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## The aesthetic politics of hegemony

### Abstract

*In this article, it is argued that Gramsci's conception of hegemony ought to be located not simply in the theory and praxis of Leninism but also in Gramsci's reading of Machiavelli. By situating such a reading in relation to Nietzsche's notion of will to power, it is possible to defend Gramsci's political theory against some of the criticisms leveled by those who decry the "hegemony of hegemony". Such a reading of the concept of hegemony enables us to understand the idea of "common sense" as oriented towards the distribution and redistribution of the sensible.*

### Keywords

*Aesthetics, Gramsci, Hegemony*

### 1. Introduction

In the introduction to our book *Aesthetic Marx* (2017), Johan Hartle and I point out that there is one main problem with the Marxological approach to the aesthetic dimensions of Marx's writings: the classical understanding of the discipline of aesthetics that is presupposed by such exegetical approaches must also be interrogated. "Aesthetics" is normally understood as a philosophical discipline that concerns the conditions for the possibility of judgments of taste, as a specific rationality that maintains its own autonomy, its own purposeless purposiveness, against contending and competing the spheres of value (the epistemic, the moral), and that deals with normative criteria in order to evaluate forms of experience and artistic developments on

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their own terms. Marx cannot be said to unproblematically contribute to the discipline of “aesthetics” because aesthetics, as an independent discipline, does not go without saying for historical materialism. And a key reason for this is that while the dominant current within philosophical aesthetics, namely the Kantian, as suggested above, insists on the autonomy of the aesthetic (in Kant’s case, obviously, built upon transcendental grounds) rooted in certain normative understandings of the human subject, historical materialism relates the aesthetic and all other cultural phenomena, at least in the final instance, to the human metabolism with nature, historically mediated as it is, and all that this implies for the totality of social life. In this sense the discipline of aesthetics might just as well be proverbial “face drawn in sand”, eroded by the further development of historically situated social relations. Indeed, for this very reason, this book, too, does not only (and not even so much) want to confirm the historically-generated understanding of aesthetics as it is. In fact, this Marxological tendency has been attributed to the attempts of second generation – and, indeed, Second International – Marxists who were trying to integrate Marx into the bourgeois canon. Its focus is – please note the difference! – on the aesthetic, the historical organization of the senses, of objectivity (*Gegenständlichkeit*), of the bodily dimensions of the organization of living labor, and of the history of subjectivity.

The “aesthetic” in this specific sense must be understood, as well, in relation to the formative or form-giving capacity of subjectivity, or what Marx called sensuous labor (*sinnliche Arbeit*) in a line that can be traced via Fichte, Kant, and Leibniz all the way back to Machiavelli and the Florentine tradition of aesthetic thought. For Marx, it was through the dynamic relation between subject and object, the human “metabolism with nature”, that the senses, themselves, could be said to be shaped by “natural-historical” processes. By understanding Marx’s thinking as comprised of determinate critiques of three diverse, overlapping, and contradictory fields, namely philosophy, political economy, and politics, in *Aesthetic Marx* we claim that Marx unearths the mutually destabilizing relation between the discipline of aesthetics, in which he had a profound and abiding early interest, on the one hand, and the aesthetic, as a historically determinate organization of the senses, on the other (Gandesha and Hartle 2017: XIII-IV).

Arguably, in his attempt to think through the specificity of the political, beyond the economism of the prevailing Marxism of the Sec-

ond International, particularly that of Karl Kautsky, Antonio Gramsci draws heavily upon the political philosophy of Niccolò Machiavelli. Indeed, Gramsci even refers to the Italian Communist Party, which he helped to found, as the “Modern Prince”. In what follows, I want to make some remarks upon the specifically aesthetic dimensions of the concept of “hegemony” in Gramsci via Machiavelli and Nietzsche. I first (1) sketch out a relatively non-controversial account of hegemony in Gramsci – his “elaboration of the Bolshevik thesis of *gegemoniya* into the qualitatively new theory of *egemonia*”; (2) suggest how this account doesn’t simply turn on the translation to the Russian experience to the markedly different set of conditions in Italy and the West more generally, but is also based on a crucial interpretation of Machiavelli’s account of “virtú”; and (3), that in this interpretation of this key Machiavellian concept, Friedrich Nietzsche helps to clarify the relation between aesthetics and power. For both Machiavelli and Nietzsche, aesthetics and power converge in the way in which political action is to be understood as a kind of “form-giving” activity. I will close with some thoughts on how the concept of hegemony might be brought into a productive dialogue with Rancière’s notion of aesthetic politics.

## 2. *The concept of hegemony*

As is well known, the concept of hegemony arose out of the experience of the Russian Revolution and was initially used by Lenin to describe a relationship between the proletariat and the peasantry in Russia characterized by political leadership. Given that, as Marx put it in the *Eighteenth Brumaire*, the peasantry forms a class “much as potatoes in a sack form a sack of potatoes” (Marx and Engels 1979: 187), it was of vital importance, in so agrarian a society as Russia, that the peasantry be actively mobilized by the Russian proletariat against the Czarist regime. So, for Lenin, the Russian proletariat would play a *hegemonic* role in the revolutionary struggle assuming leadership *vis-à-vis* this peasantry. It was this that, in the view of Gramsci, enabled Lenin to forge a “Revolution against *Das Kapital*”. What Gramsci meant was that, in contrast to Marx’s understanding of the inner contradictions of capital, in particular the contradiction between the forces and relations of production, which would of themselves produce a mass working class movement large enough and therefore

powerful enough to overthrow the rule of capital, here a revolution was made in the most backward country on the very edge of Europe based upon Lenin's perspicacious reading of the limits and possibilities of historical contingencies.

Gramsci takes up Lenin's idea of hegemony, develops it and applies it to the similar yet also very different Italian reality. Italian society is marked, above all, according to the Sardinian, by capital's logic of unequal development between a rapidly industrializing north in which logics of secularization and rationalization were proceeding apace and the relatively stagnant, agrarian south characterized by quasi-Feudal relations in which the Church maintained its centrality of place. Despite the *Risorgimento* or the unification of Italy in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Gramsci saw the real unification of Italy as a task yet to be completed and could only be done, in his view, under the aegis of the proletariat's "national-popular" leadership to the end of creating a new "historical bloc". It was to this end that he deepened and developed Lenin's conception of hegemony both as a political philosophical concept beyond its recognizable form, with certain anthropological assumptions about the cognitive capacities of human beings, the role of culture and civic associations in public life, as well as a strategic idea that could and should be put into action in the pursuit of constituting a national-popular will.

Gramsci hence translated the Russian term *gegemonia* into the Italian: *egemonia* (Thomas 2011: 137). As already suggested, Gramsci breaks with the economism of the Second Socialist International and emphasizes the relative autonomy of the political and in this he anticipates Althusser who, ultimately, arrives at a post-Marxist position insofar as he argues that in the last instance the economic determines the ideological and the political but that the "lonely hour of the last instance never comes" (Althusser 1969: XX). In contrast, Gramsci remains very much within the ambit of Marxism. However, his *innovation* is to show that the movement beyond trade union consciousness relates to what he calls the "cathartic" movement beyond the narrow sectoral interests of workers and "Trade-union consciousness" to a genuinely "ethico-political" moment. Gramsci describes this ethico-political moment in the following way:

A third moment is that in which one becomes conscious of the fact that one's own "corporate" interests, in their present and future development, go beyond the "corporate" confines – that is, they go beyond the confines of

the economic group – and they can and must become the interests of other subordinate groups. This is the most patently “political” phase, which marks the clear-cut transition from the structure to complex superstructures; it is the phase in which previously germinated ideologies come into contact and confrontation with one another, until only one of them – or, at least, a single combination of them – tends to prevail, to dominate, to spread across the entire field, bringing about, in addition to economic and political unity, intellectual and moral unity, not on a corporate but on a universal level: the hegemony of a fundamental social group over the subordinate groups. The state-government is seen as a group’s own organism for creating the favorable terrain for the maximum expansion of the group itself. But this development and this expansion are also viewed concretely as universal; that is, they are viewed as being tied to the interests of the subordinate groups, as a development of unstable equilibriums between the interests of fundamental groups and the interests of the subordinate groups in which the interests of the fundamental group prevail – but only up to a certain point; that is, without going quite as far as corporate economic selfishness. (Gramsci 1996: 179-80)

The concept of hegemony is based on a series of oppositions, some of which derive from Machiavelli on whom Gramsci draws more than Lenin, in thinking the specificity of the political. Central to such a thinking or a re-thinking was a set of Machiavellian distinctions, for example, between the “lion” and the “fox”, “coercion” and “consent”, “war of maneuver”, “war of position”, “state” and “civil society”, “good sense” and “common sense”, etc. Indeed, as Machiavelli argued in *The prince*, the regime based on both good arms and good laws, stood the best chance of withstanding the often chaotic forces of historical circumstance.

Through this set of oppositions, Gramsci wants to show the crucial role played by culture, philosophy, and world-views, in the establishment and maintenance of what he calls a given historical bloc or the conjunctural fusion of a given set of production relations and forces of production and political, cultural and legal relations. Gramsci is often interpreted – for example by Perry Anderson (2017) in his influential reading – as the thinker of the distinctive political and social realities of Western Europe as opposed to the conditions in Russia prior to October 1917. This is to say, in the former, the Czarist State was much more predominant in the maintenance of political order, while civil society (or that sphere independent of the state in which one finds a plurality of civil associations that engage activities that directly or indirectly buttress the given order or contest it) was relatively undeveloped or rudimentary. In the West, it was the opposite: here

civil society was preponderant insofar as consent (rather than coercion) was the basis of political order and this consent was secured through not just the kinds of volunteer organizations that Tocqueville sees as essential to liberty in *Democracy in America*, but also institutions such as the cultural industry that have the power to organize attitudes, perceptions, dispositions and, indeed, sensibility that can negate the negativity or opposition within society by constituting the basis for political consent. As Gramsci puts it:

In the East, the State was everything, civil society was primordial and gelatinous; in the West, there was a proper relation between state and civil society, and when the state tottered, a sturdy structure of civil society was immediately revealed. The State was just a forward trench; behind it stood a succession of sturdy fortresses and emplacements. (Gramsci 2007: 169)

It comes as little surprise, then, that Gramsci's theory of hegemony has, to say the least, been extremely influential leading to the project of the West European and North American New Left in building, after Budapest, Suez and Dien Bien Phu, what Stuart Hall calls an "anti-imperialist, democratic socialism" (Akomfrah 2013). It has also played a key role in the development of the strategy of the Italian Communist Party that Gramsci actually founded. The idea of hegemony would play a key role in the PCI's Eurocommunist strategy in the 1970s and 1980s. Such a strategy de-emphasizes the revolutionary overthrow of actually-existing democratic institutions and sought to build alliances, *hegemonic* alliances amongst "middle class" public sector workers, new social movements, environmentalists, gays and lesbians, etc., in support of their policies.

One could say that it was out of this experience of Eurocommunism as well as the changing structures of contemporary capitalist societies, particularly the decline of industrial working class, so dramatically exemplified by the victory of Margaret Thatcher over the Miners in the mid-1980's, that occasioned a final break with the Gramscian idea, already suggested by Eurocommunism, that it was the working class that ultimately was to play the leadership role in revolutionary, hegemonic politics. The broader de-industrialization of the West, the rise of the service sector and the increasing "feminization" of labour, added credence to the view that the working class could no longer be regarded, if ever it legitimately could have, as the privileged agent of historical transformation. Combined with the his-

torical experience of defeat in Paris in 1968, in which the PCF was not innocent, giving rise to what Lyotard was to call an “incredulity” or skepticism towards “meta-narratives”, there was a movement against the very idea that politics could be organized by the centrality of proletarian identity *à la* György Lukács.

This culminated in the extremely influential transformation of the concept of hegemony in the work of Ernesto Laclau who, already in his early work on Latin American populism in the mid- to late-1970’s, sought to displace the centrality of class to the hegemonic constructions of the people-power bloc opposition. It was in *Hegemony and socialist strategy*, co-authored with Chantal Mouffe in 1985, that Laclau seeks to understand hegemony as no longer articulated around class identity, but rather in terms of open-ended chains of equivalence of a multiplicity of irreducible struggles. It should also be said that the concept of hegemony was used in the British context as well (which was where Laclau was writing) by Hall to understand the rise of authoritarian populism in Britain via the use of, amongst other things, a politics of law and order which exploited the colonial legacy of Englishness to solidify the project of what we now refer to as “neoliberalism”. It was of course through the Birmingham Centre for Cultural Studies, established by Hall and Hoggart, that the concept of hegemony became key to a burgeoning field of Cultural Studies, one that showed convincingly the complex role played by culture in the production and reproduction of power within the fabric of everyday life.

After a period during which the concept of hegemony fell somewhat out of favour, perhaps displaced by other seemingly more promising theoretical vocabularies in the short interregnum constituted by the end of the short 20<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup>, the concept of hegemony is back on the agenda. For example, its specifically Marxist, indeed Leninist, pedigree has been re-affirmed by Peter Thomas in a book entitled *The Gramscian moment* (2007) to suggest that rather than being oppositions, consent and coercion are two faces of the same exercise of power. This means that, unlike previous interpretations that have emphasized the “war of position” in Western liberal democracies, Thomas suggests the equal importance of the moment of coercion, the “war of manoeuvre”, here as well.

Three important contributions to challenging the privileged role of the concept of hegemony or what has been called the “hegemony of hegemony” (Day 2005) within the vocabulary of radical politics are

books by the subaltern studies social historian Ranajit Guha, sociologist Richard Day and Latin Americanist Jon Beasley-Murray. All three contributions situate their attempt break with the conception of hegemony in the transformed historical circumstances of late capitalist modernity.

In the midst of the crisis of the Indian state Guha produced a book entitled *Dominance without hegemony* (1997), in which he seeks to show the difference between the role of Western bourgeoisie, particularly in England and France through the revolutions of 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries respectively, to mobilize the nascent proletariat and peasantry in order to successfully challenge the power of the feudal aristocracy, and the post-colonial bourgeoisie, which, as the title of the book suggests, was only able to attain dominance without hegemony insofar as the nationalist elites represented quintessentially by the Congress Party were unable to constitute a shared national identity and culture. So, Guha's aim is to suggest the limitations of universalizing the historical experience of the West to the rest of the world in general and India in particular. Although, of course, if he had paid more close attention to Gramsci's assessment of the French Revolution he would have found a critique of Italian bourgeoisie located in the communes that in some ways parallels Guha's own history of India.

Similarly, in a book provocatively entitled *Gramsci is dead* (2005), anarchist Richard Day argues that the need to break with the predominance of the concept of hegemony (the "hegemony of hegemony") can be located in the Seattle and Genoa anti-globalization struggles. What is required in this transformed historical constellation is no longer a universalizing political project that would seek, ultimately, to capture state power, through a war of manoeuvre after the longer drawn out war of position within civil society, but rather a withdrawal from organized politics via an emphasis on decentralized communities that would not so much relate with one another in terms of "unity" (as implied by the concept "hegemony") as "affinity". So, against the "hegemony of hegemony" Day posits the "affinity of affinity". This argument for affinity is entirely compatible with the emphasis in identity politics on "allyship" (as opposed to solidarity) and, as Alexander Reid Ross has shown in his book *Against the fascist creep* (2017), demonstrates uncomfortable similarities with forms of White supremacist forms of libertarianism, anarchism and syndicalism.



Furthermore, John Beasley-Murray grounds his conception of post-hegemony in *fin-de-siècle* discussions of post-ideology and posthistoire, reflective of Deleuze's understanding of a shift from disciplinary societies to "societies of control". Key to understanding Beasley-Murray's idea of post-hegemony is the way in which he picks up on Deleuze's and Hardt and Negri's philosophical shift via Hegel to Spinoza, from rational discourse and negativity to neo-Spinozan tropes of emotion, affect and multitude (2003).

The key to all three displacements of the "hegemony of hegemony" is a withdrawal from politics as typically understood as a form of contestation for state power: in other words, a certain kind of "autonomism". In Guha's account it is the irreducible particularity of the East whose logic of development and culture was radically different from that of the bourgeois experience of Europe in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. According to Vivek Chibber (2013), such an argument rests on a fundamental misunderstanding of the difference between the real versus formal subsumption of labour power in the Indian context. In Day's account, the aim should be the establishment of a decentralized network of autonomous communities that share no common cultural horizon and exist only in a relation of "affinity" with each other. Similarly, in Beasley-Murray, drawing upon Hardt and Negri, it is a "multitude of singularities" that exists in a condition of "exodus" from Empire, that supersedes Gramsci's ultimately Hegelian understanding of the relation between particular and universal, between people and sovereign power.

What I wish to do is to sketch out another way of beginning to conceptualize "hegemony" which would avoid some of the pitfalls of the aforementioned approaches which either, as we have seen, seek to bid *adieu* to the concept of hegemony or provide it with a redoubled Leninist foundation. In contrast, what I shall try to do is to suggest that "hegemony" is best understood as an "aesthetic" concept. Hegemonic struggles are struggles over the very shape of a given form of "common sense" and such common sense – or what Kant called *sensus communis* from the Greek words *koine aisthesis* – must be understood literally as referring to the organization and deployment of the senses themselves. This is what Jacques Rancière refers to as the "distribution of the sensible".

It shall be my argument – schematic as it is – that none of these critiques of the concept of hegemony sufficiently appreciate its aesthetic dimension. And by "aesthetic" I mean specifically relating to

sensuous perception as indicated by the Greek root *aisthesis*. Hegemony, as we shall see, indeed involves consent as opposed to coercion, and the principal site of such consent is in the sphere of civil society as opposed to the repressive state apparatus. Such consent is rightly understood to be secured not by violence or force, but by persuasion. Now this is not to be understood rationalistically as, for example, both Day and especially Beasley-Murray understand it. It is not simply to be understood in terms of, say, a Habermasian “unforced force of better argument”. While rational discourse, the appeal to shared (self-)interests of a given a plurality of classes and/or social movements is indeed entailed by the concept of hegemony, I would suggest that it also entails a moment of “world disclosure”, that the idea of hegemony implies a prior organization or distribution of the senses.

So, before I turn to a discussion of Gramsci’s “Machiavellian moment”, I want to just provide a discussion of the concept of hegemony itself from a section of the *Prison notebooks* entitled the *Modern prince*. It is here that Gramsci discusses the organic and conjunctural crises of the social formation as well as the resulting “balance of forces” within which hegemonic politics are to be situated. It is significant that here Gramsci enters into one of his most extended discussions of Machiavelli – not surprising given that this section of the *Prison notebooks* is about the modern prince – an understanding of the Communist Party conceived in explicitly Machiavellian terms.

Let me now turn to the next section *Gramsci’s Machiavellian moment*.

### 3. Gramsci’s “Machiavellian moment”

The concept of hegemony, in my view, must be understood less in relation to the Bolshevik experience than in relation to Gramsci’s reading of Machiavelli. Machiavelli’s transformation of the terms of political discourse, his famous contribution to the overturning of the *vita contemplativa* or life of contemplation through the *vita activa* or active life, is key to Gramsci’s understanding of hegemony. This is so both a kind of form-giving activity (*poesis*) as well as a certain kind of sensual perception of the world (*aisthesis*). Nietzsche elaborates such a transformation which he calls “will to power” (*Wille zur Macht*). Will to power, I shall suggest below, anticipates the concep-

tion of hegemony insofar as it is the linguistic-cultural stabilization of sensation in intelligible, meaningful structures.

It comes as little surprise, then, that Gramsci is led into a consideration of the significance of Machiavelli for whom the question of the conditions of agency, as J.G.A. Pocock has shown in his landmark study, is the key question. What Pocock calls the “Machiavellian moment” can be understood in a three-fold sense: it is a study of Machiavelli in his own historical context; this moment, in Pocock’s view, “asserted that certain enduring patterns in the temporal consciousness of medieval and early modern Europeans led it to the presentation of the republic, and the citizen’s participation in it, as constituting a problem in self-understanding” with which Machiavelli sought to come to terms; and the way in which Machiavelli’s diagnosis of the problem then transcended its own local context and influenced the Anglo-American republican discourse in general, and political economy in particular (see Pocock 1975). Gramsci, incidentally, likens Machiavelli to William Petty, the so-called founder of political economy.

This is the case, precisely because in his own political theory Machiavelli was himself trying to effect a decisive break with the legacy of Platonic philosophy, which, as Hannah Arendt (1958) has indicated, represented not so much a political philosophy *per se* as a philosophy *contra* politics. So, Platonism embodies the aspiration to “make the world safe” for philosophy by mastering the inherent contingency, novelty and sheer plurality of political life. Philosophy, more precisely *metaphysics*, is to lead the way beyond the political realm and to fashion it into a harmonious whole that mirrors the justice (*dike*) of divine *logos*. Platonism takes the form of a dynamic synthesis between the Parmenidean and Heraclitan conceptions of being as enduring presence, on the one hand, and being as constant change or flux, on the other.

The Platonic understanding of the relation between being and becoming is taken over by St Augustine (2003) in the opposition between the *civitas dei* and the *civitas terranea*, the City of God and the City of Man. It was precisely the terms of political discourse established by the Christian appropriation of Platonism that Renaissance Humanism sought to confront, none more so than Machiavelli, according to Pocock. Indeed, Machiavelli’s abiding concern in both *The prince* and the *Discourses on Livy* with the nature of the new prince, with a newly created political order, mirrors his own innovation in political thinking. So, Machiavelli announces his break with Plato’s and

Aristotle's ethical account of politics when he states in chapter XV of *The prince* that political thinking should be based on "what is done", which is to say, historical accounts of exemplary events and actors, rather than "what should be done" or on "imagined republics and principalities" (Machiavelli 1998: 61). To answer "what is to be done", he looks back at history – in a manner not unlike Nietzsche in his *Second untimely meditation* – neither for its own sake nor for the sake of monumentalizing a given regime, but rather with a critical view to illuminating problems of his own, *pace* Pocock, historical "moment".

What tends to be overlooked in his break with the Ancients is the way in which Machiavelli substitutes a fundamentally *aesthetic* category for an *ethical* one. This I take to being central to the inversion of the relation between the *vita activa* and the *vita contemplativa*. As Aristotle argues in book X of the *Nicomachean ethics*, the highest virtue is the contemplation of the order (*logos*) inherent in the cosmos (Aristotle 2001: 7-18). The birth of modernity entails the inversion of this relation, where action comes to displace contemplation as in, for example, the Copernican-Galilean revolution and the rise of modern scientific method. In place, therefore, of *arete* (ἀρετή) or virtue, which is, of course, an ethical category, signifying the mean between two extremes in activity or disposition, Machiavelli substitutes the inherently aesthetic concept of "virtú". The word expresses the essence of the "Machiavellian moment" insofar as it signifies the fragility and instability of the political community that must be *stabilized* by virtuosic or exemplary action just as, as we shall soon see, image-metaphor-concept serves, for the young Nietzsche, to stabilize the dizzying nervous sense data of the flux and flow of the world. "Virtú" itself must be understood in relation to the idea of "Fortuna" or historical circumstance, which itself can no longer be understood in terms of a cyclical conception of history, as the rise and fall of finite political regimes, but rather in linear terms as the very possibility of a new (bourgeois) social order. According to Miguel Vatter (2014), the fundamental axis of Machiavelli's thought turns on the opposition between "form", on the one hand, and "event", on the other.

It should not surprise us, then, that Machiavelli's fundamental concern in *The prince* is the advent of the new political regime. Indeed, recalling our previous discussion of Platonic philosophy, "Fortuna" can be understood in terms of the flux-like contingency and circumstance of being, yet "virtú" cannot be seen to correspond to the Parmenidean understanding of being as self-same permanence as

manifested in *Eidos* or forms and the erotic relations between these regions. Indeed, just as Heraclitus uses the metaphor of the river to suggest an account of being as perpetual change and transformation that, at times, can threaten to rush out of control and destroy those who draw too near, Machiavelli also uses this metaphor to suggest the unpredictable, contingent and potentially destructive nature of "Fortuna". "Virtú" is the ability, through foresight and decisive, at times violent, action to keep her in check. It is the ability to forestall or at least to delay the decay and decline of a given political regime, which the Greeks saw as inevitable. More specifically, form-giving activity, for Machiavelli, consisted in building fortifications in advance to be able to channel and control the de-territorializing temporal flux and flow of ceaseless becoming suggested by Heraclitus' master-signifier. In a passage that will be of decisive significance, I think, for Gramsci, Machiavelli states at the beginning of chapter XXV that

Nonetheless, so that our free will not be eliminated, I judge that it might be true that fortune is arbiter of half of our actions, but also that she leaves the other half, or close to it, for us to govern. And I liken her to one of these violent rivers which, when they become enraged, flood the plains, ruin the trees and the buildings, lift earth from this part, drop in another; each person flees before them, everyone yields to their impetus without being able to hinder them in any regard. And although they are like this, it is not as if men, when times are quiet, could not provide for them with dikes and dams so that when they rise later, either they go by a canal or their impetus is neither so wanton nor so damaging. (Machiavelli 1998: 98)

Elsewhere, Machiavelli understands the construction of these structures in terms of establishing good foundations without which the prince is "certain to be ruined". And "the principal foundations that all states have, new ones as well as old or mixed, are good laws and good arms" (Machiavelli 1998: 48). As I shall suggest below, this notion of building "dykes and banks" so as to forestall the chaotic flux and flow of history informs Gramsci's understanding of hegemony as consisting in the building the kinds of what he calls "trenches, earthworks and fortifications" of a given historic bloc within civil society insofar as they constitute "common sense" or an unquestioned set of assumptions through which the world is perceived. Common sense has its own historical conditions of possibility *yet comes to function* like a categorial, transcendental schema. Indeed, the very recognition of the historical nature of the transcendental is the hallmark of what

Gramsci calls “good sense” as opposed to the “common sense” constitutive of a given hegemonic bloc.

What I wish to emphasize here and what becomes so attractive in Machiavelli for Nietzsche is the Florentine’s unequivocal anti-Platonism. Platonism is oriented towards a disciplining of affect expressed in the conception of justice as a harmonic ordering of parts within the whole in which the body, the passions and appetites are subordinated to reason. Machiavelli, in contrast, argues in a notorious passage in which he explicitly states that “*Fortuna* is a woman” (see Pitkin 1999) that the prince had better be “impetuous than cautious, because fortune is a woman; and it is necessary, if one wants to hold her down, to beat her and strike her down. [...] she is the friend of the young, because they are less cautious, more ferocious, and command her with more audacity” (Machiavelli 1998: 101).

Machiavelli’s key divergence from Plato and Aristotle, as I have already suggested, then, lies specifically in the inversion of the *vita activa* and the *vita contemplativa*. For the Greeks, the contemplative life was elevated over action because being was understood as the enduring presence (*eidos*) that either, as in the case of Plato, stood in distinction from the sensual world of appearances, or an enduring presence, via fourfold causality, within that world of appearances as in Aristotle. With Machiavelli this changes quite dramatically in ways, as I shall suggest shortly, that are both magnified and developed by Nietzsche’s notion of *Wille zur Macht*. With Machiavelli’s elaboration of the concept of “virtú”, action comes to be elevated over and against the life devoted to quiet contemplation. If for Plato matter was but an imperfect copy (*eidolon*) of an unchanging, eternal form (*eidos*), or, in Aristotle, as always already *en-formed* via the four causes outlined in his *Metaphysics*, for Machiavelli, *virtú* was the capacity to engage in form-bestowing activity.

Indeed, in his discussion in chapter VI, which is entitled *Of new principalities that are acquired through one’s own arms and virtue*, Machiavelli cites as the “greatest” exemplars of such founding of new dominions “Moses, Cyrus, Romulus, Theseus and the like”. They are such because rather than simply relying on “good fortune” they relied on their “virtú”: their impetuous, affective, form-giving capacity. It is Moses who is the true exemplar as, according to Machiavelli, “he had so great a Master”. “Virtú”, in other words, is a *quasi-divine* power, now understood now longer as an alien but as a truly human power, to found and ground political regimes. So, Machiavelli argues that

as one examines their actions and lives, one does not see that they had anything else from fortune than the opportunity, *which gave them the matter enabling them to introduce any form they pleased*. Without that opportunity their virtue of spirit would have been eliminated, and without that virtue the opportunity would have come in vain. (Machiavelli 1998: 23, my emphasis)

Returning, then, to the question of agency, “virtú” was that form of exemplary activity that was able to, if not completely master “Fortuna”, at least provide it with shape and direction in such a way as to secure the self-preservation and perdurance of a particular political regime. But why ought this conception of “virtú” to be construed specifically as an *aesthetic* category? In order to fully answer this question, it is now necessary to turn to the fourth section of the paper *Nietzsche’s Machiavelli*.

#### 4. *Nietzsche’s Machiavelli*

Machiavelli hints at an answer to the question of why “virtú” was to be considered, above all an aesthetic category, this when he suggests that “virtú” is a kind of form-bestowing activity that enables the prince to master historical circumstance. The connection to the aesthetic dimension is established insofar as the word “virtú” is the root of our idea of “virtuosity” which denotes an exemplary level of dispassionate technical skill in the arts, particularly in music. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, “virtú” derives from the post-classical Latin of the 11<sup>th</sup> century as *virtuositas* denoting “power, strength, efficacy”.

As mentioned above, to fully appreciate the specifically *aesthetic* dimension of this category it is necessary to chart its appropriation by Nietzsche, in particular, in his conception of “will to power” understood fundamentally as art. While Nietzsche makes a number of important references to Machiavelli, the key text for understanding the relation is in the *Nachlass* writings assembled controversially by Nietzsche’s sister in a volume entitled *Wille zur Macht* which comprise his notebooks from roughly 1883-88. Indeed, the key role that Machiavelli plays in these notebooks can be discerned in aphorism 776 (from the spring-fall of 1887) entitled *On the Machiavellianism of power*. Indeed, he suggests in aphorism 1017 that in the 19<sup>th</sup> century

one witnesses a reaction against the Rousseauian conception of the natural man, “but also against the Renaissance concept of *virtú*”.

While it is not possible to show this decisively here, my intuition is that what Nietzsche seeks to do in this text, as well as in his published writings, upon which he comments in his notebooks, is to rehabilitate precisely this Renaissance conception of “*virtú*” as “will to power” against what he considers to be the Rousseauian affectation of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The starting point of Nietzsche’s attempt in the *Genealogy of morals* and in *Beyond good and evil* to engage in a transvaluation of values is the recognition that morality itself relies upon hidden immorality or force, which means what he refers to as the active, interpreting powers inherent in life itself. Hence, “it is the powerful who have made the names of things into law, and among the powerful it is the greatest *artists* in abstraction who created the categories” (Nietzsche 1968: 277, my emphasis).

It is important to note here that Nietzsche is using the concept of “artist” in an unusual way. What he means to suggest – and this comes very close to what Machiavelli means by “*virtú*” as the capacity to shape the matter provided by “Fortuna” or historical circumstance – is the ability to establish and maintain, against the flow and flux of an indeterminate, infinite becoming, a particular interpretation of the world amongst a multiplicity of contending interpretations that don’t necessarily understand themselves to be such. Hence, meaning or sense (*Sinne*) is “always multiple and contested” (aphorism 556). Where Nietzsche comes closest in formulation to Machiavelli’s account of “*virtú*”, as the power to shape matter, is in the very definition of “will to power” itself in aphorism 617: “*To impose upon becoming the character of being – that is the supreme will to power*”. Indeed, in his view, the capacity to engage in this type of activity is pleasurable. Nietzsche suggests: “The joy in shaping and reshaping [is] a primeval joy”. Now, it is important to be clear that Nietzsche is not suggesting that will to power is the activity of subjective will *per se*, as understood as the “doer behind the deed”. Rather, such “shaping and reshaping” is best understood in terms of Nietzsche’s early (Schopenhauerian and therefore metaphysical) account of tragedy as the unending battle between two aesthetic impulses: the form-giving and form-destroying impulses of the Apollonian and the Dionysian respectively. Nietzsche describes these in the following way: “Apollo: eternity of beautiful form ‘thus shall it be forever’, while the Dionysian impulse entails ‘continual creation’ and ‘transitoriness’” (Nietzsche



1968: 1049). Moreover, will to power, for Nietzsche, is embodied in institutions, as he states in aphorism 796: “The work of art where it appears without an artist, e.g. as body, as organization (Prussian officer corps, Jesuit order)”.

The underlying assumptions of *The birth of tragedy* can be discerned in a text written shortly after its publication, namely *Truth and lie in a non-moral sense*. The connection is made towards the end of this text where Nietzsche contrasts the “man of intuition” with the “man of concepts”. Here in what could be regarded as the completion of the Schopenhauerian reconstruction of the Kantian transcendental framework via a displacement of the opposition between the noumenal and the phenomenal onto the opposition between *will* and *representation*, Nietzsche seeks to show how the very transcendental framework – the very possibility of synthetic judgments a priori – is premised upon a forgetting of the relation between sense impression, image and concept. Concepts emerge from the metaphors that are necessary for communication. Yet the metaphorical nature of language, meaning the split or non-necessary relation between signified and signifier, is forgotten in the course of time and such a non-necessary relation is taken to be necessary and therefore transcendental condition for the possibility of truth. Another way of saying this is that what Kant calls in the third *Critique* reflective judgment (or the generation of a universal concept out of a particular experience) is taken for a determinative judgment (or the subsumption of a particular under a given concept). As Nietzsche says famously:

What then is truth? A movable host of metaphors, metonymies, and anthropomorphisms: in short, a sum of human relations which have been poetically and rhetorically intensified, transferred, and embellished, and which, after long usage, seem to a people to be fixed, canonical, and binding. Truths are illusions which we have forgotten are illusions; they are metaphors that have become worn out and have been drained of sensuous force, coins which have lost their embossing and are now considered metal and no longer as coins. (Nietzsche 1990: 84)

Such an account of truth comes very close to the neo-Spinozan account of affects animating Beasley-Murray’s rejection of the concept of hegemony. Yet, the key thing Nietzsche suggests in this text is that the opposition between an account of affects, on the one hand, and a theory of hegemony, on the other, is a false one. That is, the ability to marshal “truth”, that mobile army of metaphors, metony-

mies and anthromorphisms, is the very ability to impose a particular, dominant interpretation of being (understood as being or enduring presence) on the world. This is, of course, only an interpretation and as such has nothing of the necessity and universality implied by the word “being”. Rather such “being” is provisional. This is the Apollonian attempt to eternalize beautiful form, the “thus it shall be forever” against the contrapuntal, dizzying Dionysian continual creativity and transitoriness of the world. What is true in any given historical period is a particular ordering or stabilization of the sensible from which metaphoricity itself emerges and which, in turn, shapes our common sensibility.

What I have tried, so far, then, to suggest, is that the conception of “hegemony” can, at least in part, be rescued from contemporary criticism, if specific attention is paid to the aesthetic rather than the rationalistic dimension of the concept. As we have suggested in *Aesthetic Marx*, Marx’s own sensuous account of labour can be seen as the culmination of Machiavelli’s early account of the form-giving power of the *vita activa*. Nietzsche, of course, takes this in a different direction. Gramsci, through his appropriation of Machiavellian insights not at the level of philosophical anthropology but at the level of politics, understands the construction of hegemony *per se* as the result of a distinctively aestheticized type of form-giving activity. So, the “consent” that forms the basis for hegemonic leadership is one that involves the constitution of a particular historic bloc or configuration between economic and social relations, on the one hand, and language, culture, politics and law, on the other. What holds a given historic bloc in place is a given political vernacular or what Gramsci calls “common sense”. Inherent in the idea of common sense is both the framing of the political and the politics undertaken within such frame. Here is Gramsci’s definition of Machiavelli, which, of course, could also be taken for his addressee in his most influential political pamphlet, and by extension, the Communist Party as the modern prince:

The active politician is a creator, an initiator, but he does not create out of nothing, and neither does he draw his creations out of his brain. He bases himself on effectual reality; but what is this effectual reality? Could it be something static and immobile? Is it not, rather, a reality in motion, a relation of forces in continuous shifts of equilibrium? When applying one’s will to the creation of a new equilibrium among really existing and active forces – basing oneself on the force with a progressive thrust in order to make it prevail – one is always moving on the terrain of effectual reality, but for the

purpose of mastering it and superseding it. The “ought to be” comes into play not as an abstract and formal idea but as a realistic interpretation and as the only historicist interpretation of reality – as that which alone is active history or politics. (Gramsci 2007: 283)

The key difference with the neo-Spinozan account, of course, is that a new sensibility does not emerge on its own, spontaneously, via a line of flight marking the “exodus of the multitude”, but is a function of *political struggle*. Here Gramsci articulates the role of the party as one of stabilizing through the creation of a new historical bloc, through “one’s will to the creation of a new equilibrium among really existing and active forces” (Gramsci 2007: 283). Here it is possible to suggest that Gramsci discerns in Machiavelli what Nietzsche had also discerned: *an aesthetic will to power understood as the hegemonic imposition of a provisional aspect of being on the flux and flow of historical becoming*. It was through such a creative act that the interests of a given class can transcend the boundaries of narrow economic determination and become those of other classes. It is the moment at which the particular finds its universal articulation. Hence, we can moreover hear the resonances of Machiavelli’s notion of “virtú” as the ability to withstand the potentially raging torrent of “Fortuna” by building “dykes and fortifications”, and Nietzsche’s idea of truth as a “mobile army of metaphors, metonymies and anthropomorphisms” in Gramsci’s notion that the hegemonic struggles take the form of a kind of trench warfare or a “war of position”. In the West, such a war of position is long and drawn out given that, unlike in the East in which the “state was everything” and civil society was “primordial and gelatinous”, insofar as there was “a proper relation between state and civil society, and when the state tottered, a sturdy structure of civil society was immediately revealed. The state was just a forward trench; behind it stood a succession of sturdy fortresses and emplacements (Gramsci 2007: 169).

What is key to each, I would suggest, is not only the military metaphors to express the idea of power as the condition for the possibility of consent, but that such consent comes about by the active forging of a common way of perceiving the world through the senses. This is what Gramsci refers to in his notes on “Americanism” as the “muscular-nervous efficiency of the worker”. Such a shared way of perceiving the world, such “common sense”, is both a certain form of *reasonability* or practical rationality of a given community located in a

particular space and time but also, more literally, a common way of perceiving the world through the *senses*, the participation within a common frame of the “visible” and the “invisible”, the “sayable” and the “unsayable” that sets limits or bounds to that form of reasonability. Jacques Rancière has perhaps done the most to articulate in a systematic way an aesthetic account of such common sense, which he understands in terms of what he calls “la partage du sensible”:

What the artist does is weave a new sensory fabric by tearing percepts and affects out [of] the perceptions and affections that constitute the fabric of ordinary experience. Weaving this new fabric meaning creating a form of common expression, or a form of expression of the community, namely the song of the earth or the cry of men. What is common is “sensation”. The human beings are tied together by a certain sensory fabric, I would say a certain distribution of the sensible, which defines their way of being together and politics is about the transformation of the sensory fabric of the “being together”. (Rancière 2008: 3-4)

The struggle over the distribution and re-distribution of the sensible, I have suggested, is always already a hegemonic one.

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