The Sources for Gramsci’s Concept of Hegemony

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This article attempts to single out key sources, avoiding any unilateral attribution, for the concept of hegemony as developed by Antonio Gramsci throughout the entire course of his prison writings. Among these sources one may point to the well-established (albeit usually ignored) use of the term by Italian socialists when Gramsci was a young journalist. Later, when he was a member of the Comintern Executive in Moscow (1922-3), the term circulated freely among leading Bolsheviks (Lenin included), as Bukharin confirms explicitly, and shortly afterward began to appear in Gramsci’s letters and other writings. Major inputs, as seen from the Prison Notebooks, also stem from Benedetto Croce and from various aspects of Machiavelli, including language. Gramsci’s university linguistics studies also proved important, with the questions of linguistic substrata (which foreshadow later sociolinguistic notions) and the dialect/national language relation being crucial. Overriding all, however, is Gramsci’s reading of the concrete situation.

Key Words: Antonio Gramsci, Hegemony, Italian Philosophers, Language, Bolsheviks

In this article we attempt to identify the principal theoretical origins, about a half-dozen of them including a strong linguistic input, that converged to influence the concept of hegemony as subsequently developed by Gramsci throughout the whole of his Prison Notebooks, from its first appearance there, where “leadership” and “political hegemony” are used synonymously. Not all sources are explicitly stated as such in the Notebooks, but they may be traced by assessing both Gramsci’s comments there and his experience before prison. Shedding light on this subject is helpful for challenging often unilateral or debatable interpretations of the concept, whether by friendly commentators, who sometimes overlook or deny economic and class factors, or by hostile ones, who neglect consensual aspects. Both sides, too frequently, also ignore hegemony’s essential role as the component that transforms Marx’s somewhat static structure/superstructure metaphor into Gramsci’s more dynamic metaphor of the historical bloc.

The Starting Point for the Concept of Hegemony

Gramsci’s notion of hegemony rests, as he himself states, on a fundamental text of Marx’s, the 1859 preface to A Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy,
which he translated in a part of Notebook 7 set aside for such work (Gramsci 1975, 2358–60). A literal English translation of the main lines of interest reads: “With the change in the economic base the immense superstructure is overturned more or less rapidly. In observing such upheavals one must always draw a distinction between a material overthrow of the conditions of economic production, which is to be faithfully ascertained by the methods of the natural sciences, and the juridical, political, religious, artistic, or philosophical forms: in a word, the ideological forms, on whose terrain men become aware of this conflict and resolve it.” The kernel idea of the fight among conflicting forces on the ideological terrain is what indeed is developed throughout the Notebooks, and feeds into the concept of hegemony; just how the “superstructures” are related to the structure itself is “the crucial problem of historical materialism” (first draft) and is a problem that has to be “accurately posed and resolved if the forces which are active in the history of a particular period are to be correctly analysed” (second draft) (Q4838 and Q13837; Gramsci 1996, 171, and 1971, 177, respectively), which then implies the question of the relations between such forces: that is, the whole question of hegemony.

Left Concepts of “Hegemony” before the Prison Notebooks

In order to trace Gramsci’s notion of hegemony, a first question of importance to be asked regards the use of the word and concept “hegemony” in socialist and then in communist circles in the years before his imprisonment.

Italian Socialist Usage

First of all, then, it may be observed that, in the decade he spent in Turin, the word was in current use among Italian socialists. At this time, control of the northern and eastern Adriatic was highly sensitive from an Italian nationalist perspective. For most of the sixty-odd years from the collapse in 1797 of the Doges’ republic to the foundation of the kingdom of Italy, Venice was under Austria, but before this it had for centuries controlled much of Dalmatia (the coastal zone of today’s Slovenia and Croatia); a recognizable and easily readable Venetian “pan-Italian” functioned as a Mediterranean lingua franca in a striking example of linguistic hegemony. The breakup of the Austro-Hungarian Empire saw the largely Italian-speaking Istrian peninsula of the northeastern Adriatic come under Italian rule, passing later into

1. Gramsci’s translation includes the crucial central part of the preface. In quoting the critical edition of the Notebooks (Gramsci 1975) we will give the number of the notebook, the part number (in Roman numerals) for Notebook 10, and the paragraph number, with a page number for long paragraphs, together with the published translation in English where such is available.
2. Testimony to this are late-sixteenth-century letters in Dubrovnik’s ethnological museum authorizing Dalmatian sea captains to seek food elsewhere in the Mediterranean during food shortages. Not the popular dialect as such but the Venetian language, based on a Latin model (Q3876; Gramsci 1996, 75), was the language of government in territories under Venice’s sway.
Tito’s Yugoslavia, so it is no surprise that there were polemics about who was “entitled” to what. It is sufficient to leaf through the 1916-7 numbers of Critica Sociale, then the major theoretical organ of the Italian socialists, to see articles on “wars of hegemony,” “Italo-Serb relationships for hegemony in the Adriatic,” and so on. Echoes of this are found in Q2§89 (Gramsci 1992, 331-2), with its references to “irredentism” and the “special form assumed by the national question in Trieste and in Dalmatia (for the Italians).”

This concept, stemming from ancient Greece, of hegemony as the system of power relations between competing—or between dominant and vassal—states is found in the Notebooks in sections, for example, on how U.S. power was created (Q2§16; Gramsci 1992, 260-5) and on the history of subaltern states explained by that of hegemonic ones (Q15§5; Gramsci 1995, 222-3).

**Lenin**

However, it was another sector of the Left that provided a greater input for Gramsci’s concept of hegemony. For him, the principal contemporary architect of the modern theory of hegemony was Lenin who, as a theoretician, had on “the terrain of political organization and struggle, and with political terminology . . . reappraised the front of cultural struggle and constructed the doctrine of hegemony as a complement to the theory of the State-as-force and as a contemporary form of the 1848 doctrine of ‘permanent revolution’” (Q10I§12; Gramsci 1995, 357). In other words, the leadership of the proletarian forces had to be developed independently on all fronts “in opposition to the various tendencies of ‘economism,’” as Gramsci writes in the same paragraph in commenting on Lenin’s position.3 Especially in light of an internationally influential, but sometimes flawed, article of Norberto Bobbio’s on Gramsci, where “hegemony” is claimed to be more characteristic of Stalin (Stalin 1934, 361-2) than Lenin, whose “habitual language” is said not to have included gegemoniya (Bobbio 1969, translated as Bobbio 1988), it is doubly worthwhile examining the input from Lenin. Some of the main policies advocated by Lenin for leadership over both allied and oppositional classes are outlined in this subsection.

The concept and practice of “hegemony”—but not necessarily the word—are present under various guises in his work from long before the Bolshevik revolution. The word gegemoniya makes an early appearance in the classic 1902 pamphlet What is to be Done? whose standard English translation, however, contains not “hegemony” but a gloss. Advocating strategies mirrored in Gramsci’s concept of hegemony, Lenin says the Bolsheviks had a “bounden duty” in the struggle to overthrow the autocracy to guide the activities not only of the urban proletariat, but of other “opposition strata” (Lenin 1967, 84). In the same decade, the concept also comes into Lenin’s writings on the Paris Commune, where he notes that the “socialist proletariat” could achieve “democratic tasks to which the bourgeoisie could only pay lip service”

3. The emergence of the concept in Russian Marxism before Lenin is due to Plekhanov who, however, “never left a clearly worked-out definition of hegemony in his writings” (see Lester 2000, 17–8, 37, 40, for the words quoted).
(1931, 18), a task similar to that he later faced regarding agrarian reform. This leadership role is also shown in his observation on Engels, who, “in calling the Commune a dictatorship of the proletariat had in view ... the ideological leading participation of the representatives of the proletariat in the revolutionary government” (59; emphasis in original). The innovative elements to note are, in the first case, the role of one class (the proletariat) which, by carrying out tasks classically assigned to other classes, potentially was able to weld together a class alliance; in the second case, other classes spontaneously recognizing the proletariat’s ideologically superior positions, judged by Gramsci as essential to hegemony. Later, in the first period of the Bolshevik government, one main problem was the modus vivendi between the Russian proletariat and their former masters and, in May 1918, we find Lenin defending the need to use the former capitalists to run state industry since they were the only ones with the necessary expertise (1968, 21–2); the hegemonic aspect emerges here in the exercise of power by the proletariat over an antagonistic class. Subsequently, his 1919 article “The III International and its Place in History,” written just a month after the foundation of the Communist International (Comintern), does in fact contain the word egemonia three times in the Italian translation that Gramsci published (Lenin 1976, 245–6). In the international movement, hegemony—here a recognized leading position—passed to the German socialists after 1870, while Kautsky in 1908 said it could pass to the Slavs, before it did actually go to the Russians after 1917. Other Marxists seem to have used the word in the official documents of the First Congress of the Comintern, notably Bukharin and Eberlein in their “Platform” of the International and also, possibly, the Russian drafter Obolensky (Ovinsky) of the theses on the international situation and the Entente (The Third International 1980, 42, 54); in the latter case, the English translation has “leading position” where the Italian has egemonia. A particular concept of hegemony and the word itself were, then, as Anderson describes in a widely quoted essay (1976, 15–8), in use by Marxists, including Lenin, in the whole period up to the foundation of the Comintern.

Just after Lenin raised the question of relations between antagonistic classes in postrevolutionary Russia, a rather different aspect of hegemony was posed by another politico-economic issue—namely, the nature of the democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry, especially in the transition from “war communism” to the New Economic Policy (NEP). In order to rule, the urban proletariat had to come to terms with a backward agricultural system based on the various strata of the peasantry and reach an understanding with the majority of these latter (Lenin at the Tenth Congress of the R. C. P, quoted in Carr 1966, 277). Carr goes on to note that small producers and cultivators, the great majority of the Russian population, were present in almost all countries and, according to the Bolsheviks and the International, “the chief question of the revolution” consisted in the struggle against them.

4. On that same page, Lenin notes the leading position both of members of the First International (IWMA) and of “some of the avowed enemies of the International,” collaborating within the Commune, thus recognizing the compromises necessary in a hegemonic relationship. The original articles date to 1908 and 1905, respectively.
5. In these three uses of egemonia, the English translation (Lenin 1972) has “leadership.”
could not be expropriated like the capitalists but, at least in Russia, the NEP fulfilled the purpose of maintaining “the alliance of the proletariat with the peasantry, in order that the proletariat may keep the role of leadership and state power” (Lenin, speech at the Third Congress of the International, quoted in Carr 1966, 278). The peasantry was therefore simultaneously both the object of struggle and an essential ally; the two aspects—dominance and leadership, involving force and consent, respectively—that for Gramsci were to characterize hegemony are thus present. Lenin’s innovative policy toward the peasantry is well known and requires no further comment, but his theses on the agrarian question at the Second Congress of the International are of equal originality and shot through with the notions of hegemony while the word itself is not actually used (The Third International 1980, 113–23).

It matters little if the term gegemoniya was, as Bobbio claims, used little by Lenin. Nowhere in the Prison Notebooks does Gramsci ascribe the actual use of the word to Lenin but, as seen, it is in the original Russian of What is to be Done? and it is present in other writings (Two Tactics, The Electoral Struggle in St. Petersburg and the Mensheviks, and even, as regards the banks, in his Imperialism) as well as in the Italian translation of the Third International article. More important, what Gramsci would develop as “hegemony” is, as indicated, ever present in Lenin’s political practice.

Use by Other Bolsheviks and Communists

The above is consistent with what Anderson (1976) writes, but his statement that “in the aftermath of October, the term ceased to have much actuality in the USSR” needs qualification. In his lectures on Lenin’s contribution to the revolution, Bukharin (1925, 44–9), for one, begins by observing that Lenin was “the most outstanding agrarian theoretician existing among Marxists.” Precisely on the working class–peasant alliance, he goes on to say that in the dual struggle against “liberal Marxism” and the Narodniki, “the radical Narodniki always placed the peasantry first. The liberal Narodniki stood for an alliance with the liberal bourgeoisie, which was to have hegemony over the peasantry”; thus, “it was the problem of an ally of the working class that was being solved ... this problem was connected with yet another deep-rooted problem which had to be acknowledged both theoretically and practically—this was the problem of the hegemony of the proletariat” (emphases in the original). Attention should be paid to what Bukharin says shortly afterward: it is “superfluous to speak here about the hegemony of the proletariat and the role of the working class as leader, because this is a theoretical point about which we are already acquainted and which does not need any commentary.” In other words, the term gegemoniya was well enough known not to require any further explanation; were the word used the normal one for leadership (rukovodstvo), there would of course be no need for his comment. In the whole of this part of the lectures, hegemony is present as a word and the concept, prefiguring one Gramscian sense of it, is ever present in his reasoning.

This general currency of the term among the Bolsheviks is also demonstrated by reference to Trotsky. In the 1904–6 period, when the democratic dictatorship of the
proletariat and peasantry, or even, as he says, of the “proletariat, peasantry and intelligentsia,” was still something of the future, he asked, “who is to wield the hegemony on the government itself, and through it in the country? And when we speak of a workers’ government, by this we reply that hegemony should belong to the working class” (Trotsky 1986, 72, repeated at 109). Some twenty years later, in a speech to a Party Central Committee in May 1924, now in some anthologies of his *Literature and Revolution*, he notes that “the task of the proletariat is that of bringing the peasants to socialism, maintaining a complete hegemony over them” (Trotsky 1973, 491–511). In the introduction that same year to his *First Five Years of the Communist International*, he discusses “the question of the hegemony of the Communist Party in the workers’ movement” and, in his *Military Writings*, in relation to interstate relations, he observes that U.S. hegemony had supplanted that of Britain on the seas (Trotsky 1981).

Somewhat confusingly, “hegemony” is used in English translations of Lukács, referring to the rule of a class in power in the essay “Class Consciousness”—but readers should be warned that the original German is *Herrschaft*, not *Hegemonie* (Lukács 1971, 52–3, 65–6; 1970, 129, 148) —and to the “hegemony of large-scale capital” in his “Blum Theses” of the late 1920s (1972, 248).

The predominant sense of hegemony as the political leadership of an actual (or potential) governing class seems, on the whole, not to have changed until Gramsci’s prison writings began to appear in Italy in the late 1940s.⁶ Summing up, after taking into account linguistic and translation problems, it is clear that the germ of the idea that was to become “hegemony” in his prison reflections was current among communists in the turbulent atmosphere of the 1920s.

**Hegemony: The Working Class in the Metropolis and the Colonies**

After the Russian Revolution, including the period Gramsci spent in Russia, other important subjects were discussed and decisions taken within the International connected with the relationship between proletarian and peasant forces. These included the problems at a world level of burgeoning nationalism and the growth of anti-imperialist movements. In determining where alliances were advisable and where lines of distinction and demarcation were to be drawn, important issues regarding what constitutes the hegemony of the proletariat were posed. In this context, the word seems to have gained some international currency so that in a speech on his return from the Fifth Comintern Congress, the Scottish communist Bob Stewart could assert the need to “establish the complete hegemony of the working class by linking the workers of the colonies with the workers of this country” (in

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6. A rider has to be added here. Maurice Dobb uses the word in a volume first published in 1946 but whose gestation dates back to the mid-1920s (Dobb 1967, 13, 106, 144, 155, 156, 385). The reference on page 13 to challenges to hegemony has a particularly Gramscian ring (cf. the section of this paper on the starting point for hegemony), and an indirect influence due to Piero Sraffa cannot be excluded since Sraffa, with whom Dobb collaborated on the former’s edition of Ricardo, received in Cambridge copies of all Gramsci’s letters to his sister-in-law directly from her, including those of spring 1932 on Croce that use *egemonia* explicitly.
Murphy et al. 1924, 9). He apparently felt no need to simplify his language by using a gloss for “hegemony,” presumably meaning “political leadership,” thus providing a hint that the word was comprehensible to his politicized audience albeit maybe not in everyday use even among party leaders.

The successful resolution of relations between workers in the metropolitan and in the colonial countries runs through the Comintern debates throughout the 1920s, including those at the 1928 Sixth Congress. While Gramsci was at that time already imprisoned, some comments on the positions adopted up to and including the Congress (naturally from a fascist viewpoint), and even direct quotes from some Congress resolutions, were included in articles that attracted his attention (Q5889; Gramsci 1995, 118; 1996, 343–4, citing Gabrielli 1929: 375–84). Inklings thus trickled through to him of the substance of the Congress debate, whose concluding resolution on the colonies declared that in bourgeois-democratic revolutions the “basic strategical aim of the Communist movement” was “the hegemony of the proletariat” (The Revolutionary Movement in the Colonies 1929, 26; emphasis in original), and that, without this, “an organic part of which is the leading role of the Communist Party, the bourgeois-democratic revolution cannot be carried through to an end, not to speak of the socialist revolution” (21). “Hegemony,” as used in the resolution, involved allying with bourgeois forces and even “patriarchal and feudal chiefs and rulers” who opposed foreign oppressors, while not excluding struggle by the working class against them as the situation demanded, a conflictual relation not far from Gramsci’s concept.

Hegemony: The First Decade after the October Revolution

What emerges from the handful of publications cited is that the term “hegemony,” in its several guises, was current in the theoretical and policy elaborations of Communist leaders in the 1920s. From the instances quoted here, “hegemony” often seems used to indicate a leading role of the proletariat in class alliances involving consent, as contrasted with the “domination of the capitalist system” defined in the documents of the Sixth Congress of the International. The emergence of an independent working-class force in the colonies “directly opposing itself to the national bourgeoisie” led to a struggle with this latter “for hegemony in the national revolution as a whole” (The Revolutionary Movement in the Colonies 1929, 8, 20, 30). Why a minority can dominate ideologically did not seem widely discussed except in the work of individuals like Lukács; the fallback position, not further developed, seems to have been Marx’s dictum that the dominant ideas of an epoch are those of the ruling class. Just how this may be challenged is a key area of Gramsci’s prison reflections.

7. Stewart was important especially in the first two decades of the British party. He was British CP representative in Moscow in 1923–4, then acting Party General Secretary in 1925 when twelve top leaders were jailed on trumped-up charges. He himself was arrested three days into the general strike of May 1926.
The documents of the various Bolsheviks cited here suggest, schematically as may be, the following breakdown to be plausible. For Stalin, “hegemony of the proletariat” is “proletarian leadership of the masses” (Stalin 1934, 361–2, on successive lines). Trotsky uses the term across various contexts, including its original, ancient Greek one of military leadership, and, like Gramsci, recognizes the necessary role in the exercise of hegemony of what he calls the intelligentsia, here at times exaggerating somewhat. In his appreciation of Lenin, Bukharin uses the term “hegemony” very widely in the context of building alliances and, indeed, his biographer claims, probably relying on positions such as those of Bukharin’s 1925 booklet, that, going beyond the political, he “hoped for Bolshevik ‘hegemony’ in economic, cultural and ideological life” (Cohen 1971, 208). However, there is no clear indication that anyone, apart from Lenin himself, gives the term a meaning extending beyond a synonym for “political leadership.” In all this, from summer 1922 to autumn 1923, Gramsci was in Russia and abreast, health permitting, of writings, debates, and developments as a member of the Comintern Executive and delegate at its Fourth Congress. Shortly afterward, indeed, the word “hegemony” appears in the letters he wrote to the Italian party from Vienna, before his election to Parliament, the concept being subsequently elaborated on and having its contours sharpened in the Prison Notebooks.

The Crocean Input

Besides Marxist and other leftist sources, an important and quite different type of input consisted in the idealist philosophy of Benedetto Croce, who functioned for Gramsci rather like Hegel did for Marx. Just as Marx had to stand Hegel’s dialectic on its head in order to extract its rational kernel, Gramsci had to reinterpret certain aspects of Croce’s discourse in order to translate them into his own paradigm of the philosophy of praxis.

And it is one element in particular of Croce’s speculative philosophy—his concept of “ethico-political history”—that is indeed translated by Gramsci for use in his own paradigm of the philosophy of praxis as a basis for the notion of the expansion of hegemony, especially after a successful revolution. Gramsci draws specifically on two of Croce’s essays from the first half of the 1920s, which introduce “ethico-political history” viewed as the history of “moral or civil life,” the history of the complex of moral institutions in the broadest sense, as opposed to histories that consider “economic life as the substantive reality and moral life as an appearance,” or “merely military and diplomatic” ones (Croce 1946, 67–77, especially 67, 71–2, 125–30). For Gramsci, Croce’s “ethico-political history” represented merely “an arbitrary and mechanical hypostasis of the moment of hegemony, of political leadership, of consent in the life and development of the State and civil society.” This side of history was not, however, excluded by the philosophy of praxis which “in its most recent stage of development consists precisely in asserting the moment of hegemony as essential to the concept of the State and in attaching ‘full weight’ to the cultural factor, to cultural activity, to the necessity for a cultural front alongside the merely economic and political ones” (Q10I§7; Gramsci 1995, 343, 345). Where
Gramsci differs from Croce is in his refusal to reduce history to “ethico-political history”; this is amplified a few pages later in the observation that Croce completely neglects the moment of force in history, essential instead in the formation of a state. Is it possible, Gramsci asks rhetorically, to conceive of nineteenth-century European history without “an organic treatment of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars” or “without dealing with the struggles of the Risorgimento” in Italy? By leaving out the moment when one system of social relations disintegrates and another is established, Crocean history becomes “nothing more than a fragment of history” which, in the European case, was, in a phrase that Gramsci borrows from Vincenzo Cuoco, the “‘passive’ aspect of the great revolution which began in France in 1789,” making its effects felt right up to 1871 by “a ‘reformist’ corrosion.”

On Italy he adds that the hegemonic system was maintained “and the forces of military and civil coercion kept at the disposal of the traditional ruling classes” (Q10189; Gramsci 1995, 348–50). His well-known generalization of this is that hegemony is consent backed up by coercion: that is, in a classical parliamentary regime, “the ‘normal’ exercise of hegemony ... is characterised by the combination of force and consent, which balance each other reciprocally, without force predominating excessively over consent” (Q13537; Gramsci 1971, 80 n. 49). Gramsci takes one term of Croce’s discourse but radically alters it to render it compatible with his own paradigm—that is, to translate it, analogous to the operation he carries out on Cuoco’s “passive revolution” factor.

The Stimuli Provided by Machiavelli

Machiavelli’s “Centaur”

The combination of coercion and consent within hegemony can also quite evidently be traced to Machiavelli, whose centaur, “semi-animal, semi-man,” indicates “that a prince must know how to use both natures, and that one without the other is not durable” (Machiavelli 1950, 64). This dual nature represents for Gramsci “the levels of force and consent, authority and hegemony, violence and civilization, of the individual moment and the universal moment (‘Church’ and ‘State’), of agitation and propaganda, of tactics and strategy etc” (Q13514; Gramsci 1971, 170, whose first draft, Q8586, explicitly refers to Croce’s “Church and State” essay; see Croce 1946, 125–30). This description comes very close to his metaphorical one of Jacobins, “imposing themselves” on adversaries (force: see Q1544 and Q19524; Gramsci 1992, 147 and 1971, 77, respectively) at the same time that they built consent by stimulating the “active intervention of the great popular masses as a factor of social

8. This “‘passive’ aspect” is taken by Gramsci from Cuoco, the Neapolitan patriot and leading member of the short-lived Parthenopean Republic (1799) and, as modified, used fundamentally to mean a ruling class’s tactic of conceding just enough from above to head off demands for radical measures.

9. This brief subsection of the present article summarizes, without attempting to argue fully, the positions developed by Boothman (2002, 102–19, especially 107–11, and, in a slightly revised form, in Boothman 2004, 111–36).
progress” (Gramsci 1995, 341). Indeed, Gramsci portrays Machiavelli as a Jacobin *avant la lettre* (Q8§35).

**Machiavelli: Negotiation and Language**

Benedetto Fontana has taken the argument regarding the Machiavellian source of hegemony one step forward by noting that, for a stable state, Machiavelli required that the “Prince” and the people should negotiate and share common goals. The precondition for this is that individuals should be converted from a “multitude” (*multitudine sciolta* in Machiavelli’s phrase), in which each member looks to his or her private interests or *bene particulare*, into a collective subject or a “people” (*populo*) with a public interest or *bene commune*: that is, the people are created as a potentially hegemonic force in a “public space” where the moment of force is transcended through dialogue and agreement is reached between prince and people, leaders and led (Fontana 1993, 130–1). In contemporary terms, this means that the sides come together as equals with, for Gramsci, an interchange of personnel between the “prince-as-party” and the people so that, tendentially, substantial differences become erased and fusion between them is obtained. Gramsci explains that “in the hegemonic system there exists democracy between the leading groups and the led to the extent to which the development of the economy and hence legislation … favors the molecular passage from the led groups to the leading [sc. “governing”—DB] ones” (Q8§191): that is, promotion of individuals of the subaltern classes into the ruling class, analogous, as he says, to Roman citizenship being possible for conquered peoples. Making the link back to Machiavelli, without the “public space” that allows dialogue and, as seen here for Gramsci, formation of a collective leadership, the alternative for a nondemocratic leadership based purely on force is, according to Machiavelli’s *Discourses*, to “build fortresses” and “keep a good army always ready to take the field” or to “scatter, disorganize and destroy” the people as a collectivity and reduce them to individuals (1950, 363). However, “to hold one’s own country, fortresses are injurious,” he concludes (368).

Machiavelli’s transformation of *multitudine* into *populo*, by way of a “public space” for arriving at a common position, finds its equivalent in Gramsci’s striking metaphor of an orchestra whose single instruments produce a cacophony in tuning up, “yet these warm-ups are the necessary condition for the orchestra to come to life as a single ‘instrument’”; again, unless people are bound by a sense of responsibility (Machiavelli’s *populo*), they can act like a crowd (the *multitudine*) forced to take shelter “under a roof during a downpour,” a situation in which “individualism not only is not overcome but is driven to an extreme through the certainty of impunity and irresponsibility” (Q15§13 and Q7§12; Gramsci 1995, 16, 275). In this transformation, leaders cannot resort to old-style rhetoric and flights of oratory but must instead convince through reason (Q11§41 and Q10II41ii; Gramsci 1995, 297–8, 406, respectively; also Q11§25; Gramsci 1971, 429). Further, while “the popular element ‘feels’ but does not always know or understand, the intellectual element ‘knows’ but does not always understand and in particular does not always ‘feel.’” Gramsci instead looks forward to the situation in which relations between “intellectuals and
people-nation, between the leaders and the led, between the rulers and the ruled” become cohesive to the extent that “feeling-passion becomes understanding and thence knowledge” (Q11§67; Gramsci 1971, 418, cited in Fontana 2000, 305). Only then, as Gramsci continues, can the relationship be “one of representation” with the “exchange of individual elements,” thus one “brings into being the shared life ... one creates the ‘historical bloc.’”

The language input in this aspect of hegemony is not to be underestimated. One of Machiavelli’s models was the Greek philosopher Isocrates whose dictum, logos hegemon panton, or “speech and language are the ruler and guide of all things” (Fontana 1993, 126), is found in Machiavelli’s insistence on language as the medium for reaching agreement (pace Wittgenstein). This approach then assumes even greater importance in Gramsci, for whom speech and language are the principal means for realizing a culture.

The University Linguistic Input

In various ways, then, language informs Gramsci’s reflections on and development of the concept of hegemony. But the role of language in hegemony does not stop there. In a path-breaking book, the Italian linguist Franco Lo Piparo examined in depth the dialect/national language question, both as it transpires in the Notebooks and in terms of how linguists studied by Gramsci at university had considered it, in order to show how it feeds into the subaltern/hegemonic relationship.

Indeed, the notion of “linguistic hegemony” or “cultural hegemony,” with hegemony often replaced by near synonyms such as “prestige” or “primacy” and even “dictatorship” (sic), was fairly widespread among these linguists (Lo Piparo 1979, 106-8). One in particular, Grazia dio Isaia Ascoli, had taken issue with Alessandro Manzoni, Italy’s foremost nineteenth-century novelist and president of the parliamentary national language commission, which concluded that this language should be created by teaching, on a national scale, the standard Florentine dialect. Ascoli, on the other hand, “more historicist” than Manzoni, did “not believe in cultural hegemonies by decree, i.e. not supported by a deeper and more necessary national function” (Q23§40; Gramsci 1985, 173); or, according to the first draft, did “not believe in linguistic hegemonies enacted by legal decree, without a supporting economic-cultural structure” (Q1§73; Gramsci 1992, 179). For Gramsci, after the decay of medieval Florence, Florentine as a national language had become “the language of an exclusive caste which has no contact with a historical spoken language” (Q1§73; Gramsci 1992, 179). Indeed, on unification, Italy, divided linguistically into scores of dialects, numbered less than 3 percent of speakers of the Florentine that solely among the “educated classes” functioned as a national language. In other words, Manzoni’s purely rationalistic approach to language reform represented linguistic “force” rather than “consent” in using state means to impose from above a linguistic “Florentine hegemony,” regardless of both the absence of trained personnel to teach the language and even local variations around Florence, sometimes closer to dialect forms found elsewhere. Here one may detect the influence of Francesco De Sanctis, Italy’s greatest literary historian and critic and
minister of education in the (bourgeois) left government subsequent to that of the “historic right” of Manzoni’s reforms: dialects were linguistically positive factors for pupils if due attention were paid to the elements of similarity between them and the budding national language (Dardano 1984, 143).

Here Gramsci is dealing with what, in terminology borrowed from Ascoli, may be called “substrata” of the population and their use of language, a position that foreshadows sociolinguistic ideas of class language developed only decades later. Gramsci’s full-fledged position sees language as the mode of expression of the culture characteristic of a class or other group of the population (cf. Ives 2004, especially 33-6), different linguistic codes thus being one aspect of the conflictual relationships between subaltern and hegemonic cultures. Here, in his position as a speaker of the Sard language, but also through his contacts with the cultures and dialects from all over Italy present among Turin's automobile workers, Gramsci had to confront the dialects and minority language versus national language question. For him language and culture, including the culture on which a politics is based, are more than just closely linked: in one way, as Dante Germino remarks, “in a vital sense language is politics, for it affects the way people think about power” (1990, 27) and, in other ways, as Gramsci observes, language is to be “understood as an element of culture,” each language constituting “an integral conception of the world” (Q3576 and Q55123; Gramsci 1996, 74, 366). The whole question is summed up in Gramsci’s very last notebook where, yet again, he brings together language, culture, and politics, concluding that “every time the question of language surfaces,” other questions—most notably that of the reorganization of “cultural hegemony”—are being posed (Q2983; Gramsci 1985, 183-4).

Lo Piparo is right, then, to maintain that an important input to the subaltern/hegemonic relationship comes from the dialect/national language dyad. Dialect is generally limited to a narrow cross-section: usually but not always the subaltern classes and strata, Ascoli’s linguistic “substrata” here showing their influence. For Gramsci, dialect cannot deal with the grand themes of world culture for which a national language—with all its flexibility, depth, historical development, and capacity of expression—is needed. The overall conclusion to be drawn on language’s input to hegemony is that Gramsci is influenced partly by the linguists he studied at university but, as Fontana has shown, also by Machiavelli’s insistence, through Isocrates, on consent, characteristic of the human part of the centaur, through language as “ruler and guide of all things.”

The Main Sources of Hegemony

There can be no definitive word on the Gramscian concept and use of hegemony since, as with other concepts of his, first, it was in continual evolution and, second, it

10. As such he aided his linguistics professor, Giulio Matteo Bartoli, in comparative research on Latin-based languages. Discussion of the influence on Gramsci of Bartoli’s glottology course will appear in a forthcoming article in the proceedings of the International Gramsci Society’s 2007 conference.
assumes different contours according to the situation. What may be done when considering its principal uses in the Notebooks is to bear in mind the multiple origins of the concept, comparing when necessary the early uses with those found later on (i.e., in and after the central monographic Notebooks 10–13 on philosophy, on the intellectuals, and on Machiavelli), where the notion becomes more fleshed out. The present reconstruction suggests that the inputs to the concept include Marx, the Italian socialists, the early international communist movement, Croce, Machiavelli, and his linguistics studies including, in his words, the language question, bound up as it is with the culture of societal groups and classes, and, as such, always posing the subaltern/hegemonic relationship. Last but by no means least comes his own reading of history and social reality, a key factor here being Jacobinism, which is extended metaphorically by Gramsci from the French revolutionary movement to other experiences. The examples quoted here from Lenin’s practice illustrate the fact that hegemony’s range goes wider than the merely political field. One of Gramsci’s central achievements is to have developed and woven together all these various strands of hegemony for its innovatory application on the civil, social, national, and international political, cultural, and economic planes.

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