dynamic and historically contingent nature of language, paving the way for his combination of Bàrtolian neo-linguistic and Marxist historical materialist methods.

In the second sense, Gramsci's translation constitutes a theoretical method that aims at illuminating the possibilities for political action for what he views as the progressive social stratum in a given historical configuration. For Stuart Hall, Gramsci's translation (although Hall uses the term sparingly) occurs not horizontally, across historical moments or across cultures, but vertically, along "lower" and "higher" "levels of abstraction" (1986, 7): Gramsci takes some of Marx's more general concepts and applies them to more concrete twentieth-century circumstances. Hall thus characterizes Gramsci not as a "'general theorist'", but as a "political intellectual" (1986, 5), writing that Gramsci "was constantly using 'theory' to illuminate concrete historical cases or political questions; or thinking large concepts in terms of their application to concrete and specific situations" (1986, 6). Gramsci, in other words, uses theory to respond to concrete political problems, not to abstract philosophical polemics. His theory is employed in the service of praxis. This is not to say, however, that Gramsci views theory as subservient to praxis, as much as he expresses contempt for the "purely 'bookish'" *(Q4, §9)*

philosophical type. Rather, the two exist alongside each other, with new political developments constantly demanding theoretical innovations.

My framing of Gramsci's theoretical method as a method of translation might be useful for understanding Gramsci's preoccupation with the history of Italian intellectuals. As I argue, what requires translation for Gramsci is not so much the relationship between theory and politics in the abstract, but rather the relationship between the means of intellectual production – typically reserved for a given society's professional, or "traditional" (*SPN* 10) intellectuals – and the direction of the masses' political passions *(Q4, §33; Q5, §127)*. These passions are not to be manipulated at will by an intellectual vanguard – rather, the populace's existing intellectual capacities require "critical elaboration" if they are to act in the service of an emancipatory mass politics (*SPN* 9). This does not mean that Gramsci views theory and praxis as indistinguishable, but rather that his work represents the effort to bring the two closer together – an aim in which language plays a crucial role. As Lo Piparo (2010, 25) observes in his study of Gramsci's linguistic influences, the role that intellectuals play in Gramsci's thought can be viewed in parallel to the preoccupation of the neo-linguistic school (of which Bàrtoli, Gramsci's professor of linguistics, was a part) with a theory of the diffusion of languages "beyond [their] original geographic or social confines" that foregrounds the role of "social groups capable of irradiating cultural prestige." On Lo Piparo's reading, Gramsci transposes Bàrtoli's attentiveness to carriers of cultural prestige as agents of linguistic diffusion onto an analysis of the role of intellectuals – carriers of theoretical or philosophical 'prestige' – in the diffusion of a particular conception of the world. With this move in mind, I read Gramsci's oft-cited line that "[a]ll men are intellectuals (...) but not all men have in society the function of intellectuals " (*SPN* 9) as the assertion that the language spoken by any given individual always already expresses a particular conception of the

world, and that "critical elaboration" (*SPN* 9) is thus a process that involves building upon the people's existing political vocabulary to give rise to a unified popular conception of the world. As I argue in the next section, Gramsci views Machiavelli's *The Prince* as a theoretical work aimed at critically elaborating and unifying the masses' political will, and reads *The Prince* with an eye towards a historically transposable theoretical method that would allow him to produce a similar effect in early twentieth-century political circumstances.

V. Gramsci's Reading of Machiavelli

Machiavelli served as a key figure in Gramsci's carceral theoretical project since its early stages: Gramsci asked for Machiavelli's works to be delivered to his prison cell in November 1927, over a year before he was granted permission to write in prison (Buttigieg 2011a, 87). Still, despite Machiavelli's frequent appearances in the *Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci's reading of *The Prince* hardly engages in precise textual interpretation of Machiavelli's treatise itself. Rather, as I will argue in the following section, Gramsci focuses on the origins of Machiavelli's continued historical relevance, and looks to *The Prince* for methodological (or theoretical) and strategic (or political) guidance. This section devotes particular attention to two aspects of Gramsci's interpretation of Machiavelli – his view of *The Prince* as a dramatic "myth" (*SPN* 125) and his suggestion that Machiavelli's aim was to illuminate a concrete political opportunity to be seized by the *popolo*, whom Gramsci views as the true addressees of *The Prince* – and reading them through the lens of the concept of translation. Further, it suggests that Gramsci's reading of *The Prince* as a dramatic work segues into his consideration of the possibility of its re-staging, or translation, in his contemporary historical context in order to illuminate opportunity for the seizure of political power by the Italian proletariat. In Louis Althusser's words, Machiavelli "speaks to Gramsci (...) not in the past tense, but in the present: better still, in the future" (2001,

10). Yet in order for Machiavelli to speak to the masses – and not just to Gramsci – in the present and future tense, his theoretical method requires translation into twentieth-century political language.

By reading Gramsci's interpretation of Machiavelli through a dramatic and linguistic lens, I do not aim to undercut the connection between Gramsci's reading of Machiavelli and his preoccupation with revolutionary political strategy. Rather, instead of replicating Benedetto Fontana's (1993) move of downplaying the Marxian overtones of Gramsci's interpretation of Machiavelli, I propose a conceptual expansion of the militant reading of the *Prison Notebooks* of the sort advanced by Peter Ives (2006, 19) and Anne Showstack Sassoon (2002, 109–10, 130), in which Gramsci casts the political party in the role of Machiavelli's Prince to provide a blueprint for the establishment of proletarian hegemony in early twentieth-century Italy. Drawing on Thomas (2018), my reading highlights Gramsci's view of Machiavelli's *The Prince* as a "'living' book in which ideology becomes 'myth'" *(Q8, §21)* not to suggest that Gramsci's interpretation of Machiavelli is more aesthetically or linguistically oriented than it is political. Instead, by arguing that Gramsci views Machiavelli as a translator of political strategy – a field of knowledge previously available only to elites – into a language that is legible to the masses, I aim to show how questions of linguistic and aesthetic representation, and hence questions of translation, lie at the heart of Gramsci's more politically-oriented thought. Following Davidson (1973, 60), who argues that Gramsci's notes on Machiavelli are "more (...) an illustration of his technique of reading than a full-fledged interpretation," I focus on the mode of textual and political interpretation that Gramsci attributes to Machiavelli and endeavors to apply to his own work.

Translating Myth

Gramsci's Notebook 13, titled "Brief Notes on Machiavelli's Politics," opens with an observation on the theatrical quality of *The Prince*: Gramsci writes that "[t]he basic thing about *The Prince* is that it is (...) a 'live' work, in which political ideology and political science are fused in the dramatic form of a 'myth'" (*SPN* 125). As Thomas (2018, 77) notes, Gramsci's sensitivity to the "dramatic form" of *The Prince* should not be surprising: Gramsci had, after all, served as the theater critic for the daily newspaper *Avanti!* for five years prior to his arrest. Further, among the four subjects that Gramsci lists in a 1928 letter to Tatiana Schucht (his wife's sister) outlining his plans for his carceral studies, Gramsci lists – alongside "a study of comparative linguistics," a history of Italian intellectuals, and an essay on popular literary taste – a "study of [Luigi] Pirandello's theatre and of the transformation of Italian theatrical taste that Pirandello represented and helped form" (quoted in Lo Piparo 2010, 22). Likewise, considering that Machiavelli was also the author of popular plays who "mulled over dramatic forms and techniques throughout his life" (Martinez 2010, 206) – as evidenced both by his actual dramatic output and the attentiveness to the spectacular in a number of his political works (see, for instance, Di Maria 2007; Winter 2018, 46) – it does not seem like a stretch to suggest that Machiavelli might have considered the dramatic effect of *The Prince*, not only on Lorenzo de' Medici, to whom the work is officially addressed, but also on a potential popular audience. Yet regardless of Machiavelli's true intentions, Gramsci's reading of *The Prince* as a mythical, dramatic text casts some of Gramsci's other observations on Machiavelli – those on his realism, on his legacy in the history of Italian philosophy, or on his connection to Marx – in a different light, and can offer insight into Gramsci's own theoretical method. The concept of translation, which Gramsci himself attaches to his discussion of Machiavelli in his consideration on what it

would mean to "translate the notion 'Prince' (...) into modern political language" *(Q5, §127)*, can serve as a prism for this recasting. I read Gramsci's framing of *The Prince* as a dramatic work as exemplary of Gramsci's broader argument that the terrain of popular language – and, with it, the terrain of drama, where what matters is what is performed and what is uttered, rather than what is shown or imagined – should be treated as a crucial site of ideological struggle.

In his first carceral notebook, Gramsci describes how Machiavelli sets the stage for examining the possibility of Italian national unification through examining the circumstances of nearby European nations: he writes that "Machiavelli in *The Prince* is more strongly influenced by France, Spain, etc. and their travail of national unification, than by Italy" *(Q1, §150)*. This does not mean that Machiavelli's theoretical method is purely comparative: Machiavelli, on Gramsci's reading, does not so much measure Italy's historical developments against those of France or Spain as he "deduces the rules for a strong state in general and an Italian one in particular" from a combined study of the internal politics in the republic of Florence, power struggles among Italian states, and the achievement of national unity by surrounding states *(Q1, §10)*. Although Gramsci does not use the term in this context, the method that Gramsci identifies in Machiavelli could thus be described as translational: Machiavelli's theory mediates between various levels of analysis, translating the political developments of Italy's surrounding nations into a mythical roadmap for a similar development of the national state in Italy, with the recognition – akin to that noted by Ives (2004, 99; 2006, 16) and Mouffe and Sassoon (1977, 34) in their descriptions of Gramsci's efforts to translate the Russian Revolution into the Italian context – that theorizing this development requires attending to the historical specificity of Italy's situation when examined against the backdrop of the conditions that lie beyond it.

In emphasizing the historical specificity of Machiavelli's work, Gramsci's reading of *The Prince* runs counter to dominant interpretations of the Florentine as a general theorist of politics, "good for all seasons" *(Q1, §10)*, and as a realist in the sense of offering a pragmatic view of human nature. It also rejects the abstract opposition between 'what is' and what 'ought to be' – a distinction that, as Fontana (1993, 76) writes, thinkers like Benedetto Croce, Federico Chabod, and Luigi Russo have latched onto.[4] Instead, it positions Machiavelli as presenting a vision of 'what ought to be' that is realistic, rather than "abstract and nebulous" *(Q8, §84)*. When past and present historical forces are accurately translated into theoretical language, "[t]he 'ought to be'" manifests itself as "a realistic interpretation and as the only historicist interpretation of reality – as that which alone is active history or politics" *(Q8, §84)*. What renders Machiavelli's interpretation of what 'ought to be' realistic is thus not abstract clairvoyance, but rather his ability to accurately translate the broader European historical experience into concrete Italian terms: Gramsci writes that "[i]t is impossible to understand Machiavelli without taking into account the fact that with the European (international, for his times) experience he went beyond the Italian experience; without the European experience, his 'will' would have been utopian" *(Q6, §86)*. Theory, in other words, is the translation between what is and what ought to be – it serves as a bridge between the two.

Much like translation, the theoretical practice that Gramsci recognizes in Machiavelli is in part a creative endeavor: Gramsci reminds us that the Prince lacks a "real historical existence" – he is "a pure theoretical abstraction – a symbol of the leader and the ideal *condottiere*." In the final chapter of *The Prince*, however, "the elements of passion and of myth (...) are drawn together and brought to life,'" invoking a really existing Prince (*SPN* 126). There is thus a performative

[4] Davidson (1973, 59) also points out that Gramsci likely read interpretations of Machiavelli by these authors in prison.

dimension to Machiavelli's book: the Prince starts off as a purely hypothetical, abstract entity to whom Machiavelli offers his advice, yet in the final chapter of the book he emerges as a real, 'living' figure, standing before a concrete historical opportunity. Just as writing a play requires attentiveness to verisimilitude if the play is to arouse the passions of its audience, the work of theory requires faithful description of the forces whose movement one hopes to influence. Machiavelli is thus "a creator, but he does not create out of nothing, and neither does he draw his creations out of his brain" (*Q8, §84*). Rather, Machiavelli intervenes in his conjuncture by translating between the political languages of France and Spain, of the fragmented Italian states, and of the Florentine Republic. The character of the Prince does not appear out of thin air – he is the product of a translation of dispersed and motley historical currents into a concrete personage, the embodiment of the "qualities, characteristics, [and] duties" (*Q13, §1*, quoted in Thomas 2018, 77) required for the achievement of Italian national unity.

On my reading, the myth that Gramsci recognizes in *The Prince* is not purely the myth as a "mirror of political relations," as in Max Horkehimer's reading of Vico (Horkheimer 1993, 314), nor is it quite the sort of myth that Georges Sorel envisions in *Reflections on Violence* – even as Gramsci explicitly draws on Sorel's description of the general strike as myth in his notes on *The Prince* (see, for instance, *SPN* 126, 130). Sorel likens myths to "groups of images," "pictures [that] people [form] for themselves before the action." The myth of the general strike, on Sorel's account, furnishes the collective proletarian consciousness with "intuition of socialism which language cannot [offer] with perfect clearness" (2004, 62, 118). On the other hand, I read Gramsci as suggesting that the non-systematic, aniconic nature of *The Prince* is what imbues the work with political resonance. *The Prince* does not offer ready-made images of popular action any more than it offers the image of a "ready-made state, with all its functions and components

already in perfect order" (*Q5, §127*). The achievement of the "perfect clearness" of the Sorelian myth is the opposite of Machiavelli's intention: on Gramsci's reading, the latter intentionally presents his concepts in "aphoristic and nonsystematic form" (*Q5, §127*). It is on the terrain of language, not that of images, that Gramsci locates Machiavelli's awakening of the popular collective will. On Gramsci's interpretation, in the twenty-sixth chapter of *The Prince*, Machiavelli pivots from a tone of "scientific detachment" to that of a 'merging' with the people – in the book's final paragraphs, the tone of "rigorous logic" in Machiavelli's argument emerges as the "inner reasoning worked out in the popular consciousness, whose conclusion is a cry of passionate urgency" (*SPN* 126–7). Machiavelli's aim is thus not to produce a perfect image of the Prince, but to infuse the reasoning of the popular consciousness with passion. The outcome of Machiavelli's switch in tone is not the Sorelian picture formed in the mind of the proletarian "before the action" (Sorel 2004, 62), but a spontaneous, immediate "cry" (*SPN* 127) that is the call to action itself. Fontana writes that Gramsi's interpretation of Machiavelli dissolves "the liberal antinomy between those who know and those who merely 'feel,' between the *alta cultura* of the ruling groups and the *cultura popolare* of the masses" (1993, 158). The dramatic character of *The Prince* is, on my reading, related to this dissolution: the subversiveness of the concluding chapter of the text awakens popular passions and directs them towards a common political goal.

In a similar vein, Peter Thomas (2018, 79) draws the reader's attention to a passage in Notebook 13 in which Gramsci writes that Chapter 26 of *The Prince* "is not something extrinsic, 'tacked on' from the outside, rhetorical, but has to be understood as a necessary element of the work – indeed, the element that projects its true light [*riverbera la sua vera luce*] onto the entire work and makes it a kind of 'political manifesto'" (*Q13, §1*, quoted in Thomas 2018, 79). For Thomas, Gramsci's use of the verb "*riverberare*" in the passage merits particular attention: in contrast to

the verb "to reflect" *[si riflette]*, which Gramsci uses in this section in an earlier draft (*Q13, §1*, quoted in Thomas 2018, 79), reverberation, for Thomas, implies a process of active transformation, rather than a reflecting back of an existing image: he writes that whereas "reflection implies a direct linear relation in which a subject observes itself as object, reverberation suggests a more complicated and retroactive process." (Thomas 2018, 79). The term 'reverberation' also carries auditory connotations that contrast with the visual associations of the verb 'to reflect' – it suggests an echoing back of Machiavelli's impassioned call for the people's seizure of political opportunity. I read these auditory overtones in Gramsci's notes on Machiavelli as parallel to his writing on the Jacobins, whom he refers to as "realists of the Machiavelli stamp and not abstract dreamers." Gramsci writes that the Jacobin slogans of "equality, fraternity and liberty," which ring as "'abstract'" and utopian to the contemporary listener were once held as "absolute truth" both by the Jacobins and the "great popular masses" that the Jacobin Club attracted: [t]he "Jacobins' language, their ideology, their methods of action reflected perfectly the exigencies of the epoch" (*SPN* 78). Given Gramsci's comparison of the Jacobins to Machiavelli, one can imagine that this description could be extended to *The Prince*: the language of the final chapter reverberates through the text, arousing the collective will of a "dispersed and shattered people" (*SPN* 126), precisely because it is a language "understood by the masses" (*SPN* 185) – one that the people recognize as their own and register as an immediate and passionate call to action.

The view of the theoretician as the translator or the dramatist of political relations helps to clarify the relationship between theory and praxis that Gramsci outlines throughout the *Prison Notebooks*. Reflecting on Gramsci's view of *The Prince* as a "revolutionary utopian manifesto" (Althusser 2001, 13), Althusser writes that Machiavelli's writing is a "*political act*" – for

Althusser, Machiavelli at once enumerates the political means for Italy's unification at the Prince's disposal and "*treats his own text* (...) *as one of those means*" (2001, 23; emphasis original). I read Althuser's interpretation alongside Buttigieg's statement, quoted earlier in this essay, that "intellectual activity is itself a form of political praxis" (2011a, 17) as representative of a broader tendency to view the line between theory and praxis in Gramsci's writing as nebulous. It is true that Gramsci reads Machiavelli's work as intent on advancing a particular political cause. However, Gramsci is also aware of the limitations of theory and of its duties to accurately represent the historical conjuncture from which it emerges: for him, the realism of Machiavelli's theory does not guarantee that his thought will be translated into praxis – he contends that "one cannot expect an individual or a book to change reality but only to interpret it and to indicate a line of action" (*Q8, §84*). The theoretician's task is not to alter reality – a task one cannot accomplish alone in any meaningful sense – but to translate its elements into a language that arouses political passions, which Gramsci defines as the "unmediated impulse toward action" (*Q8, §132*). The "double viewpoint" of both the Prince and the people that Althusser identifies in *The Prince*, by way of Gramsci's reading, is thus both internal and external to the text, a relationship between the Prince and the people as characters in Machiavelli's book and between *The Prince* as a dramatic work and the people as its intended audience (2001, 32).

Translating Opportunity

In the previous section, I focused on Gramsci's identification of a concrete theoretical practice in Machiavelli. I suggested that focusing on Gramsci's description of *The Prince* as a myth-like, "dramatic" (*SPN* 125) text illuminates the importance of language for Gramsci's theoretical method. Contrasting the imagistic nature of myth for Sorel with its more dynamic, reverberatory

iteration in Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*, I further suggested that Gramsci's myth comes into being in vernacular rather than imagistic form – a process that can be described through the lens of translation, as a disparate set of political conditions translated into an "unfolding historical drama" (*Q4, §152*) whose language the people recognize as their own, and which thereby rouses the populace into action. In this section, I turn to Gramsci's own efforts to translate some of Machiavelli's language into contemporary political terms, encapsulated in Gramsci's view of the political party as the "modern Prince" (see, for instance, *Q8, §21*).

As Buttigieg (2011c, 557) notes, Gramsci uses the term "modern Prince" in two senses. In the first sense, Gramsci uses the term as "the title of a book he is thinking of writing" (which Buttigieg renders in the English-language critical edition as "Modern Prince," capitalizing both words to indicate that Gramsci is discussing a potential book title). Gramsci first sketches out this project in his fourth notebook, proposing a "book that extracts from Marxist thought an orderly system of actual politics along the lines of *The Prince*" (*Q4, §10*): a theoretical text presented as "an unfolding historical drama," rather than as a set of abstract "scientific principles." In the second sense, Gramsci uses the term to describe the political party, in which he locates the potential for revolutionary leadership that fulfills an analogous role in twentieth-century Italy to Machiavelli's original prince (which Buttigieg renders as "modern Prince," with only the noun capitalized). This distinction seems crucial to me, not because it denotes a separation between theory and praxis – between the theoretical text that Gramsci intends to write and the really existing Italian Communist Party, which Gramsci views as the formation capable of bringing about a unified national collective will *(Q8, §21)* – but because it illuminates the space between what is and what ought to be that Gramsci's theoretical project endeavors to fill. On the one hand, Gramsci identifies the political party as the heir of the

Prince's legacy in part because the party already contains, at the time of Gramsci's writing, "partial collective wills with a propensity to become universal and total" *(Q8, §21)*. It is an organizational form that already holds a degree of political recognition, and one that has "to some extent asserted itself in action" (*SPN* 129). Rather than interpreting Gramsci's notes on Machiavelli as an effort to claim the legacy for the Marxist camp by forcibly casting the modern political party in the otherwise contentless role of the Prince, I read Gramsci's statement that "[i]f one had to translate the notion 'Prince' as it is used in Machiavelli's book into modern political language" (*Q5, §127*), then "'Prince' could be translated (...) as 'political party'" as derived in part from empirical observation and evaluation of political possibility. Gramsci's translation of Machiavelli's concept is realistic and 'accurate' in the sense of being faithful to existing political conditions.

At the same time, following from my reading of Gramsci's interpretation of *The Prince* in the previous subsection, I see the political party that Gramsci casts in the role of the modern Prince as a partially indeterminate entity. As Peter Thomas argues, the modern Prince should be seen "not merely as a figure or entity, but as a dramatic development within the structure of Gramsci's texts" (2018, 84) – not a "euphemism for an already existing and known type of party" but the representation of a "process of experimentation in the construction of an unprecedented future, and the formation of a new type of political party." Like Machiavelli's *Prince*, the book project that Gramsci sketches out in the *Prison Notebooks* promises to serve as a "'political manifesto'" (*SPN* 127) that would point to the opportunity for the establishment of a "new [State]" or a "new national and social [structure]." If the potential to establish such a structure already exists in the political party, it exists only "in embryonic form," (*SPN* 140) to use Gramsci's own term out of context. Just as the character of the Prince comes alive over the course of Machiavelli's book,

revealing itself to the popular audience only in the final chapter, the type of political party that Gramsci invites to take on the role of the modern Prince should perhaps be understood as a type of party that is in the process of coming into being, rather than a type of party that already finds its concrete embodiment in the Italian Communist Party.

Gramsci's aim, in short, is to produce a work that achieves the intended dramatic effect of *The Prince* – the formation of a "national-popular collective will" (131) – that is adapted to the particular political circumstances of Gramsci's time. This is not to suggest that the structure and of *The Prince* in its entirety can be analogized and transposed onto twentieth-century political terrain: as Thomas (2018, 83) writes, "Gramsci's modern Prince (...) does not merely 'repeat' Machiavelli's 'new Prince', but inherits its critical force under radically changed conditions." A 'literal' translation of *The Prince*, which would simply dress up the modern political party in the sixteenth-century Prince's costume, would carry little political resonance to contemporary readers: as Peter Ives writes of Gramsci's efforts to 'translate' the Russian Revolution into the Italian context, such a re-enactment would be little more than a "'farce' — as Marx speaks of in the *Eighteenth Brumaire*" (2004, 102). The successful translation of *The Prince* into a contemporary theoretical text involves modifying it to the extent required to transmit the aspect of the work that Gramsci arguably views as the most essential: its effort to perform a collective popular will into being.

Still, to what extent such a translation can actually be found among the fragments that make up the *Prison Notebooks* is a matter of some contention. Thomas (2018, 83) argues that "The Modern Prince" – Gramsci's proposed book project – is not purely hypothetical, but actually begins to take shape in Gramsci's twenty 'special notebooks', "reverberating" (2018, 86) across

his earlier carceral notes. Thomas argues that the fragmentary, unfinished structure of Notebooks 9 to 29 emulates the theoretical strengths that Gramsci identifies in *The Prince*: he contends that "the modern Prince (...) becomes a structural principle of the later phases of the *Prison Notebooks*, the dramatic discourse that concludes – or rather, 'incompletes' – them as a 'living book', in a perennial openness to invitations-to-come" (2018, 84). Given the present lack of availability of Notebooks 9 to 29 in full English translation, anglophone readers may not yet be able to evaluate Thomas's argument on their own, or to appreciate Gramsci's translation of Machiavelli at its clearest.

Yet if there is a text currently available in English translation that exemplifies the dramatic form that Gramsci identifies in *The Prince*, it might also be Gramsci's short article titled "Some Aspects on the Southern Question" – an unfinished article written in the autumn of 1926, shortly before Gramsci's arrest (Buttigieg 2011a, 85), and the last work of Gramsci's prepared for publication (Maas 2010, 91).[5] In it, Gramsci responds to what he views as a mischaracterization of his party's views in another journalist's recently published article, beginning with a clarification of the position of the Communist Party of Italy regarding the relations between the largely industrial working class in Italy's wealthier Northern region and the peasantry in the primarily agricultural South. However, as the article continues, Gramsci begins to offer a set of prescriptions to the party, in a manner reminiscent of Machiavelli's recommendations to the Prince. Gramsci presents the core issue facing the Italian Communist Party: "for the proletariat to become (...) the dominant class," it must mobilize the majority of Italy's workers. To do so, it must obtain "the consent of the broad peasant masses" (*PPW* 316). Obtaining such consent, however, requires a change in the collective consciousness of both the Northern proletarians and

[5] For a discussion of the ways that the topics discussed in "Some Aspects of the Southern Question" are developed into some of the central themes of the *Prison Notebooks*, see Maas 2010, 91–3.

the Southern peasants. In the North, proletarians need to abandon the idea, "disseminated on a vast scale by bourgeois propagandists," that the "backward" South is holding back the development of Italy as a whole, and that the Southerners are "lazy, inept, criminal, and barbaric" (*PPW* 316). On the other hand, the Southern peasants are "in perpetual ferment" and "have no cohesion among themselves," and must be organized in a way that will allow them to give a "unified expression to their aspirations and needs" (*PPW* 327) – a characterization reminiscent of Gramsci's description of the "dispersed and shattered people" (*SPN* 126) unified in *The Prince* under a collective will. Further, just as Machiavelli's discourse in *The Prince* unfolds through his examples of the actions of past *condottieri*, chief among them Cesare Borgia, Gramsci goes on to discuss examples of widely recognized Southern intellectuals: Giustino Fortunato and Benedetto Croce. The two thinkers form "the flexible but extremely resistant armour of the agrarian bloc" (*PPW* 337): their social role has involved extinguishing any budding revolutionary passions among the Southerners by ensuring that "the way (...) the Southern question was approached did not go beyond certain limits, did not become revolutionary" (*PPW* 333–4). Gramsci thus identifies Fortunato and Croce as the current holders of the means of intellectual production: as Maas (2010, 93) frames it, Gramsci's goal is the "reappropriation of intellectuals and thus also language by the producers themselves" – in other words, a reappropriation of the means of intellectual production, and hence of the means through which a particular conception of the world is produced and reproduced.

Although the article is clearly cut short, its final paragraphs contain an injunction for the seizure of a historical opportunity that echoes the final chapter of *The Prince*: Gramsci writes that the "formation of intellectuals is needed if we are to see an alliance between the proletariat and the peasant masses," and that while the "task undertaken is enormous and difficult," it is "worthy of

every sacrifice (...) on the part of those intellectuals in both North and South (and there are many of them, more than is generally believed)" who recognize the proletariat and the peasantry as the only "essentially national" social forces (*PPW* 336). Although the article clearly precedes Gramsci's carceral notes on Machiavelli, I read this passage as emblematic of the dramatic sequence that Gramsci later identifies in the final chapter of *The Prince*. Initially pointing to Benedetto Croce and Piero Gobetti as the paradigmatic Southern intellectuals – the existing gatekeepers of bourgeois class hegemony – Gramsci ends the article by illuminating the opportunity for intellectual leadership to the Northern proletariat and Southern peasantry, inviting the two groups to unite in the name of a common political goal. He does not call on Northern proletarians and Southern peasants to become intellectuals: in noting that there are "more" intellectuals "than is generally believed," he assumes that the two groups already possess their own intellectuals, even though those intellectuals may not currently hold the same social function as Croce or Gobetti – since, as Gramsci writes later in the *Prison Notebooks*, "all men are intellectuals (...) but not all men have in society the function of intellectuals" (*SPN* 9). To an extent, Gramsci's article thus performs the figure of the Italian worker-intellectual into existence. One could say that Gramsci translates the term 'intellectual,' but it is a translation that preserves the original word while shifting its meaning to include those members of society who perform intellectual labor without currently being recognized as performing the function of intellectuals in society.

Although Machiavelli's *The Prince* occupies a central role in the *Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci arguably hardly engages in precise textual interpretation of Machiavelli's book itself. More often, Gramsci's focus lies in the historical function that Machiavelli might have intended for *The Prince* to play, as well as the actual function that *The Prince* has performed in Italian history

since its publication. In particular, Gramsci's notes on Machiavelli focus on the range of ways that Machiavelli's thought has been used in equal measure by his conservative and liberal interpreters. In fact, it is precisely this plurality of interpretations and continued popularity of Machiavelli's thought in diverse intellectual and political circles – both among those who "want to preserve and extend their dominion" and "those with liberal tendencies who want to modify the forms of government" – that Gramsci considers as evidence of the "*objective validity*" of his thought (*Q4, §4*; emphasis original): he writes that "[t]he historical and intellectual importance of Machiavelli's discoveries can be measured by the fact that they are still debated and opposed even to this day" (*Q4, §9)*. For Gramsci, then, the truth of Machiavelli's work is to be ascertained not through an evaluation of his ideas on the page, but through a consideration of their continued relevance for making sense of social and political phenomena. Expressed in Freudian terms, the social and political observations made in *The Prince* must be remembered and repeated, both in philosophical debates and in practice, until the phenomena that Machiavelli describes are worked through – that is, for Gramsci, until "the intellectual and moral revolution contained embryonically" in Machiavelli's thought is fully realized in practice (Freud 1981 [1914], 155; *Q4, §9*).[6] Put differently, the fact that *The Prince* has been the site of such long-standing ideological struggle serves as evidence that it captures something essential about the development of the Italian collective consciousness.

When viewed in this way, the opportunity for the formation of a collective Italian will, illuminated in *The Prince*, ceases to appear as an opportunity that has already passed. Rather, the opportunity periodically reappears throughout Italy's history. However, its illumination requires continual translation into a language that clearly identifies the political task at hand, if the

[6] There is some evidence in the *Prison Notebooks* suggesting that Gramsci was interested in Freud's psychoanalytic theory, though he also writes that his knowledge of Freud's work is limited (see, for instance, *Q1, §33*).

opportunity is to be captured. Although the North and South of Italy have been formally united since the nineteenth century, the continued economic, social, and cultural divisions between the two regions has prevented the formation of solidarity between Northern workers and their Southern (largely agrarian) counterparts. Gramsci acknowledges the party's role in the organization of the Southern peasants into "autonomous and independent formations" (*PPW* 337), but simultaneously notes that the party alone cannot accomplish this task: its success depends on the construction of an alliance between Northern and Southern intellectuals.

When Gramsci's statement that "[i]f one had to translate the notion 'Prince' (...) into modern political language" then "'Prince' could be translated (...) as 'political party'" (*Q5, §127*) is reread through "Some Aspects of the Southern Question", the political party ceases to appear in the foreground of Gramsci's analysis. The political opportunity illuminated in the final chapter of Machiavelli's *The Prince* demands to be seized not by an existing Prince, on Gramsci's reading, but by the *popolo*, whose political education and mobilization constitutes the true aim of Machiavelli's book. Likewise, I read "Some Aspects of the Southern Question" – alongside some of Gramsci's notes in the *Prison Notebooks* that touch on the themes broached in the unfinished article – as a call for the self-recognition and self-empowerment of the Northern proletariat and the Southern peasantry as a single class, capable of seizing the opportunity for the representation of their common political will through majority support for the Communist Party. Gramsci thus translates not only the superficial cast of characters of *The Prince*, swapping the Prince out for the political party, but also the text's dramatic intention and development, connecting the party with the twentieth-century Italian proletariat just as Machiavelli connects the Prince with the Italian people at the end of his book.

VI. Gramsci's Reading of Marx

Throughout the *Prison Notebooks*, Machiavelli and Marx often appear in conjunction. In his fifth carceral notebook (Q5, §127), Gramsci writes that Machiavelli "articulated a conception of the world that could also be called 'philosophy of praxis' or 'neohumanism,' in that it does not recognize transcendent or immanent (in the metaphysical sense) elements but is based entirely on the concrete action of man, who out of historical necessity works and transforms reality." Such a characterization has led a number of Gramsci scholars to conclude that Gramsci reads Machiavelli as a "forerunner" of Marx's philosophy (Thomas 2018, 78; see also Speer 2016, 13–4). At the same time, Gramsci's linguistic and Marxist influences are not welded together artificially in the *Prison Notebooks* in an attempt to retroactively crown Machiavelli as a member of the Marxist theoretical camp, as thinkers like Lo Piparo (2010, 21) or Rosiello (2010, 29) would seem to suggest. As noted earlier in this essay, in Notebook 4 Gramsci records his intention to write a "book that extracts from Marxist thought an orderly system of actual politics along the lines of *The Prince*" (*Q4, §10*). Gramsci's placement of Machiavelli alongside Marx is thus motivated by a concrete theoretical project: Gramsci aims to clarify and translate the philosophical language of Marxism into Machiavellian political language.

Yet Gramsci also further develops his method of theoretical translation from his interpretation of Marx's work, including *The Holy Family*[7] and the preface to *A Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy*[8] – a development that leads him to conclude, in Notebook 11, that "only in the philosophy of praxis is the 'translation' [of various philosophical and scientific languages] is organic and thoroughgoing" (*Q11, §47*, quoted in Boothman 2010, 116), whereas in other philosophical systems the efforts to establish links between national and historical languages

[7] See, for instance, *Q1, §44*; *Q1, §152*; *Q3, §48*; *Q3, §52–§53; Q4, §42; Q8, §208;* Ives 2006, 18.
[8] See, for instance, *Q1, §113* and *Q4, §15*.

tend to be overly stilted and schematic. In contrast with interpretations of Gramsci's reading of Marx that take Gramsci to invert the Marxian assertion of the predominance of the economic structure over the social and cultural (and hence linguistic) superstructures (Piotte 1970; for a summary of this line of interpretation, see Mouffe and Sassoon 1977, 44), I argue that it is through his reading of Marx, not against it, that Gramsci arrives at his understanding of "ideology as something other than false consciousness," in the words of Mouffe and Sassoon (1970, 58; see also *Q7, §21*), and hence of language as the central site of political struggle. If Gramsci conceives of the work of theory as politically useful only insofar as it is historically situated and concentrated on mapping the cultural and ideological terrain of hegemony, it is because he sees the beginnings of such a conception of theory in Marx. Rather than reading Marx as a theorist of structures and framing his own project as a theory of superstructures, Gramsci sees Marx as a translator of various superstructural forms. It is Gramsci's reading of Marx that leads him to the conclusion that cultural and philosophical superstructural forms across national and philosophical languages are mutually translatable – Gramsci refers multiple times to the passage in which Marx compares Proudhon's French political theory to Hegel's German philosophy, interpreting Marx as suggesting that French and German philosophies can be mutually translated – and that this mutual translatability serves as evidence of the "vital connection between structure and superstructures" (*Q4, §15*).

The concept of various philosophical currents as distinct philosophical languages, and, consequently, of the mutual translatability of philosophical languages, comes to occupy a central place in Gramsci's thought, as I intend to show in the first subsection below. In the second subsection, I further trace the theme of language through Gramsci's notes on Marx in the *Prison Notebooks*, arguing that Gramsci's reading of Marx locates the importance of a collective 'living'

spoken language for political praxis in Marx's thought itself. Finally, I propose that a Gramscian reading of Marx can serve as the starting point for a displacement of the prioritization of the metaphorics of vision over those of hearing in Marxist theory in particular but also in political theory more broadly.

Marx's Translation of Philosophical Language

Language and translation could arguably be seen as themes that run through much of Marx and Engels's *The Holy Family* – a text that Gramsci frequently references in the *Prison Notebooks*[9]. In the book's introduction, Marx and Engels accuse the Young Hegelians of seeking to "redeem the mass from its massy massiness, that is, to raise the popular way of speaking to the critical language of Critical Criticism" (Marx & Engels 1956, 20). Marx and Engels frame the philosophical goals of the Young Hegelians in linguistic terms: to elevate the language of the masses is also to rescue them from the materiality of their experience, to transform "all *exterior* palpable struggles into pure struggles of thought" (Marx & Engels 1956, 111; emphasis original). Further, in Chapter IV, Marx offers a criticism of the Young Hegelians through a comparison of Edgar Bauer's "characterizing translation" of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon to the latter's original writing, providing Bauer's 'characterized' renditions alongside citations of Proudhon's work in the original French to highlight the shortcomings of Bauer's interpretation of Proudhon (Marx & Engels 1956, 35). Yet the passage from *The Holy Family* that Gramsci references most extensively throughout the *Prison Notebooks*[10] is one in which Marx notes the conceptual affinity between the French political concept of equality and the German philosophical concept of "self-consciousness," writing that "the latter principle expresses in German, i.e., in abstract

[9] See, for instance, *SPN* 78, 199, 368, 370-1; *Q1, §44, §152*; *Q3, §48, §52; Q4, §3, §42; Q8, §108, §208.*
[10] Between Notebooks 1 and 8, Gramsci recalls the same passage at least seven times. See, for instance, *Q1, §44, §152; Q3, §48, §52; Q4, §3, §42; Q8, §108, §208.*

thought, what the former says in French, that is, in the language of politics and of thoughtful observation" (Marx & Engels 1956, 55). On Gramsci's interpretation, in the passage "Marx shows how the French political language used by Proudhon corresponds to and can be translated into the language of classical German philosophy" – a statement he deems "very important for understanding the innermost value of historical materialism" (*Q4, §42*). Stuart Hall's observation that, for Gramsci, ideologies are "sustained and transformed in their materiality" (1987, 22) might provide direction for considering the importance of the passage from *The Holy Family* for Gramsci: by recognizing the affinity between the German philosophical concept of self-consciousness as "man's equality with himself in pure thought" and the French political idea of equality as "man's consciousness of himself in the element of practice," Marx refuses the Young Hegelians' sharp separation between ideological and material realms. For Marx, on Gramsci's reading, the ideological cannot be considered apart from the material, but neither is one entirely reducible to the other. Marx's description of German philosophical language and French political language as mutually translatable introduces a more complex relationship between the two realms – one that must be mediated by what Gramsci views as a distinctly Marxist theoretical method.

For this reason, on my reading, Gramsci views Marxism at once as a new philosophical language and as a mode of translation between various philosophical, political, and economic languages. Gramsci describes Marxism as a "new, independent philosophy" and is wary of any interpretation of Marx that collapses Marxism back into the idealist and vulgar materialist philosophical roots from which it has developed *(Q4, §3)*. Just as all written and spoken languages contain traces of their history in the form of metaphor, so the theoretical language of Marxism – even as it represents, for Gramsci, a wholly original conception of the world that is

irreducible to its constitutive historical elements – contains traces of its preceding philosophies, building on the "currents contained in embryonic form" *(Q4, §12)* in its preceding philosophical languages. In what I read as a description of Marx's construction of a new philosophical language, Gramsci describes the method that he sees Marx as employing as "passionate sarcasm" towards the theorists he critiques (*Q1, §28*). Such a variety of sarcasm does not aim at a mean-spirited mockery of the "most intimate feeling[s]" (*Q1, §28*) of the authors that Marx engages with in his work. Rather, Marx's sarcasm is directed at the "cadaverous smell, so to speak, that leaks from behind the painted facade" (*Q1, §28*) of Marx's intellectual predecessors – an attentiveness to "what is living and what is dead," in Croce's (1915, vii) words – in the philosophical languages he borrows from. Passionate sarcasm draws out of philosophical language the elements of it that are 'living' – the ones that contain the potential to capture the relations of forces in a given historical moment, if adequately translated into contemporary terms, just as Hegel's philosophy offers a "view of reality" that is "turned upside down, as in a camera" *(Q8, §61)*. Yet the identification of Marxism's philosophical influences does not permit a reduction of Marxism to an offshoot of one of its preceding philosophical currents – Marxism does not only "[surpass] previous philosophies," it "renews from top to bottom the whole way of conceiving philosophy" *(Q4, §11)*. Rather than merely providing a new vocabulary to be employed in philosophical contemplation, Marxism provides the theorist with the tools to translate between the languages of philosophy and politics, and to notice how one is always informed by the other.

Marx's attunement to what is living in past philosophical languages assumes literal meaning in Gramsci's notes on the Hegelian origins of Marxist thought. Discussing the relationship between Marx and Hegel, Gramsci emphasizes the vernacular quality of Marx's statement that Hegel's

philosophy "'has men walking on their heads'": "it really seems to have sprung out of conversation, fresh, spontaneous, so little 'bookish.'" Gramsci further suggests that "[s]ome of Marx's assertions (...) should be considered in special relation to this 'conversational' vivacity" – he urges the student of Marx's Hegelian roots to "remember (...) that Marx participated in German university life very shortly after Hegel's death, when there must still have been a most vivid memory of Hegel's 'oral' teachings and of the passionate discussions about concrete history which these teachings generated" (*Q1, §152*). Crucially for Gramsci, the image of men walking on their heads appears in Hegel's writing itself: Gramsci recalls that Hegel uses the image in a description of a concrete historical event: on Gramsci's account, Hegel writes that "when the new state structure was organized" during the French Revolution, "'it seemed' that the world was walking on its head." The "fresh, spontaneous" quality of Marx's 'upside-down' reading of Hegel thus appears to stem less from the originality of Marx's vocabulary than from Marx's transplanting of an expression already found in Hegel's writing into a new context.

When viewed through the lens of Gramsci's considerations on Marx's reading of Hegel, the auditory dimension of Gramsci's suggestion in Notebook 4 that the reader of Marx "[s]earch for the *Leitmotiv*, for the rhythm of the thought as it develops" (*Q4, §1*) comes into sharper focus. On my reading, Gramsci's injunction goes beyond calling for adopting a holistic view of Marx's intellectual development, as opposed to cherry-picking key quotations.[11] By urging readers to search for the "*Leitmotiv*" of Marx's work, Gramsci highlights the necessity of examining Marx's thought in its historical specificity, tracing its potential 'living' theoretical influences – such as conversations in university halls – rather than merely constructing a genealogy of Marx's thought

[11] The vocabulary of rhythm also informs much of Gramsci's reflection on the capitalist mode of production: he refers to the "rapid rhythm of capital accumulation" (*SPN* 291) or the "rhythm" (*SPN* 210) of the reorganization of classes following a general crisis of the State.

based on his predecessors' published texts. At the same time, recalling Marasco's (2019, 346) phrase that a Gramscian interpretive method requires attending to what "resounds" in a text when read in its historical context, I read Gramsci's prescription for the reader to listen for the "rhythm" of Marx's thought as an effort to interpret Marx the way that Marx appears to interpret Hegel, with an attentiveness to the junctures at which philosophy and politics coincide.

The Living Spoken Language of the People

In the previous section, I suggested that Gramsci reads Marx as a translator of past philosophical and political languages in a way that both reveals their mutual translatability and the possibility of their theoretical supersession. Yet, as I have suggested earlier in the introduction to this essay, Marx's textual practice extends beyond mere interpretation and critique of past philosophies. Interpretation, on Gramsci's reading, is only useful insofar as it is presented in the service of politics – the task of the theorist is to "work systematically to form, develop, (...) enlarge" and render more "homogeneous" and "self-aware" the political "force that can be pushed forward when the situation is propitious" *(Q8, §163)*. I read Gramsci's interpretation of Marx as the pursuit of a 'living' mode of philosophy, of a theoretical style that does not fossilize into abstract thought but retains a rhythmic, conversational quality. This interpretive angle colors Gramsci's reading of Marx, and of Marx's own Hegelian influences, and at the same time it orients Gramsci's own theoretical project towards a historically specific staging – one that takes its cue from the dramatic form of Machiavelli's *The Prince* – of Marx's more general theory.

Although Gramsci's considerations on vernacular language are not limited to his notes on Marx, he assumes a historical materialist approach to the study of language throughout the *Prison Notebooks*, treating language as an "integral conception of the world" rather than merely an

"outer garment that functions indifferently as a form for any content" *(Q5, §123)*. In Notebook 5, for instance, Gramsci describes the contrast between the written Latin (visual) and the vernacular (auditory) Italian as emblematic of the class struggle between the "aristocratic-feudal" and the "bourgeois-popular" *(Q5, §123)* conceptions of the world in Renaissance-era Italy. In the same note, Gramsci traces the "beginning of the divergence between Italian and French history" to the event of the Oaths of Strasbourg, during which the French army, on Gramsci's interpretation, "introduced their language into the history of the nation" by swearing in the vernacular Romance language, thereby "presenting themselves as a collective will." Likewise, in Italy, the absence of linguistic unity must be understood in historical context: Gramsci writes that the fall of the medieval Communes and the rise of the *signoria* "crystallized" Italian into a "written and not a spoken language, a language of scholars rather than a language of the nation" (*SPN* 131) – a crystallization that has persisted despite Italy's unification in nineteenth century, as evidenced by the continued widespread use of regional dialects as opposed to the Italian.

Gramsci's auditory vocabulary places him in contrast with a strand of Marxist interpretation that employs the language of vision in its discussions of Marx's political-theoretical method, as well as of democratic forms of politics more broadly. For instance, although Louis Althusser's thought is profoundly indebted to Gramsci's reading of Marx in *Reading Capital*[12], Althusser's analysis of Marx's writing, unlike Gramsci's, is shrouded in the language of vision – he writes that Marx's method involves registering the "oversights" of his predecessors (Althusser and Balibar 1970, 18), or that, on his method of reading, Marx recognizes the "identity of non-vision and vision within vision itself" (Althusser and Balibar 1970, 22, 28). Examined more broadly, scholars have tended to frame the work of political theory in visual terms, in line with the

[12] For discussions of Althusser's "Gramscian debt," see Marasco 2019, 344 and Speer 2016, 1.

etymological source of the ancient Greek word *theōría*, which "pertains to the human experience of seeing, to the field of vision" (Cavarero 2002, 506; see also Jay 1994 and Wolin 2004). Further, questions of the formation of democratic self-recognition in political theory tend to be framed as issues of visual representation, rather than auditory unity. Adom Getachew, for instance, frames the formation of collective Black self-regard in early twentieth-century Garveyite political projects as a collective consciousness forged through the "visual spectacle" of the parade and mass assembly – spectacles aimed at countering the "ubiquitous and denigrating white gaze" by summoning "white spectators" to "play the role of mirrors that reflect back an image of the newly empowered race" (Getachew 2021, 1, 4). Reaching further back in history, Jason Frank discusses the problem of aesthetic democratic representation in the wake of the nineteenth-century transition from monarchical to republican forms of power as a problem of the construction of a "living image of the people," explaining that "[t]he replacement of the (...) external rule of the king with the (...) immanent self-rule of the people posed representational difficulties (...) of visualization and form" (2017, 125). Gramsci approaches the same transition from the point of view of the living language, rather than of the living image: the language of the Jacobin Club, for Gramsci, was "ultra-realistic since [it was] able to able to set in motion the forces necessary to (...) give power to the revolutionary class" – their language was living, the medium of real conversation, because it gave expression to the political task at hand. Consequently, when the Jacobins' language was "cut off from their time and place" in the wake of the French Revolution, it became "a different thing, a ghost, hollow and useless words" *(Q1, §43)* – the words themselves had not changed, but they had lost their political charge because they no longer heralded the coming into being of a new republican form of government.

As Frank bestows the task of democratic representation to the visual artist, so Gramsci considers it a task best suited for the linguist and the dramatist (*Q3, §73*): he writes that the "degree of national linguistic unity" is measured not by looking at a dictionary of any particular national language, but by examining the "living spoken language of the people." Thus, in an example that Gramsci provides in the same note, if a dramatist wants to produce a work that is "in time with the public," he ought to do so not in the generic, sanitized Italian, but in a regional dialect, since and "in informal life, the dialect is used; to a large extent, Italian is an Esperanto, (...) a partial language" (*Q3, §73*). The average member of the audience of a play staged in Italian would not recognize ('hear') themself in the characters on the stage – the production would not accurately represent the typical Italian's lived reality. At the same time, Gramsci identifies the fact that "there does not exist a unified Italian cultured class that speaks and writes a unified 'living' language" *(Q1, §73)* as the nation's political weakness, at once the symptom and the cause of the absence of a cohesive Italian working class. Language facilitates praxis, but language can also, as Maas (2010, 88) observes, serve as a "*limitation* of praxis," if it is not sufficiently universal to provide a basis for a unified conception of the world, as is the case with regional dialects.

Gramsci's logic in the above passages might thus appear counterintuitive: the generality of Italian in comparison to the regionally specific dialect might make it seem like the more attractive option for the measure of national-popular unity, or for the artistic depiction of a generic Italian character in a play – just as Esperanto purports to serve as a universal, democratic language, when in reality it is an "artificial language" (*Q3, §76*), an invention arising from the "failure to comprehend the historicity of languages and hence of ideologies and scientific opinions" (*Q7, §3*). Language is not truly democratic unless it is a 'living' language – that is, a genuine expression of a popular conception of the world, a language actually heard and spoken

by the people. Gramsci makes his criticism of Esperanto even more explicit in a 1918 letter to Leo Galetto – Gramsci's fellow editor of the newspaper *Avanti!* – writing that "[p]urism is a rigidified and mechanistic form of linguistics, and therefore the mentality of the purist resembles the mentality of the advocate of Esperanto" and that "the only *useful* and rational forms of social (...) activity are those that emerge spontaneously and are realized through the free activities of the energies of society" (quoted in Buttigieg 2011b, 474). Building on Maas's discussion of the connections between the Esperanto movement and the First International's struggles to build an international political base in the late nineteenth century (2010, 86–7), I read Gramsci's stance on Esperanto in parallel with his concerns over early twentieth-century Marxist political organization. Gramsci's invocation of Esperanto in the *Prison Notebooks* is not merely metaphorical: it approaches the absence of an organic popular language as a political problem. Following from my reading of Gramsci's interpretation of Machiavelli – which draws on Thomas's (2018) observations on the importance of drama and theater to both thinkers' intellectual development – in the preceding section, I read Gramsci's commentary on the task of the dramatist alongside the question of national linguistic unity as bound up with his plans for producing a 'dramatic' work aimed at arousing a unified Italian political will. The task of accurately representing the lived reality of the people is the dramatist's as much as it is the political theorist's – a theoretical work that is not "in time with the public" (*Q3, §73*) and does not speak the public's language ceases to have any practical use.

On my reading, then, the contrast between Gramsci's auditory language and the language of vision employed by thinkers such as Althusser is not only a matter of preference for one sensory metaphor over another. To view the auditory dimension of Gramsci's thought as purely metaphorical would be to repeat the theoretical move I discuss in this essay's second section of

reading the theme of translation in Gramsci's work as figurative. Instead, Gramsci's choice of auditory language should be seen as related to his view of vernacular language as the expression of national-popular political consciousness. For Gramsci, "language should be treated as a conception of the world, as the expression of a conception of the world" (*Q5*, §131). Language is both ideology and the expression thereof, both the medium through which political will is expressed and the site of political struggle itself. Gramsci's auditory vocabulary can, in turn, be seen as an extension of his view of vernacular and spoken language as the terrain on which the revolutionary stratum of society gains consciousness of its collective political aims. As Lo Piparo puts it – despite his opposition to the idea that Gramsci's linguistics and Marxism are interlinked – "[a] collective will is held together (...) by a common language" (2010, 26). On my reading, unlike Lo Piparo's, this is an idea that stems directly from Gramsci's reading of Marx: Gramsci writes that in the Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* "Marx explicitly states that humans become conscious of their tasks on the ideological terrain of the superstructures (...)" – and hence, for Gramsci, a terrain that finds its expression in language – "and the aim of his theory is also, precisely, to make a specific social group 'become conscious' of its own tasks, its own power, its own coming into being" (*Q4, §15*). For Gramsci, in other words, a unified revolutionary proletarian class does not exist in Italy *a priori*, simply by virtue of the direction of Italy's economic development – the formation and subsequent unity of such a class depends on the extent to which its members can communicate in a common language. The development of collective political self-consciousness is thus a relational, conversational process, rather than a matter of internalizing a static image of the political subject.

It is in light of this emphasis on vernacular language as the terrain of politics that one ought to consider Gramsci's interpretation of Marx's eleventh thesis on Feuerbach, and his related statement in Notebook 8 that "philosophy must become 'politics' or 'practice' in order for it to continue to be philosophy" (*Q8, §61)*. For Gramsci, philosophy does not become politics by forcing itself on the people, or by seeking to "redeem the mass from its massy massiness," to use the terms of Marx and Engels's critique of the Young Hegelians (1956, 20). Instead, Gramsci reads Marx's statement that "philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to *change* it" (Marx & Engels 1959, 245, emphasis original) with particular attention to the term 'philosophers,' stretching its definition beyond "traditional" (*SPN* 10) intellectuals and reframing philosophy as a popular activity. As Anne Showstack Sassoon remarks, Gramsci recognizes that "[i]n contemporary society (...) the forging of a link between theory and practice (...) is only possible if intellectuals change their mode of existence and intellectual work is democratised" (Sassoon 1987, xviii). Gramsci's interpretation of Marx's eleventh thesis on Feuerbach could thus be read not as a criticism of philosophers, but as the injunction for the category of philosophers to be expanded to include all workers – an interpretation parallel to Gramsci's reading of Machiavelli as a translator of the political practices of his age into a popular political pedagogy aimed at empowering the *popolo* to take on the role of the imagined Prince.

VII. Conclusion

Although the theme of translation in Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* has not gone unnoticed by his readers, I have argued that it has tended to be read in two ways: figuratively, as a metaphor for devising a revolutionary political strategy appropriate to a particular national context, or 'politically,' as an expression of the necessity for Marxism to pass from the realm of philosophy

to that of praxis and for the development of nationally specific political strategies. Against these two lines of interpretation, I have argued that Gramsci's use of the vocabulary of translation in Gramsci's political-theoretical work is not rooted purely in his belief that abstract theory requires 'translation' into concrete political practice. On my reading, for Gramsci, the term 'translation' is not merely used metaphorically, nor should its use be dismissed as a coincidental product of Gramsci's intersecting interests in linguistics and politics. It is also not a sign of Gramsci's denigration of theory in favor of a constant preoccupation with political strategy and praxis. Rather, I've proposed that the concept of translation structures Gramsci's thought throughout the *Prison Notebooks* and signals an effort to name and develop a concrete theoretical practice.

I have further intended for this essay to clarify the ways that Gramsci draws his textual practice out of Machiavelli's *The Prince* and some of Marx's texts, particularly *The Holy Family*. In doing so, I have tried to show that Gramsci's Machiavellian Marxism does not consist merely in reading Marx 'onto' Machiavelli, or in wresting the legacy of Machiavelli's thought out of the hands of conservative or liberal interpreters and returning it to a popular base (though, as Fontana [1993, 70] argues, this was certainly part of Gramsci's goal). Rather, Gramsci often considers the two thinkers in tandem in the *Prison Notebooks* because he views Marx as having replicated – perhaps with greater political success – Machiavelli's aim of facilitating the masses' self-awareness, and hence awareness of the political tasks before them. Both Machiavelli and Marx achieve this aim through producing theoretical texts that endeavor to unite "political science and political ideology" (*SPN* 125*)*, "theory and practice" (*Q8, §208*), reason and passion (*SPN* 126–7). In the third section, I argued that the themes of language and translation lie at the heart of Gramsci's reading of Machiavelli's *The Prince* as a 'living' theatrical text: Gramsci

views Machiavelli as a dramatist who translates the knowledge of practices required to lead a state into the language of the people, thereby enacting a popular political language into being. I further argued that Gramsci's last known essay prior to his arrest, "Some Aspects of the Southern Question," can be read as a 'translation' of the dramatic form that Gramsci identifies in *The Prince*. In the fourth section, I argued that Gramsci's preoccupation with linguistics and translation in the *Prison Notebooks* is not fully extraneous to his Marxist theoretical influences – rather, Gramsci draws his principle of the translatability of philosophical and political languages out of Marx's texts themselves. Likewise, Gramsci's insistence on the political importance of a "living spoken language" (*Q3, §73*) is not solely the product of Gramsci's preoccupation with Italy's fragmentary linguistic landscape, but instead has some of its roots in the textual practice that Gramsci attributes to Marx's reading of Hegel. For Gramsci, in other words, the development of a unified popular language is one of the primary goals of a Marxist political education.

Framing translation in Gramsci's thought as a historical and theoretical method – rather than as a metaphor – might hold several implications for Gramsci scholarship and for Marxist political-theoretical work in general. On an exegetical level, the view of theory as translation helps resolve some of the dissonances in the secondary literature regarding the role of the relationship between theory and praxis in Gramsci's thought. Marasco (2019, 359) identifies the maxim that "[k]nowing is nothing; doing is everything" as one of the "guiding principles of a Gramscian political literacy." On the other hand, in a passage quoted earlier in this paper, Joseph Buttigieg proclaims that "intellectual activity is itself a form of political praxis" for Gramsci (2011a, 17). On Marasco's interpretation, theory would appear to play a subordinate role to praxis in Gramsci's thought, and Gramsci's political pedagogy would appear to center on

encouraging the passage from the abstract resolution of philosophical problems to concrete political action. In contrast, Buttigieg's account seems to imply that theory and praxis blend into one another in Gramsci's thought. Against both interpretations, I have proposed that while Gramsci views the unity of philosophy and politics as the endpoint of a Marxist political pedagogy, he recognizes that the individual theorist's capacity for bringing about such a unity is limited. Reading Machiavelli as relaying the political language of those "in the know" (*SPN* 129) to the masses in *The Prince*, or reading Marx as inverting the philosophical language of German idealism to return its legacy to the workers, Gramsci would thus appear to suggest that the theorist cannot hope to create or even popularize a whole new philosophical or political language, but only to serve as a translator of foreign philosophical and political languages – whether distant geographically or historically from the theorist's present circumstances – into a 'living' language that animates a collective political will.

Since the Prison Notebooks' initial publication, the meaning of Gramsci's key concepts has been profoundly contested, and often – according to a number of Gramsci scholars – interpreted and applied to novel empirical contexts with little rigor. Statements paraphrasing Michel Foucault's characterization of Gramsci (cited in Buttigieg 2011a, xix) as an author who is frequently cited but rarely truly known abound in Gramscian theoretical circles.[13] I have tried to attend to the novel avenues of interpretation of Gramsci's work that are opened up when the fragmentariness of the Prison Notebooks is treated not as an obstacle to an accurate understanding of Gramsci's thought, but as itself a source of information about Gramsci's methodology. The difficulty of a totalizing, 'literal' reading of Gramsci posed by the fragmentary nature of his carceral notes uncovers the possibility for his readers to themselves engage in translating his work – in the

[13] See, for instance, Hoare and Smith 1971, xciv; Crehan 2002, 1; and Thomas 2009, xviii, 12.

sense of transposing it into an updated theoretical language, but also in the sense of mapping out the possible avenues of political action in the present conjuncture with the help of Gramsci's writing. Such a method, I have proposed, can be drawn out of Gramsci's reading of Machiavelli's *The Prince*, which highlights the 'living' aspect of the work, and that of Marx, which attends to the "rhythm" (*Q4, §1*) of Marx's thought rather than engaging in an overly schematizing, "bookish" (*Q4, §8; Q6, §27*) analysis of its content. I have framed this translational methodology as no less rigorous than a 'literal' reading of Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* that avoids uprooting his concepts from their precise historical context – on the contrary, as I have argued, attentiveness to the shifts in meaning that words undergo as they are applied to changing historical circumstances lies at the heart of Gramsci's historical materialist method.

The application of this method of theoretical translation can take place on several levels. For Peter Thomas, it must first take place at the level of grasping the method of reading that the *Prison Notebooks* demand: he writes that the reader of Gramsci is "called upon not so much to read the *Prison Notebooks* as to decipher them, or, as with Joyce's *Ulysses*, to 'translate' their formal foreignness into a known literary convention" (Thomas 2009, 42). Other scholars comment on the difficulty not of only reading, but also of writing about Gramsci: Sassoon (1990, 23) remarks on the challenge of writing about Gramsci "in the logical, rational order of which we have all been trained (...) His writing, his approach, his language keep escaping and leading us astray." Following Thomas (2009), Sassoon (1990), Buttigieg (2011a) and Piotte (1971), I view efforts at a systematizing textual analysis of the *Prison Notebooks* as no real "antidote" to the "partial (...) interpretation" of which Hoare and Smith (1971, xciv) accuse many of Gramsci's readers. There is no abstract, universal theory of politics to be found in the *Prison Notebooks*. Instead, as Marasco (2019, 346) puts it, reading Gramsci requires listening to what "resounds" in

his writing "when it is studied in its historical determinations and effects" – an auditory technique that, as I have suggested, Gramsci himself employs in his reading of Machiavelli and Marx. An understanding of some of the secondary literature on Gramsci as exercises in 'translating' his work might call into question the tendency to characterize certain strands of Gramscian interpretation as misreadings, and instead draw attention to the ways that an understanding of the function of Gramsci's ideas might in fact require being led astray by the ever-shifting definitions of his concepts. Viewed in this way, exegetical work on Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*, as well as efforts to transpose Gramsci's insights into new political contexts, should be evaluated not on the basis of the extent of their faithfulness to a 'literal' reading of Gramsci, but rather on the basis of the extent to which they translate Gramsci's ideas into the language best suited to their particular philosophical, political, and economic conditions.

Gramsci himself seems to suggest at various points in the *Prison Notebooks* that the reader of his prison notes should not take them at face value – suggestions that Gramsci scholars have tended to interpret as the injunction to proceed carefully, and to verify Gramsci's sources before assuming that the observations contained in his notes are accurate (see, for instance, *Q4*, *§16; Q8, introduction,* and *Q11*, *introduction;* for a discussion of Gramsci's comments on the provisionality of his notes, see Buttigieg 2011a, 33). Given Gramsci's limited library in prison, and the fact that the *Prison Notebooks* contain numerous instances of misremembering and misquoting, it is certainly plausible that Gramsci's disclaimers are primarily the result of his concern about potential factual errors in his notebooks. Still, I read Gramsci's contention on the first page of Notebook 8 that "it might even be the case that the opposite of what [some of his notes] assert will be shown to be true" (*Q8, introduction*) as more than a note of caution for the potential future editor to verify the accuracy of his references. Rather, I interpret Gramsci's

admission to the limitations of his work as an acknowledgement of the limitations of theoretical language, and of its constant need for updating, more broadly – a parallel to Marx's recognition in *Capital* that "in their appearance things often represent themselves in inverted form" (Marx 1909, 588). On my reading, Gramsci's attentiveness to the elusive, 'living' nature of language is related to this acknowledgment. If theory is to continue serving as a compass for praxis, then theory requires periodical translation into contemporary language – a transfiguration that sometimes requires a total inversion of past philosophical systems. In his notes on Marx, Gramsci comments on Marx's statement in *The Holy Family* that "it is possible to arrive at a view of reality in Hegel, even if it is turned upside down, as in a camera" *(Q8, §61)*. Taking his cue from Marx's reading of Hegel, Gramsci similarly attempts to put the conception of the world embodied by Benedetto Croce's philosophy back "on its feet" *(Q8, §61)*. At the same time, Gramsci's suggestion that future editors may find the opposite of his statements to be true could be read as an invitation for further investigation of the correspondence between reality and Gramsci's theoretical depiction of it. I have attempted to shed light on how Gramsci applies Machiavelli's and Marx's theoretical insights to new, twentieth-century political circumstances, in the hopes that doing so can also inform efforts to apply Gramsci's thought to contemporary political problems.

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Note: Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks (Vol. I-III)* are cited using the standard referencing system, with "Q" (*quaderno*, or Notebook) followed by the notebook number and a "§" symbol followed by the paragraph number.

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